Highland Trail 550 – 2022 – Rob Waller

Most people reading this will know what the Highland Trail 550 is. However, some will not and some may be under the misapprehension this is a slightly more demanding MTB cycling version of the North Coast 500.

Let’s be clear. This is a very very very hard adventure, which includes hike-a-biking many miles, through bogs, across streams and rivers, up rocky climbs and down peat bog cliffs. This is not a proverbial walk in the park. There are long remote stretches through dodgy terrain. It is not a ride around the man made trails of “gnarly” bike parks. It is not even the equivalent of a Lakeland Loop or a trip through the Cairngorms. This is attritional travel in arduous conditions.

This is fun.

If you believe in reward in proportion to effort, this is a trip to research and target. I love it. And having signed off my second ride in 2016 with a “never again”, I came back and finished again in 2021, but without a write-up. A lot changes as time passes and some things do not. It had been a challenging few years personally, from a health perspective and also family-wise. Enough said that I wanted to “prove I still could” in 2021, even if this wasn’t going to be troubling the pointy end of affairs in the so called race format. I have long since signed up to enjoying the process as much as the outcome; holding on to former glory outcomes ruins the process towards getting them, especially with age. With age comes, a version of, wisdom. 2021 was magical in many ways, long encounters, brief encounters, all soul rebuilding and life moved on.

So what about 2022?

This was the first year I prepared properly. Alan and I had some quality weekends in the Black Mountains, riding a mix of unladen and laden bikes over the weekend and always camping out, in beautiful spots, making great memories. I might even have had a cider or half. There was also an excellent trip to Cadair Idris, camping just below the summit with other HT550 veterans Mike Toyn and John Fettis. Watching John’s feather-light “sleep system” almost blow away was slapstick hilarious. However, when the wind picked up that night, it was possibly the most secure system, weighted down by body, whereas tents leaned as sails into the wind. We were all intact in the morning.

Preparation was going well, with kit choices laid out weeks in advance and packing tried and tested on the bike. Fitness-wise, things were brewing nicely, with the long weekends and a booked trip to the Ardennes to ride a Cent Cols Challenge “Hardennes” road trip, from a base camp hostel, single room, covid-friendly. I even drove out to avoid the virus risk of unnecessary contact. Having lived like a hermit for two years, in fear of heart related side effects from the virus (fuelled by GPs nagging in my ear etc), it was very strange being in company, and international company at that.

The riding and banter were superb, so missed and so needed. Then the bombshell. Covid was in our midst. It was a matter of time and sure enough the lateral flow test lit up positive 6 days into 8 days of riding, perhaps explaining the blocked feeling creeping in a few days earlier. It felt like a death sentence…. all those concerns of worse case scenarios queuing up to come true. It was utterly weird, waiting for the illness to hit. And boy, did it hit.

At just after Noon on the day of the positive test, the sledgehammer of symptoms came down. Hot, then freezing, front of head headache, back of head headache, sore throat, coughing, sore hips and joints, wakefulness, sleepiness. A merry-go-round but without the predictability and rhythm and certainly no fun and music. 2 days in bed and I felt I could make the journey home in the car, which indeed is what happened, only to tumble into bed for another couple of days sleep and symptoms on arrival.

Slowly, the virus got bored and left the body. After a couple or so weeks I was tickling the pedals and then exploring longer distances but the run up to the HT for 5 or so weeks did not include a challenging ride. Although ready to go, my mind was haunted by the shadow of low late levels of physical preparation in this final period and the recent recurring weariness.

I didn’t mix with the pre-ride gatherings in Tyndrum, keeping a low profile but enjoying the occasional chat. I knew what was ahead, having had varied experiences of completions in 2015, 2016 and 2021 and didn’t want to excite the nerves further, mine or others’. I was ready mind-wise, covid aside, kit-wise and even fuel-wise. There was no stove this year but there was a laminated list of food stops, opening times and contact numbers, which I could even read wearing contact lenses. I also had a new Exposure light with long running time for potential night riding towards more ideal camping stops.

When proceedings kicked off, I made sure I sat at the back and span a really low gear, trying not to get carried away with the excitement of the roll out and knowing I was not troubling a leaderboard; the “race” was with myself, to finish, to endure, to enjoy and to journey through the best of the Highlands and the many experiences of trail, weather and people.

As a rule, I find the highlights of the trips come from the extreme moments, be it of pain or joy and these tend to focus on nights, food and trail challenges. All the better shared with others, sometimes in a moment, sometimes for longer.

Day one is relatively benign in terms of trail challenges and the highlight has to be the single track crossing of Ben Alder, both the up and the down. Thrilling, if all alone this year. Great views, great riding, great progress. Perhaps I was charging on a bit too much in the valley but all felt well in the world.

Why the energy melts away towards the mid section of the Corrieyairack Pass AGAIN, I don’t know, or rather I didn’t address AGAIN.

Last year I rode the zig zags, only to pay big time soon afterwards with zero energy for the run in to Fort Augustus. Way before the top this year, it was turning into a trudge of misery and dark thoughts, all put at the door of covid. Thanks to Naomi from Edinburgh passing with a word of encouragement, my spirits lifted enough to enjoy the descent together, flying down the first straight bit with the mountain dolphins (deer) keeping us company, wary of when they might suddenly dart across our path, slowing to let them cross the trail just in front of us. A magical moment.

The magic was short-lived…. On entering Fort Augustus, my first sight was John Fettis outside the Chinese, looking somewhat disconsolate. He had had covid more recently than me and had not enjoyed the benefit of the miles I had had in Belgium; he was all for bailing and I thought he might have a point!!! There was B&B above the Chinese and, having had a stomach refusal on food intake and amazement at Beccy’s delight at chicken chow mein “AND chips”, I had a bath and fell asleep without eating. I should note that Naomi had advised sleeping on the bailing idea and what wisdom that proved to be.

When I woke up the next day, all seemed good again. Having nattered with John, who was still set for bailing, I moved out at 9.30, no breakfast but a belly full of desire to have a good holiday and see what came to pass. Bailing was still an option but one that could wait and so tease me further into route commitment.

The journey to Contin and beyond is also largely benign, although the views keep building and the wildness opening up, with few objective trail difficulties. The riding is certainly mixed and occasionally “flowing” in a “where did the time go” sort of way, and the weather was behaving, the now interval snacking and body management working and the rear marker status proving a plus as I had solo trails and views. It was pure bliss.

I should mention the great chat with Pete early in the day, who was recording a story from riders. Why do this route? For the love of the challenge, the process, the adventure, the experiences, not the outcome. The world of “normal” stresses washes away and simpler more organic stresses of travelling through challenging terrain and circumstances take over. For me anyway, this makes me feel very alive, very in the moment.

Having made Contin for the important restocking, there was no stopping for the day yet. The brief chat with Kirsty (munching pies and even getting free pies thrown at us by the shop) about schooling, passion for her job, kids, life choices, this being her first MTB experience of scale, was uplifting; in the end she completed and related that a comment in Contin to flex her “80miles / day or 11PM stop, whichever comes sooner” rule had proved helpful. I had suggested putting more miles in the bag, if time allowed, to make up for what lay ahead.

Barrelling down the doubletrack descent towards Croick, before the tarmac briefly resumes up the valley then muddying across into Glen Oykel, there was a herd of Highland Cows on the trail…. and to the side a nervous looking Kasia, worried about passing them. So much so, it appeared she was willing to climb a Munro to avoid them! After some mild encouragement, she followed me through as the beasts were waved gently aside without complaint.

As night began to fall, so the rain began to fall also. I stopped under dry trees to eat a sandwich just before the Croick junction (the first of many coronation chicken variations, this one quite tasty, unlike others to come) before pushing on and recapturing Kasia. To my surprise, we found a dry open shed, big enough for two and dry enough not to worry about tents etc.

Having replaced my sleep mattress like for like just before the event, I had not bothered to blow it up. Had I done so before 11PM on Sunday night, I would have discovered sooner that the replacement was not quite like for like, missing half my body length. Whoops. I was surprised it didn’t prove cooling on my legs that night or any other thereafter.

Moving by 4.30AM the next day, drizzle and dark skies marked the ascent of Glen Cassley and the crossing to the entry into the Northern loop proper. I had seen nobody. Alone again in this bleak but alluring landscape of rock, water, peat and bleakness.

This entry trail was the site of random hugs in 2015 but none were to be repeated in 2022, no game keepers in sight and gentler weather too. Last year, Jonathan Edwards and I had come across a Komatsu digger just above the peat slide. This year, it was parked, rejected from its sentry and shelter duty in the high lands, at the entry into the loop. I took a photo for Jono and sent him a memory card!!

What is this I see? All in glistening black, there is a rider! More precisely, a pusher. Misfiling her nationality from a brief day one encounter at the head of Glen Lyon, I said hello. Cat and I made one of those silent alliances, of motivation and spirit in challenging conditions, to get through the peat ahead. We were soon three, as Beccy slid past, then just far enough ahead to provide one of the most entertaining (sorry, at the expense of another) moments of the day. Spoiler alert for the few that might read this and not know. Do NOT go between the stones at the bottom of the peat slither. I have done it and disappeared up to my waist. I watched as Beccy emerged in similar shock and delight…. Fortunately, there is a deep river just after that washes both body and bike and so it did for Beccy.

Morten first created the impression of a stoic Viking, insisting on riding the climb from Achfary, or much of it. (I was “walking” and taking it steady.) The next couple of days were to see the inner good humour of this wonderful man rise to the top and crack his face into the most beautiful of smiles!!

No amount of Cat and my charm offensive, re-joined briefly at the fish restaurant, could persuade early sustenance, so Drumbeg-bound we were. I both love and hate this stretch and stripped off the waterproof layers to be cooler for the roller coaster of tarmac that reveals bays, islands, views of all varieties to the North. Of course, it started to rain soon after.

There was quite a social gathering at the store. Steve and Wendy were welcoming as usual and made the best and most appreciated sandwiches of the trip. Somewhat ironically, the default filling last year had been coronation chicken, which was not on offer this year….

Having passed where Jonathan and I sheltered last year, Cat and I rolled on through the golden hour to Lochinver, past crashing waves on sand, shingle and shining rock, along single track of bliss and rock obstacles of (this year) playfulness rather than cursing (2015). Lochinver was eventually a shining view, with cardboard cut-out of backdrop mountains and the alluring sanctuary of a dry bunkhouse, warm shower and bedded sleep; in a bonus empty 6 bunk room. Deep sleep. Body ready for more. My last thought that night…. I was having fun. Would this state continue?! Sod it, if I wasn’t racing/pushing on. Rushing through these experiences and feelings would have been like reaching the end with none of the journey. This trip / event is ALL about the journey, which can, of course, be experienced in many ways, year to year and person by person.

One big memory of the next day is fish and chips. Once at Oykel Bridge. Again in Ullapool. I don’t think the third time “repeat” on the final climb really counts. The overall day is a blur of good times in my memory. I can think myself into the Ledmore crossing single track, skimming stones in the loch, obstacle cobbles, the peat single track, the tarmac prediction of rain, the perfect timing to hotel to make first orders for lunch, the banter with the richest man I will likely meet, sunny trails and calm lochs matched by stretching thoughts and pondering principles of living, the smell of gorse, sun over the sea, the flash of outdoors shop and supermarket, the fish and chips, an ice cream, sliding into relaxation, golden hour pushing a coffin, meeting Morten just after “breaking” his bike … all building to the perfect mountain campsite for three and sleeping like a log. Happiness - not wanting to be anywhere else.

There always comes a time on a long ride when I get emotional. I mean break down in tears emotional. It can be a finish. It can be a view. I guess it can be tiredness, sadness or happiness. I try not to overanalyse it (which means I really do overanalyse it) but the next morning, above Fisherfield, with the sun rising to my back and views of previously walked ridges to my right. I had a wee weep. The weeping on HT is usually sweet and so it was this time. In the HT zone.

The Fisherfield crossing (river, clamber and causeway) was physically uneventful and time was taken soaking up the silence, space, skyscape and feelings, of which there were many. Arriving in Poolewe was a shock, both the pace of the final mile or so, apparently induced by the aroma of coffee beans, and the warmth of the sun. The latter encouraged a drying of kit and a readiness for the (my least favourite section) Tollie Path. Annie Le was taking photos and sewed a seed in my head that took hold a few hours later. Annie said she rode from Poolewe to the finish in one (long 35+ hour) go in 2021 … I do recall Annie saying that “she wouldn’t recommend it” but that only came back to me in Tyndrum!

On my own again, Tollie Path delivered its usual personal misery, if less than in previous years. New Zealand Dave, on the other hand, seemed to be having the full experience. His kit was exploded all over the track and his was “waxing lyrical” about the delights of hike a bike and …. he was bailing; I mean literally on the phone bailing, or trying to. I tried hard to keep him in the game but his head was not for turning. But he was in fine spirits and was making plans.

Onwards in the evening sun with views across to Slioch and the Postman’s Path, enjoyed in 2016 with Chris Purt. The quiet tarmac section culminated in an unexpected bonus, last orders full blown dinner at the Whistle Stop / Gorse Bush café. Outside on a table to myself, I feasted on sea bass, broad beans, peas, baby onions, chilli prawns, fresh orange juice and cheesecakes….. Wonderful, if somewhat costly, and the body was feeling good again.

Just as I was leaving, Cat rolled up and the golden hour through Torridon was a haze of easy riding, views and calm. The teahouse bothy was occupied (and smelly) but the flat areas were tent free. So it was, that the best night’s sleep of the trip ended with a mission in mind.

Mission Tyndrum…

I didn’t know how far (255km) or how long (27+ hours) but I knew I was going to have a go….

This was a completely new experience, having never ridden through the night solo and into the next day. Every time the terrain invited a little dig, I kept saying to myself out loud “no matches, no matches”, as in don’t burn energy unnecessarily.

The day time was a blur of pleasant, if occasionally uncomfortable, progress. Sunrise Torridon single track, engaging with the technical descent, DRY woods, road rolling, formal gardens, wind works double track, muddy single track, other’s dropped oil (picked up), tractor memories, sandwich (surprisingly not coronation chicken) by the sea, road climb to view and blast to petrol station refuel, sitting on the effort on the run in to the hike a bike, steady to the top, photo by Camban Bothy, timing the breaks for food, gently down the looooooong Glen Affric/Feshie (I know which, honest), nodding to the Chris Purt last camp of 2016 and lie down of 2021, steady over the wooded rollers and gravel climb of grind, whooshing the descent to the main road and quick crossing, knowing the 8PM deadline for Fort Augustus would be comfortably met on the ascent of the military “road”, so playing on the descent before restocking and eating….. and onwards along the 35 miles of “flat” to the dark of Fort William, passing the camp of fire of last year, before embarking on the cold of Glen Nevis and the pitch black of the West Highland Way, edging the descent into Kinlochleven, feeling bad at 2.30AM eating another f\*\*\*ing coronation chicken sandwich outside the noisy mill, sizzling my tongue on Haribos, pushing / riding the double track… and then BOOM sunrise and spontaneous body rejuvenation, including a spell with recording Pete that passed unnoticed, a magical sunrise at the top of the Devil’s Staircase.

At the Kingshouse Hotel, I was well awake again but really hungry, if incapable of eating much, and somehow blagged a 5.30 breakfast in the empty foyer. For some reason, I thought being inside 6 days was the next good idea, so I pushed hard, or as hard as I could, all the way to the line, making it with one minute to spare.

WHAT A JOURNEY! WHAT A PROCESS! What feelings! What experiences! Happiness is not wanting to be anywhere else and, for almost all of this trip (8.30 on Saturday evening aside), I was utterly happy.

Thank you to those with whom great experiences were shared and from whom inspirations sourced. Thank you, again, to Alan for laying on the stage for riders to act out their version of the Highland Trail play; the same scripts but individual interpretations.

Do it again? Definitely!!