

ULTRA-TRAIL

AUSTRALIA

UTA50 - James Watson

So.....How'd you go?

Nervous but composed, my strategy was simple. Go hard when the running is open, stay upright as things tighten. The start list is published, I am thinking top twenty. Age group podium is realistic. An absent Tony Fattorini has my prospects improving. We're off! Vlad put twenty metres on us in the first hundred and was gone. Open road, top ten, in rhythm, feeling strong and acutely aware of my effort.

The Giant Stairway, unknown to me, I am afraid of becoming a human speedbump as the mountain boys move forward. Surprisingly, I blitzed my way to the relative comfort of the Leura Forest without interruption. Beautiful running - soft trails, earthy browns, lush greenery and Climbing towards Leura Cascades. It's Hanny Allston! What a buzz. Etiquette says speed up or let her through. Plans abandoned, can I hold her off? Working hard, my 'space' isn't threatened and with confidence growing I charge ahead. Only positive thoughts as the track opened up. Onto Gordon Falls and The Fairmont. My plan is to run straight through this water point. Four guys lead me in and they all stop! Knowing the trails ahead were very runnable, instinctively, I 'gas it'! Four 'scalps' right there! Things are falling into place. Good legs and trail connection, most importantly, I am having a blast. Between Lillians Bridge and Wentworth Falls I meet with Vlad again who offers me reassurance despite being unwell.

Onto Tablelands Road, "Fifth mate!", just the boost I'm looking for. Arriving at checkpoint 28K's I am 'supplyless', restocking allows one through. Watching him move up the road, my thoughts - patience / execution. A brief climb then onto the quad smashing Kedumba Pass. I have practiced this! I know what to do, but it doesn't feel right. I am moving too fast, what will be the cost? Approaching Jamison Creek, did I pass two? The climb out is brutal, it's now time to dig. Fifty minutes, only the dirt at my feet. Counting steps, 200 run / 50 walk, sometimes negotiating as the grade steepens. Chastising myself if I lose count. Moving consistently closer to third, I dare to dream! Did I read about a new Garmin on Facebook? Maximum concentration required! I run 400 steps as I move into third. Although my effort is applauded I can feel the fight, we are both substantially weakened so it isn't over yet. Through the last checkpoint, I fill my small bottles.

Enjoying the Leura Forest once again, 'No complacency' is my mantra, "Do not fall!" I encounter Majell, who runs briefly with me. "Second isn't too far ahead mate, maybe you can chase? 'I bet you say that to all the boys'. I feel pretty solid as thoughts of 'The Stairs' materialise. The cowbell rings, and I start to climb. A moment of panic. No power! My trusty 'string beans' are dead. Toiling, I wait for the cowbell to again ring, revealing my gap. With one hand on the top rail, the other pulling chainmesh, unfortunately, I have no energy to acknowledge the generous supporters. A long line of concrete stairs, nobody in front - nobody behind. My body goes cold as I move onto the boards, I remember this from last year. I have made it!!

Alone in the finish chute, the cheering could only be for me! The smiling faces of strangers was amazing, my joy was pure - a moment never to be forgotten. Stunned and emotionally confused, I didn't know what to do. With dry clothes on, I sat in my car for about forty minutes. I called my wife and kids. It was my Flossy's birthday and I wanted to go home.

Obviously, after chatting a while I went back to Scenic World and had a wonderful afternoon watching others achieve their glory. The Podium was very exciting for me.

Ultra-Trail Australia / The Blue Mountains. BRILLIANT!