

Isle of Coll Half Marathon - 18th August 2012

What a day! A nervous sleep on the top bunk in an Oban back-packers' hostel, getting up at 5.30am to cycle to Oban ferry port, boarding a ferry to Coll at 7.00am, pitching the tent, then running a half marathon at 2.00pm the same day....it was fantastic!

The ferry was full of bikes and runners – and all thin and fit-looking, which worried me not a jot....or perhaps just a little. There was a real buzz in the air, lots of chat back and forth between runners, swapping tales of the various half marathons they'd run that season so far. I elected to sit out on deck so I could keep a look-out for seals, porpoises and gannets, although the driving rain and howling wind soon sent me scurrying for cover. Perfect running conditions, as I can't bear running in the heat. Hmmm. More of that later.

We arrived on Coll – a bleak and beautiful wind-swept island which welcomes up to 400 runners every August for this festival of running: a half run, a half walk, a 10k, a 5k and a 1k children's race, with medals, T shirts and goodies for every entrant. Marshalls were there to direct us to the field surrounding the newly-built community centre, which stayed open for the duration of the weekend so we had 24 hour access to toilets and showers. There we were, happily putting up the tent, me scoffing bananas and malt loaf and chatting to other runners, when I felt a distinctly warm glow on my back. It was the sun. The wind had dropped. It was going to be warm.

At 1.30, we headed back down to the pier for the start of the race. Runners from the Elvet Striders were there – including the man who carried the Olympic torch through Stocksfield – how bizarre! I tried to shake his hand, but he simply thrust his torch into my sweaty paw and gurned at me for the obligatory photo. I just look bemused.

And then we were off. Beautiful scenery, friendly runners (apart from the fast ones at the front who went off like...like....like....well, something very fast) and – HOT sun. I knew then I was doomed – and we hadn't run even half a mile yet!

The course was described as undulating. Yep, that was an accurate description – no major hills, but very rarely a flat stretch where you could just relax, find your rhythm and lengthen your stride. It was when we hit the sand dunes at about mile 6 or so that the heat really started to get to me. But that was ok, because the next water station had some wee nips of the good stuff to get you fired up for the next few miles. My lovely prop for the day had cycled to meet me with energy gels and more water – and a camera. As I struggled up the hills, out would come the camera and I'd have to lift my legs, paste a smile on my face and run – yes, run – past her. It wasn't a pretty sight, especially when I experienced a touch of 'run rage' as I ran past picnickers cheering me on with their glasses of wine. Remarkably, I didn't snatch their glasses as I ran past, most probably because I was trying to stay on my feet and didn't dare risk deviating from a straight line.

The views were amazing – golden beaches, islands shimmering in the sun, sheep giving me the evils as I ran past them...seriously, I was glad they were on the other side of the fence! And then I saw the top of the church, and knew I must be heading back towards the finish line. I had a sneaky look behind me and realised I'd been overtaken by pretty much everyone else, but that was fine by me. It meant

they'd all be there at the finish, cheering me on!

And you know, they were as well! What a great experience it was to sweep down into the village...there were so many people cheering and shouting 'Come on Stocksfield!' as I ran over the line, I couldn't help but shed a tear. Just one, mind – no time to waste, a pint was waiting for me at the bar!.

And then it was time for a shower, food, and a trip to the bar to prepare myself for the night's ceilidh – and how awesome a ceilidh it was! Put many, many dehydrated, tired runners in a room with a band and beer, and you can imagine the scene by 1.00am. Carnage, I tells ya!

So, who's coming with me next year?

Ruth Whiteside, proud to be a member of Stocksfield Striders