

ULTRA-TRAIL

AUSTRALIA

UTA50 - John Chan

I vividly remember the moment on 14 May. There was warm sunshine, a slight breeze, birds chirping as I sat on a tree stump with my eyes closed, taking it all in. I finished off my water and all I wanted to do next was lie down and sleep. I had given it a good go but training on the flat terrain in Sydney during the cool early mornings had not prepared me for the highs and lows (literally!) of the UTA50 course. I've never DNF'ed before but now my only thoughts were how do I let a race official know and how would they get me back to Scenic World?

As I pondered this, I tried to work out where I had gone wrong. The out-and-backs at the start had been comfortable, the cheering through Scenic World had provided a boost, the steep trails on Giant Staircase and Leura Forest had been negotiated safely. Seeing my family at the Fairmont gave me a real lift, although I made a rookie error in not stopping for longer with them. I loved high-fiving my kids and others lining the roads. It was warming up as I approached Queen Victoria Hospital but I still felt good and knew that there would be an energetic vibe there. The crews didn't disappoint and the plentiful supply of nutrition was just what I needed to top me up for the tougher second half. I left QVH looking forward to the steady downhill to Jamison Creek on beautiful, shaded trails. I was joined by another first timer and the kilometres flew by as we chatted about shared race experiences (Six Foot Track, Coastal Classic, Melbourne Marathon) and joked about how we "conveniently" planned family holidays to coincide with local races (we all do it, don't we?).

The easy running abruptly came to an end though on crossing Jamison Creek...I slowed to a walk almost immediately and watched my buddy gradually creep ahead up the unrelenting climb. My pre-race strategy had been to take it slowly but purposely up the slopes, saving my legs and lungs for Furber Steps. However as I ground my way further up a dreaded ache started to spread through my calves. I shortened my stride, taking on fluid and nutrition. It seemed to be working until the short downhill before the 41km aid station... I had full on cramp that felt as though someone had removed my legs and replaced them with the same tree trunks I was now sitting on! Now I could only shuffle 50m before having to stop and curse at how far there was still to go to the finish. An hour has never felt longer and it came as a relief when I decided that I'd had enough...

But as every one of the 3000 runners knows, the spirit of your fellow competitors won't let you give up so easily - if you can walk then you're finishing! I lost count of how many people checked on me and gave words of encouragement. Several offered to walk with me. Maybe it was the runner who stopped to give me a salt tablet that got me going again. It was more likely the realisation that we were all going through the same pain and exhilaration together. Whatever it was fired me up to put one foot in front of the other, through the final kilometres and every single Furber step.

A final jog round the left hand bend and I grabbed my kids' hands to cross the line together. I've never pushed my body so hard or have to dig so deep mentally. I now appreciate the wonderful contrast that UTA offers, from the peacefulness and suffering out on the trails to the cheering and elation at the finish line. My family can't wait to come back again next year. I've already put a circle around 20 May 2017...