

Ultra Trail Australia 100 2017 Race Report

It was dark and drizzly as I hopped on the event shuttle bus in Katoomba and headed towards the startline of the Ultra Trail Australia 100 at Scenic World. This was my third time making the journey to Katoomba for Australia's largest ultra trail running event and it is amazing to see how much the event has grown. I had made the trip from Canberra with three other mates, two were doing the 50 kilometer event, and the other was on the bus with me about to embark on his first 100 kilometer journey. I had a great race here last year and was hoping to achieve another personal best, even sneak in under 12 hours on a great day. However the weather leading up to the event was not favourable and the course needed to be slightly revised given forecast. This threw a spanner into my race plans and I decided to just scrap my race schedule and run by feel instead. The revised course made for interesting pre race banter and was potentially harder because although now there was slightly less elevation, this was countered by more stairs, more technicality and less overall rhythm. I definitely am not the best technical runner so I just had to take the race by ear and hope that the weather somewhat improved.

In hindsight I was overly stressed at the startline and I kept going back and forth about whether or not to start with a rain jacket. I did this despite knowing that I would probably take it off later anyway once warmed up, but at the same time I was not sure how long the downpour would last. I ultimately started with the rain jacket but ended up taking it off within the first ten kilometers as the rain eased and was replaced by the amazing sunny weather that has traditionally characterised this event in the past. As usual for me the first twenty odd kilometers are incredibly mixed feelings as I try to find my running rhythm, while at the same time combat the usual thoughts of doubt in terms of whether i've done too little or too much training. These thoughts however were swept away as the fog cleared and the beautiful Blue Mountains national park revealed itself, and I was once again reminded at how lucky I was to be running in such an amazing part of the world.

I finally began to find my rhythm as I approach the second checkpoint around thirty kilometers into the race. The sun was well and truly out now as I passed through the checkpoint and followed the course marshals onto the first of several course reroutes. We would no longer be going up Ironpot Ridge, instead we are diverted back onto the fire trail where I begin to stretch out the legs and hopefully make good time towards the next checkpoint near the Six Foot Track. This checkpoint is located around forty five kilometers into the race and everyone has to undertake a mandatory gear check upon arriving, in this case they were requesting our head torch and hi-vi vest. I produced both before quickly before thanking the volunteers and heading for the exit. I had no idea of my placing but my energy levels and time felt pretty similar to the previous year so I thought I was travelling pretty well. I try to really minimise time in checkpoints because I worry about getting too comfortable and losing my rhythm, but at the same time you need to make sure that you leave with enough supplies. I always make a mental note of when checkpoints are coming up so that I can take stock before arriving of what I might need and not waste time flaffing about. This is of course a personal preference and many runners benefit from longer stopovers, everyone for their own as they say.

I now head for the Six Foot Track and the climb out of Nellies Glen towards Katoomba. This is a frustrating piece of fire trail because it is undulating but totally runnable until you get to Nellies Glen, and I force myself to run as much as possible knowing how much time I can lose along this section. I suck down a gel but I am also aware that I am reaching the 50-60 kilometer mark, which where I almost always experience my first low point in a long event. Like clockwork as soon I have finished the hike out of Nellies Glen and head through the town of Katoomba towards the next checkpoint at the Aquatic Centre I begin to experience my first big down moment of the race. I arrive at the checkpoint that is the unofficial halfway point at around 55 kilometers and bump into several friendly faces including Thomas Brazier, Marie McNaughton and Kelly-Anne Varey. It is great to see familiar faces and it reminds me to always smile and keep a positive mindset whatever is happening. I down two cups of coke before grabbing another banana and head back out for the longest section of the race that will take me to the final checkpoint at the Queen Victoria Hospital. The revised course now means that this checkpoint point will serve as a turnaround point instead of us heading down into Kedumba Valley.

I now run along the cliffs towards the Three Sisters trying not to bump into the tourists that have come out to take advantage of the now incredible weather that seemed so unlikely just twelve hours earlier. Their faces are a mixture of amazement and confusion, while the children are always game to offer you a high five. I have my only stack in the race along here (gotta have at least one) before passing through Echo Point and head towards the next water point at the Fairmont Resort around the 60 odd kilometer mark. I was starting to find my rhythm again here and the volunteers as always were amazing, and I always make an effort to thank them. I now headed towards the final checkpoint and Marie McNaughton has caught back up to me after experiencing a rough patch earlier, and we run together towards the final checkpoint and turnaround point at the Queen Victoria Hospital around the 75 kilometer mark. We pass the front runners coming back including Tim Tollefson and Lucy Bartholomew, they are looking so strong and looked like they were moving effortlessly.

The course changes meant that there was now an extra three kilometer out and back upon arriving at the final checkpoint where we had to run to the gate at Kedumba and back. Although I had broken the back of the course by this stage, I would rather have continued on down into Kedumba than head back the way we came. There was slightly less elevation however more stairs and technical running, which for me made it hard to get into a rhythm but on the bright side it was great to see so many familiar faces coming the other way. I continued running with Marie and we came across Chris Warren who was having a rough time, but he latched onto our train and we continued together back towards the Fairmont Resort water point. It was here that I experienced my second wind of the race and managed to build a gap on Marie and Chris, and then I was on my own again all of a sudden apart from the occasional runner coming from the other direction. It was getting dark now and soon enough I was back on the original course and passing the five kilometer countdown markers, which always seem to take forever and eventually I reached the bottom of the Furber Steps.

I had been moving fairly well until this point but it had been a long day and I somehow managed to lose the rhythm again on this section, I just could not seem to get moving. I was passed by three people and compared to last year this section took me 22 minutes compared to 18 minutes. I was certainly knackered when I crossed the finish line at Scenic World and the guy who had finished one spot ahead of me last year had managed to do the same thing again this time. It was even more ironic that I had met this man the night before because he was staying at the same hostel as me (it was fantastic to meet you Soonchul Shin and congratulations on your amazing run). So 12 hours and 20 minutes after starting my journey I finally returned back to Katoomba to finish my third Ultra Trail Australia. I just love this event on so many levels, it was my first ultra event back in 2014, the volunteers and atmosphere are amazing and I just love the Blue Mountains.

I cannot end this report without recognising again the massive efforts of Tom Landon-Smith and Alina McMaster and their team, who put on a fantastic event every year and this year was all the more special given the challenging circumstances but more importantly it was the tenth anniversary. The event has grown so much and I look forward to being there for the 20th anniversary. There are a few other special mentions, Tom Bartlett you are an amazing 18 year old and congratulations in smashing your first 100, Callum Moggach I hope you had a great first UTA experience and well done in the 50 (must have been all those kebabs), Alex Ramsey it was great to finally get "that" run in together and congratulations on your result, and Marie Mcnaughton it is always great fun to run with you and hopefully I can see you again soon in Hong Kong. There are too many others to name here that I came across on the course but it was great to see so many friendly faces enjoying the day out and finishing strongly, whatever obstacles you were facing. I think I will end it here before I end up writing a book however I know I will return again in the future but for now more food and sleep is the order of the day. Cheers.