

ULTRA-TRAIL

AUSTRALIA

UTA100 - Matt Gilbey

Unknown.

Unknown are the variables leading into this event. Unknown are many of the people who register anonymously through accounts and portals for a day in the distant future where - even further - the unknowns will determine the outcome of what will undoubtedly be a long day. Unknown are the number of people who drop out and sell or transfer their tickets in the months, weeks, days before the event whether through injury or fear or just plain circumstance. Equally unknown are the people at the tail.

For me this event was always about the unknown. It's the not knowing that holds the appeal and the excitement. The intangibility of what I can actually do when I have to do it. That's what drove me to toe the start line with all those other unknown individuals with whom I shared a common understanding and anonymous camaraderie.

Reigning in the excitement on the short road section at the start was a mental torture I had been unprepared for. The vibe and energy of the competitors and supporters lifts everyone and those that have been there before all share that knowing look and a barely perceptible shake of the head. Phrases like "have fun, we'll see you later" have true meaning and this time I took the hint. A good friend had offered to help me in my campaign and he was happy to stay with me as long as he maintained his 19hr Western States qualifier target - even though he was capable of a much more respectable time. We kept to our chosen pace and watched the casualties slowly mount. A young lady injuring her ankle with a cringe worthy, audible crack less than 7km in and barely on the trails. Several more seem to have underestimated the unseasonably warm weather and struggled with the need for additional hydration/nutrition/electrolyte etc. Many nameless faces of withdrawing competitors smiled at me from a departing bus as I too struggled with my demons heading into check point 3 along Megalong Valley Road." Far too many and far too happy!" was my spiteful thought as the dust cloud obscured the departing bus from view.

Food. Water. How they can change the body and spirit on such an enterprise. Although I didn't feel hungry, I knew that my black clouds were due to inadequate intake and I was now on the rollercoaster of swinging moods. I knew I was pushing the limit as far as hydration but knew also that I could make it into the checkpoint with empty bottles. Hydrated and fed I managed a respectable climb out of the Megalong Valley and continued with a positive frame of mind and ambition of a comfortable 19-20 hour finish bubbling forth.

Unknown. I didn't make it. I succumbed to what at the time felt like a race ending injury, but as my memory fades and I replay it in my mind; feels more like a soft excuse. I cannot decide if my reasons to drop after those brutalising stairs from the Aquatic Centre through to the Hospital were legitimate.

That indecision, that hollow feeling, are the embers that catch on the fuel of ambition. The generous gift of a bronze buckle by a patient and loyal friend - who stayed with me well beyond where he should have - still managing to gain his prized Western States Qualifier - the breeze fanning those embers to flame.