

I hadn't meant to ride the Highland Trail. However, things don't always turn out as planned. Back in 2019 I was asked to commentate on the race for the DotWatcher website. It was great fun and I commentating on the riders took me back to places that they were riding through and I felt the pull of the event once more.

The race did not take place in 2020 and so on 22nd May 2021 I found myself on the start line with the usual mix of nerves and excitement. This year there was no mass start for Covid-19 reasons so riders went off in small groups at 10 minute intervals. This meant that there was no crazy rush at the start but it did mean that there was always another rider just up the track to act as an incentive for the first few hours.

Preparing for the Highland Trail has become a bit of a routine. Simply ride as much as possible for as long as possible in the run up to the event. There is always a feeling that you could have done more training and you are always aware that there are certain sections that you just cannot train for as they are simply too hard.

Day one was going great. The miles were passing by comfortably. The weather was dry but cool and I was happy not to face the risk of overheating like I had done on my last ride (2017 had been a hot ride). This year's route meant that there would be no resupply options until Fort Augustus, at least 12 hours' ride away. I stopped to eat part way through the day and managed to force down a peanut butter and banana wrap and a flapjack bar and carried on riding. As the day settled in I became aware of a nagging feeling of nausea. I eased up on my pace, drank lots, tried to eat but nothing helped. I simply felt sick and could not face eating.

There are some wonderful trails on day one. Probably the standout section is the Ben Alder singletrack. After a long gradual climb there is a narrow, twisty descent that seems to go on for ages. This was great fun to ride and I was glad of the extra protection I had fitted in my tyres to mitigate the impacts every time I crossed a drainage bar.

By late afternoon / early evening I was accepting of the nausea and had given up trying to force food down. I figured my body would sort itself out in due course and I would feel hungry when I was ready. I laboured my way over the Corrieairack pass and down into Fort Augustus. I had arrived in time for the chip shop but could not face eating. I had been thinking that a comfortable night in a b+b would be helpful but nowhere had any space so I rode on and camped just outside of town.

Day two started early and I had set my sights on Contin for food and resupply. That would be mid morning. The sun was rising as I started riding the light over Loch Ness as I rode through the early morning mist was very special. I eased myself into the day, riding steady and trying to strike a balance between dawdling and going too hard for my body that had not eaten properly for a day. I was pleased to ride past several riders who had gone past me in the night but were still in tents and to catch a few others up who had made early starts. It was good to ride along with them for a bit and to hear about how they were finding the ride. There were several stories similar to mine. Apparently the pizza shop had been filled with riders all looking at their massive pizzas but unable to face eating them.

I had a great ride with a fellow competitor called Ruth Crewe who was on a gravel bike. She was very contented in her choice of bike and we enjoyed sharing the trial until a bit of technical singletrack split us up. On the run into Contin, the effects of hunger hit me and I crawled along at a snail's pace. The last time I rode, I had nearly quit at Contin due to heat exhaustion. This time, I had made an agreement with myself that I would not quit because of my head. I would only quit if I was unable to go on through injury or bike problems.

When I got to Contin, I forced some food down, slugged a coke and coffee and soon felt perkier. The restorative effects of a short rest, caffeine and sugar are not to be underestimated. Onwards, onwards. The next great section is past Loch Vaich; I love this bit. There is a 'hidden' exit at the head of the valley that does not involve a huge climb but the easy way out does not reveal itself until the last minute. At the start of the descent out northwards were two local, old guys on tatty mountain bikes who gave me a huge cheer as I rode past. I wondered what they were doing there as they were miles from anywhere. They became a talking point for riders as everyone who passed them had wondered the same thing (pike fishing???). The north end of the glen is part of a rewilding scheme and there is a much improved diversity of plant and tree life.

Next stop, Oykel Bridge Hotel. Soup went down a treat as did macaroni cheese (normally I eat a plant based diet but I reverted to vegetarian for convenience during the event). However all was not right with me as I couldn't eat all my chips (quite an embarrassment for a northerner). There was a group of riders there all looking at the weather forecast for the next day. It ranged from light drizzle and a breeze through to torrential rain and strong winds depending on which forecast was consulted. I tried not to get too worked up as there was not much I could do about it. Onwards and northwards, I made the most of the evening's following wind. In the back of my mind were the points I had camped at in 2015 and 2017 and by the time I stopped for the night, I was only a few hours behind them. I felt good.

Day three heralded the most northerly section. I set off towards the Bealach Horn and the rain started. It turned out that the most pessimistic forecast was correct. By the time it was at its heaviest, I had turned westwards and so it was falling on my back. I still got drenched but at least it was not blowing in my face. Down the peat hags, drop the bike down the 1.5 metre ledge, jump down after it into the peaty sludge. The process has become familiar over the years but it is still hard work. By the time I had done the fast, technical descent to Achfary I was very cold and my hands were not working properly. Time to stop in a cow shed for a respite, to eat and warm up. Hands in armpits while I forced food down – eating was still an effort and usually made me feel nauseous. Thankfully the next section was the drag out of Achfary and a chance to warm up. I had intended to push on past the Kylesku hotel, carrying on to the Drumbeg stores, but by the time I passed the entrance I was cold and wet again and the allure of a coffee and warmth was too much.

The night before, I had checked TrackLeaders and seen that Alan had camped about 3 hours behind me. It came as quite a shock to check it again the hotel and see that he was just behind me. How had he gained that much time? He arrived in the hotel shortly after, equally wet and cold. He had not wanted to go over the most northerly section in the terrible weather and had done a short cut on the road. He had scratched. It took some will power to step outside into the rain again as I was not sure I could face days of being wet and cold like I had done in 2015.

The afternoon's riding had the benefit of a tailwind along the Drumbeg road and I happily reminisced about the ride that Rachel and I had done along it on a tandem tour a couple of years earlier. The rain abated, the sun came out and I began to dry out. Another triumph for perseverance.

A quick refuel in Lochinver outside the Spar, more coffee and coke and some forced down food, helped prepare me for the Ledmore traverse. This is a long, slog of pushing that takes between 3 and

4 hours. The only thing to do is settle into it, enjoy the views and stop thinking about things. Before you know it you are at the other end.

By the time I got to the road at the other end, I was still a few hours behind my progress from 2015 and 2017 and feeling good about things. However, I knew I needed to get to the Oykel Bridge Hotel before they stopped serving dinner. I thought they would stop at 20.00: I had 30 mins. The wind had swung round again (why were the wind gods being so kind to me?) and I went as hard as I could. At 5 mins to eight, I realised that I would not get there in time so rang the hotel with the aim of putting my order in and leaving the food to go cold to eat on arrival. Thankfully they were still serving until 20.15 so I got in in time.

Soup went down a treat, mushroom burger was OK, chips still not really going down well. Phil Clarke turned up and he was in a similar state of tiredness to me. We both accepted that Ullapool was not going to be feasible that night. We had both asked if the OBH had any space in their bunkhouse only to be told it was full. We dragged ourselves out into the evening and camped a few minutes away.

Day four began with a steady ride over to Ullapool. It was wonderfully still and the views were amazing. I don't know why but it is a real psychological landmark to reach the coast at Ullapool. It feels like I am on the way back. Breakfast on the quayside and by this stage, I was properly hungry and ready to eat anything. I was so pleased that my appetite had returned and that food could be consumed with passion and enjoyment. I felt ready for the next stage. Which was lucky because the next stage is the Fisherfield. This began with a new route in which was a welcome change from the Coffin Road over to Dundonnell. It also went past the slabs of Sgurr Ban which are simply stunning lumps of rock that rise hundreds of metres. They are a sight to behold.

By the top of the massive hike-a-bike section, Phil had caught me up and we had both caught up John Fettis who I know through Alan. The sun began to come out and we did the stunning descent to the Carnmore causeway together. After this, is an extended section of singletrack that is the best in the world. Mainly because of the views and the amount of effort you have to put into getting to ride it. We charged along it like we were on a day ride (and forgot about the previous 12 hours of effort to get there) and had fun swooping round corners and bumping over drainage bars. Life was just about perfect at that moment in time.

We rocked into Poolewe to catch the hotel in time for dinner. My appetite was back but I could only manage a smallish amount before I was full. I guess my stomach had shrunk a bit. The food was great and we decided to carry on along the Tollie Path. Some love it, some hate it. I think it depends on whether it is wet or dry. In the wet, the rock slabs seem like ice and fear means a lot of walking. We faced them in the dry, with a rising mood and pink clouds. Thus, it was more smiles and fun riding. We called it a day at Slattadale and camped by Loch Maree. The night was chilly and sleep was fitful but being tired on the Highland Trail is part of the deal.

The plan for day four was simple: ride over to Strathcarron and get to the hotel there in time for breakfast. That would fuel me up for the rest of the day and keep me in line with my 2015 times (2017 times were out the window at this point). The descent to Achnashellach is similar to the Tollie Path in that it is treacherous when wet, but this year it was dry and I rode more of it than I have ever done. It was a great technical challenge of nerves, balance and skill. I figured the hotel would stop breakfasts at 09.00 and had 30 minutes to do the road section there. I used a big gear and pushed on, by the time I was approaching the hotel, it was just after 09.00 and I was practicing my pleading to be allowed a breakfast. When I rolled up to the hotel, I was distraught to find it shut. Ooops. Phil, John and I had a snack on their outside tables in lieu of breakfast and carried on. On the next section

to Dornie, I paid the price for the lack of food and fast ride to the hotel. My motivation dropped like a stone, and I watched as John and Phil rode away from me. All I could do was push along a trail I should have been able to ride and accept that I would come good again if I was patient. I was surprised to find that John and Phil were still in Dornie. I greeted them with a deranged, thousand yard stare and plunged into the shop to buy copious quantities of food. I demolished a two person macaroni cheese (heated in the shop's microwave) and washed it down with a coke and coffee. It was surprising how quickly I felt human again.

Onwards up the hike a bike from Kintail to Glen Afric. We caught Lars Henning up who was struggling with hike a bike due to a sore Achilles. We formed a group of four as we rode down the glen which is huge in scale and full of beautiful Scotch Pine and Silver Birch trees. We rolled into Tomich and stopped for food at the hotel. We all demolished a three course meal and I felt wonderfully and contentedly full. It was great to have eaten a meal and felt full to bursting without any nausea. We resisted the landlord's offer of a deal on two twin rooms and carried on over the pylon climb. We put our lights on for the climb of General Wade's military road up and over to Fort Augustus. It had been a big day and we camped by the Caledonian Canal shortly before midnight.

I had gone to sleep aware that I was further on than I had been in 2015, that I should finish the next day and that Rachel would be waiting for me on the finish line. I had not been under any time pressure to leap up and get going so I didn't set my alarm. I had a deep and restful sleep until 05.00. Our group of four had all got going at different times and I began my final day alone. It would have been great to have finished in our group as we had all been getting on very well but it seemed like that was not to be

I caught Phil up and we rendezvoused at Caol outside the Coop for breakfast. It was a shock to the system to see real life carrying on as kids were waiting the school bus and people were on their way to work. It is easy for your sense of reality to shrink to the race and nothing else.

The section of the West Highland way to Kinlockleven was the usual experience of a 'rush hour' of walkers who were all making their way in the opposite direction followed by a great technical descent into town. One last snack from the Coop and then up over the Devil's staircase. Lars passed Phil and I while we were snacking and we didn't see him again until the finish. At the bottom we met Liam Glen, this year's race winner, who was there with a couple of others to cheer riders on, they told us that John was behind us. This was a shock to me as he had set off first in the morning but we must have passed him in Caol / Fort William.

The afternoon was hot and the views were amazing. Phil and I spurred each other on to the finish; we had somehow arrived at an unspoken pact that we would finish together. I had really enjoyed his company, we had ridden together, on and off, for most of the race and it seemed fitting that we should finish together.

We rolled over the finish line together at 16.22 (5 days, 7 hours and 47 minutes) and Rachel was there to greet me. Seeing as my tracker had stopped working the night before (unbeknownst to me) I'm lucky she managed to time her arrival at the finish line 10 mins before I got there. She showed great fortitude by being willing to hug my unwashed body. By the end, I'd ridden quicker than in 2015 and was pleased with my completion particularly as it had happened in the face of several situations when it would have been easy to pack it all in.