



West Highland Way CHALLENGE Race 2019

A Competitors Tale – Michael ‘Mick’ Mattison’s story.

Introduction from the Race Organisers

In the spirit of helping others, staying true to the aims and ethos of The WHW CHALLENGE Race and celebrating adventure, we wished to share the following tale from Michael ‘Mick’ Mattison. Mick took part in the 2019 race. He successfully completed the course in under 35 hours by steady walking/hiking the entire route.

Quote from Mick: *“There is no denying your Challenge Race is what it is all about, whether chasing a sub 24 hour time or Long Distance Walking Association style hiking. The race is open to all, fair and honest. What you put in to the event you get out, nothing more, nothing less. It is the same for everyone. It is truly a fantastic race experience”*

Now over to Mick. Here is a summary of his race experience:

First of all Jim, may I congratulate you on your decision to start up this race, albeit a few years since, it was indeed the correct and right thing to do.

What I learned from our two hour pre-race conversation on the telephone, was that you are as committed now to the West Highland Way as you were before you'd ever traversed it, passion combined with respect for the terrain, I could hear it in your words, it was nice to hear, it instilled in me a great confidence, that I would complete the race.

Respect is born out of experience and I've completed 6 x 100 mile events but having walked the WHW with my to be wife during the miners strike of 1984 (we walked it at Christmas, camping, I was 21, Di was 20!) I knew it was not an easy undertaking and so I planned and prepared thoroughly.

One week into 2019 I ran the Scarborough rock 25 miler off road. Then in April, the 50 miler Woldsman. All went well with 7 weeks left to finalise the event details. I haven't really used drop bags before, well not to the extent of what is needed in the West Highland Way Challenge Race. **I would like to assure folk that without the correct use of drop bags, you are likely to endure a different race experience entirely.**

Everything that we need to know about the race is contained on the website. I looked at all the finishers and spilt times of all the years. It is very informative, you would expect when folk have done well, finished in a good time, that would be that, maybe even bettering that performance in successive years. But that is not the case. Many drop out or fail to beat times previously posted, this told me a lot.

In some races, it's understandable, that first passed the post is credited with being the best, and everyone else also rans. But in other races there is a common gold standard amongst all starters when the event is so demanding. Consider this (some years with really tough weather conditions) only one in 3 competitors will finish in the allotted time, everyone that does is just as much a worthy winner as first passed the post, and is treated by fellow competitors, the same.

I planned my approach/attack for this race two fold To use all the allotted time. Let me say that again, to use ALL of the allotted 35 hours and to buddy up with John Vernon. JV is 68 years old and has raced the West Highland Way for the last 15 years, successfully completing the entire route 15 consecutive times. JV knows the route very well and what speed to go at over the various different sections on the route. Now you may think that this plan is a bit slip chod but why make it any harder than it needs to be? {note from race organisers: we feel this race approach is actually very smart. Yep, you have to be fit and train well, simply turning up with little training and hoping to hike 96 miles over a very tough course will be disappointing for all. However planning and training hard to use all the allotted 35 hours is very smart. Anyway, back to Mick}. Judging by John Vernon's track record (please see recent results and split times) it should be possible. I must add that before the race, I had never met John.

The weather wasn't looking good for the weekend and no one wanted to mention it, but Jim put it on the entry notice board, so I was glad, as I had planned meticulously for the weather. By that I mean I had put the marching clothing in the last drop bag at Kinlochleven, thick ski waterproof coat, heavy mittens and a complete change of clothing {note from race organisers: again this was very smart}.

We set off just after midnight from the official start of the West Highland Way obelisk, in the centre of Milngavie, the front guys were off, I started walking steady, a group of half a dozen or so, John was in this group, no one was making conversation, it was the realisation of what we were attempting. That was on folk's minds. However, as I had my plan to get to know John, I asked him how he was and how things had been for him recently. We chatted and the early miles passes quickly. We enjoyed the early water point, then checkpoint and before we knew it daylight and the top of Conic Hill.

I train with a guy who's 73, and although Old Jack, as he's known, is a marathon runner, most of the experienced folk, seem to be knowledgeable about all sorts of subjects. John was no different, instilling me with confidence, just like my old training mate Jack, I was well at home in John's company.

The weather was kind to us until Saturday dinnertime by which we had a steady stream of drizzle, but nothing heavy, and it was warm too. The views from the Loch Lomond were stunning, the first drop bag came in handy and all went ok. We were well fed and watered at the checkpoint.

We began to play leapfrog with the competitors who were near to us, this made for light banter and I was clicking with John, whose company I was really enjoying. I'm a born joker and loud, and I could say a quip and John would add his own accompaniment on it to form a well-rounded jest. There's no point in been out there on the trail, if you can't find the time to have some banter and joviality!

After Beinglas we carried on to the checkpoint at Achtertyre, this section is tough and hilly, but well way marked on a good track and better underfoot than had been by the Loch Lomond section (which is rocky, tree roots, technical, even includes some minor scrambling). The route to Achtertyre seemed quiet too as the day was drawing on.

However as time passed the only folk who didn't seem to get passed, by other folk were John and I. We would carry on at the same pace, see folk in the distance, catch them up, have a chat, and reach the next checkpoint, and more often than not we would depart on our own. WE WEREN'T RACING, WE WERE PACING.

The weather was windy and cold on the traverse towards the Bridge of Orchy. We donned full waterproofs hat and gloves, it was quite wild for a while, and I was glad to get to the checkpoint, especially for my 2nd drop bag. The food and shelter at the checkpoint was excellent, as was the service, everyone was talking to John and having a laugh and even though, he was tired, he was giving them it back, much to my amusement! It was around 7pm or 8pm and we set off to the next checkpoint.

We left Bridge of Orchy knowing that daylight would soon be gone and a long stretch over Rannoch Moor awaited us. We set a good pace, although, we were still catching the odd competitor. Many had the same tale of woe, how they were suffering, the light heartedness sometimes doesn't cut it. But you can but try. We eventually arrived at the Kingshouse Check Point, where Jim and co were waiting for us with warm food and drinks, which were very welcome. Jim was trying to help a lady to enable her to accompany us on our crossing to Kinlochleven (up and over the Devil's Staircase). We buddied up with another competitor who had enjoyed a short sleep in a tent to regain strength and the 3 of us set off into the night.

We climbed the Devil's Staircase and descended to Kinlochleven. We nearly lost the route at one point, but John put us right at the workings low side of the aluminium works.

We got to the checkpoint and were again fed with warm food and drink. It was just 4am, so we decided on a power nap for an hour {note from race organisers: again this is a very smart move and each competitor is carrying their lightweight sleeping bag when they arrive into Kinlochleven}. We left just after 5am, up and over to Lundavra and the welcome sight of the last water/checkpoint.

We hiked on up towards the last climb out of the forest and up on to the forest road at the top. We changed out of our wet gear as it was becoming humid and set off in earnest to the finish at Fort William

I took the opportunity on the easy descent to thank John for his company and companionship on this wonderful journey of the West Highland Way. I had learned even more about life, with the company of John, in the testing conditions, there was no subject not discussed at length, we shared our athletic, and life endeavours, much like old friends.

John was sincere with his comments, saying I kept him going. I took that as a great compliment, it was the icing on the cake, for me. It optimises what Jim and his race support team are trying to achieve with the Challenge race. To test, to learn and to challenge all competitors whether runners, joggers or hikers on the West Highland Way.

Well done John and thanks again.

Well done Jim and the Race Support Team

Cheers

M Mattison

Race Year: 2019

Finishing Time: 34:32

