

ULTRA-TRAIL

AUSTRALIA

UTA50 - Ken Benson

The shoes are off!

Sitting in the athletes lounge, I look at the line to the kiosk and catch my wife's eye as she patiently waits to get to the front of the queue. I try to smile but it comes across more like a grimace. Her eyes smile back - I can read the concern behind them. Not fifteen minutes ago I was receiving my medal. UTA50 tick! That was one big tick. I'll admit I had a tear in my eye and choked on my thoughts when I saw the stairs into the finishers lounge. How cruel is this event. Even getting into recovery is hard. I'm never doing this again, and don't ever consider me for the 100. Those people must be mad.

She sits down with me and passes over the food and drink and asks how I feel. Contemplating before I answer I do a mental check of myself. I'm dehydrated, hungrier than I can remember. I have aches in my chest (from breathing hard all day), my back (carrying that pack for longer than ever before), my arms (who would guess, running hurts the arms) and of course I could probably count every muscle in both of my legs just by how poor they feel. I answer 'good', but it's not sincere and she knows it. I can't reach my shoes to take them off and I'm feeling the cold. Could it get any better? It isn't until my thirst and hunger have been sated that I begin to enjoy the event again.

The excitement and anticipation had me almost bursting. For two days before the event I couldn't sit still. The forecast promised and delivered a spectacular mountains day. The electricity at the start line had me tingling. Last minute checks and preparations done, did I want to race the start or stick my plan. Adrenalin almost got the better of me but with a calm head off I set. The scenery was spectacular. The other runners friendly, courteous, and some chatty.

Support on course from spectators was obviously sparse but at aid stations and check points it was voluminous and noisy. A thousand hands all trying to help. Pats on the back and cheers from afar. Time slowed as the event lengthened, running (even walking) became more difficult as the kilometres ticked over. My feet and legs started to complain. Squash those thoughts it's a long way to go. More complaints sometimes silent, sometimes as a groan or comment under the breath. Keep going...

It was about the base of Furber Steps that I looked for a way out. There had to be some other way to finish this event without having to climb them. I don't mind admitting quitting was an option, if only I could find an easier way out. I sucked in as deep a breath as I could muster and lifted first one leg then the other. With a few pauses we made it up all 951 steps.

My wife, family friends and hundreds of other people I didn't know carried me across the finish line with their enthusiastic cheers. The weight of the medal - as light as it was - almost dropped me. I'd made it.

That is the hardest run I've ever done.

That brings me back to where I started. Sitting in the athletes lounge. I was there some time watching others come and go, a few enter the medical tent looking I hope worse than I felt. The sustenance provided by my meal and the support of others buoys me and I start to contemplate next year.

Would I do it again? I don't think so... not while the UTA100 has my name still to be added to the finishers list. My wife shakes her head and utters the two words I heard when I signed up for UTA50, "You're mad!"