

The Highland Cross

Claire Whitehead

It was deep in the middle of winter when I finally put my name on the entry sheet for the Highland Cross. I had known of the race for years; it is a unique event that manages to combine raising huge sums of money for charity with being a competitive and gruelling event. It is a 50 mile race from Kintail to Beauly, the first 20 miles being run, or walked, and the following 30 miles are cycled on public road. Many famous names from past and present Scottish athletics have competed in it.

I had been a spectator for several years as my husband Dan took part. In the summer of 2013 I was several months pregnant with our 4th baby when I stood in the pouring rain watching Dan finish. "I'll do that next year" I thought to myself, as always swept away by the competitive atmosphere at these events. As an athlete it's always hard standing at the sidelines, and inner thoughts always turn to setting new challenges. "I can do that" I thought.

In the months before the race I trained, and raced a bit, hill running being my main sport. Time isn't usually an issue; despite having 4 children we always manage to squeeze our training in. For me there are other problems which affect my ability to train, a weakened core from bearing 4 children and a lack of recovery time after training sessions. As June drew nearer, I realised I was going to have to compete "on a wing and a prayer". Although I'd done a few long runs, and was gradually building up a bit of consistency with my training, it was far from ideal. The race is based on teams of three, in my case I was with my husband Dan and Adrian Davis. I was not the only one with training problems as Adrian had barely run due to a knee injury.

As is often the case in our family, our plans were made and then changed at the last minute. The initial idea of taking the whole family over to Beauly to spend the night in our campervan before handing them over to my mum on Saturday morning prior the race was luckily rethought. My mum asked the simple question "why don't you leave the boys at home and I'll come to your house" and suddenly life looked a whole lot more straightforward. Instead of

packing up for 6, I could concentrate on what I would need for the 20 mile run and 30 mile bike ride. Knowing I always struggle to eat before and during competitions was my main concern. How was I going to get up on Saturday morning and eat my porridge with a stomach that felt like lead? The best I can do is eat plenty in the days leading up to an event to ensure my muscles are well fuelled, so the pre-race breakfast is just topping up the energy levels. The discovery of Shot Blocs has really helped me too. These little energy sweets may be dismissed by some as expensive Jelly Babies, but to me they are an easy to ingest, slow releasing carbohydrate life-saver. I packed my bag with several packets of them.

It is logistically challenging getting to the start of the Highland Cross, Kintail, over on the west coast of Scotland, with all the necessary kit. A convoy of buses transports the 700 odd participants from Inverness and Beaulieu. From the start point walkers set off early in the morning, followed by the runners. But the first challenge is to survive the bus journey without getting travel sick. Dan and I hopped on one of the new looking coaches only to find it almost full. We squeezed into seats at the back and I looked at Dan and shook my head. No way would I survive sitting at the back of this coach with no fresh air and no leg room. We quickly squeezed back out and went to the very end of the line of buses to where an old bus was sitting with big old fashioned seats and windows that opened. We sat down right at the front and enjoyed a relatively smooth journey during which I watched Dan effortlessly eat his peanut butter and jam sandwich as I choked mine back, telling myself I needed the energy.

The changeover from the foot section to bikes is in the middle of nowhere, or so it feels, at the end of Glen Affric. The bikes have been taken to the changeover by lorries, and laid out ready for the competitors coming in. When your bike is packed onto the lorry you have to make sure all your cycling kit is with it in a bag, and both your bike and bag have to have your race number attached. When you are ready to start the race, you hand over a bag with all your pre-race warm clothing to a lorry which transports it back to Beaulieu where you collect it at the finish. Amazingly, this all seems to work well and all you have to do is get your head around all the permutations of what clothing you want to have available and where.

As the race starts on the west coast, crosses some very high ground and finishes on the east coast, there is a high chance of passing through many changes of weather. In 2012 Dan left Kintail in sunshine and soaring temperatures to arrive on his bike in Beaulieu in pouring rain, needing first aid attention for near hypothermia. With this in mind I tied my light, waterproof jacket around my waist as I loaded my pockets with Shot Blocs and an old favourite, Nairns rough oatcakes.

The Highland Cross is a really friendly affair, and you meet people from all walks of life. As I walked up the road to the start line I met my friend Des, who presents the Adventure Show. Uh oh, I thought, pity they're filming when I'm not in great shape. Who wants to see themselves on TV not quite on top of their game? I kept that thought to myself though, and we chatted about the sunshine and our hopes for fine weather. I then met people I race regularly against, people I haven't seen for years, friends who were there just to make it to the finish line, and even an old friend from university who, when I last saw him, was more prone to hanging about in the Union pub.

The start of the race is on a winding landrover track that snakes up Gleann Lichd. The route then swings north east, up Eionngleann, climbing some 320m and then passes by Alltbeithe in Glen Affric. As the race began I could quickly see that I was off the pace of the leading lady. My legs were lacking in running miles. I decided to focus on my own race and just start steady and see how it went. Despite having studied the map intently many times prior to the race, all details of what lay ahead seemed to have vanished from my mind. I recalled something about a climb after about 3 miles, a bothy after about 8 miles, then some tea ladies and then the torturous yellow brick road, 7 miles of undulating track to the changeover point. Looking back that's roughly what I remember, interspersed with lots of pain. The best bit of the whole race for me was the long climb which comes after the first section of landrover track. This is on nice single path tracks and I was able to pass runner after runner. My strength has always been in my climbing and it was so satisfying to pass people who had shot off up the flat track at the start of the race. But as the track topped out at over 1000ft and I began to descend, I could feel a niggly in my hamstring which quickly intensified into a pain that inhibited my ability to stride out. It's hard not to focus

solely on the pain when every step sends out a shooting red hot rod of pain up the back of your leg, but it's amazing how your body eventually dulls down the pain signals when it realises you're not going to stop, and other things began to take over in the worry stakes. Was I not going to catch "Horny Dave" from university who used to be a gangly unfit lad? Where was that other packet of Shot Blocs? Was that them I heard falling out of my pocket? Turning and running back up the hill to retrieve them was demoralising but not as bad as facing 10 miles without them. And if that was the tea tent ahead, did that mean I still had 7 whole miles to go?

Running along the yellow brick road was one of the most endless, painful experiences I have endured. Apparently I was not alone in feeling this. The Highland Cross run is notorious for leaving one's legs really knackered, something to do with the combination of fast running at the start and the end with steep climbing and descending in the middle. I heard this year's winner Joe Symonds say his legs were seriously hurting those last hard miles. Somewhere along the way I caught up with our 3rd team member Adrian. He was limping along and decided to chum me on the last section. He is a cheery kind of a chap and kept up a string of chatter along the way. I had by this point lost my sense of humour about the whole event and wasn't really answering. At one stage I remember choking as I tried to eat an oatcake, not easy to eat and digest without water and I'd tried to eat it earlier, between water stations. Adrian was looking at me, worried as I choked and struggled to keep running. I didn't even have the energy to explain to him what was wrong. To add insult to injury, the 3rd lady passed me at this point.

Finally we reached the changeover. All I can really recall of this is happily getting on my bike thinking "no more running". The bike ride starts off downhill all the way to Cannich. I quickly passed the lady who had caught me at the end of the run, which was a good feeling, and I wondered if I could make any inroads on the 1st lady. Although I have ridden my bike a lot, I am relatively inexperienced in racing. As male competitor after male competitor passed me, I failed to realise that if I put in a short burst of speed to get on their wheel, my ride would be so much faster as we could work together. I struggled on on my own as single riders and groups passed by, until finally about 8 miles from the end I caught the wheel of someone as

we headed up a short rise. We then worked together to the finish line and those last few miles flew past. If only I had managed this at the start of the ride.

At the finish line, Des came up to me and asked how I'd found the race. I felt happy to be finished but knew I'd been below my best, so there was not the elation you sometimes get when you know you've put in a good performance. I was frustrated with my bike ride, knowing I could have gone harder if I'd been more tactically smart.

However, Dan raced well to finish 5th, and Adrian had pulled away from me on the bike ride and finished 10 minutes ahead. We secured 2nd Open team prize, which felt satisfying. As we drew out of the car park to head home, our thoughts were already turning to the 2015 event.

Some results of the 2014 Highland Cross

First Gent	Joe Symonds 3h:19m:17s
First Lady	Claire Gordon 3:57:18
First Veteran Gent	Dan Whitehead 3:39:24
First Veteran Lady	Claire Whitehead 4:11:18
First Open Team	Nevis Cycles
Second Open Team	Bike Station, Ballater
First Mountain Rescue Team	Aberdeen Mountain Rescue Team

Conversation With An Eaglet

Eric Jensen

I was deeply unsettled. The referendum on Scottish Independence was looming and I just had to get away. North-west Sutherland beckoned and at short notice I arranged accommodation at Bettyhill. From books and scientific papers I had previously worked out the location of several golden eagle home ranges, so here then was an opportunity to examine them further.

My passion for *Aquila chrysaetos* was kindled in 1967 on reading Seton Gordon's second book, "The Charm of the Hills". (I wrote to