

WOW! What a ride I have been on for this years ULTRA TRAIL AUSTRALIA 2017 prep! Talk about an emotional rollercoaster! I have a lot of people that I want to thank, so this is the best place to do it. Firstly thank you to the team at AROC Sport / Ultra Trail Australia who took me on as a race ambassador for this year. The main reason that I was thrilled to get this role is that I knew that I could use this avenue to inspire females to do what I do and love trail running as much as I do....I never thought that the journey after I signed up for this role was going to take such a change in shape.

For those of you just joining in, I was originally set to run the 100k UTA event. My first 100k race. I have spent years toying with this idea and getting my body strong enough to take on this challenge, but months in it wasn't to be for me, when I ended up with a stress reaction in my tibia after continuing to train through a calf injury. Instead of pulling the pin on the whole idea, I decided that I would still stay on as an ambassador of the race and give my best at making the start line of the 50k race. This was no easy feat. I was totally non running for around 6 weeks and was not even allow to go walking! It proved a very challenging time. At this time I was still tossing up trying to make the start line of the 100k (what was I thinking? I must be crazy....).

My coach knew, (and I eventually saw sense) that this was not a good idea to give the 100k a go at all, so we set about early in the piece when I was diagnosed with my stress reaction training for the 50k. This involved countless hours on the spin bike and running in the pool at times. I couldn't weight train. I was doubting what my body was going to be capable of, and the fact that it was such a technical and challenging course with all the stairs made me question if I was indeed an idiot to even think any of this was a great idea, but I love a challenge and I have seen that when I want something bad enough I go

after it, and so I dedicated myself to getting every session done and making my body and mind as strong as possible for my running return.

When I returned we had 5 weeks before race day, and because of the type of injury I had I couldn't even jump straight in, but had a very conservative approach to the runs I could do. So basically it was a bare as bones training plan and a few long runs before race day to allow myself to build slightly and taper.

Heading up to the race I was excited. The weather was looking rather sketchy and the UTA22 event on the Friday was rainy and muddy. I was so thrilled and proud watching all the amazing RMA running through the finish line and I was excited to get that chance to run on the Saturday.



**RMA AMBASSADORS ANA AND ANNA AND ME BEFORE THEIR 22K RACE**

We headed home to our accommodation for the afternoon to rest as I had to be back on stage for the panel in the evening and the briefing. That was exciting (and daunting) being on the panel in front of hundreds of runners, but I was honoured to be up there doing it for all the everyday women out there like me who have running dreams. Being the only female on the panel meant that it

only highlighted the need we have for more female representation in our sport.

That evening due to the weather the course changed. Not just a little, but COMPLETELY CHANGED. So instead of running the general UTA50 course we would now be running on the first part of the UTA100 course. Something that the normal 50 course doesn't even touch. Initially I had a wave of panic come over me. I was already unsure of how things were going to unfold and now I had the added pressure of having no course experience apart from a small hike up the golden staircase a few weeks before. All my fuelling plans were thrown out the window as I didn't know how far the checkpoints etc were going to be or how much I was going to need between them. Luckily for me my friend Tova was staying with us and she had run the 100k before so we sat down and she gave me a run down and I worked out a very relaxed fuelling strategy that I was hoping was going to work out. Sleep came and went and we were ready for race day. All night it had poured and even getting dressed it was raining. As we drove to the start line and got out of the car the clouds started to disappear and miraculously the day looked like it would be perfect. We were so lucky.



**BEFORE THE START WITH SARAH, TOVA AND SOPHIE**

Standing on the start line in wave 2 was a fun experience hanging with my friends and singing along to "it's the final countdown". So fun. Before we knew it we were off and running! The first climb up the road is always the hard bit...straight up hill. I maintained a decent pace to try to get out in the front of my wave as much as possible before we headed into the trail. Down the hill past all the spectators is one of my favourite bits and into the trail we went. Down the stairs, down furbers steps and along the landslide. I was moving surprisingly well and only a few runners wanted to pass. After a while I realised I was running way too quick for this stage of the race and so I decided to relax and just go easy to the Golden Staircase. No point dying now.... We hit the stairs in no time and I took a deep breath preparing myself for the slog. One foot in front of the other, passing a few people along the way. Chatting with a few about how crappy this was to be in the first part of the race etc etc :) A quick look at the views as we went and just keep putting one foot in front of the other and control your breathing. I was so thankful for all the bike at this point. My legs felt so much stronger than ever before.



VIEWS OFF NARROWNECK IMAGE BY [SOPHIE GERAGHTY](#)



When we finally got to the top I was relieved as I knew it was more gentle running for a while. I went with the plan that whenever it was runnable I was to run and if I had to walk bits I was not to walk more than 30 seconds. This proved to be needed in this section. Undulating fire trail was doing my head in. The views were just gorgeous though and I tried to focus on them and not how much I wanted off Narrowneck. Runners would pass and I would pass and we just kept that momentum through checkpoint 1 and until we hit the ladders. Heading down the mountain was precarious and there was a lot of bum shuffling for my little body to get down some of those rocks. The ropes became my friend. :) I even managed to drop my mountain ring going down one section off my finger and had to scramble to pick it up! I was hoping the fact my mountain ring fell off wasn't a sign that things were going to fall off for me during the race!



NARROWNECK IMAGE BY [SOPHIE GERAGHTY](#)

At the ladders there was a 6 minute wait or I could take

the alternate route. I decided to go the other route...not sure if that was a good idea. It was terribly slippery and precarious and I did almost go off the cliff a few times, thankful for the thin rope that kept me from toppling to my death. I was also alone so this didn't do much to help my confidence in this section! Finally we came around and headed to the single track. It was here that the runners that had passed me earlier on narrowneck that I had passed by not using the ladders passed me. I took my time through the single trail enjoying myself and making sure I was careful not to roll an ankle. Just move forward evenly I told myself. Plenty of time to go.

After this we came to firetrail again. Up and down up and down. I was a little over the firetrails and I went to grab my iPod which I had charged to just give me a bit of a boost and to keep my cadence ticking over. IT WAS DEAD FLAT. A brief panic, and then I thought "oh well...what can you do?" ....so the counting began. I counted my way through this section, 1,2,3,4,5,6 all the way to Dunphy's camp. On the way the highlight was the digeridoo player as we ran past. I could hear it from a mile away and I thought about how lucky we are to live in Australia and what an iconic event this is, and how special that I get to run it.

When I arrived at the checkpoint my RMA friend Jessicah was there. She immediately took my bottles for me to fill up while I grabbed myself a few cups of coke! It was heaven in a cup. I was feeling good at this point. Just a little tired, but legs felt great. My fuelling to this point had been ok but I was a little slack with my gels and my tailwind and my tummy was not really wanting to take on many more gels but I felt ok. I only spent a few minutes in that checkpoint, maybe 6 mins or so, re-tied my shoes as my foot was starting to hurt a little in my arch and kept running out of there with Jess. We ran out down the hill and I remember thinking what a bad idea two cups of

coke was at that point. . .coke+downhill+running....not a great combination!

After a while I just needed to do my own pacing as I knew that I didn't really know what was ahead so I told Jess to go ahead and I stuck to my pacing plan. In hindsight I think I need to work on pushing myself a little out of my comfort zone, but given my lead up and not knowing what was coming I wasn't willing to take that risk this time around. I paced myself up and down those six foot track hills well and felt great. I ran everything that I could with a few walk breaks and hiked strong on the hills while eating my sandwich and ran until I got to the six foot track checkpoint.

I knew not to spend too much time here. I filled up my tailwind and took an electrolyte drink as my head was starting to get a little dizzy and I felt like I needed something more that I was perhaps lacking. There was no coke that I could find so I just ran out of there with a vague idea of what was coming.

I have run down this section before in the 6 foot track marathon but I haven't run up it, so all I knew was that I needed to make sure I was fuelled up for Nellies Glen. That is one hell of a climb out of the valley up the escarpment. I made sure running up six foot that I had at least one of my tailwind bottles and I would keep the other for the climb and the run home if needed. I really wanted to take off my pack and throw all the water out as I felt like it was weighing me down. I managed to get down half a gel but that was all I could handle. It would have to do. Along this section I passed lots of runners. I was happy I had paced myself early on. A few passed me too including one of our RMA girls Rachel and I was stoked to see her doing so well.

When we got to the stairs I knew I just had to keep moving strong. I passed a few people as we entered but then I was stuck behind a group of guys who were

moving steady, but I could have moved faster. I decided to stay behind them as I knew that it was better for me to just move steady up the stairs then push myself and have them pass me again. Up up up we went and I breathed and pushed my little legs up those enormous stairs. It felt like it went on forever.

When we reached the top I really thought that we were going to run the rest on the road (insert no idea), but no, we were straight back into the trails again up and down a few gullies. It was starting to cool down as dusk was approaching. I passed a few QLD RMA girls here who were doing the 100k and gave them a hug and kept going. I knew I only had a few kilometres to go and I wasn't going to stop anywhere. The road section was tough. It felt long, and I just wanted to see the aquatic centre so that I knew exactly how far we had. When it finally came around we ran in the door and straight back out down the hill and back into a trail again for a short while. I could hear the roar of the finish line in the distance.

We came out down the bottom at the road and we had to stop to let cars pass. I couldn't believe they were ushering us back into the trail again past the waterfall....I momentarily wanted to just scoot across the road to the finish line. Down I went down the stairs and along the boardwalk where two years ago I had fallen and managed to do significant damage to my left ankle, which had me pull out of UTA50 in 2015 before the race. Every time I run past here I am reminded of my strength to come back from injury to run ultras again. I was born to do this. I ran past two guys who didn't seem in much of a hurry and up and down the muddy trail until I came to the slightly slanting boardwalk leading to the finish line. I trudged along waiting to go around the bend. It is actually amazing how quiet that boardwalk is. As I rounded the bend towards the steps the noise grew louder.



As I approached the first step I saw RMA Ambassador 's Ana Croger and Jodie Osborne, and I heard Anna announce "HERE SHE IS!!!!" .... For a moment I thought I would burst into tears. I had done it. I had made the finish line of UTA50 again. This time was so much harder to get here, but here I was. I was so proud of my resolve to get there. I earned this moment. And just like a rock star, lucky for me the finish line was all mine. I ran through the finish chute feeling strong and excited and pumped my arms into the air through the cheers of the crowd. In that moment I felt like I had won the race. I had. I had won my race against myself.



**RUNNING TOWARDS THE FINISH**

The things that stand out to me in this experience is that it doesn't matter if things don't go to plan. I didn't get to do the 100k I set out to achieve, but I learned a lot of lessons about myself along the way to this event. I learned that I am strong and capable of achieving great things. I learned to be patient. My time was 24 minutes faster than

my previous UTA50 time on a much tougher course, and I managed to pass 46 people in my last 30km. My back half of my race was definitely my finest to date. I learned that the mind is really where as ultra runners we excel. My body was no where near as strong as it could have been and especially on such a runnable course, having little running leading up was a big downfall, but the mind was willing to keep going and not give up and finish strong just as I planned.

Looking around me for the whole weekend I was surrounded by strong, determined and capable women. Women who inspire me to do my best. Women who inspire others. The shift in the amount of female participation in our sport is alive and well. We are on the rise, women. Believe that you can do hard things. Let go of fear and have a go. You may just learn something about yourself along the way.

Nic X