

NOT JUST ANY 100 – MY JOURNEY TO UTA 100

I did it! I completed the UTA 100! I still can't believe it. Before the race I imagined myself crawling up Furber Steps, staggering across the finish line and collapsing with exhaustion. Instead, I ran into the arms of my coaches Kerry and Ali from Squadrun and was on a high after 24 hours on my feet.

From my late 20s to mid 40s (now almost 55), I suffered from Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS). Back in 2011 my brother did the NF100. Although I had slowly started exercising again, there was something about the NF100 that sparked inside me. I said as much to my husband one day whilst out on a bushwalk. "I want to do the NF100." I can't remember if he commented or not, but I know what he was thinking because I was thinking the same thing. Not likely! We started to get into trail running, and he completed his first NF100 in 2013. Later that year I completed the Coastal Classic – my first "big" trail run. This was a massive achievement for me and it got me thinking that maybe I could do the NF50.

Early in 2014 I joined the Summit Sisters. What a wonderful group of supportive, like-minded women founded by Jo Brischetto and Gretel Fortmann. Jo and Gretel ran some pretty amazing trail running camps which were so informative and loads of fun. Many fond memories. Meanwhile, I completed the NF50 in 2014 and was getting right into trail running even though I'm a Back of Packer, and always will be. Noel and I joined Running Wild and have met so many wonderful people along the way. In 2015 I completed another NF50, but for some reason, I didn't enjoy it quite so much. I think once you repeat an event, there is always pressure to do better. My friend Judy (who I met through Running Wild) and I had been toying with the idea of 100. But on the finish line of that 50k, we both declared to her partner, that if we ever seriously entertained the idea of doing 100, we were to be talked out of it! I also declared I was never doing more than 30 k again!

2016 rolled around and the idea of 100 was still niggling me. I asked my husband Noel to take me out on the first half of the course, which we did mid week in February. We went straight out along Narrowneck (I was familiar with the landslide and Golden Stairs), down into Megalong Valley, up Nellies Glen (which I thought would never end) and back to Scenic World via the Aquatic Centre. About 45k all up. I collapsed in a chair at Scenic World, downed a milkshake, and was very grateful that I didn't have to drive home. After an early night, I woke the next morning to the realization that the (now) UTA100 was outside my capabilities. Two days later I felt great and I thought, well if I've recovered well with not much training, then maybe I can do it.

As we had spent April in Italy, it was always my plan to do Pace 22 that year. I was looking forward to running down Kedumba on fresh legs and knew I could do it without a lot of training. At the Expo I chatted to Hanny about the 100. She suggested that maybe I should do Tarawera instead, as it may be easier. I explained that I didn't want to do any 100, it had to be this 100. I love the Blue Mountains and part of the attraction was to experience the ladders and the didgeridoos out on Ironpot Ridge.

Once UTA for 2016 was over, I started thinking about 2017. It was now or never. I decided I needed to take my training seriously, and get a coach. I was already doing 2 sessions of Step into Life a week, so I needed something affordable, but more importantly, flexible. I signed up with Squadrun in late June and started building a base before the real programme started in October. Once it started, I was put on the Easy 50 plan. Even though I was doing 100k, I wasn't capable of the volume that the 100 plans demanded. Kerry and Ali were always there to answer any questions and give moral support.

My training went steadily and consistently. I think this was the most important thing I learnt from training was consistency. I never will break any speed records. I had one minor bump in my training in mid February. I was going down Furber Steps only 2 kays into my run, and I felt my calf go ping. I have had a torn calf muscle in the past and it took 6 weeks to recover from. This was just a strain, so I walked, then for 2 weeks I cycled only and had a couple of physio sessions. In 2 weeks it was good as new and I could resume training as normal.

I did the Anzac Day Challenge (40K) 4 weeks out from UTA and finished feeling pretty good. I was pumped and ready. Those last 4 weeks dragged by. I just wanted to do it. Then the weather reports started surfacing. Everybody put their own version on Facebook. This was my worst nightmare. 100k of rain. When I realized this was reality I just decided I had to be best prepared as I could. Lots of spare clothing in all my drop bags.

UTA week finally arrived. I had taken 2 weeks off work and was going to enjoy this whole experience. I attended the Trails in Motion movie night (amazing, inspiring...), Expo on Friday and welcomed in a few friends and my sister doing the 22. We never miss the Runners Forum, or David King's Welcome to Country and Tom's race briefing. I, and am sure everybody, is so grateful to Tom, Alina and their team for working so hard to put changes in to place because of the weather. It would have been devastating if it had been cancelled. We were conveniently staying at CMS which was ideal for Noel. (I never would see bed on Saturday night, but I knew that). Friday night I listened to the rain all night and barely got any sleep.

Saturday morning dawned and I was fatalistic about the rain. I started in the last wave and was running out along the road section at the beginning and looked out to my left and could see a slight break in the clouds and a glimmer of blue sky. Things were looking up. The day just got better and better. My mantra was present moment awareness (my yoga teacher would be proud!) and I made sure I just enjoyed the experience and took in the beauty of Narrowneck and Megalong Valley. I felt so lucky to be out there and I was going to enjoy every minute. By the time I got to the Fairmont Resort that night, I was starting to get tired. My only complaints for the day were sore feet and fatigue. I felt blessed. Many people were having a bad day with gut issues, cramping or injury. I had none of these, and no blisters or chafing either.

Everybody says when you do a 100k you go to a dark place at some point. The only dark place I went to was night time and that was the whole night. At no point did I ever regret it or feel like giving in. The last 22 k was super tough. I left QVH at 12.30am and it took me nearly 7 hours to the finish line. After the road section, it was literally one foot in front of the other, and very carefully at that. I knew once I got to the bottom of Leura stairs it would be easier. At the intersection of Dardanelles Pass and Federal Pass I stopped for half a Carman's protein bar and some Coke. I had been religious all day and night about having a small amount to eat every 30-40 minutes. The light was coming in to the sky and I was less than 3k from the finish. I got a second wind. I even started doing bursts of running again which I hadn't done for about 10 hours!

I started up Furber Steps and it felt no harder than it normally did. By now it was daylight and the cloud filled the valley with the Three Sisters and Mt Solitary poking out. I stopped for photos half way up. This was a memorable way to finish. I got to the board walk, rounded the corner and was able to run the last few metres into Kerry and Ali's arms with tears streaming down my face. My mum and Noel were also on the finish line, and I got a hug from Jo Brischetto who has been so instrumental for many women getting into trail running and pursuing their dreams. There were also a few hardy Summit Sisters on the finish line – it was so good to see you all.

Two weeks later I'm still on a high and I had such a positive, once in a lifetime experience. My doctor at the time when I had CFS said I would probably only regain 95% of my health. Well it feels like about 200%!

P S My friend Judy also completed the 100 and came in shortly after me. (2nd in her age group!)

Thanks to the following people:

Noel- for always believing in me and being my biggest supporter

Luke and Amy - xoxox

Mum- even though I'm sure she thought I shouldn't or couldn't do it, she wisely said nothing. And thankyou for the hot showers, lunches and overnight visits

Dad – even though he's no longer with us, my love of the mountains which comes from him, grows stronger with each visit

Summit Sisters – Jo and Gretel for starting this group, and to all you wonderful ladies for the training runs or who came out to support or volunteer

Squadrun - for the training, Squadcamp and finish line hugs. It was worth it!

Volunteers – you're all amazing and very much appreciated. I will be joining you next year.

AROC Sport – Tom and Alina, thankyou for putting on an event where the ordinary people get to realise their dreams without having to do an out of reach qualifying time

Janet Deakin