

ULTRA-TRAIL

AUSTRALIA

UTA50 - Mel Burnet

I am a runner.

12 months ago I had never ran, I didn't believe I could run. That's before I decided I needed something in my life for me. Firstly, running was up and down the street, and then around the block, then I started running Parkrun. I fell in love with running because of how it made me feel. The time it gave me alone with my thoughts.

I met some people through Up Coaching and started training. I fell into the excitement of entering the races all of my friends were entering, I didn't want to miss out. Everyone was talking about this race called UTA50. I thought "yeah I could do that." I threw up the idea a few people suggested that it may be a bit much as I had never ran on a trail before. I thought about it and begrudgingly with some disappointment agreed. I decided to enter the 22. I wasn't happy with my decision and really knew in my heart I wanted to give the 50 a go.

Through Up Coaching I got a coach. He believed in me and made me believe in me. I decided to start training. I did a lot of training on and off the course. I made the decision to formally change my entry to the 50. My training was going fantastic until in April I was diagnosed with an ovarian cyst which required surgery. My surgeon advised me to have the surgery sooner rather than later. This would mean at least 4-6 weeks off running. I couldn't do this after all the training and the hype that was rapidly building. I discussed with my surgeon the risk of delaying surgery. There was a low risk of cancer and if it was would still be early stage and treatable. I struggled with the decision to forgo surgery to complete the race. After discussion with my surgeon and husband we decided to delay the surgery until I could conquer that 50km that is known as Ultra trail Australia.

I continued to train with pain and nausea. At most times I was unable to eat a lot however training was continuing well until the day I managed a long 42km on course training run. My knee went on me. I knew deep down that this had to be the dreaded ITB syndrome that I had heard so much about. I thought if I could manage 42km in horrendous pain and had put my surgery off, nothing was going to stop me getting to that start line absolutely nothing. I decreased my training, had more rest (as much as a runner could) and put my body through some tough torture to get myself to that start line. With a week out I was feeling really unwell.

I was unable to prepare my body enough for the torture I was about to put it through. I felt constant nausea and was forcing myself to carb load. Mentally I felt beaten as my body felt, but I just couldn't give up. In my mind I was thinking, "I haven't gone through this hell for nothing." With lots of encouragement from my coach, my husband and my friends, I made it to the day before the race. I had to believe, believe that anything is possible.

I volunteered for the stair challenge on Friday with my daughter and my friend. It was a great day cheering on everyone, especially my friends that competed in the 22. I was quietly excited and In my mind I was thinking "just maybe I might get lucky and pull it off." We had a girly night the night before and all felt good. I had a secret couple of goal times and I was hopeful. The morning was amazing, great weather, great atmosphere, one of my favourite old songs was playing on the loud speaker, my family here to support me, I was ready to do this.

Standing next to the best people possible, we started. Waving goodbye to my family, I began the challenge I set myself. I wanted this more than anything I have wanted in a long time. The first few kms were fantastic. The cheer of the crowd, people calling out your name, putting their hands out for you to touch, it felt amazing. I needed to run those first few hills as they are my strongest. I felt great, no pain anywhere in sight. I felt awesome visualising my training runs. I was running smart and before I knew it I was at Echo Point.

I was reminded of all our great early training runs here and hoped to see many of the local cockatoos we had always seen. I got to the stairs and it was pretty banked up and took quite a while to get down. Taking it slow gave me time to think about my technique and hope I got it right. I had made the decision to leave my friends early on the hills, I needed to run alone. I don't know why, I just thought it was for the best.

I tried my hardest to go down the stairs lightly and not put to much pressure on my back, hips and knees. They seemed to go on forever, much longer than anytime I had run them before. I began to feel it my back, then my hips and then in my knee. Still, I couldn't let any bad thoughts in. I still had a long way to go.

Everyone was talking but I just had to keep to myself and stay in my own little UTA bubble.

I love Leura Forrest and wanted to run it but I took extra caution and got to the cascades. It was banked up again (thank God) and we all went up those stairs one by one. There was Lots of talk here and I'm grateful that many people gave me so much encouragement up those stairs. I was sorry that I could barely say a word back.

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We reached the road I felt that I could run a little more knowing that my family weren't far away at the Fairmont. I could push myself a little more. Along this road I found some of my training buddies we had a chat and gave each other moral support. It was here that I felt the nausea hit me. My mouth was so dry and I couldn't continue taking in the gels or food I had. Water was the only thing getting me through. Running into Fairmont felt great seeing so many familiar faces. I saw my husband and daughter and the tears came. They gave me great encouragement to keep going. I heard someone tell me that my running buddy had said to tell Mel that she will see me on the hills (she knew that was my strongest). I knew deep down I wouldn't see her again. I tried to eat some chips but my mouth was so dry I had to spit them out. I composed myself and off I went.

I knew the course. I knew the parts I could run confidently but I was feeling weak and so sick. I wanted to run that last couple of kms to Conservation Hut but it felt impossible. I found another friend and we chatted a bit and again I felt bad that I couldn't give much back conversation wise. I could still only stomach water and pondered with the thought of stopping at Conservation Hut and filling up but I knew if I stopped I may not start again. I knew that when I'd see my husband I would get teary again.

I ran small bits up to the hut and when I reached it there was a sign, press for power. Somehow I missed pressing this and this could have been my downfall. My friend took the time to press it, why didn't I?? Well you can see by my face, why I didn't. My husband told me to keep going but I felt so sick. I had to stop and try and make myself sick only I had nothing in my stomach. He sent me on my way quickly not before telling me I was doing a great job. Through Wentworth falls there were quite a few tourists which at times made it a bit difficult to get through but once I was on that fire trail I knew I didn't have that far to QVH. Along the way I met a few other ladies who were talking about wanting a cold Coke. I butted in and said "OMG me to" I was desperate for a Coke and somehow this made us all run faster. I finally got to QVH and quickly looked around for the Coke table. I found it and I bolted. Only to be told there wasn't any left. Surely he was mistaken, I was so desperate and thought that may have been the only thing I could stomach that may just possibly get me through the next 22km which I knew was my strongest on course. I had to ask a few times just in case I was hearing things and he may have been wrong and would quickly find some for me. But, there was not a drop of Coke insight.

Feeling so sick and in pain I quickly found the water tank and filled up my bladder and quickly went on my way. I was thinking that I could still get close enough to one of my goal times. Heading down kedumba with a friend I complained all the way about not getting Coke. It was then I just didn't feel it anymore. I was too sick and in too much pain. I knew my race plan had to change and the goal had to change. I had all the coaches voices in my head going over the advice they had given me. I told myself that today wasn't my day, it wasn't my race. I don't think I gave up the goal, it just changed it. It was now about finishing and not finishing so broken that it would take more months than I was willing to wait, to fix my body up.

Passing Jamison creek and up those hills I was once strong on, to Leura creek where I remembered soaking our legs in the water one long training day then up those damn hills again is where I met a stranger. A stranger who I told, I was sick and had been pretty much the whole race, she told me she had been sick to and wasn't in the greatest condition. She then pulled out her mandarin she picked up at QVH and offered me half. I don't even eat mandarins but this tasted like heaven. We both wished we had grabbed more. This and a few swear words got me to the next checkpoint. We chatted more along the way and this helped me greatly.

The next few kms of the course I shared many a swear word with many other runners. Strange but it was also comforting that others were feeling what I was. I was also frustrated that I didn't or couldn't even run one hill. Those hills that were once my friend, today they were my enemy. The whole 50km was my enemy but I wasn't going to let it beat me.

I quickly went through the last checkpoint. I knew deep down I would be unable to run through that last part of Leura forest thanks to my ITB being so angry at me. I was so bloody angry with it too. Here I was reminded that even though I was a little broken, I was still there. I had a few laughs with people either in front of me or behind me, a few things were beginning to agitate me, like those walking poles (sorry to those using them) but the noise they made was really getting to me at this point.

I used a lot of this time to remember all the fun training runs we had done and knew I had not far to go when I came to a camera, just about to take a photo when the lady behind me says, did you fix your makeup up? I turned and said "yep I fixed my mascara up at the last checkpoint" I had to laugh because if I didn't, I would have cried. With just a km or so out from Furber my new wonderful mandarin friend runs past and says "come on Mel, I'll see you on those stairs" I say "it's ok you'll be way in front of me" and off she went. I finally reached those stairs that were once my friend. I had enjoyed many runs up them trying each time to beat my time. persisted, she insisted I go in front of her and would not leave me alone.

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Up those dark and lonely stairs one by one my friend kept talking to me but I just couldn't answer, I just wanted it to be over. I'm never running again, why the hell would I do this to my body so willingly??? Why, why the F would I do this? But again my friend kept telling me to move. So I kept moving thinking surely I was nearer to the top, I don't remember them being this far or taking so long. Then all of sudden light appeared, I could hear the crowd. I composed myself because I had been imagining and picturing this feeling, this moment for as long as I could remember. I mean it wasn't going to be the same ending I had in my head but I had made peace (well sort of) with myself that my goals had changed back in Kedumba and with that I somehow quickly forgot the pain and sickness and ran towards that line.

I saw all my Up Coaching friends who were yelling, I saw my neighbour who was waving, I thought why is he here, oh yay he is here for me, where is his wife she must be here somewhere?, I didn't know they were coming up.

I then saw my baby girl. I didn't know she was coming up either. I lost it then. At that point I didn't want to cross the finish line, I wanted to savour that moment for longer but I couldn't and when my girl ran to me, I picked her up. She said to me "put me down mummy I want to run" and with that and seeing my husband and my other daughter at the end we ran for that finish line together, hand in hand. That finish chute was the most amazing experience. So many people shouting out for you, calling your name all excited because you and finished. After a cuddle from 2 of my kids and my husband I really wanted that long awaited Coke! Another beautiful friend went in search but unable to find one anywhere. So I quickly peeled a mandarin and got that in, since when did mandarins taste so good? Then surrounded by family, friends and one of my best friends who bought my baby up, I went to the physio tent and got them to just give my ITB's some TLC and quietly thank them for sort of getting me through this 50km race.

So, in the arduous, sometimes cold and sometimes lonely Blue Mountains where running is usually considered heinous, the dedicated trail runners who decide to race through the vicious stairs, hills, fire trails and single trails are members of an elite squad known as ultra-marathoners. And this is one of their stories.

I am not a runner. I am an ultra marathon runner!