

Devil o' the Highlands Footrace Saturday 6th August 2011

I'm afraid all my race reports read very similar this year ... ran well to 25-30miles then started to struggle but battled through to the end!

Maybe that's all you need to know but for those who like a bit more detail here is the story of my 2nd Devils race and 17th ultra not that I'm counting!

Before the race

Two years ago when I ran this race Katrina and I travelled up on the morning leaving Paisley at 4.15am but this year Emma, Hollie and Hollie's friend Helen were coming with us so it didn't seem fair to drag them out of bed so early.

Also we thought it would be nice for Helen, who lives in Birmingham, to see some of the sites of Loch Lomond on the way up. We left at 12noon on Friday and stopped at Luss for an hour or so on the way.

We had booked to pitch our tent at the 'By the Way campsite'. Kirsty who runs the site with her husband is very supportive of the races on the whw. They opened up their campsite for the Fling and Kirsty gave out banana bread on the whw!

This year Kirsty was running the Devils race and when I booked in she was a little apprehensive but looking forward to the challenge. There were a number of runners camping and Kirsty very kindly put us all together in one area and looked after us all superbly.

If you are looking for a good training base I would thoroughly recommend 'By the Way'. We will certainly be back!

We wandered down to the Real Food Cafe for our tea



The Real Food Cafe is another business that really supports the races on the whw and we were able to use my vouchers from the Fling and whw races for a free cake and hot chocolate/coffee.

We met up with Marco & Debs then Thomas & Silke. Debs & Thomas were running with Marco & Silke supporting them.

I didn't sleep great but soon enough it was 4.30am and time to get up. We decided it would be easier if just Katrina came to the start and then I would meet them at Black Rock Cottage, Glencoe which would mean the girls could have a bit longer in bed!

It was good to meet lots of friends at registration. There is always a certain buzz of excitement and anticipation of the race ahead.

I had decided to run without my garmin or even a watch for this race. I've never done that before but was interested to see how I would find it. Look no watch!!



Tyndrum to Bridge of Orchy (6.62miles)

I really wasn't sure how I was going to run today. On one hand I knew that I'd had a real battle in the whw and had a tough race and I wasn't sure if I'd really recovered but on the other hand I'd been running every other day and felt okay.

So in the end I decided to run with Debs for as long as could and take it from there. That way if I was going well she'd pull me along to a decent time and if not I'd know soon enough and readjust my goals.

So we set off at 6am and settled into a steady run together. Debs is having a superb year and she is so good at maintaining a sensible pace with a minimum of effort. She has an ideal

running style for ultras and is not fazed by what anyone else is doing.

I've not run much with Debs this year so it was really good to chat and catch up on various bits of news. A few people passed us and we caught up with a few but basically held of our position over the first hour or so.



I ran into Bridge of Orchy feeling pretty good and certainly feeling comfortable with the pace. I didn't feel I was running quicker that I wanted to and my breathing was fine.

There was a good crowd at Bridge of Orchy so it was fun to run through cheering spectators.

I was very impressed with Marco who was multitasking taking photos and holding a tray of goodies for Debs to choose from.

Bridge of Orchy to Black Rock Cottage (11.50miles)

We walked up the hill taking the time to eat and drink. I had my peanut butter sandwich while Debs ate a gell which she told me cost £2.60 was made sure she ate every last bit!

One or two ran past us up the hill. I love the views from the top and it was so good to be out and running on such a lovely morning. The temperature was just right. It was cool with a light breeze.



Davie Hall was at the top taking photos and made a comment that I was attached to Debs with an umbilical cord! Debs responded that she's been trying to shake me off all morning without success!

I often lose ground on the downhill running so I was keen to see if I could stay with Debs on the way down. Again she has a nice easy relaxed style going down and I was pleased to stay with her.

We both agreed how much easier it is to do that bit with only 7 miles in our legs rather than 37!

We ran along the road to Victoria Bridge and then to the entrance to the woods where Marco was waiting for us. I'd arranged with Marco to have some water as I'd know I'd need to replenish mine before I saw my team at Black Rock.

We ran and walked up the hill. Debs had said to Marco that she didn't want her ipod as we were running together. I wanted to make sure that Debs was okay about running together and told her that I wasn't expecting her to wait for me!

Once we got onto the Rannoch Mor we settled into a good steady run. Debs said she likes to get her head down and get this section done. I took that as a comment that she didn't want to chat!

So with Debs leading and me a pace behind we had a great run across the Rannoch Mor. Again I tried to make sure I was comfortable with the pace and I felt I was. I started the run thinking if I could stay with Debs to Black Rock I'd be happy but now I thought maybe I could stick with her for longer.

There were quite a few runners in a line ahead of us and very slowly we were catching them. As we approached the final climb we agreed to run for 20 breaths before walking. Debs walked when I got to 17 so for a few yards I was actually ahead of Debs!

We caught up with two girls who seemed to be running together and then just ahead was Sharon and a guy. Debs made some rude comment about Sharon's backside and I won't report what Sharon did next!!

Sharon was feeling her IT band but was keen to keep going. As we reached the top of the hill and headed down Debs & Sharon ran together and I ran with Graham into the checkpoint. For the first time in the run I felt I was going a little quicker than was good for me!

As we approached the checkpoint Debs & Sharon went straight through and I suspected that might be the last I saw of them and I was right!

I stopped for a minute or two, taking a new water bottle



Katrina then walked down the hill with me as I drank my first milk shake. It tasted really good as I put it in the freezer on Thursday night and it was just defrosting. I changed my buff as it was starting to get quite a bit hotter.

Black Rock Cottage to Kinlochleven (9.5miles)

As I ran down the hill I was on my own for the first time and knew I needed to refocus and get into my own pace. I could feel I wasn't running as easily as before and I it was getting hot.

I crossed the road the headed down the hill to Kingshouse. Marco was sitting in his car and greeted me with a 'seven hours to here John!!' I knew it wasn't seven hours but I didn't have any idea as to what the time was.

I sensed that it was probably about 7hr pace as I knew Debs was aiming for that and I was only a few minutes behind her. From on I tried not to think too much about the time as trying to finish with a smile on my face became the priority!

A group of three runners caught and passed me on the run to Altnfeadh. Once again I suspected that I may well be slipping down the field but there wasn't much I could do about that now.

I reached the bottom of the hill and realised I was feeling VERY hot. I started the slow walk up and was finding it pretty tough. When I'm going well I look forward to the climbs and feel I push hard on the walk and very rarely get caught but not today.

I did manage to catch a few walkers but they had massive packs on their backs so didn't really count! I tried not to look too far ahead but when I did I could see a few runners a fair way up.

I plodded on and eventually made the top where Davie was waiting with his camera. Not sure what the picture of me will look like but I did try and smile!

Once I was over the top I started running but it wasn't very smooth or quick. Over the next few miles a few runners caught me. As far as I remember they were all girls. I had a quick chat with them as they went past. A few have read the blog and made some nice comments about it helping them.

To be honest I felt a bit of a fraud as I struggled to run and felt I was back on the same pattern as the whw race. Decent start then not been able to keep it going. I started to wonder why I put myself through this!

A few more runners went past me on the final few miles into Kinlochleven but at least I was running when they did! On one of the down hills I saw Ian heading up to support Sandra.

I decided I was going to change my top as it was soaking with sweat. It was getting warmer and warmer and I felt I was really struggling coping with the heat.

Finally the checkpoint arrived and I wandered over to Katrina and the girls. I think they could see I was not looking good but were great and sorted me out. I changed top and Katrina suggested I took my sun glasses and hat to keep the sun off.

The thing that concerned me (and my family) was that I was breathing really heavily as if I'd just run a five minute interval flat out! I stretched against the car before heading off for the final section ...



Kinlochleven to Fort William (14miles)

I drank another milkshake and took one with me for the final section. I still had no idea of time but I thought back to the whw when this section had taken me almost 7hrs. On a good whw I've done it in 3hrs 20mins and in the Devils race in 2009 I did it in 2hrs 40mins.

How long would it take me today? Hopefully not as long as 7 weeks ago but as I set off I wasn't sure! I ran a bit down the road and set off up the hill. There were 2 guys behind me but I soon let them past as I was struggling big time up the hill.

I was pouring with sweat and was breathing far harder than I should be for that pace. I wasn't dealing with the heat at all well. At every stream I soaked my cap and tried to cool down. I was taking succeed tablets every 90mins or so but without a watch I was trying to estimate that!

It was a battle to the top but eventually I did make it. I was hoping I could get going but if anything it was worse as there was no shade and I was really overheating.

At the next stream I stepped off the track and poured as much water over me as I could. I filled my cap with water as I set off again. I did help and I was able to start running again. I set myself the goal of 10 breaths and then if I was still going another 10.

I walked all the hills but tried to run the downhills as much as possible. This carried on for the next half an hour or so. I think another couple of runners went past but I was past caring about position or time. It was all about getting to the end as best I could. So much for enjoying myself ... this was another battle to the finish!

As I ran/walked my way along the Lairigmor the sun went behind the clouds and there was a light breeze. Suddenly I felt a whole lot better and was able to run a bit stronger. I can't say I was flying but it felt a whole lot better than a hour or so before.

About half a mile before Lundavra I saw Ian again. We chatted for a while before he took off to meet up with Sandra. I assumed she wasn't too far behind. Ian told me that Matt Williamson had won with Thomas 2nd in 5.35! Lucy was third in 5.45. Very impressive runs from them all.

As I reached Lundavra I saw Lucy sitting there! As always she was full of encouragement. Someone's support refilled my water bottle. Thank you whoever you were!

I set off on the last 7 miles feeling as though I was going to be able to run. It was so much cooler now and I was looking forward to finishing in a decent shape.

So I walked the up hills and ran the downhills. I thought back to 7 weeks ago when I staggered my way in the dark with Katrina and Stevie keeping me going. This was still tough but so much better than then.

I ticked off the landmarks and came into the open forest area. Up and down then onto the wide forestry road down to Fort William. I started to wonder about my time. It crossed my mind that I could have asked a walker what time it was but decided I'd got this far without knowing I might as well keep to my decision!

I was hoping I'd be under 9hrs but if I'd been told it was 10hrs I would have believed you!

As I climbed the final hill to the road I heard a shout of 'come on John'. I gave a wave but couldn't work out who it was. I was very happy to see it was Katrina who had walked up the hill to see me.

We walked, then ran together for a few minutes but in the end I asked her did she mind running ahead as I needed to get my head down and finish this off.

I ran as much as I could but I did need some walking breaks. I ran for 50 breaths then walked for 10 and made my way down the hill. I stopped at the stream at the top of the little raise to refill my water and cool down again.

There were a number of supporters heading up and they all gave a cheer and a well done. I love the way everyone supports and encourages everyone else. It makes such a difference when someone acknowledges what you've done. Thank you to all.

Braveheart car park came and went and I headed along the road. I even caught another runner on the final mile!

This last mile took forever 7 weeks ago when I was stumbling along but this time running the landmarks to pass came a lot quicker and the finish line was in sight.



I tried to smile as I finished but it was more out of relief than pleasure!

My official time was 8hrs 23mins 15secs and I came 49th out of 123 starters. 116 finished.

The shower and food was very welcome at the Nevis Centre and it was good to meet up with Thomas and Debs who had superb runs. A bonus was seeing Jono & Jo who had driven down from Inverness to see us.

They all went off for a game of 10pin bowling while we went to the prize giving.



I'd like to give a big thanks to Katrina, Emma, Hollie and Helen for their support. They were superb and looked after me well.

Also thanks to Garry and his team for organising such a good race. All the marshals and helpers did an amazing job. Plus the goodie bag was great with a smart t-shirt and running shoe prize.

Once again I'll need to reflect on what I learnt from this race but that's for another day.

Finally congratulations to Johnny Smash for being the closest guess in my competition. Johnny did send in his guess (8.16.40) after the 9am deadline and so had seen all the other guesses! so I'm also going to give a prize to Julien (8.08.08) who was the closest at the deadline!!