THE BEN RACE:
The supreme test of athletic fitness

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Inverness

Lofty Ben Nevis, King of Britain’s hills,
Wreathed in perpetual snow, thy hoary crest
High heavenward stands, peerless amid the rest;
Unmoved amidst the storm’s tempestuous roar
The giant stands, formed by the Mind that wills
And rules the universe by his mysterious power.

This paper will focus on the origins of the Ben Nevis Race, the annual challenge from the foot of Britain’s highest mountain to the top and back again; and its early development as a major sporting and social event in the Lochaber area of the Highlands of Scotland up until the Second World War.

The mountain

Ben Nevis, highest mountain of the British Isles, in the district of Lochaber, Highland Region (until 1975 in the county of Inverness), Scotland, reaches, 4,406 ft (1,343m) at its summit, which is a plateau of about 100ac (40ha), with a slight slope to the south and a sheer face to the Northeast. Snow lies in some parts all year, and permafrost conditions (i.e. the presence of a permanently frozen soil layer) are almost reached. The mountain consists of a superstructure of volcanic rocks surmounting the ancient schists, with granites intruded of the Scottish Highlands. On the summit are ruins of an abandoned hotel and a former meteorological station, access to which was provided by a bridle path, nowhere steeper than a gradient of one in five, from Glen Nevis at Achintee.

The description offered by Encyclopaedia Britannica of arguably one of the most ferocious mountains in Europe is of necessity brief and to the
point. Its very brevity, however, disguises the many intriguing facets of Britain’s grandest mountain mass - its beauty and majesty, ferocity, fickleness and mystery. These are the very qualities which have intrigued and defied travellers, climbers, scientists and runners for centuries - much longer in fact than the history of the race to the top and back again. By any stretch of the imagination, it is a magnificent mountain with a varied and complex form.

It would require a person with a fecund imagination to concoct mentally a scene more entrancing or impressive than the prospect from Ben Nevis in the glorious days of summer. Lakes and streams innumerable, rolling moorland wastes, rivers, copse, corry, and tarn, flit before the vision, and vie with each other for predominance.¹

The origin of the word ‘Nevis’ is obscure. The Scots Gaelic form of the mountain’s name Beinn Nimheis, has been linked with various Gaelic and Irish words including ‘neamhaise’ meaning terrible, ‘neimheil’ meaning poisonous an ‘neamh’ meaning a raw and bitingly keen atmosphere. Most of the suggested meanings imply a dreadful character.

The West Highlands is one of the wettest areas in Britain. The average annual rainfall in Fort William is 2.0 metres, but this figure increases to more than 4.0 metres on the summit of Ben Nevis, where much of the precipitation falls as snow. At sea level the climate is relatively mild and equable due to the influence of the Gulf Stream, but conditions become increasingly severe with altitude. Snow lies on the summit of Ben Nevis for much of the year and it rarely disappears altogether from the gullies on the shadowy northeast face. The temperature on the summit is generally 9 degrees Celsius colder than at the base of the mountain, and it can be calm in Glen Nevis when there is a gale blowing on the plateau. So although the footpath up the north-western flank of Ben Nevis is often referred to as the “Tourist Route”, its ascent should never be undertaken lightly. The best time of year to attempt this route is probably in August, by which time the plateau is normally free of snow. Even then it is essential to wear proper walking boots and clothing, including a full set of wind and waterproof outer garments should also be taken. It is recommended that some six hours be allowed for a comfortable ascent and descent.
It is safe to assume that people have climbed Ben Nevis, or more accurately made the effort to get to the top, for as long as there has been a settlement at the head of Loch Linnhe. St Columba may even have given its majestic features a sideways glance as he headed up the Great Glen after he arrived in Scotland in 563AD.

By the early 18th century mountain ascents were not exactly unheard of, but rare nonetheless. As time wore on, however, it is clear that the top of the highest point in the land began to hold no fears for many and was a most definite attraction.

Queen Victoria was amongst its visitors. Arguably the most famous visitor to make it to the top in this period (if we can believe him) was the poet John Keats who made a grand tour of Scotland with his friend Charles Brown, in 1818. Keats’ perambulations and the tourist boom which hit Scotland at the end of the 18th and 19th centuries were followed, and aided, by improved road networks, the Napoleonic Wars which re-directed people northwards, and the opening of the West Highland rail line.

Travelogues by the dozen followed, with each and every one expanding on the detail provided by the previous explorer. Gradually the scientists of the Scottish Meteorological Society took a more sophisticated and closer look at what was being found, and this eventually led to the building of a bridle path up the mountain, and the erection of an observatory (manned continuously for 21 years) on the summit.

The observatory was not, remarkably, the only attraction at the top of Ben Nevis. A small “hotel” was also built there - a small annex erected by a Fort William hotelier after the building of the observatory. It was run by two local ladies who were, apparently, frequently indignant at being awakened at all hours by visitors coming up to view the sunrise. Lunch was available for three shillings (15 pence), bed and breakfast for ten shillings (50 pence) and there were four small bedrooms.

And predictably, perhaps, things soon started to go wrong:

The folly of ascending Ben Nevis without a guide has been demonstrated again. Three English ladies ascended the Ben on the 23rd inst., and when descending missed the path, and were only found the next morning at the top of a ravine on the west side of the Ben, by
the Rev. Mr. MacColl and Peter MacDonald, a guide, who had gone in search of them. It was fortunate that they wandered to the west instead of the east side of the Ben, where there are precipices of a thousand feet.\footnote{4}

Soon, travellers were arriving from far and wide aiming to reach the top.

Scarcely a day goes by without a large number ascending the Ben, very often as many as 30 or 40. On Thursday last, a Mr. and Mrs. A. T. Smith, from Kirkwall, accompanied by Colin Cameron, a guide, made the ascent and descent of the mountain in five hours and 45 minutes. This feat has not been performed in so short a time by a lady so far as is known, and yet Mrs. Smith did not seem to be much fatigued on her arrival in Fort William.\footnote{5}

Eventually, getting to the top of Britain’s highest mountain on foot began to take on an altogether different character.

A foot-race from the post office at Fort-William to the top of Ben Nevis and back, was an event which helped considerably to vary the routine of things at the Observatory. Strength of muscle and physical endurance are qualities which seldom fail to call forth admiration; but when these are employed in foolhardy and dangerous exploits, their possessor is surely acting in opposition to the laws of nature.\footnote{6}

Such was William Kilgour’s reaction to what he later described as the “mania” which suddenly captured Lochaber and, indeed, people from much further afield. Not content with getting to the top of Britain’s highest mountain, the object quickly became to get there quicker than anyone else. All of a sudden records became the vogue - the oldest person to the top, the youngest, the first woman ..... and so it went on. Kilgour was not impressed:

There doubtless is a qualified degree of honour in being able to sprint up and down such a mountain as Ben Nevis in two hours and a half, but is the game really worth the candle? What object is to be gained thereby? Verily, athletics are extending if such a departure is destined to come within the category.”\footnote{7}
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Goodness only knows what the redoubtable Kilgour would make of events now, with 500 runners making the annual ascent of the Ben. But when 27-year old William Swan, a local hairdresser, dog breeder, sporting buff and general man about town, made his legendary first timed ascent of the mountain at the end of September 27, 1895, he achieved much more than celebrity status. He established a record which is to this day, for a variety of reasons, still unbeaten.₈

(On Monday) Mr William Swan, tobacconist here, ascended Ben Nevis with the object of establishing a record. The day was exceedingly hot and unsuitable for mountaineering, but, notwithstanding, Mr Swan managed to reach the summit, and, after drinking a cup of Bovril, returned to Fort William in the incredibly short space of 2 hours 41 minutes. This is believed to be a record.₉

As to the precise origins of the “mania” (as Kilgour referred to it) of running the timed ascent, these must remain a mystery, but at the end of the day the simplest explanation seems to be man’s quest for a challenge and his will to achieve, and better, what no other has done.

And so it came to pass that for whatever reason, one William Swan completed what is now referred to as “the first authentic performance” of the Ben Nevis Race. The next few years would see a fascinating series of runs achieved by an intriguing set of individuals. The route to the top then would have been much as it is now - the five miles or thereby of the bridle path, zigzagging up the mountain, with a gradient of 1 in 5 at many points. The route down is that chosen by the individual - the quickest and not always the safest - some fourteen to fifteen miles in all, depending on where the starting point was taken.

To make the ascent comfortably and with the least output of exertion, one should wear a pair of strong “tackety” boots, provide himself with a stout walking stick, and be clad as lightly as possible. The fair sex, the broken-winded and the rheumatic must therefore do their own sweet will on Ben Nevis. A large percentage of seemingly incapables reach the top, but in many cases the waste of energy in doing so is bound to have detrimental side effects.₁₀
Detrimental side effects there may have been (as Kilgour would have it at any rate) as a result of the race, but all of a sudden, largely due to the advent of the railway in 1894, and the influx of visitors to the area, the top of Ben Nevis was the place to be.

William Swan’s first timed ascent and descent was made in two hours and forty-one minutes. He is understood to have started from the Post Office at 10am, cycled to the foot of the mountain and was back at the Post Office at 12.55pm after remaining at the top (where he apparently fortified himself with a cup of Bovril) for 14 minutes. The point of departure is the subject of some debate and not a little confusion. The original Post Office, two sites earlier than the current one in the East End of the town, appears in fact to have been where the current Woolworths’ store is, beside the Royal Bank of Scotland. The Post Office then moved nearer the centre of the town at 88 High Street, opposite what was the Ben Nevis Hotel. That was used for many years thereafter as the traditional starting point of the race, and is still locally referred to as “the Old Post Office”.

After Swan accomplished his notable feat in 1895, there are no further records of any attempts at timed ascents until two years later when a remarkable individual, 53-year old Lieut. Col. Spencer Acklom of the Connaught Rangers arrived in Lochaber.

Lieutenant Colonel Spencer Acklom, who has no intention of competing from the record ascent and who was not properly equipped for climbing, on Friday last reached the top of the mountain from the base in one hour and fifty-three minutes. On Tuesday, Col. Acklom made another attempt when he climbed and ascended the mountain in 2 hours 58 minutes. The ascent occupied 1 hour 43 minutes, with one minute on the top, and the descent 1 hour 14 minutes, an exceptional performance considering the many disadvantages he had to overcome.

Acklom, apparently, had no training and undertook the task in cycling shoes and without a guide. Said to be “a staunch abstainer”, he had climbed many of the higher ranges in the world and been at great altitudes in the Himalayas during military service.

The race to be the fastest man to the top of Ben Nevis had by now gathered a momentum of its own and the record was soon to be challenged by all-
comers. By now a medal was at stake and the challenge was being taken up on a regular basis.

It is round about this point that the Post Office appears to have moved west along the High Street to number 88, from its original site. Spencer Acklom completed his run “thirteen minutes outside Swan’s time”, before registering another time of 2 hours 55 minutes referred to as being “from the new Post Office”.

Gradually, as more and more runners went up the mountain, so the time for the ascent and descent came down:

At 12.30p.m. on Thursday Mr. William MacDonald, a journeyman of twenty-five years of age, who is a member of Leith Gymnasium, started on foot from the Post Office in Fort William to the summit of Ben Nevis for the purpose of endeavouring to beat the best previous record. He started off at a good swinging pace, and reached to top in the incredibly short time of one hour thirty minutes. Asking one of the staff of the Meteorological station to take the time he immediately started back on the homeward journey, and reached Fort William at 2.57p.m., thus accomplishing the double trip in 2 hours 27 minutes and beating the previous record by 28 minutes.

Mr MacDonald’s time was, according to no less than Lt. Col. Spencer Acklom, “splendid and remarkable one”. In saying that, the worthy Acklom understated his personal achievement on his own first run. His view of the challenge was, by definition, completely different from that of Kilgour: “True sportsmen,” Acklom opined, “contend for sport not for reward.”

Starting from the Fort William Post Office at 9.00a.m., M Hunter of Edinburgh reached the Observatory on the summit of Ben Nevis at 10.33a.m., and being rested for four minutes he set off on the return journey. When near the foot of the mountain he unfortunately slipped and inflicted a nasty gash near the kneecap of his left leg. An eager, expectant crowd assembled at the Post Office to welcome the competitor and as time wore on excitement increased. Hunter, however, failed to arrive until 11.35a.m., thus taking two hours thirty minutes to the double journey, which is six minutes in excess
of the time occupied by Mr. MacDonald. On the whole the weather was good and well suited for mountaineering, although there were two to three inches of fresh snow on the hill top and for some distance down the slope.\textsuperscript{14}

Another run of 2 hours and 20 minutes by Swan on October 29, 1898, earned him a new record, and a Gold Medal, which was presented at a special ceremony in the town on a stormy Friday evening, December 23. The medal was donated by Mr John B. Patrick, 8 Woodburn Terrace, Edinburgh. Swan’s new time then left him as holder of the records from both the old and new Post Office and the epithet “The Ben Nevis Sprinter”. The occasion at which the medal was presented was a concert organised by Lodge Lochaber of the Loyal Order of Ancient Shepherds. In his acceptance speech, Swan modestly acknowledged the tributes paid to his achievements. The medal was an honour to the town and district, he said, and not a personal one. Swan however was not to be outdone.

Starting from the Post Office at 10.30a.m. Mr Swan reached the Observatory on the summit of Ben Nevis at four minutes past noon. Spending one minute there, during which he drank a cup of cold tea and was photographed, Swan again started down the homeward track, arriving at the Post Office at 12.50p.m., thus accomplishing the arduous task in two hours twenty minutes which is seven minutes less than the time occupied by Mr. MacDonald. On his arrival at Fort William, Mr. Swan was greeted with enthusiastic cheering by a large crowd who had assembled and, after being photographed, he was carried shoulder high through the main street of the town. The accomplishment, it may be mentioned, was performed under somewhat adverse weather conditions.\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{The Fort William News} of the same weekend reports that Mr MacDonald of Leith had arrived in the town that Tuesday with a view to making an attempt on Swan’s record. On being asked whether he thought the record of two hours and twenty minutes would be difficult to reduce, he said: “No; it won’t be difficult to reduce. Of course I would not have come at all were it not that I was sent against my will by the Gymnasium.”

Acklom, who was more than twenty years the senior of MacDonald and Swan (both being below 30 at the time), was also waiting for better weather
to mount another assault on the record and the newspaper said the honour of being the fastest man to the top for the season lay “between these three gentlemen”.

Lt. Colonel Spencer Acklom, who had a way with words as well as a hugely interesting lifestyle, wrote regarding the Ben Nevis record:

Ben Nevis can hardly be called elegant and picturesque as compared with the two sky-piercing stacks of Ben Cruachen (sic), but it is rougher and more massive, and to my mind can be compared to nothing more appropriately than the body of an elephant....

The enthusiasm now evident for the timed challenge, and the haphazard nature of the bids to beat the time, eventually led to a more formalised attack on the record. It needed to be settled once and for all - the fastest man to the top. On June 3, 1898 the proprietor of the Lochiel Arms Hotel in Banavie, Mr Menzies, offered a Gold Medal to the first man to finish in the race - yet another route, and this time ten competitors ran together. The distance was apparently one mile longer than the course from the new Post Office and was the first to be run under Scottish Amateur Athletic Association rules. The race, involving ten runners, was started (not for the first or last time) to the sound of a shotgun.

Altogether, there were ten competitors who were started at eleven o’clock by Mr. William Lapsley, official timekeeper of the Amateur Athletic Association, Mr. Menzies, the organiser, acting as referee on the summit. As the time wore on the excitement increased, and the spectators eagerly scanned the hillside for the return of the runners. Shortly after one o’clock one of the competitors was observed coming over the shoulder of Meall An t-suidhe, and this turned out to be Hugh Kennedy, under keeper at Tor Castle, near Fort William who reached the winning post at 1.43p.m., having performed the double journey in 2 hours 41 minutes.

Kilgour - never one to disappoint in this regard - was dismissive of the whole event. The medal which had been offered for “the establishment of an authentic competitive record for the climbing of Ben Nevis” was unceremoniously shot down as “a trinket intrinsically not worth more than a couple of guineas.” “Wherein,” Kilgour boomed, “lay the glory and
honour if health and strength in consequence to be permanently impaired, not to speak of danger to limb and life?"

Given the nature of this particular event, and its running under Scottish Amateur Athletic Association Rules, this could arguably be claimed to have been the first Ben Nevis “Race”. However, within a few months, by the end of August, Mr MacDonald of Leith, no doubt with a point to prove, had set a new record for the “official Course” - 2 hours and 18 minutes.

Such was the interest in the Ben at the time, in terms of records, that *The Oban Times* of July 1, 1899 listed the best times for the 15 mile run from Fort William.

1895 30 September W. Swan (Fort William) (27) 2 hours 41 minutes  
1897 6 October Lt. Col. Spencer Acklom (Connaught Rangers) (54) 2 hours 55 minutes  
1898 4 August W. MacDonald (Leith) (25) 2 hours 57 minutes  
1898 29 October W. Swan (Fort William) (30) 2 hours 20 minutes

Twenty-one year old H. Kennedy of Tor Castle was credited with the best time for the 16-mile version of the run from Banavie - 2 hours 41 minutes, completed on June 3, 1899. The Youngest Ascent recorded at the time was Bella Stewart, aged 3 months, who was carried up in her mother’s arms on August 23, 1891.

By the turn of the century the race to the top had become the ultimate sporting challenge and a matter of pride to the individuals concerned. It was to survive as a race for three more years, and Kilgour was to be vindicated in his carping criticism. Regular attempts, however, were made to beat the best time.

The “gentler sex” as Kilgour sarcastically points out, had up until the turn of the century been barred from the race, (he rather more picturesquely and sourly puts it as having “failed to escape the infection”) but in 1902, the inevitable occurred. The first recorded attempt was made by Lucy Cameron of Glen Mallie (Ardechvie). She is understood to have made a reconnaissance of her route the day before her ascent and had walked all the way from Glen Mallie near Banavie, to Fort William the day before that,
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according to some sources. Her time of 2 hours and 3 minutes, made from the Post Office, was to earn her a handsome Gold medal.

It will be recalled that some time ago Miss Cameron, who is only twenty years of age, made the ascent in 2 hours 17 minutes, but on that occasion the weather conditions were unfavourable. While Tuesday was not ideal for climbing, it was not altogether unsuitable with the result that Miss Cameron reduced her previous time by 14 minutes, having accomplished the feat in 2 hours, 3 minutes, being 3.5 minutes in excess of the time occupied by the record holder.

A further attempt on the ladies' new record was then made by Elizabeth Tait, the post runner at Corrour, on the evening of July 19. Her time of 1 hour 59 minutes and 30 seconds for the ascent, again from the Post Office, was to stand for some time. This is a remarkable performance for a female climber and will be very difficult to beat.

The following year, 1903, was to see two timed races, one involving seven men, which has given us the earliest picture of an organised start. It was run from Achintee farm to the summit only and won by Ewen Mackenzie the Ben Nevis Observotary Roadman. There is unfortunately no record of the time taken although Charles Steel recalled that one or two of Fort William’s older citizens in the 1950s believe it to be just over one hour. It was known at the time that MacKenzie had run up the mountain from Achintee in one hour eight minutes.

The race, which started from Achintee and was for the ascent only, was started by Major Cameron, factor to the Cameron Lucy Estate, with a shotgun. Ewen MacKenzie, the Observotary road-man emerged as the winner, although no record of his time exists. He was one of six Fort William men to take part. The others were D. MacNaughton, W. Riach, the redoubtable Mr. Swan, D. Rankine, J. Rankine. The seventh runner was D. Cameron, Tomnaharrich.

There is no record of the date on which the race was run, but on September 28, Ewen MacKenzie and Hugh Kennedy took part in another race along with a Glasgow runner R. Dobson of Glasgow. The race, the first from the Post Office at 88 High Street, was started and timed by Mr J. W.
Brownrigg, also of Glasgow, an official S.A.A.A. timekeeper. Ewen MacKenzie’s winning time of 2 hours 10 minutes 6.8 seconds from the Post Office for the ascent and descent was to be the last recorded for 34 years.

Later in the day, Robert Dobson, the Maryhill athlete, was found unconscious on the bridle path by a tourist who was making the ascent of the mountain. This gentleman happily was a naval doctor, attached to the Home Squadron, now lying in Loch Leven, and he used all the available remedies in the restoration of Dobson. He was, however, unable to restore consciousness, and with the aid of some other climbers, who were descending the hill, the victim was carried to the half-way hut, and a message sent to Fort William. A number of willing hands, along with a local doctor, immediately set out for the hut. It was decided, on arrival there, to have the unconscious man conveyed on a stretcher to Fort William, and this was satisfactorily accomplished at a late hour, after Dobson had been for about nine hours on the mountain. Dobson remained unconscious till about two o’clock on Tuesday morning, having been in that state for almost twelve hours. After regaining consciousness, he mentioned to the doctor, who had remained with him overnight, that the last thing he recollected was being blown down by a gust on the hill. Dobson recovered sufficiently to travel South by the 1.10 p.m. train on Tuesday.  

According to The Oban Times, “over-exertion and heart strain” were the cause of Dobson’s predicament, although eventually his “vitality was restored”. Notwithstanding the day’s events, the presentations for the race were made later in the evening. Dobson himself expressed his thanks to the people of Fort William in a front-page advert in the Oban Times a week later.

The second of the two races in 1903 was to be the last for some time. The sport “falsely so designated” of running to the top and back again was to stop. Whether it is as a result of the unfortunate Dobson’s experience or the closure of the Observatory in 1904, is unclear. Kilgour, as ever, was in no doubt, writing in 1905:
“While disapproving of the contest, *qua* such, we of the meteorological staff, as we could not “call it off”, interested ourselves in the results and on race days we were all agog with excitement, the man of the night watch even foregoing his quota of sleep to watch the competitors arrive and depart. Now that the Observatory has been shut up, it is very unlikely that any further such contests will be organised, and record breaking on the mountain will be a tale that is told. *Sic transit gloria mundi!*”  

The next race recorded was not to be until 1937, but Mr Kilgour did not have his own way entirely. On September 14, 1909 - (a beautiful autumn morning with a touch of frost), Miss Wilson-Smith of Duns in Berwickshire made a solo attempt at the race. Starting from the Post Office, she “essayed the hazardous task” on a Tuesday, as *The Oban Times* quaintly put it, and was credited with a time of 1 hour 51 minutes for the ascent. Her time-keeper was none other than William Swan. Four days earlier, she had run from Achintee to the summit in three hours, but as a woman, this was not recognised as a record.

Seen by our correspondent after her return, the lady was inclined to belittle her so-called feat, and said that she accomplished it at no discomfort to herself. An ardent cyclist, she is in good training, but had only once before made the ascent of Ben Nevis. Her previous climb highest climb was on the Sidlalls, when she ascended to 2600 ft - only about half of the elevation of Ben Nevis. She underwent no special training for Tuesday’s task, and on her return looked as if she might repeat the climb without inconvenience. The day was bright and clear with a touch of frost in the air, and was highly suitable for such an exploit.

It is quite possible that there were some timed runs up Ben Nevis in the years between the World Wars, but no records or reports have survived. The “mania” for getting to the top of Britain’s highest mountain, however, clearly continued. Timed challenges once again surfaced, contests which eventually led to a blossoming of the event into a full-blown race with all the organisational back-up and an obviously enthralled populace. Since then the Ben Race has gone on to become one of the hill running fraternity’s greatest events, attracting a world-wide audience and participation.
It has had many highs and lows, many moments of supreme athletic endeavour with the years immediately preceding the Second World War and the decade of the 1950s its most successful period. A full-blown race was eventually organised in 1937, by the Fort William’s deputy Town Clerk George Spence, himself a mountain climber of some note. A Challenge Trophy was presented as a prize, by Mr George MacFarlane, who was also to leave his own mark indelibly on the history of the race. He was also eventually to become Provost of Fort William. His sons Sandy and George have given many years of sterling service on the Ben Race Association Committee. The starting point was once again the Post Office at 88 High Street.

C.P. Wilson of Kilwinning was at the time the holder of the record for the Ben Lomond Climb. Wilson was, along with Daniel Mulholland (a well-known cross-country runner) and Michael Reavey, of the Ardeer Recreation Club, and Fort William’s own Duncan MacIntyre, to become legends in their own life-time before the Golden Era of the Race in the 1950s.

MacIntyre, the single-eyed butcher and shinty player, produced one moment of classic sporting drama in 1942. There were no races in 1940 or 1941, but on Wednesday May 20, of that year, at 5pm, a record entry of eleven runners, including record holder Daniel Mulholland and C.P. Wilson, set off from the Post Office, with the revived race forming the highlight of “Warship Week”.

By 1942, the Ben Nevis Race was firmly established as a major local event. It is reported that “hundreds of people” were said to travel to Fort William from outlying districts to watch the start and finish and to follow the fortunes of the runners on the mountain. And it was in 1942, that Duncan MacIntyre (“Duncan the Butcher”), eventually to become President of the Ben Race Association, featured in one of the Race’s most dramatic moments. MacIntyre had lost an eye in a shinty match in 1934. Something of a local sporting hero, he had finished third in the race three years earlier, and led with a hundred yards to go. And just as Dorando Pietri collapsed near the end of the 1908 Olympic marathon in London and Jim Peters was to do famously at the Commonwealth Games in Canada in 1954, so the unfortunate Duncan was overcome with the finish line and victory in sight. He was, unfortunately for him in terms of winning the challenge, helped by his brother Alister and therefore disqualified.
The shock of realising that Duncan had failed to finish in such tragic circumstances made a lasting impression on another runner, Hugh MacLeod. His recollection of the day’s events remained crystal clear in his 77th year.

“It was a devastating blow to realise that my good friend Duncan had fallen so close to the line. Of course I didn’t know that at the time, and I just kept going at my own pace. But it was such a wonderful thing that he went on to win the race the following year. I think everyone wanted him to do that after what happened. But yes it was a terrible way to finish after such a great effort.”

The unfortunate Duncan MacIntyre received a silver medal and special prize for his heroic effort. Mulholland was presented with a vase of Goss china, inscribed with the Fort William coat of arms as a memento. MacIntyre’s colossal disappointment, however, did not stop him going on to set a record of 2 hours 4 mins and 30 seconds, when he led home a field of eight runners in 1943. In that year, the Ben Race had moved to what many regard as its spiritual home - the King George V Park, a magnificent natural amphitheatre, now the site of a swimming pool and bowling green complex.

**Conclusion**

The 1944 race was to be the last for another seven years as events elsewhere took their toll in more ways than one. The Ben Race though was about to enter a new era and a whole new dawn, and set of competitors, beckoned. The story of that decade and the years which followed, when the Ben Race grew to an annual event with a maximum of five hundred runners, which was to become known as the event’s Golden Era must remain untold for the present. In summary, however, it is a story of supreme athletic endeavour, from the entry of sixteen year old Kathleen Connachie in 1955, to the heroic achievements of the great Eddie Campbell who ran virtually every year for two decades uninterrupted from the 1950s; the death of John Rix in 1957, the only fatality recorded in the Race in over 100 years; Dave Cannon’s five wins in six years in the 1970s; to the cancellation in 1980 as the runners gathered at the start line and the near tragedy of a weather-induced evacuation of the mountain in 1988.
The Ben Race is a local institution and an athletic event of international significance, but also one which has never really fulfilled its potential in terms of being a sporting attraction. Its survival is ensured by a select band of committed individuals from a number of voluntary agencies ranging from the RAF mountain rescue teams to helicopter pilots; from Red Cross to marshals. It is a sporting challenge of the highest order which makes very special demands on its participants. It is, arguably, “the supreme test of athletic fitness.”

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Notes

1 Kilgour, 1905, p.90.
2 Duff, 1980, p.175.
4 *The Oban Times*, August 27, 1881.
5 *The Oban Times*, August 25, 1883.
6 Kilgour, 1905, p.45.
7 Kilgour, 1905, p.45.
8 There is some debate about the precise date of this first timed run, but the evidence of contemporary sources such as *The Oban Times* and *Inverness Courier* suggests fairly precisely, that Friday 27 September or Monday September 30 was the occasion. The Wednesday of the first of these weeks was the autumn holiday in Fort William. However, it was not chosen for the ascent.
9 *Inverness Courier*, October 4, 1895.
10 Kilgour, 1905, pp.11-12.
11 *The Oban Times*, September 18, 1897.
12 Spencer Acklom was born in Wexford on January 28, 1844. At the age of 20 he appears in the Regimental Roll of the Connaught Rangers, appointed ensign in the 16th Regiment on June 28, 1864. A glittering military career followed with postings to Mauritius and South Africa. Mentioned in despatches in the London Gazette on February 26, 1878, he was awarded a medal and clasp. Another medal followed during his service in the Afghan War, 1880. He retired from the army on March 1, 1893, to appear in Fort William two years later. He died a widower in Brighton, England on March 15, 1922.
13 *The Oban Times*, August 13, 1898.
14 *The Oban Times*, September 24, 1898.
15 *The Oban Times*, November 5, 1898.
16 *The Oban Times*, October 29, 1898.
17 *The Oban Times*, June 10, 1899.
18 See, for example, *The Oban Times*, August 5, 1899; *The Oban Times*, May 24, 1902.
19 *The Oban Times*, October 4, 1902.
20 *The Oban Times*, July 26, 1902.
21 *Inverness Courier*, October 3, 1903.
22 Kilgour, 1905, p.50.
23 *The Oban Times*, September 18, 1909.
24 In conversation with the writer, 1994. MacLeod finished second in the race and still has his medal. This paper is based on the writer’s published history of the Race. See MacLennan, 1994.