

The logo for Ultra-Trail Australia features the words "ULTRA-TRAIL" in a large, bold, black, hand-drawn font. Below it, the word "AUSTRALIA" is written in a smaller, black, sans-serif font. The text is enclosed within a decorative border of small orange and black dots. The entire page is framed by a vertical border on both sides, consisting of larger, irregular orange and black shapes that resemble splatters or abstract patterns.

# ULTRA-TRAIL

## AUSTRALIA

UTA22 - Paul O'Loughlin

My journey started a year earlier, in 2015, with an accidental flirtation with the North Face 100 finishing chute when in Katoomba for other purposes. In this fortuitous meeting I witnessed the winner, and leading contenders, cross the finish line in the 100km race. The atmosphere was electric, buzzing with excitement and emotion for not only these athletes, but just as much for the strugglers coming through to finish their 50km adventure.

I was converted. Trail running became my focus, but 50km? Or 100km? Ultra Australia conveniently introduced the 22km event for my old legs. My "practice" race a few weeks prior revealed some serious flaws. Then followed a few visits to the actual course where I was determined to practice steep ascents. And those tricky descents where I am always putting on the brakes for fear of crashing to the dirt.

The bus trip out was a jolly jaunt. A friendly chat with a fellow competitor who had twisted an ankle down in the valley just a week before. Would it hold up for the 22k? I myself had a bad lead-in feeling particularly unwell with a simple head-cold earlier in the week. Significantly not nervous at the start. I hate Eye of the Tiger. Those first few kms – my confidence going down Kedumba was up, reaching the 5km in under 30 minutes, which was probably, in the final analysis, too fast. Because the climbing was slow, energy was low, from the depths of Leura Falls Creek to Leura Forest. It was hotter than on my usual early morning runs – why had winter weather not arrived? Was I the only one complaining about the beautiful weather we were having?

Federal Pass, lovely. Rather a joy running along here. But knowing Furber Steps were ahead, I gave my legs a little respite at the base of the Giant Stairway while refuelling, watching other runners go by, and sharing those sandstone seats (meant for tired tourists) with weary runners battling injury and cramps.

Furber. They are a torture. The organisers have a pathological loathing for runners I am sure, with the idea of putting the finish line at the top of these stairs. But alas I reached the top, and shuffled into the finishing chute I remembered from the year before, and there again was that electricity, that buzz. It is no contest – there is no better finish to a race – winning or losing, or somewhere in between.

And I came back again early the next morning to volunteer!