

ULTRA-TRAIL

AUSTRALIA

UTA50 - Susan (Sue) Atherton

The thrill of a challenge - not just a primal urge, but for me the ultimate measure of endurance and willpower. The kind of challenge that pushed me to register for my first ultra-marathon, the UTA50.

I never predicted it would be easy – my longest run was 25 kilometres by comparison. But I had the drive and the capabilities; the rest would fall into place as I worked towards my goals. I excitedly began to train through boot-camps, training runs and ate healthily to ensure I had the fuel I needed. As a resident of Katoomba, I was able to begin familiarising myself with the UTA50 course through regular running sessions. As it happens, the UTA50 course is a great place to meet people in search of the same challenge as I was and I met many great people who would become both my friends and training partners. My fitness improved almost as quickly as my knowledge of the course.

The efficient running machine I was training to be needed the right fuel and equipment for maximum function. I worked hard on my nutrition and ensured I had every tool available for my success. The most valuable thing I found through training was the encouragement and support of fellow runners. I will always remember how welcoming they were to me, and how eager runners were to share their experiences and knowledge.

I felt ready. I had prepared as best I could and was emboldened by the support of all my family and friends. I was in the 4th start group and found myself besides some fellow first timers – Scott Hawker's parents. At 7.38 am, my ultra-marathon began. I found my training began to pay off almost immediately – my running was strong, my breathing was easy and I felt inspired by the support of the community around me. Before I knew it, I had reached Echo Point. To my pleasant surprise I saw some of my friends who were cheering me on. Their support reaffirmed that I could do this, they believed in me and so did I. Down the Giant Staircase the run stretched, a parade of people in search of a challenge. Time flew by as I climbed out of Leura Forest and on to the Cascades, en route to Gordon Falls. My friends were waiting for me, and their belief in me spurred me on again.

My training had served me well, I had reached Willoughby Road – a sign that the worst of the stairs were behind me, although Furber Stairs were still waiting ahead at the end. The open road provided the opportunity to stretch my legs, an opportunity I relished. The Fairmont arrived sooner than I expected, so I filled my water and allowed myself a moment to chat with my friends. As I continued on I noticed the camaraderie among runners meant all were polite when overtaking – this challenge was as much about challenging yourself and not hindering others. But fate had a different challenge in mind for me.

As the Conservation Hut came into view, I felt my foot catch on a rock and knew something was wrong. I began to fall, and threw my right arm out to lessen the impact. But as I hit the ground I felt my arm give way underneath me. The pain was excruciating but I managed to roll onto my side, where two of my friends and a runner (who providentially happened to be a doctor), stopped to assist me. The race was over for me, 22 kms before the finish line. I had not reached the goal that I set for myself.

Of all the things this experience has taught me, the most valuable lessons lie in human resilience and the amazing community that exists in Ultra-Marathon runners. Although I am typing this the night before I head to hospital for a surgical repair of my broken humerus – my spirit remains unbroken. In 6 months when my shoulder is repaired it will be time to begin training for UTA50 2017. The challenge continues...