

ULTRA-TRAIL

AUSTRALIA

PACE UTA22 - Julie Steele

So near yet so far!

“a great introduction to Ultra-Trail Australia and trail running”, they said. “... a challenging course that ... is still achievable for novice trail runners”. They even published the elevation map with exquisite details describing the course. Next time I just might pay more attention to the subtle hints and detailed topography and tailor my training just a little more.

Having crewed for a friend in the 100 km event last year, I was so excited to try the last 22 km of her race. After visiting the port-a-loo about 20 times before the start, we were off, albeit in a billowing dust storm created by the ~800 excited enthusiasts all stampeding along the fire trail together. Picking myself off the ground after tripping over in the first few metres, I was now hoping to stay upright for the next 22 km. I had been warned that the race was basically down, followed by up, culminating in those dreaded 951 stairs! However, I didn't realize quite how challenging “down” was.

By about the 10 km mark, I was sensing an unusually strong tightness in my calves, which didn't bid well for the up. But then the inclinations changed and the series of “upward undulations” began. I quickly realized that my pre-race notion of trying to not walk would be impossible, comforted by those around me who had also slowed to a positive power walk, which transitioned into an anguished hand-on-thigh upward shuffle. But then at ~16 km we turned onto the lush and “level” trail, that wound ominously towards the Furber stairs. Despite the stampede at the start I found myself running much of this section of the course alone, really appreciating the coolness of the shaded trail and being serenaded by the whip birds, cheered on by the occasional bemused bushwalker. And then they appeared, those relentless Furber stairs. The serenity of my solo trail run was suddenly broken by the anguished sounds of those runners whose tight calves had rebelled, leaving them lying anguished on the side of the track.

In true trail running spirit, fellow competitors would stop and try to administer some much-needed slow stretching to help their new-found friends make it to that elusive finish line. I was spurred on by the mantra of my coach's voice swirling around in my head - “just keep putting one foot forward” and the thought that the 100 km runners would have already completed an additional 78 km before reaching this point. Finally, with a glimpse of the finish ahead I decided to make a sprint for that elusive line.

With mere seconds to break the 3-hour time barrier, my recalcitrant calves had plans of their own and it wasn't pretty. My contorted face, rock-like legs and mal-aligned running posture drew a few gasps from the supportive crowd who had massed around the finish area. Gingerly I stepped forward onto that cramping leg, replacing any notion of a sprint with a delicate shuffle forward towards that line. 3 hours and 43 second, but at least I was still upright and exceptionally elated. Not bad for an old girl, achieving a surprising 4th place in my 50-59 age category, even though I sit at the older end of the age spectrum.

Despite desperately following “Hanny's Recovery Tips” that had been uploaded on the Ultra-Trail Australia Facebook page, walking was an interesting challenge for the next few days and caused great amusement for my students. However, with delayed muscle soreness a distant memory, my thoughts are now turning to 2017 – 50 or 100 km, should I give one a go???

Thanks for the amazing opportunity to experience a little part of the Ultra-Trail Australia event. We will be back!