

ULTRA-TRAIL

AUSTRALIA

UTA50 - Sally Connor

The view from the back of the pack: A walker's perspective

Thankfully events like the UTA welcome walkers with non-crazy cut-off times, and my sister and I joined up from Melbourne, eager to get amongst the atmosphere, test ourselves on the 50k course, and enjoy the scenery.

Heading off, we felt a lot of excitement and nerves, got some pumping up from the announcers, and suddenly we were off. We looked around over the first bit of the event and noticed everyone was running. Well everyone except for us, and another pair of girls who had shot off at the pace of Olympic race walkers. Our goal became to stay ahead of the "sweeper".

We quickly got to the part of the course where we hugged the cliff faces alongside the Three Sisters and the views were spectacular. We were pacing with a few of the walker / runner types at this point. Then we descended on the Giant Stairway, and I had my first and only fall for the whole event, scraping my arm on a ladder step and was lucky not to draw blood.

At the bottom, we grabbed our poles and headed through the Leura Forest, a section of the course that had a few flat bits but was mostly up and around waterfalls a few times, down and up gullies and down and up more stairs and ladders. Thank goodness for hill training here! We passed about 30 people on this section, some of whom were really struggling with the ups and downs.

After a brief stop for water, the next part of the course seemed to drag in some parts and flew by in others. There were some pretty ordinary climbing bits and then some incredible views through by Wentworth Falls and under cliff hangings. The forerunners to the 100k came streaming past us during this section, full of beans and encouragement for us.

The paved road to the checkpoint dragged on forever and was my most hated part of the course. Luckily the checkpoint had toilets, some good fruit buns as promised, some lovely volunteers giving us lollies and water. Better still we were a long way ahead of the cut off time. And had some inkling we might get this thing done. Phew! Beyond the checkpoint came the "long and winding road" descending into the valley below. Thankfully there was a pretty constant stream of 100k runners coming past us to keep us feeling upbeat with their remarks. And the scenery remained amazing to keep up our spirits, although a large number of huge hills up and down seem to appear from nowhere to challenge us.

The forest in the dark was surreal. It hardly seemed like the same place we had encountered just hours before. How I didn't trip over myself in the last section I have no idea. I had a couple of minor trips over rocks and tree roots, stepped straight into a huge mud puddle, and got startled quite a few times by the automated cameras. Walking was getting harder with my leg now not wanting to bend on downward stairs.

Finally we could see the lights up the top of the hill ahead of us, and the finish awaited. Oh wait, hang on, after 951 steps straight up hill it awaited. The dreaded Furber Steps. And then finally, after what seemed like an eon, we were up the top – with the finish line noise really close... and heading toward it. We walked across the line together just as we had shared most of our walking through the event. It felt incredible to have done it. We looked at the time and realised we had got through it in just under 12 hours at 7:56pm, much better than our anticipated time and beating the cut off by an hour and a half.

An event that I had initially thought was outside my capabilities was completed, and wow what a journey!