**West Highland Way Challenge Race – 96 miles**

**May 2023**

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It’s not easy to get to the start of a 96 mile race. By the time I entered the 2023 West Highland Way Challenge Race, I’d been thinking about the event for almost four years. I had wanted to improve my hundred kilometre walk time, and to walk the entirety of the West Highland Way, to see what was involved. Having achieved both of these objectives, I sent my entry form in at the end of October 2022.

A few days later I got a call from Jim Drummond, the Race Director, to talk about the event and my application. We discussed the events I’d participated in before, my experience of the West Highland Way, and the event itself. Jim has completed over 600 ultras, and is a fount of knowledge about event preparation and strategy, and about the route itself. He talked about other participants, their experiences over the years, the sections to watch out for or not worry about, the best place for a nap, and the importance of a steady approach.

There’s something about the ethos of the race – we want you to get as far as you can, we’re here to support you, and we want you to enjoy the experience – that is captivating. The Challenge is registered with the UTMB and attracts serious runners, including those who race to the summit of Ben Nevis and back down again even before starting on the 96 mile West Highland Way. It also appeals to steady walkers, who return year after year, for the camaraderie, atmosphere, and familiarity of this brilliant event. I’d learned a lot from the Challenge website and the many race reports – both those that reported immediate success, and those where participants described returning year after year, confident that they would make it across the line, building the mileage up each year. I felt I got to know other participants through their reports, and so some of the names at the start line were already familiar both from these reports and from conversations with Jim.

Although I was initially registered for the 10am start, my anticipated pace moved me up to 8am, and Jim very kindly arranged for a lift from Glasgow. So I found myself outside Glasgow Queen Street at 6pm on the Friday looking out for a couple and their German Shepherd. My self-description was ‘red hair, and a massive blue holdall’. John, Phyllis, their beautiful dog and I then wended our way up to Fort William, via an excellent dinner stop at the Bridge of Orchy hotel, and good chat about big walks, supporting those doing long walks, and the myriad, random, glorious topics than can accompany any long journey, interspersed with moments of quiet as the scenery became ever more majestic.

There’s something sobering about covering by car a distance that you’re then going to walk in reverse. The road by Loch Lomond is just as tricky as the path on the eastern side, and the sections between Tyndrum and Fort William remain my favourite. There are times walking across Rannoch Moor where there are no signs of human habitation, and the podcast I’d listened to on my previous Moor crossing had talked about ‘cosmic insignificance theory’, which I’d found oddly comforting. It’s a spectacular drive, the light and weather changing as we got further north.

We reached Fort William about 10pm, the sky still a little light, and John (W) and Phyllis kindly dropped me at my B&B, before heading to their own accommodation with a promise to collect me first thing in the morning. After unpacking, repacking into two drop bags, one emergency bag, one finish bag, and my pack for the day, I was able to rest up, ahead of an anticipated 36 hour day.

By contrast with many hugely busy races down south, the morning registration for the event was very straightforward and quick. The myriad bags went into the various piles, the number on to my pack, and I photographed and securely stowed the information sheet (with emergency numbers and checkpoint locations). The nine early starters then pottered up to the start of the Way proper, and – after some final information from Jim – we started promptly at 8am.

The climb out of Fort William is steady and relatively undemanding. I always start races out of breath (the prospect of the distance ahead briefly daunting), but fell into conversation and a settled pace. I was told that the pace to watch was that of John V, 200 metres ahead, wearing a red bandanna, who was on the WHW Challenge for the 20th time and had completed it all but once. John V, Christine, John W and Louise were to appear at various points during the race – often just ahead or close behind, and became familiar, welcome presences, with many moments of chat along the way.

After the long steady climb, the gradient evens out, and the path becomes narrower, so others went ahead, and I found my own pace. I’d only previously seen the stretch between Fort William and Kinlochleven in torrential rain, so took moments to turn around, take in the views, and say hello to the many walkers heading north (the customary direction for the West Highland Way). At some point, I was overtaken by the first of the Ben Nevis runners, who’d started his summit attempt at 6am, run back down, and then past me at pace.

Another chat on the steep descent to Kinlochleven, and I found myself at the first main checkpoint, with chairs, refreshments, proper toilets, and cheering company. I was determined not to pause for too long, as so much time can be lost at checkpoints, and so replenished drinks, and pressed on. The climb out of Kinlochleven, to the back of the Devil’s Staircase, is fairly relentless, and the early stages involved a cloud of accompanying midges. It’s the longest climb of the route (at least in the southbound direction), with various false summits. But the weather was perfect from my perspective – cool, with a light breeze and occasional drizzle. By this point I was being overtaken by many 10am starters and Ben Nevis summiteers, but I remained determined to go at my own pace, giving way to and cheering on those who were faster.

The summit of the Devil’s staircase is glorious, and when reached from the north gives a wildly beautiful view of Glencoe – dappled sunlight, a distant horizon, distinctive, familiar mountains, and a long road ahead. Down the Devil’s staircase, along the A82 to Kingshouse (where Phyllis and other supporters were waiting), and up to the Glencoe Mountain resort, dropping in and out of conversations along the way. The Mountain Resort is home to the second main checkpoint, the quarter way mark, and a very large cup of tea, plus drinks, snacks and Quality Street. The longer you walk, the more random the conversations can become, and John V was talking about Einstein (“blind obedience to authority is the greatest enemy of the truth”). Then onwards, to my favourite stretch of the route – across Rannoch Moor.

After a brief climb up from the checkpoint to Rannoch Moor itself, another amazing expanse opens up. As the ground levelled out, I spotted a rainbow, paused to take a photograph and to point it out to another participant. We fell into conversation, the afternoon warmth and light gradually softening, as we enjoyed the easy downwards gradient and remote location of this true wilderness. Walking up the way, the path across Rannoch Moor can feel unforgiving; on a slow descent, these were easy miles, both walking wise and conversationally.

Near Inveroran, many small groups were setting up camp for the night – starting their cooking fires, opening a drink, nestling in. A perfect place to camp. From Inveroran, there’s a steep climb up to views back across Rannoch – I put headphones on for this section, whilst number 20, pressed ahead, and I sung a little on my way down to Bridge of Orchy, conscious of those ahead and behind, but no-one too close to be too disconcerted by my impromptu karaoke.

Into Bridge of Orchy, and my first drop bag, replete with (excessively abundant) snacks, and clean socks and a clean t shirt (perfection). I ate a bowl full of delicious veggie chilli, attended to my feet – recognising that doing both simultaneously is gross but necessary – chatted to the checkpoint volunteers and various participants, and sorted out my bag for the next stretch, conscious it would likely get dark before Auchtertyre.

Number 20 – Peter – and I set off together, the evening light deepening, the conversation and companionable silences continuing, and the navigation generally straightforward. That is until we missed the entrance to the tunnel under the railway and had to frustratingly retrace some steps, to avoid the pavement-less A82. Tunnel entrance finally found, we joined up with other participants for the final stretch into Tyndrum.

I love Tyndrum, and in the late evening fairy lights abounded, the staff of the Real Food Café were clearing up for the night, and we continued on, now into the fourteenth hour of the walk. That took us easily to Auchtertyre for some hot soup, more tea, and Jim’s concerns that no-one should walk alone overnight. Peter and I set off together into the night, now convinced of the necessity of headtorches; Christine and John V close behind. The stretch from Auchtertyre to Beinglas was tough – the climb goes on forever – every small downhill involves a commensurate uphill, which is especially gruelling by headtorch light.

Eventually we decided there could be no place higher to climb and – sure enough – the path opened up, the gradient eased, and the walking became easier. Jim and volunteers have done an amazing job marking junctions with reflective signs, so navigation was straightforward, and we found our way easily to Beinglas, despite the limited visibility afforded by torchlight. I became convinced that Peter, ahead of me, was walking through a series of green arches, but this was only a trick of the light.

About two miles out of Beinglas, I tripped on a rock, face-planted into the path, and luckily managed to escape without serious damage, only myriad cuts and scrapes, with my headtorch protecting my overnight glasses (and causing a forehead dent). It could have been much worse. Peter carefully got me up, once I’d recovered from the initial shock and – both a bit shaken – we proceeded. The ‘party in the woods’ Beinglas checkpoint was very welcome – the best, sweetest cup of tea of my life, large antiseptic wipes and big plasters, more soup, and snacks. I crammed the contents of my emergency bag (bivvy bag, sleeping bag, and spare torch) into my rucksack. As the horizon started to brighten (even at 3.15am), and now joined again by John V and Christine, four of us set off down the path, ‘kicked out’ of the checkpoint, in the kindest way possible, and grateful for the gathering dawn.

The next section is populated by abundant bluebells, luminous in the early morning light, and a steady climb brought us to the pink dawn over Loch Lomond, and the prospect of a tough section ahead. I’d previously characterised this section as an endless Going on a Bear Hunt slog, mile upon miles of roots, mud, rocks to clamber over, a wearingly undulating gradient. And – like Bear Hunt – you can’t go over it etc, you have to go through it. A few miles before Inversnaid, Peter and I agreed that it would be a good idea to have a brief nap, that there was plenty of time on the clock and that a reboot might help.

I have never before thought that it was wise to sleep just lying down on bare dirt, but it looked so inviting. I managed fifteen minutes before being woken by a midge in my ear, and what later turned out to be a proliferation of midge bites round my midriff (the little feckers having found an un-Smidged part of me). Next year I’m going to take Louise’s steer and have a long nap before embarking on this section – she and John W appeared just as I was hobbling back to the path, and Peter was putting on a midge net, Louise with a recharged exuberance that was energising, and which I could not remotely match.

At Inversnaid (62 miles) I reached the furthest distance I have ever walked continuously. More sweet tea, various snacks, and a brief stop in the hotel loos, and I was good to go. Well goodish. By this point, I was feeling a lot of blister pain and discomfort in my badly grazed knee. My inability to eat whilst walking, and a consequent general sense of overwhelming fatigue were all cumulatively becoming too much. I also made the mistake of thinking too far ahead (34 miles, not just checkpoint by checkpoint) and then calculating the time remaining. Each footstep was painful, and I couldn’t shake the intense tiredness. I put on my get-the-hell-on-with-it playlist, having urged others to go ahead, and the music helped. But not quite enough. The higher path to Rowardennan is more forgiving than the Lochside one, but I couldn’t convince myself that I had it in me to complete the race.

I rocked up at Rowardennan pier, hobbling, tearful, out of Aces, and Peter bounded up to me, full of enthusiasm for my arrival and the rest of the race. For a little while I was persuaded that I could go on – I repacked my bag, removing the overnight emergency equipment, drank a lot of coke and tea, ate as much as I could, popped blisters, changed my socks, took painkillers. And it was only at the point when I tried to put my shoes back on and realised they wouldn’t fit (or at least not done up) that I called it. It was the right decision, but a painful one. I’d put so much into this, but this wasn’t going to be my day.

John W and Peter set off, the latter having borrowed my walking poles for the remaining 27 miles, with a plan to meet at the finish line. I repacked bags, enjoyed the views of Loch Lomond and the warming morning, whilst chatting with another participant who was also done for the day, and then got a lift back to Milngavie with the very kind checkpoint team. I dozed in the back of the van, feeling more relieved about the decision with each mile we drove (and only a slight pang at the sight of the Balmaha ice cream shop that had a definite place on my walking itinerary).

Back at Milngavie, runners were arriving regularly, crystal wine goblets were being distributed, family and friends were meeting, or waiting for, those arriving. A Ben Nevis/WHW runner had made it to the finish, still looking energetic. I gathered my various bags, and hobbled the short distance to the Premier Inn. Even there, the race atmosphere continued, with the sister of a participant kindly helping me to my room with my bags, and chatting about the immensity of the event.

After a shower, change of clothes and a nap, I pottered back to the finish line, to meet my earlier companions. Peter and John W had made it to Drymen, then called it. Others would continue to arrive long into the evening, with John V and Christine reaching the finish after a consistently steady race. My ‘never again’ at Rowardennan was already being replaced by ‘when’s next year’s event?’. Jim took the opportunity to sensibly point out that an hour’s nap can make all the difference, and is possible mid-event.

As ever, I’ve learned so much from the event about what these kinds of challenges require. My key takeaways are: more sleep (probably an hour or two), more food at checkpoints (as I struggled to eat whilst walking in the latter stages), more weight training in the coming year, and not thinking too far ahead (the approximately 12 miles between checkpoints is plenty to consider).

It was great to see others at the finish line, to round off the weekend where it started, with a chat with John W and Phyllis. Peter returned my walking poles, and that particular conversation has continued, with gratitude for the serendipity that led to us meeting, on a remote Scottish path on a sunny late May afternoon. I have apparently promised to get him to the finish line next year, and we’re both signing up on the basis of this reciprocal arrangement.

And the path awaits. The West Highland Way becomes more familiar with each visit, yet still unexpected and wonderful – in different light, changing weather, varying frames of mind. I hope 2024 will be my year. 96 miles is an absurd distance to cover in a single outing yet, as a wonderful fellow walker says – “you didn’t go this far to only come this far”. I also suspect that reaching the finish might not stop me wanting to sign up again. The atmosphere, support, brilliant organisation and camaraderie all make this a very special event indeed.