



## The Agony and Ecstasy of the LAMM 2008- the exploits of two Wootton Road Runners conquering Munros and the Scottish midges!

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The LAMM is an intriguing race, you know it will be in a fantastic mountain location, you know it will be tough, you may even know about the fickle weather and the dreaded midges. The start point is always a mystery until 2 days before the start; all we knew this time was that it was 2½ hours north of Glasgow – we guessed it was north of Fort William.

A mountain marathon is a two-day challenge of navigation in the high mountains carrying all you need, including your kit for the overnight camp. The weight of your rucksack is a challenge, it must be as light as possible, whilst carrying enough food and warmth to survive, after all this is the north of Scotland when it has been known to be very wet, windy and cold even in June. This means the lightest tent, sleeping bag and stove as well as the minimum clothing you can get away with – it can be an expensive game. The biggest weight is the tent – hence we used a very small one man tent for the two of us; it was cosy.

I checked the LAMM website at the appointed hour of 1.00pm on the Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> June. We were right, the base camp was just 15 miles north of Fort William on the Road to the Isles at Glenfinnan – a famous landmark seen on many a tin of Scottish Shortbread. Quick text to Andrey to confirm location; discussion at the WMMC that night to confirm leaving time – we would start the journey north at 10.00am planning to arrive about 6.00pm if the road is clear. A quick check on the BBC website confirmed that weather would be mixed, in other words it could be bright and sunny but it was also forecast to be wet and windy with Saturday the best day – ah well we would have to prepare again for all eventualities.

The journey was an easy drive, quick stop at Gretna Green Services just north of the border, next stop Fort William last minute supplies to get essentials such as water and beer, then quickly onto Glenfinnan. The car park was a forestry road, not too bad, and then it was a walk in to the camp site – not far they said – after a mile the arms felt rather long: whose idea was it to buy some beer when there was a pub across the road!

The camp site was as ever in a field with a fantastic view, this time the Glenfinnan viaduct. We quickly put up our base tent – lots of room – we went and registered, I had the dibber fixed to my wrist, we were told our start time of 8.20am – we bought the race tee-shirt – Andrey bought two, last year's and this for a bargain £20. We then had some food from Wilf's – good honest camp food, cooked for you saving the real hassle of cooking. We then looked at the gear shop – any last minutes purchases – not yet, but we did return later in the evening as we bought a midge net for our heads as the dreaded Scottish midge arrived about 8.00pm as the wind dropped.



The morning always comes early due to the alarm call from a Scottish piper – quickly out of bed, up to Wilf’s for breakfast, although not quick enough as the queue is outside the marquee with plenty of those dratted midges again – it’s amazing what you can do with a midge hat on. A quick check on our gear making sure we have enough but not too much and then we started the walk to the ‘C’ start, picking up our special LAMM maps on the way then heading up the road beyond the bridge, a 15 minute walk, and we are late! Mind you we had the easy start, all other groups had to go and get the train to their start.

The start is in a hollow on the hill side. We arrived at the start line, put our dibber in the post to start the clock ticking, we were then given a small piece of paper with the list of 7 check points we must visit. We then find a piece of ground and plot the checkpoints on the map with our permanent marker pen. After about 10 minutes, checking our map reading and picking the route we head off up the hillside and meet the official photographer and smile! As you can see the weather was good if you were going to the beach, but very hot work on the mountain – all those hills.



The first checkpoint was a small knoll only about 2½ km from the start point. It was relatively easy to get to, the sky was clear, the lie of the land was clear; it was just a case of our route choice. We were not the first from the start so we had sense of the direction from the routes that others were taking. It took us 1 hour 10 mins to reach

the checkpoint from the start dibber. We were moving well, the ground was dry and the line was clear.



The next checkpoint was another knoll further up the valley. We now had a route choice, head down into the valley losing height or contouring across the hill side. We decided to contour. It was during this stage that the 'agony' took over as my foot went and I could feel a searing pain from my ankle. How stupid, we are just getting going, we were looking to improve on last year's place, we were carrying a lighter load, the ground was drier and the weather was good. All of a sudden I wasn't moving. I wasn't going to admit defeat, it would quickly go, it wasn't too bad, I had come all of this way and I wasn't going to give up at the first sign of trouble. I moved slowly, but I was moving, I was being very careful where I was putting my feet, we were moving slowly, but at least we were moving. The next checkpoint came quickly, with the route to the next one clear – up the steep hill to the col and then down again before going steeply up the next hill looking for a re-entrant this time near the top. This was getting harder: Andrey was having trouble with his feet, bemoaning his choice of shoe with a blister coming – quick stop for the Compeed. I didn't want to look at my ankle; it was OK going up hill as I could easily see where I was putting my feet. The next stage was agony; we lost many places with the feeling of going backwards. The ground was downhill and very rough, my ankle was hurting, Andrey's heel and toes were complaining.

We could see the route on the map to the mid-point camp-site; it was uphill to a Munro, along a long ridge to the next Munro and then straight down to the camp site. We learned last year that the route planners liked to take you onto the high ground and make it hard for those who looked for the 'easy' route by following the low ground. The ascent was then 300m to the next check point and then another 300m to the first Munro of the day Sgurr nan Coireachan 956m, we then went along the ridge taking in other subsidiary summits to the next Munro Sgurr Thuilm 963m. It was a fantastic 5km ridge with stunning views all round, we even managed to run the flat and downhill sections. We could see the campsite from Sgurr Thuilm, it was still a long way across difficult ground to get to the next checkpoint, and we even had to cross by some old snow. The ground was quite good, my ankle was hurting but I could move, Andrey's blisters and toes were now causing major problems. We then went further downhill to the penultimate checkpoint in the valley, it now seemed very easy along



the valley bottom to the campsite. I should have known not to expect an easy stage, at least from the direct route, the ground was rough in places, and it was the boggy bits that gave the most problems, even up to my crotch at one point. However, it was good to cross the river and head straight into the finish. Dab the dibber one last time and get a computer print out of our time – it was 9 hours 24 minutes and 42 seconds – it was a long day, we were disappointed as we were slower than last year and we didn't want to be the last. The course planner said it was 22km with 1730m of height gain – it felt a lot longer. We checked times throughout the evening and we were eventually 92<sup>nd</sup> out of 120 finishers a better position than last year.



The camp site was on a micro light strip surrounded by large mountains and bordered by a river, the source of our drinking water. The campsite was rather crowded but we managed to find a space, put up our tent and started the process of recovery - getting the stove out, boiling some water and having some drinks and food. After a while we started to look at our feet and share out tales of woe.





As the evening wore on we considered our options, should we continue, how easy is the low level route out, what do we say when we get back home; we would make a decision in the morning. The evening became a midge fest with the moments of clear air and breezes, the breezes were best. Eventually we went to bed; we were exhausted and looking forward to a good night's sleep. This meant I had to blow up my balloon bed, a great innovation, very light weight, but fiddly to do – you know the sort of balloons artists use; only they are stuffed in a light weight mattress with 7 tubes to make a mattress. It's a real knack getting onto one and not bursting the balloons – I burst the central one, same as last year! We closed the tent door to keep the midges out, the tent was hot, we opened the tent door and hoped the midges had gone to sleep and it seemed they had for while. However, having to get up in the night the midges were out even though by now it was blowing rain, they are real devils, eating you alive, we sprayed the midge stuff into the tent and onto the ground, not sure how much difference it made. It was soon time to get up this time the piper was round by 5.30am – the cloud was low, the rain still blowing in the wind, the midges out in force. We had a quick breakfast of porridge, got changed, took down the tent and almost without saying anything we decided we were taking the low level and 'easy' way out.

The walk out was not that easy and not that low – another learning point if there is a next year, there is no easy way out from the Lamm unless your are really bad and they will drive you out or call the helicopter. The easy way out was 14km long with 550m of height gain; the race was only 19.7km long with 1,210m of height gain!!! It took us over 3 hours to walk out; it was a fantastic mountain walk through 2 U-shaped valleys, up one and down the other. We kept saying we had made the right choice, I am not sure we both believed it all of the time, mind you if we had taken the mountain route it would have taken a lot longer perhaps 5 or 6 hours and would my ankle or Andrey's feet have made it, who knows!

Walking into the base camp was an anti-climax, we knew we had not completed the Lamm, we dropped our rucksacks' off at our tent, went to the marquee and handed in our dibber although we had no times today so no time ticket, no excitement about our time, just two raffle tickets so we could go and get our meal from Wilf's. We saw a few people coming in, but we definitely felt we should eat up, get changed and head down south and back home.

It is always disappointing when you do not achieve what you set out to do. We had been unlucky, on any other day I would just have stumbled, cursed and been none the worse for it, same with Andrey, he would have not had blisters and bruised toes, his shoes would have worked fine.

Here's to the Lamm, a real fine mountain marathon, but one that is very challenging. It's your turn now, put a date in your diary for June 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> 2009 somewhere in the north of Scotland, you will love it (or hate it!)

Mike  
16<sup>th</sup> June 2008