

# Beyond the Bonk

*Brian Cunningham*



*One hour before meltdown. Photo Brian Cunningham*

## **Back Story**

In 2012, I celebrated my seventieth birthday by running seventy miles from Oykel Bridge to Cape Wrath. Although I was quite chuffed to have completed it in less than twenty-four hours, the route for the final stretch was a cop-out. I'd ducked the hard finish via Sandwood Bay, choosing instead to run along the A838 from Gualin Lodge to the Kyle of Durness ferry and from there to Cape Wrath on the lighthouse road. The road route was a tad longer but it was an order of magnitude easier than the trackless fifteen miles from Gualin lodge to Cape Wrath via Sandwood Bay.

'You are never too old to set another goal or to dream a new dream.' CS Lewis.

## **The Run**

2014 didn't get off to a good start. After nearly two years of planning and preparation, I abandoned a dream to sail a Wayfarer Dinghy around Ireland. Although the eight consecutive days of storms at the beginning of the trip definitely weakened my resolve, the real reasons for quitting, without going into details, were all age-related. Once the dust had settled on that failure, my thoughts inevitably turned to the unfinished business of my 70@70 - the hard finish.

Club septuagenarians will recognise my condition - an irrational desire to see if I can still cut the mustard, and a bad memory. It's a dangerous combination. In this instance my bad memory was the main culprit. It had completely erased all traces of the bonk I'd had on a steep ascent during the overnight stretch from West Merkland to Gualin Lodge. I was to pay dearly for this.

Within days of returning from Ireland with my tail between my legs, I started to put plans in place. An exchange of emails with Arthur Kirkpatrick confirmed that he was up for the 'hard finish' and the attempt was on - although he obviously remembered our previous run better than I did.

'I've been thinking.' He said, 'If you're going to do the hard finish, do you really need to do the six mile stretch on the main road between Oykel Bridge and Rosehall again?'

Arthur and I go back a long way. We are a team. A long run is truly a joint effort. What he was proposing hadn't occurred to me, but it made good sense. However, 'good sense' is something I display with increasing rarity these days.

'Good idea.' I replied, thinking that any suggestion that got me to the start of that hard final stretch to Cape Wrath via Sandwood Bay in good conditions was a good idea.

Both Arthur and I are retired, so we are completely flexible on timing. However, booking our preferred B&B, the Old School House at Kinlochbervie, proved difficult so in the end we were forced to plump for a date, thereby removing our ability to vary it depending on the weather - something I would live to regret.

2nd July came around quickly and after the five-hour drive from Largs it was like old times as Arthur and I made our way up Glen Cassley, me jogging and Arthur on his mountain-bike. Schooled by Paul Murray, I was sticking religiously to 'Bob Graham Rules' - run on the level and downhill bits and walk the uphills.

The good news was that the wind was behind me. The bad news was that a well-heralded frontal system was approaching from the west, bringing stronger winds and lots of rain. We parted company at Duchally Lodge just as the first spits of rain arrived. Arthur had a tough cycle into the wind all the way back to the car, while I headed off into the gloom aided by the brisk wind. The rain was now coming in sheets as I climbed around the flanks of Maovally, and by the time I started on the long descent towards the head of Loch Shin I was absolutely drenched and thoroughly chilled. It was a long and miserable plod to the A838 but fortunately, within minutes of arriving on the road, Arthur rolled up in the car.

'Fancy a change of clothes?' He said.

'No thanks', I replied. 'Think I'll wait until I get to West Merkland and do a proper job before the tough leg over to Gualin Lodge - maybe I could have one of those self-heating meals?'

'Fine. See you at West Merkland.' And with that he drove off.

Six miles later I arrived at the car. By then the worst of the front had passed and there were signs that the sun might break through. Fifteen



*Governuigach Lodge.*

*Photo Brian Cunningham*

minutes later, having changed into dry clothes and eaten some hot food, I set off up the hill on the track to the Governuigach Estate propelled by a near-gale. Pale-rimmed dark clouds raced across the sky. Bright shafts of sweeping sunlight illuminated the west-facing cliffs, steaming and gleaming above white-flecked lochans. Torrents tumbled over wild precipices to be dispersed into sparkling showers by fierce updraughts. This is why I do these long runs. A scene is more than just what we see. The total context of the moment is what we experience. Effort; discomfort; even pain; both mental and physical have been invested in that scene. It becomes so much more than just the view. It becomes the complete experience. For a while my spirit soared and the animal in me withdrew into the depths.

It was still broad daylight at 9:00pm when I arrived at the Governuigach Estate. On my 70@70 it had been dark and I'd missed the first bridge. This navigation error had forced me to ford the Strathmore River at the Lodge, thereby condemning me to a desperate struggle over very rough terrain to the bridge over the Easaidh which leads into Glen Golly. No such mistake was made this time. I was soon congratulating myself on having arrived at the start of the Glen Golly track in good shape and in good time. There seemed every possibility that I could reach the river crossing at the north end of Loch Dionard before dark. Hopefully Arthur would be there to greet me and we could enjoy our companionship on the long track to Gualin Lodge on the A838.



*Tough terrain in Glen Golly.*

*Photo Brian Cunningham*

When the first blast of wind hit me in the face I put it down to a freakish gust. However, after a few minutes it became apparent that it wasn't just a one-off. The wind had cruelly veered into the north-west and I was in for a dour struggle. By the time I arrived at the foot of the steep ascent to the watershed I was all in. From time to time I was brought to a standstill by the stronger gusts and as I started to ascend the broken track a huge weariness descended on me like a leaden cloak. The next 1,200 feet of climbing led to a place I'd never been before. After so many long runs in the hills, I thought that I'd been as tired as it was possible for me to be. But I was wrong. There was another world of exhaustion which I now entered. A place of no soaring thoughts, no hallucinatory companions, no 'out-of-body experience', no 'nature's orchestra, no 'third meadow', no 'bright light at the end of a tunnel', only an all-consuming desire to give in. I arrived at the edge of my own, personal Black Hole and teetered precariously on its Event Horizon. If I fell over that edge, nothing - absolutely nothing - none of the things that define me - could ever emerge. I would vanish without trace. A single glittering shard of coherence penetrated my frightened brain and it brought a brief smile to my lips - this was BEYOND THE BONK!

By the time I'd hauled myself over the watershed and stumbled down to Loch Dionard I was utterly spent. Arthur dragged me up the bank of the river and shepherded me all the way to the car. We barely spoke. John Ridgway once commented, 'You'll be able to tell when Brian is dead - his lips will stop moving.'

My silence worried Arthur. I seemed preoccupied to a degree he'd not seen before. When we got to the car all thoughts of the hard finish had long gone. It was 2am. The car rocked in the wind and the rain spattered on the roof as we dozed off.

### Epilogue

The 'hard finish' was completely beyond me. When I got to the car I had barely ten minutes left in the tank, never mind the ten hours or so it would probably have taken me.

Using conventional methods, I'd measured the distance from Rosehall to Gualin lodge as 45 miles. My Garmin Forerunner GPS watch measured the distance as 49.21 miles.



*The route.*

*Illustration Strava.com*