

BY FELICITY MARTIN

LAMMI 2008

Glenfinnan



Chris Dale and Steve Smith race downhill towards the finish in Glenfinnan



Running repairs (Day 1)

All photos courtesy of Felicity Martin
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The Lowe Alpine Mountain Marathon always takes place in spectacular Scottish Highlands, but this year Race Director Martin Stone excelled in his choice of venue, managing to combine challenging terrain with a picture postcard setting.

The Event Centre was in a field beside the Glenfinnan Viaduct, which carries the West Highland railway line over the River Finnan. This photogenic location appears in Harry Potter films with the train to Hogwarts steaming across the sweeping curve of arches.

As they arrived, competitors passed another impressive sight – the Glenfinnan Monument, at tall column standing at the head of Loch Shiel. This was the Highland rallying point for Bonnie Prince Charlie in the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745 and it commemorates the clansmen who fought for the cause.

It was bright, hot and sultry on the camping field, but the surrounding mountains were wreathed in dark clouds, making them even more imposing. Several Munros and Corbetts (mountains over 3,000ft or 2,500ft) stood within racing distance. In between lay deep glens and lochs, including Loch Morar, the deepest freshwater lake in Britain (over 1,000ft/300m).

The 2-day event has a tradition of surprising participants, with maps and courses kept secret until the last moment. But never in the history of

the LAMM have competitors been dispersed so widely through the hills. Planner Angela Mudge and Controller Andy Spenceley took full advantage of the large map printed for the event, setting courses that headed northwards across a front 18 miles wide from the A830 Fort William to Mallaig road.

The Elite and A teams caught a train on the West Highland line to Lochailort, 10 miles west of the event centre. The B course started almost as far west, while the C course start was a short way up glen above Glenfinnan. The D and Novice teams were bussed 8 miles east, to a picnic site by Fassfern woods.

All headed to a midcamp at Strathan, at the west end of Loch Arkaig – a 14km walk from Glenfinnan if the shortest route is taken through the valleys. Of course, competitors didn't have it so easy, with the Elite teams completing a staggering 37km and 2380m of climb, and even the Novices tackling 16.5km and 910m of climb.

It proved to be one of the hottest days of the year, with baking conditions on the south facing climbs. Although this area records the highest rainfall in Britain, dry spring weather meant that some of the water features used as control sites – high streams and lochans – had dried up.

At Strathan, the event midcamp was kindly hosted by Edward and Sue Hinks, who have a microlight airstrip outside their isolated cottage, beyond the nearest single track road. The strip proved an ideal, if somewhat long and thin, campsite with soft mown grass. The shallow waters of the adjacent River Pean soon glistened with bathing runners, looking like pink basking seals.

The Arrochar Alps Mountain Rescue team always supports the LAMM, but its members usually have little to do beyond providing radio communications. However, this year Day 1 finishers reported an injured competitor out on the hills, so event marshals were rallied to help with a search and rescue party. They borrowed a boat from a house further down Loch Arkaig to get them into the area and bring out the casualty, who had slipped on steep grass and hurt his back.

Day 2 dawned still, misty and damp – ideal conditions for the midgets that were out in force. The marshals became veiled figures and even the bagpiper who gave the 5:30am alarm call wore a midge net.

Chasing starts put pressure on the leading teams. Pairs on courses A, B and C had to cross the River Pean and get over 400m of bog on the far side. In the rush, some people disappeared up to their waists in the quagmire and had to be pulled out by their team mates.

As on Day 1, the longer courses offered some difficult route choices: up and over the craggy mountains or down and round through the boggy glens. Everyone was taken to some spectacular viewpoints, including the two shortest courses. The D and Novice courses each had a control on a Munro summit – Sgurr nan Coireachan and Streap respectively.

By the time the first teams ran down the finish funnel, the old LAMM magic had done its trick and the sun had broken through. Exhausted runners basked in the sunshine as they wolfed down their hot lunch from Wilf's.

The day was a triumph for some teams, as they extended their overnight leads. For others it was



Two teams race into the midcamp finish (Day 1)

a disaster, as they blew it with navigational mistakes.

Tim Higginbottom and Chris Near were worthy winners of the LAMM trophy. Having started 20 minutes ahead of Alec Keith and Brendan Bolland in the chasing starts, they extended their lead to 44 minutes.

On the A course, Dan Duxbury and Matt Ready maintained their leading position. But on the B course, John Earl and Jon Davies mis-marked their map and failed to find their eighth control. They came in without punching it and were disqualified. Sam Grummit and Ian Scott, who had been fourth overnight moved up to win the B.

The Day 1 leaders on the C course made an "embarrassing" mistake out on the hill and dropped to 13th place. The winners were John Tansley and Trevor Wade, who rose from fourth overnight.

D course overnight leaders, Ben Wallace and Paul Warnock stayed in front and increased their lead. While on the Novice, Andrew Taylor and Jamie Aarons overtook David Bentley and John Ellaby to come in first.

On the run in to the finish all the teams passed under the Glenfinnan Viaduct. Built in 1897, it was a pioneering structure – the first in the world made of mass poured concrete. Having completed a mountain marathon in some of the most gruelling terrain and temperatures in Britain, everyone who took part must have gone home feeling that they too were pioneers.



Registering at the last control for the short courses on Day 1



Above: Elite winners Chris Near and Tim Higginbottom with the (broken) LAMM trophy



Above: Jim Reid and Tom Challands get off to a flying start across the River Pean (Day 2)



Marking up the course at the Day 2 start at Strathan