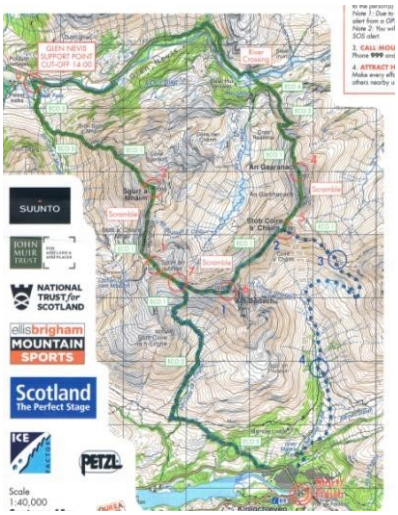
Ring of Steall Skyrace
Graham Watson

29km/2500m - I was a bit worried going into this event as it was the week after the Lake District Mountain Trial which usually takes me 7+ hours and wipes me out for the season. However, I was really looking forward to it as I've spent a bit of time in the Mamore mountains over the years - as a teenager backpacking, working at Outward Bound Loch Eil in the late '80s and a few times since as well. The mountains are bigger and steeper with unavoidable rocky sections so I was keen to return.

Learning from past training I spent two weeks in the Pyrenees eating and drinking large amounts of cheese, bread, wine and beer and resting a lot (a few days in the mountains probably helped as well). This seemed to do the trick as despite Quentin Harding's best efforts in planning and my less than best efforts in route choice I managed to get round the Mountain Trial in a fairly normal for me 7h40, and was pleasantly surprised to be feeling OK the next day.

And so to Saturday and my big day out. Quite a contrast to the Mountain Trial - 850 runners, fully flagged trail, an aid station, and basically a huge up followed by huge down and then the same again. And lots of razamataz - after all, it was the World Skyrunning Champs and Golden Trail Series and Killian Jornet was on the start line too (somewhere at the front of that sea of runners in front of me)!

And we're off, and everyone's racing along the 1/2 km tarmac either racing to get to the narrow trail first or just in that usual rush of excitement. This is my ideal start as everything soon gets slowed down to a sensible pace for warming up and climbing 1001m to the first top, after which things spread out a bit more, some scrambling slows people down and then a huge 1000m descent to the aid station with loads of sweet stuff and ....potatoes! What a great race food! It's a gentle ascent to start up Glen Nevis so ideal for eating handfuls of potatoes. Then comes Steal Gorge - spectacular with it's waterfall and another huge 800m up, some more up and down, some scrambling, and then another 1000m descent back to Kinlochleven (and the final killer tarmac). It's nothing like any Lake District fell race I've done. Here's why it's different and worth doing:



- spectacular mountains, big with great views
- scrambling sections - not difficult but nice if you like that sort of thing, very difficult to overtake but good for a rest (you'll need it for the next hill!)
- 850 runners - I thought I wouldn't like this but it was a great atmosphere and once through the first climb it thinned out but still with enough people around for company.
- the marshals - yes, I know fell race marshals are all brilliant but these were something else. Every marshal seemed to be cheering you on by name (names on number bibs helps here of course) even after several hours in the mist on the summits, and on the run in at the end. Even if you came on your own you'd feel like you had your own support team here!
- the race seemed to have an almost completely different, younger field of runners. There were a few people from fell running clubs but they were a minority. With no age classes, clearly most people were in it for the challenge of getting round rather than for a placing which seemed to add to the atmosphere.
- pricey to enter - there's a lot of organisation behind this, a top quality 'technical' t-shirt, medal, post-race meal so why not treat yourself. Actually I could do without the medal, the Tshirt is great but the post race food was a big let down especially compared to many fell races (and especially CFR races). Don't let that put you off as, unless it was just me who thought this, I reckon they are the type of race organisers who are looking to improve every year so I wouldn't mind betting it will be better food next time.

So I got round, it was brilliant to be up in the Mamore mountains and I loved it as a race, all topped off with the ultimate accolade from one of my daughters - 'quite a good time (for you)'!*

Graham Watson
* 6h 15m (winner, Killian Jornet, plus 75%. Not the slowest compared to the winner I've been this year!)