

Race report

I want to shift a bit to alleviate discomfort, but I can't for fear of generating as yet undiscovered pain. At least what I'm suffering is manageable. I'm fearful also that the hip cramps suffered after the finish last year and the year before will attack again (I've never found a way to alleviate hip cramps, and it must be a blast to watch as Genevieve, my wife and greatest supporter, simply rolls around laughing at my contorted body and pained face).

I'm perched uncomfortably on a bumpy log, with 3 of my kids ferrying water, oranges and watermelon to me. I burp loudly and in amongst the temporary relief this brings, I look up to see a fellow competitor react to the noise, and I apologise quietly.

I've finished the race, and am relieved... pleased even... but can't gather the energy yet to be euphoric. I hope my kids can see that I achieved some of what I set out to, and as I look at their faces and that of my wife, I see their delight in the moment, and feel deep gratitude that they are here.

The scene is wonderful with competitors of all ages and abilities variously hobbling and chattering, reflecting one of the great aspects of this particular race. Competitors start the race in waves over a two hour period, with the slower leaving first and the faster last, ensuring that the finish has representatives from all groups, and a marvellous community atmosphere. I see runners that I passed, and that passed me (no really), and I see some of the professionals walking unhindered, and reflect on their astounding speed over technically difficult terrain.

I'm pleased that I have honoured my family and my sponsors by finishing, and honoured their contribution to the Indigenous Marathon Foundation cause that I care about.

But this outing began more than 6 hours before....



The start at Belair station

The alarm isn't needed as I check my watch again and notice that I am now close enough to 5am, that I might as well get up and be awake upright. The morning routine is now familiar and I grab my salmon, eggs, rice and sweet potato with coconut oil, and eat enough but not too much. I run through my lists again, that I'm sure drive Genevieve nuts. They set out every quarter hour from now to the race (grown men probably don't need a list to tell them how to dress, but the order of it all gives me comfort).

YURREBILLA 56km Ultra Trail

27 September 2015

P Hurley

It's around 8am and I've never been so relaxed before a race. I enjoy the routine and the cuddles of good luck from my kids, as I mill among the elite runners who form the bulk of this last group to leave Belair railway station. I wonder why I'm not fretting as usual, and start to fret about not fretting. Great athletes are apparently full of confidence at the start, buoyed by faith in their preparation, but I can't decide if I am doubtful or if it's just that I care a little less about the result than in the past, and I might just enjoy it more.

With final kisses and good luck wishes, we are welcomed by the local elder, and moments later at 8:30am we plunge into beautiful bushland for the meandering first stage.

I comply with my solemn promise to begin very slowly and my mantra for the first twenty kilometres begins "conserve, conserve". I wait for all but one of the field to leave ahead of me as I recall the living nightmare that eventuated last year as a result of going out too hard. The final runner Dion is with me (both of us officially last), and we chat about our superior strategy, and I'm not sure how to feel when he tells me that he has finished top 10 every year, and with that he leaves me for dead, and I find out later that he will finish 5th overall.



Eventual winner David Byrne leads us out

I swear I'm running so slowly that it's practically backwards, but I still arrive at the first checkpoint 4 minutes faster than my target. I keep the strategy going, and reach Cleland Conservation Park where we hit 21kms and I'm thrilled to see my three little ones waiting to run into the checkpoint with me, and we do so laughing and skipping.

As we near the halfway mark, I pass a number of the early starters as well as some of my contenders. I meet Brenton and begin a 20km tussle where we will pass one another many times, and don't know it yet but we will finish closely and congratulate one another at the end, neither of us caring much about who won the honours.

It's been 4 hours now and at Marialta Cottage we are 37kms into the race, and once again Genevieve has managed for the kids to be there to give me cuddles of encouragement. I set off for the final remote leg and notice that my two "race voices" join me, as they usually do when we start the more challenging stages. Voice 1 is the aspiration of the person I want to be, and Voice 2 is the person I fear that I could be.

I'm passing others more often and feeling that my strategy is working when at 40kms I have a serious fall and suffer a deep gouge to my knee. Despite the selflessness of a couple of runners who turn back to make sure I'm alive, I am gutted at the setback, and Voice 2 laments that I'll have to withdraw. My knee feels frozen and I am nauseous, while Voice 1 explains the difference between bravado and character. Voice 1 prevails and after a 5 minute walk, I trip into a run and keep going.

At 42.3kms we are reminded that we are now ultra-marathoners, and the second last brutal climb



begins. I am stronger than in past years and find that I have petrol in the tank. Voice 2 tries to find reasons for acceptable failure, to the extent that a pine needle prick to my finger triggers a debate in my head, but we are so close that Voice 1 and I finally dismiss the negativity and cast Voice 2 away for the remainder.

My quads are screaming with each descent, when I should be pushing for final honours. It's marvellous that fellow participants egg me on as I pass, which validates the format, and I smile and say thank-you each time. I head toward the final checkpoint where Genevieve and the kids are screaming for me, and try not to think about Black Hill, a vicious 3km ascent, the steepest of the race, followed by the technical 3km descent to the finish.

The climb is an endless blur, and I marvel at how the pros get through it in under 18 minutes. I am upright, but my hands can practically touch the hillside it's so steep, and I know that there are several false peaks, so I trudge on.

I'm over the top and my brain is thinking a sprint home is appropriate but my legs have a different view and I stumble through the surprisingly technical finish, and pass a few more on the way. I am conscious of my throbbing knee and worry that a fall will be the end of me, so I waiver between speed and caution. As I pass Ian, many years my senior, it occurs to me that I hope to be fit enough to do this in 2 decades.

I do my best to imitate a dash to the finish, and am thrilled but not surprised that Genevieve has positioned the kids to give me high-fives in the tunnel to the end at Athelstone.

I stop the clock at 6 hours and 27 minutes, 3rd in my age but 5 minutes faster than last year when I was 2nd. I surprise myself by caring little about missing 1st by 8 minutes (although that will come later), and am more focused and delighted with the presence of Genevieve, Georgina, Ella and Ryan cheering me on and enjoying the finish.

For those of you that sponsored me, I thank you on behalf of the Indigenous Marathon Foundation. Your contribution will help 10 runners participate in the New York Marathon in less than a month, and will drive benefits in the indigenous community thereafter.

