

THE music soars as Fiona Rennie picks her way down the treacherous slope, bumping between the rocks like water finding the quickest way down a hillside. The camera retreats sharply to reveal a brooding expanse of Scottish countryside enveloping this sole runner and a chirpy voice begins to speak. "Some people do begin to hallucinate but I've never had anything that exciting..."

The tone is of disappointment but the 49-year-old could probably do without her mind playing tricks on her; running ultra-marathons after suffering a brain haemorrhage must be stressful enough.

Yet watching Rennie navigating the West Highland Way in *Running Wild*, a short feature put together by her husband Pete for the Edinburgh Mountain Film Festival, is a lesson in the resilience of the human body and mind. The Dunfermline mother might not be the fastest competitor in her field but she has overcome more than most to be among them.

It was on a bleak April morning in 2005 that her life changed. Having woken at 4am to prepare for the Speyside Way race later that day, she was preparing porridge when what felt like a muscle cramp struck the back of her head. Feeling faint, Rennie lay on the kitchen floor but, when she tried to get up, realised that she had lost feeling in her right hand side and had no control over her leg. "My first thought was 'how am I going to run 50k with a floppy leg?' then the next thing I remember is waking up in the Western General in Edinburgh."

The missing hours were fraught. Pete, having been woken by his wife's struggle, found her in the kitchen and summoned an ambulance to go to Queen Margaret Hospital in Dunfermline, whereupon the results of a CT scan necessitated an immediate transfer

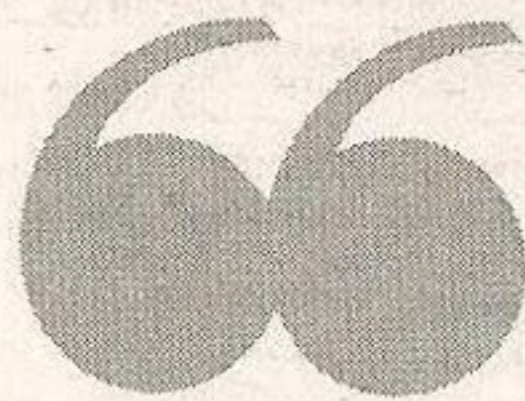


across the Forth. "I was in the high dependency unit and I remember looking at those in the ward around me and thinking 'these people are awful ill, why am I here?' because I couldn't comprehend what was happening," she recalls. "It wasn't until two or three weeks later when I got home and had a look on the internet that I discovered that something like a third of people die straight away and another third die within a month."

That Rennie was among the third who survived should be no surprise; after all this is a woman who has run half marathons since 1986 and graduated to the full distance six years later. Having accomplished that transition with relative ease, the Carnegie Harrier reasoned that

Fiona Rennie has amassed 70 events of marathon distance or more.

Picture: Stewart Attwood



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adding another nine miles or so to the distance by running the Two Bridges race over the Kincardine and Forth crossing – an event that growing up she considered only possible by the "superhuman" – would also be within her capabilities.

Rennie was right but instead of wallowing in satisfaction like most people, she decided to take it one step further by running the 95 miles of the West Highland Way. "I had completed it twice before my illness and knowing that gave the strength to recover," says the supermarket check-out worker of a period in which she not only had to regenerate her wasted muscles but also restore her confidence and self-esteem.

All she wanted was to get back to normal – running abnormally long distances – but the neurological experts were reluctant to fuel her ambitions. "Nobody could really tell me if I was okay," she says. "I didn't know how hard I could push myself or if it might happen again so for the first year I took it quite easy. Mind you, I did run a half marathon after seven weeks..."

Her protestations that it was her 100th half marathon and was completed in "a very slow two-and-a-half hours" might not have appeased the medical professionals but someone who regularly pushes their body the way Rennie does will be attuned to its needs. Indeed despite advice to the contrary, the psychological boost of finishing a full marathon at Loch Ness four months later was sufficient recompense for any physical trauma.

Within months, she had conquered the West Highland Way for a third time – a race she has now run on eight occasions to take her total to 70 events of marathon distance or more, including 11 over 24-hours – and her recovery was crowned in 2009 when, along with identical twin Pauline Walker, she won team bronze for Scotland in the Commonwealth Championships.

"I tell myself I've had my illness and it's not going to happen again," Rennie says, when asked about her attitude in recent years. "You do get problems when you run for 24 hours but, although it's tough, I've chosen to do it whereas someone fighting cancer hasn't and they can't stop after 24 hours; knowing that I can is a privilege."

■ *The Edinburgh Mountain Film Festival runs for four days from next Thursday.*
<http://www.emff.co.uk>

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TOMORROW Hugh MacDonald