



SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

It's all go in Glencoe!

IN 1692 in the highlands of bonny Scotland, the infamous massacre of Glencoe took place. The Campbell Clan, who had been at war with the McDonalds, invited their erstwhile enemies to a peace gathering and when their visitors soundly slept in their tents, the Campbells dispatched them in murderous attacks.

Some several hundred years later, I was similarly lured to the foothills of Ben Nevis by my good friend, Mark Kinkaid, who told me that we should go and tackle a new challenge. "Great Mark, what's involved?" Mark answered: "Just a wee trot with great views," he replied. "Where do I sign up?" I asked. Was I to suffer the same fate as the foes of the Campbells?

Several months later, after a 30 minutes bus ride from Fort William, we arrived at 8.00am in the Red Squirrel Camp Centre in Glencoe.

It was minus three. There were over 1,000 of us. Dawn was breaking, a lone piper was serenading us, the early morning sun struggled to burn the mist off the river which meandered beside us... was I ready for this?

Of course not. I was never ready, particularly when I realised that I had signed up for the UK's toughest off road marathon! But I have learnt by now, it's just about putting one foot in front of another. You forget about your injuries, you just get on with it, the time for excuses is over, the past is irrelevant, the only thing that matters is the future 4 or 5 or 6 hours. Neither Mark nor I had any idea of the topography of the course and he predicted 5 hours 30 minutes for his finish time whereas I plumped for an hour longer – and neither of us were to beat our target!

We were based in Fort William which is on the east coast of Scotland. It is at the end of Lough Linnhe which, interestingly, has sea water in it because it is connected to the Irish Sea/Atlantic Ocean. (I saw the effect of this when I noticed a boat in the harbour which, several hours later, was several feet higher in the water).

The town is named after King William and of course there used to be a fort there as well. It appeared to me to be the equivalent of the Killarney of the Highlands, ie, a gateway town nestling in the foothills with access to all manner of climbing and trekking delights in the same way that Killarney is the entrance door to the lakes and the Magilliguddy Reeks Mountain chain.

Fort William was also phenomenally busy. You couldn't buy a parking spot, you had to reserve a seat in any of the restaurants and B&B space was at a premium. The tourist industry is not seasonal but all year long.

The mountain bikers in the summer are replaced by skiers in the winter while trekkers and climbers and runners are stupid enough to be out 12 months a year.

HARDY SOULS

The course was based on part of the spine of the West Highland Way, a 154km long distance footpath, running from Glasgow to Fort

William. Over 15,000 hardy souls walk the entire route every year!

The registration process was simplicity itself the day before at the Glencoe Visitor Centre where I purchased a 'I climbed Ben Nevis' beanie hat (because I had, twice).

We were told we couldn't start the race without a lot of emergency gear which included waterproof trousers, a coat, hat, gloves, dry gear, survival blanket, whistle, spare food, etc. The week before, the weather had been at its most foul and all of these accoutrements would have been necessary. Race day, however was to be incredible for early October, no wind no rain and sunshine with about 15 degrees forecast, what an unexpected bonus. The head of the Scottish tourist board couldn't have bought a better day.

The race presumably was not scheduled for the summer due to the bane of the Highlands, ie, mozzies and other various flying beasts who make life hell for the unsuspecting visitor who doesn't have a hat with a protection net around it.

I had told the guys on the start line to "Be bold, start cold" so the jackets were shoved into our rucksacks as I knew that within a few miles, we would be plenty warm.

The MC was whipping up the excitement on the start line with the countdown and it was good to be finally underway at 9.00am in a crisp clear frosty morning. The third of our triumvirate, Osman Morris, soon left Mark and I as tailend Charlies. We fell into an easy rhythm. The two of us have competed – and completed – in the UK, all over Ireland, Europe and the USA and we are good support for each other. I knew that if I got into difficulties, Mark would help but I was determined that I wouldn't need to be Johnny Brownlee-ed across the finish line.

This was going to be a 1 percent inspiration 99 percent perspiration kind of a day. The talent has long gone with the doggedness is still there – woof!

INTO A SHEUGH

The first mile was on tarmac, what's so tough about this, I thought? Soon however, we were steered off the road into a sheugh which basically continued for the next six or seven miles.

Your precious dry feet, dry socks and dry shoes very quickly became neither dry nor precious. You gave up any pretence of staying dry and just ploughed on through the puddles. Later on, after the first aid station, the puddles became mud and after that the mud became the equivalent of a ploughed field which had us sinking in up to your shins and also sucked at our energy reserves.

We had been warned of the Devil's Staircase. I have done a few various mountains in various places and they all invariably have a Devil's Staircase where it is basically a hand and knees job. How anybody could run up this is was beyond me, mountain goats maybe but not mere runners!

It dawned on me that I was completely unsuited to this type of terrain as I was terrible on the ascents, even worse on the descents but boy, could I bluff on the flat! I had broken 40 minutes for five miles during the week but this was completely alien. I can't remember any more than ten

flat metres in the entire 42k, it was all up all down or else you were stuck in a bog.

I was wearing my Fitbit watch which eventually told me later that night that I had managed 60,000 steps, (but thankfully it didn't tell me how slowly I had taken them!) had expended over 4,000 calories and according to my watch, I was still alive.

I certainly didn't feel it but maybe that was because I had indulged in a post-race meal of haggis and a wee dram of Ben Nevis whiskey – hey, when in Scotland etc.

I heard lots of different accents during the day. There were Belgians, French and a Dutch military team (if a military team is using it as their playground, you know it is tuffie).

I thought that most people I overheard were foreign but then I realised they were Scots conversing in their local thick-as-a-hawthorn-hedge dialect.

Gear, of course, is all important in a long distance race particularly the shoes. I had selected my Salomen trail shoes but I'm not sure what shoes would of protected feet and legs so punishing was the terrain. At about mile 23, I wheezed to Mark: "What are your top ten injuries and pains at the minute?"

He asked if each toe counted as separate injury – no, I reflected ten toes just represented one complaint.

In my top ten, I had a lot of competition for the number one slot – they included my toes which had been squashed against the front of my shoes on the downhill sections; the souls of my feet (on fire for hours) ankles; knees; quads (busted by the downhill section); lower back and a new contender which was my neck and shoulders as I had to constantly look down to try and not take a tumble.

HURTLED TOWARDS MY DOOM

Two weeks previously, I had been running in Newcastle-upon-Tyne before breakfast and as I was just finishing off my effort, my toe caught the edge of a footpath. As I hurtled towards my doom – and the concrete – I was thinking: "Please, not a repeat of my broken finger/busted ribs/fractured clavicle" which I have all done on previous outings.

I hit the pavement and rolled over. My first instinct was to flex my fingers and check my ribs and shoulder. The good news was that they were all seemingly intact. A woman, however did rush over and kindly proffer a hanky to me. I mumbled to her: "What's that for?" and she replied: "For the blood coming out of your head, son." "Oh thanks," I replied. I ended up in Newcastle A&E where they treated me royally and glued up my gaping forehead and eyebrow. I was determined to remain upright in the Highlands and had no desire to check out the local infirmary, just the distilleries!

The halfway point was Kinlochleven, a gorgeous wee town (maybe the sunshine helped). We had to there by 1.00pm, otherwise we would have missed the cut off and be pulled out. We made it comfortably with 45 minutes to spare – 3 hrs 15 minutes for a half marathon and we thought we were going well!

The second half started with another major

slog up a forest trail, again on rough ground, and there where breath-taking views – that is if you had the breath to take them in and if you had the energy to look up.

I seemed to spend most of my time trying to decide where to place my feet. Would it be on that painful sharp rock there or that ever shaper even more painful rock there? Talk about being caught between a rock and an even rockier place.

So warm was the day that I was down to a gym top despite the altitude and lateness of the season. This was the last of my five challenges for the year and I was three miles away from completing all five.

I had started with Last One Standing in Castleward Country Park in February (50 miles on foot in 12 hours); Lisbon half Ironman in May (appalling weather); the Ironman Challenge in Venice (lovely weather but nothing left in the tank for the run); the summit of Mount Kenya in July (easy peasy with incredible dawn views over the equator at nearly 5000 metres) and now a mountain marathon in October.

Boy, was I looking forward to the 5k Parkrun on Portrush beach where all the pain is over in about 24 minutes!

At the last aid station as well as usual stuff (water, energy drink, bananas, energy bars) we had the options of cold punch with ice, hot punch – and port and cheese! I snaffled the lot, excess leads to success, etc. I wasn't sure if port caused gout or prevented it but I thought I would chance it!

EMERGED FROM A DARK TUNNEL

Eventually, with the sun dipping in the sky, Mark and I emerged from a dark tunnel (or maybe it was just a forest) where we were confronted with the straightforward downhill run of just over two miles to the hallowed finish line.

Downhill sounds easy but when your quads have been bashed all day, every step is the equivalent of putting your foot too close to a bonfire. I told Mark that we could break 7 hours if we ran 15 minutes for each mile. We staggered, we stumbled, we did everything but crawl and seemingly hours later (but only 27 minutes) we left the mountain to trot over – and sink into – one final bog (just in case we hadn't had enough bogs to contend with all day) when the glorious, glorious finish line was reached.

A (wooden) medal was slung around our neck, the timing chip was taking from our ankles and we happily posed with Osman (who had been waiting for us for over an hour) underneath the finish gantry.

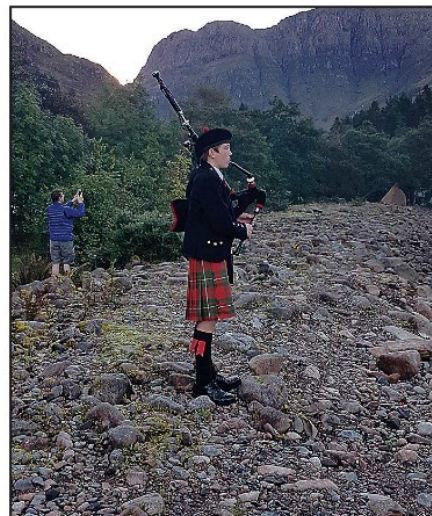
Done and dusted, finished – in every sense of the word.

A post-race snack would have been gratefully received but hey, what a great race. The winner by only 16 seconds may have been 3 hrs 45 mins ahead of us but did he have the craic that we had?!

Fabulous scenery, stunning mountains and unforgettable memories. I may have been massacred in Glencoe but at least, unlike the McDonalds, I had lived to tell the tale!



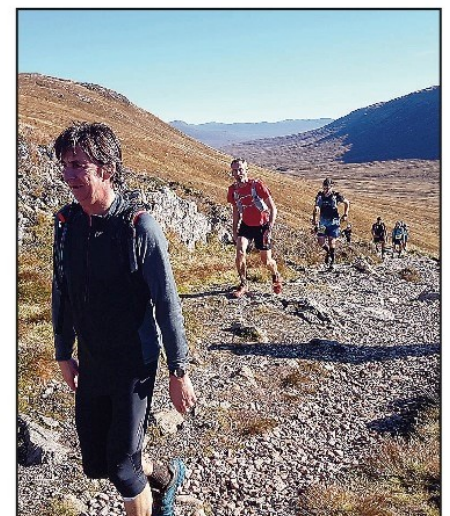
PJ, Osman Morris and Mark Kinkaid celebrate at the finish line. NCL41-11s



A piper entrains the participants. NCL41-09s



The breathtaking scenery at Glencoe. NCL41-07s



On the rocky road to pain. NCL41-10s