

2017 Ultra-Trail Australia 50 Race Report

Damien Whittaker – Newcastle Flyers

This event started for me a year prior, chatting with fellow Newcastle Flyer Josh about future goals, seeking a new challenge to enliven our enthusiasm, seeing the images of the finishers on the Furber Steps Yes, we must enter.

50km? Sure. Steep hills and steps? Shouldn't be too hard with a bit of training, right?

A group of Flyers once interest piqued became dreamers, none of us prepared, all of us optimistic, some might have thought recklessly so.

The Dirt Train was born, our monthly foray into longer trail runs where we were educated by trails, inclines, declines, various forms of suffering, deprivations, and the wise words of those who had gone before us into the realm of the trail ultra-marathon. We started as all Flyers are wont to do, disregarding any fears of hill or distance, of leeches, rain, darkness or injury. From Glenrock to Heaton and finally the DTA44 (or thereabouts) we came to the belief that yes, we could finish this thing.

The usual pre-event feelings of anticipation mixed with self-expectation around pace and time were replaced with a more pure form of excitement but without pressure, of anticipation without expectation, and the wondering, the little fears of the many questions yet to be answered. For me these questions included: would I have the legs to last that long a time? Would I have the right hydration, electrolyte and nutrition plan to control the blood glucose level for such a long time? Have I packed everything I'll need for such a long time? Why don't I just stop worrying about it taking such a long time?

A number of us assembled at the Flyers Event Party House in Blackheath on Friday, 3 UTA100 debutants Luke, James and Jerry with their support crew partners, UTA50 entrants Reggie, Felicity, Carlos, Daniel, Josh and I, and post-UTA22 finisher Kyle who had smashed out a great race in the rain that morning. His hobbling stilted peg-legging around the house having run "only" 22km that day was quietly noted. ... we'll be fine right?

The event expo and registration is a huge affair of all things trail, of gear galore, purportedly waterproof socks, nutrition (why don't I try Tailwind for the first time tomorrow? One of us was heard to say...), and most of all of energy, of anticipation. We met up with a few other Flyers and Novocastrians who were making the journey to their UTA destiny. Discussion was intense around the rain, the course changes that saw the UTA50 going on the first loop of the UTA100 course instead, and the UTA100 changing to a loop then out and back. Being a newbie I thought hey, the course will make no difference to me, I've no idea whether I'll make it through 50km in any direction near Katoomba.

Morning of the event the 100 runners left early and we 50 entrants lazily prepped for our delayed 9:30 start, giving us ample time to assemble at Scenic World with our fellow Flyers to get psyched up and amped to throw our "it's not a serious race" mentality out the window. Brendan, Robbo, James,

Filip, Colin “I’m not lactating, this stuff is perpetuum”, and Mark met us, along with 22km finishers Matt “70’s lumberjack come new-face-of-Ultra-trail” and John (who took first Flyer honours in UTA22) to give support. Trail veterans Craig and Chris were there with us. We were ready...

To describe the day’s running I feel I could only give an outline that would inevitably fall short of conveying adequately the soaring highs and lows experienced on course. Each of us entrants have both similar and widely differing experiences to share. More than a few of us felt like crying for all sorts of reasons at the finish. Some (or maybe just me?) may have felt like crying on course. Images of finishers hugging their families, their kids in particular, were still bringing tears as we recovered in front of the big screen with ice cream, chips and beers. We talked long into the evening and through the next day about our experiences out there. Yes It was a true adventure, more than a run.

If you are contemplating a new challenge, something to take you into uncharted territory in both your running and your inner self, then entering a trail ultra-marathon comes highly recommended. I will be back next year, and I wouldn’t be surprised if all of us UTA Newbies are together again in May 2018. I wonder whether the whole experience will be different. The unknowns will remain but they will not be quite the same. The distance we will have covered before. The bliss of charging in a line of runners along rock-strewn single track will have been tasted before. The soaring feeling of galloping along a ridgeline fire-trail, the clouds parting to reveal the expanse of the Megalong Valley to East and West, will be in our memories already. The sudden grinding halt that came halfway up Nellie’s Glen as most of each leg cramped at once may be a lurking fear. It will be somehow different to this time. Likely in fact it will be a different course so pretty much a new experience anyway!

The honour role of fine Flyers performances is long and impressive. Josh “it’s just a training run for Gold Coast” made his way through the 50k at the front of our group. Reggie “I’m not racing ... can you boys pick up the pace a little?” stormed the course beating many a seasoned trail head home. I’ve little doubt we all exceeded our own expectations. Mention must be made of Carlos. A seasoned cyclist, a seriously tough character, he tested his mettle and finished despite various challenges: hardly having run before, being injured for weeks leading up, and hardly having run before. Kudos to Felicity, the only Flyer who appeared completely unaffected, like she had just been for a 5k stroll, you might be on your own out there next year Carlos!

In the UTA100 we were blown away by the performances of Luke, Jerry and James in their first attempts, overcoming pain that we 50k finishers were able to check out of at half-way, covering the course in amazing times. Jody finished strong and fast as we expected he would, it being clear on our Dirt Trains that he was only warming up when the rest of us were seizing up, happy to nonchalantly share his wealth of good advice as we sank into our red zones. Having tasted 50 I would say 100 looks a very different dish.

My personal grinding halt on Nellie’s Glen and painful trudge through the final 7km may have dented my finishing time but did nothing to dampen the elation of the day and the relief of crossing that line. Leaning on trees trying not to fall over meant I was recipient of the other and possibly greatest thing about trail running: almost everyone who passed gave a word of encouragement, offered to help, asked “are you ok”?? Kristian clapping us on at the top of the steps, DK, Robbo, James and Brendan passing me, along with Ex-Newie Canberrans Sean (100k) and Lewis gave me encouragement to keep on staggering. I found a fellow struggling crammer from Canberra to hobble and trot to the finish with and, finally, almost unbelievably, it was over.

The Dirt Train will be back soon. Drawn by the desire to return to UTA, maybe run it a little differently, maybe "better", but really just to experience it again, odds on I will be there in Katoomba, May 2018.