

## UTA100 Race Report – Mark Stone

This was my birthday present to myself ... coming into this race my mind was really on the 100 mile Western States Endurance Race, June 2018 (if I get in through the lottery .. which is unlikely).

Woke up at 4.30 and ate a seriously large breakfast. I've learnt that my body needs a lot of calories and I run best when I start on a full tank of gas. I put my race kit on and head out of the door of my guest house.

Due to my logistical incompetence, getting to the start line entailed running 3km in steady rain until a sweet old lady (Beth, aged 73, volunteering at the start) offered me a lift to the start line which was another 2km away.

I composed myself in a dark corner of the multi-storey car park at Scenic World before heading to the start-line.

I was placed in the 3rd start wave of 7, with about 200+ runners in my wave. I looked around for my mate Trevor (first-timer at 100 ... much respect) but could not see him among the many faces. We set off at 6.33 in the light of dawn. Game on!

The rain eased and stopped around 7.00. Thank god. It then got progressively brighter and drier all day enabling great views of this beautiful place we are lucky enough to run through. Running temp was perfect. We were so lucky with the weather. It could have been crappy all day.

I reached checkpoint 1 (11km) and felt great. The trail was hilly but mainly downhill apart from a set of steep steps. I grabbed two cups of water and one electrolyte plus half a banana. They had cookies etc but I was still digesting my big brekkie. Plus .. cookies are not hobnobs.

The trail to checkpoint 2 was mainly flat and I pushed myself to run quite quickly as I knew I'd tire later on. There were some good descents where I ran as quickly as I dared. Didn't want to twist an ankle.

I had a couple of energy gels and got to checkpoint 3 (44km) after 5-1/2 hours running. Felt strong. Keep smiling. Folks were stopping to sit and stretch but I decided to make this a very quick pit-stop ... formula 1 style ... An amazing volunteer (they were all amazing) filled my water for me and ushered me back on the trail with a "you've got this....". Maybe I have!

I wolfed down a banana and a gel on the way to checkpoint 4 via some very muddy trails. (((My choice to run in my New Balance 880 road shoes now seemed foolish as I slid everywhere and tumbled once ... but boy are they comfortable shoes.))) I felt for the runners coming behind me and hoped the track would dry a little for them.

The climb up Nellies Glen stairs was long, hard and tedious. I had completely forgotten how tough those stairs are and I passed a lot of runners who had cramps or were simply exhausted. I gave one runner a spare gel and let another runner drink nearly all the water from my back pack. He looked wasted but grateful and - as is the way with endurance events - he came screaming past me an hour later shouting "thank you Mark".

I reached checkpoint 4 at 1:30pm having ran for 7 hours straight. This was the 55km mark and, like last year, it was a massive boost to see Juliet and the kids cheering for me inside the sports centre. More than halfway there ... no complaints - I signed up for this thing and trained over a hundred hours for it. The kids helped me change socks and running top and I wolfed down a PB sarnie, high-calorie milk drink, and a banana for the road. Kisses all round and I was back on the trails. I only spent 12 minutes in the checkpoint and later found myself ahead of several faster runners who'd passed me going up Nellies.

It was now mid-arvo and I felt mentally strong. Toes and quads sore ... but I know that's typical for 60km into a race. The route is now mainly flat over to Leura apart from some small descents and climbs. I ran past a lot of tourists who were high-5ing me and shouting kind words of encouragement. I always appreciate the support and it kept me running when my mind wanted to walk.

Had a nice chat with a guy called Ben from Sydney and a runner from Brisbane called John. Trail runners are generally more chilled-out and less competitive than marathoners. Good karma.

Next stop was the Fairmont Hotel gardens at 66km. It was now late afternoon but last year I arrived in pitch-black, so I knew I was doing really well.

Another quick stop for watermelon, a handful of lollies for the sugar boost and some potato crisps for the salt. The volunteers gave the kids lollies which made their evening! Jonny (8) and Sophia (10) ran with me downhill for 150m before heading back to mum. What a boost!

The route to checkpoint 5 goes through Wentworth Falls and has a lot of descent on technical trail. It was now getting dusky and I was concentrating hard to place my toes in sensible spots. The trail is beautiful here and I stopped a few times for 5sec to get a mental snap-shot of the amazing scenery.

Last year, near the falls, the runner in front of me suddenly slipped and slammed into the trail. Wake-up call for tired minds and bodies ... Bizarrely this year, at nearly the same spot another runner tumbled and turned his ankle. I checked to see if he needed serious help but he said he'd walk it off. (Ouch).

On the trail up to the hospital road I see my training buddy Tom James heading back towards me. He's a great runner and at this stage about an hour ahead of me. High-5. Go Tom! Go Mark! I reckon Tom is on for sub-14 which is awesome. It's his first UTA but had run 100s.

The final few kms down into checkpoint 5 is on tarmac road and while there are hills it's so much faster than trail. I realised that my average pace had slowed since Fairmont so I pushed myself all the way to the checkpoint. Legs hurting.

Due to the bad weather, the race director had to change the course, adding a 3km loop before the aid station. I could see how demoralising (but necessary) this was for many runners, having to run past family and friends before they could see them properly again.

I see runner Ben again and chat with him for a bit before passing him. His first 100km ultra and he is hurting ... but determined.

Checkpoint 5 (78km mark, 5.38pm, 11 hours of running) was joyous! I gave Juliet my heavy excess kit, put my head torch on, chugged down a cup of coffee and two iced buns! Ka-boom!

I ran out of the checkpoint like a bank-robber and decided to run up the hill towards the trail. I kept encouraging the steady stream of runners heading towards me and decided that nobody would pass me until Fairmont. Keep smiling.

My running watch battery failed at this point, but I think that was actually a god-send as I forgot about time and maintained a steady run/hike until Fairmont (87km).

I'd now been running for 12-1/2 hours and just wanted it to end. I figured another 13km of trails would take me 2 hours and the Furber steps (a few hundred of them) would add another 20 mins. This could see me finish in under 15 hours (my secondary goal) if I could keep it together.

I joined a Chinese runner for a couple of kms and we chatted in broken English. We were doing 5:30 splits according to his watch and I felt strong ... until we both realised we were LOST!! Going from a high to such a low was tough and it took several minutes to retrace our steps and find the route again. This was my biggest fear for the rearranged 100km course and I felt annoyed at my lapse in concentration. However, the anguish soon turned into new motivation as I overtook 'man in green running shorts' who I'd dueled with since checkpoint 3 (I overtake him ... he overtakes me). We exchanged nods and I gradually left him behind.

I eat my last UTA gel. It's got a lot of caffeine in it and I've been saving it up for now. Sickly espresso flavour but I need the energy hit.

Now the seemingly endless descent to the foot of the Furber steps. Again .. nobody is making me do this. I join a pack of three runners who all want to go sub-15hours so I latch onto them. Mentally okay but legs are sore and I'm out of water. We run in silence for an hour.

I reached the base of Furber at 9.07pm and made it to the top at 9.27pm. Two runners passed me but I couldn't do much more. I can now hear the finish line cheers and realise I am just minutes from ending this ordeal. I put my high vis away, calm myself and blast to the finish. Juliet, Jonny and Sophia link hands with me and we all cross the finish together. 14:54min. Beat my PB by 70 mins ... very happy.

Just typing these words makes me well-up as last year I finished alone and waited a while in the cold to see Juliet. Hugs and kisses all round. Warm top on and backpack off. Thank you volunteers.

A quick hello and congrats to Tom who has worked hard for his silver buckle, before we head home to pizza, a warm bath, cups of tea, chocolate Hobnob biscuits, and sleep.

Trevor makes it through at 18 hours to claim his buckle. So happy for him.

Western States next year? Unlikely but possible. Back to UTA to try for sub-14 hours ??? Maybe. I really