

ULTRA-TRAIL

AUSTRALIA

UTA50 - Nina Leatherday

I recently joined the band of ultra-marathoners when I finished the Ultra Trail Australia 50K. And it was flippin' amazingly fun.

Since I hadn't pre-qualified, I was in the last (and largest) start group of the day. I edged towards the front of the group and was off at 7:50. I'd done some training on the course but had neglected to pay much attention to the first 9K of the race. It was along roads and according to the topo map it looked pretty flat. How hard could it be? Turns out my race strategy – run where it's comfortable and walk where it's not – kicked in a lot earlier on in the race than I anticipated! The “flat” sections were still pretty hilly! Before I knew it we were at 9K and at the top of the Giant Stairway. There was a major back log of runners here as only the intensely crazy people run down these steps, and I was thankful for the slow pace. I had a nice chat with a lovely Kiwi girl who was in front of me - apparently there's lots of beautiful trail running to be had in NZ!

At the bottom of the steps the course evened out a little bit and I was able to get into a rhythm before we started the incline back up out of the valley – more steps, and another bottleneck of runners. A slow hike – I was maybe slightly annoyed at the pace but at the same time I knew that there was A LOT of race left and my only goal was to finish with a smile on my face. I was on track.

I carried on to the first checkpoint at 17k which I rushed through (a few lollies – too chewy! A few crisps – salty wonderfulness! And a few salt packs – straight on the tongue!). 10K later I was feeling pretty good and everything was going well...until I went for a drink and realised my camelback had run dry. I had to laugh when less than a minute later there was a sign that said “aid station, 300m”. HOORAY! Perfectly estimated water usage (really: it was luck). At the aid station, I refilled my camelback and had some of the most amazing watermelon and mandarins this world has ever seen. They were cold and wet and delicious and provided by the most lovely volunteers (THANKS!).

From there it was all downhill to the bottom of the Jamison Valley – 8K of downhill. I found this to be the hardest part of the race. I hadn't done this section in training and in my mind “downhills are free” and that means easy. But 8K of steep decent is actually really challenging. And people were cruising past me. How do they do that!? I was happy to see the bottom of the valley.

Then it was back up. I had done this part in training so I knew what to expect. I knew that it was steep and I knew that it was hard and I was mentally prepared to walk it all. Which is just what I did. I think I would have been crushed had I planned to run the whole race as I honestly don't think any amount of training would have set me up to run this section. Once I arrived at the top it was about 4K along pleasantly undulating trails until I reached the bottom of the Furber Steps. Again – down to a slow hike. But this time there was no one in front of me, it was a self paced slow hike. As I closed in on the top I could hear music and cheering and bells pulling me upwards towards the finish line, which I ran across with a big ridiculous grin on my face. Goal achieved!

The race went by in a blur. And I loved it.