

## Cradle Mountain - 7<sup>th</sup> February 2015



*Dove Lake and Cradle Mountain at sunset the night before the run*

Words cannot even begin to explain the sheer enormity of this event. This is the first time you will hear me honestly say I under estimated how tough this ultra was going to be. Common sense should have given me a slight hint of this just from the experience of going through the selection criteria. The field of competitors attracted the best of the best with Stu Gibson and Gill Fowler as the dynamic duo who I predicted would win the men's and women's and I was not wrong. Another great runner Kathy Mac just inspires me every time I attempt these crazy adventures and she did not disappoint with a strong 3<sup>rd</sup> place in the women's. Kathy had given me some sound advice when we ran the Australia Day 6hr endurance overnight event together. You do not race Cradle Mountain on your first attempt you just survive it and survive it I did – but just barely.

Tasmania is famous for snow even in January so this event requires you to carry mandatory gear in case of that situation arising. There was not going to be any need for thermals or waterproof pants as the weather forecast was going to be high twenties but we had to carry it all anyway. It actually reached 35 degrees in parts which explains my suffering in the heat and the dropout rate of runners. As always I really hope you all enjoy my race report as I attempt to describe the experience as it unfolded in front of me....as always you can skip to the last page to see the final results.

Friday night was mandatory gear check and race briefing at the Cradle Mountain Lodge. This is where I had the chance to scope out the running field and they had come far and wide to compete. I was totally out of my league and experience on this one so it was time to reset my expectations and look at this differently. All week I had been overly anxious and nervous about attempting Cradle Mountain and I was beginning to see why. This is not an event you take on lightly. It is a highly technical run that requires you to be light and nimble on your feet and that I am not. The terrain is so diverse and varied over the 82kms but every turn was yet another breathtaking view.

Back in October when entries opened Karen, Greg and I were all lucky enough to be selected for the event. In between times Greg had injured his knee and had to withdraw from the event so it was now Karen and myself. I also knew Andy, Brett and Kathy Mac so having some familiar Victorian faces around me helped to settle my nerves a little. Karen and I had agreed to run our own races but I was still pretty anxious to do this by myself so I had planned to stay with Karen for the initial part of the run and then would see how it evolved.



*Beginning of the track the day before the run  
Marion's Lookout in the background*

Saturday morning at 5:50am at Waldheim cabins we all headed down to the start for one last roll call to make sure all runners were accounted for and present. Final words from the race director and best wishes all around as we counted down to a 6am start. Karen and I kissed both our better halves before we were about to take off. Dawn was still approaching and with 3 seconds to go everyone yelled out Go Stu and he was off – we all joked about a false start but before I knew it I was caught up in the single row of runners making their way down the boardwalk into the valley. We had started the ultra from Cradle Mountain to Lake St Clair and 82kms later I would be crossing the finish line – well that was the intention. The first really noticeable memory for me was once we had descended into the first valley the temperature dropped significantly – so much so everyone made mention of it. The coolness would not last long as we began our first climb up Eagle Hill to Crater Lake.

The sun had still not risen up above the mountain range yet but you could see it was going to be a magnificent sun rise. The trail was initially boardwalk and as we approached Crater Lake became a rocky gravel trail – all single so it was near impossible to pass a runner unless you moved off to the side of the track. Crater Lake was so still and the mountain range reflected off the water as we ran past the first very small hut we would encounter – Scout Hut. This was my first photo opportunity and trust me there were many of them.



*Sunrise at Cradle Mountain on our climb to Marion's Lookout*

Past Crater Lake was the gruelling climb to the top of Marion's lookout. Wow what a climb but the views were amazing! There was even a short section of chain rope to pull yourself up the rocky incline. At one stage the steps were too high for my legs and the runner behind me gave me a nudge to get me up. He did apologise but I said there is no shame for ultra-runners when you need help. Every little bit helps. At the top of Marion's to our left was Dove Lake and Cradle Mountain with the sun starting

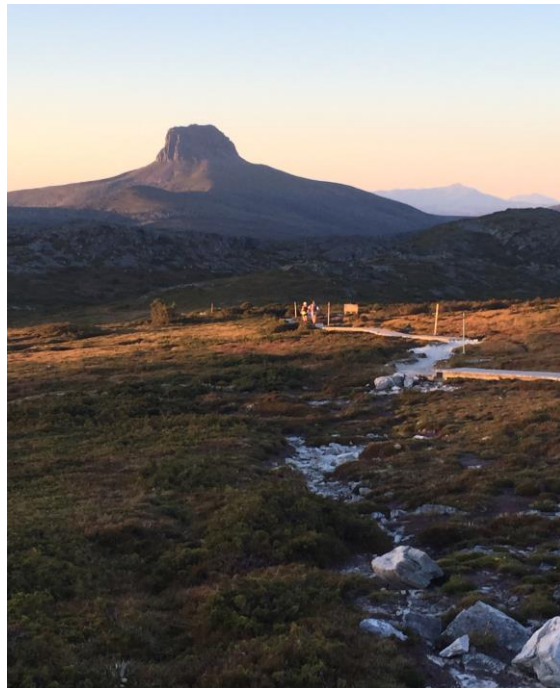
to peek through and to our right was Crater Lake and a full moon. We were blessed with such great clear views for the day. The top of Marion's Lookout just took my breath away, it was a photographers dream. I had to take my one and only selfie with Cradle Mountain in the back ground.

Once at the top of Marion's you followed the Plateau to Kitchen Hut - this was just over the 5km mark but it felt more like 10kms. Karen and I had been travelling well together and had caught up with a few other runners – one of them being Brett Saxon who is a Race Director back in Melbourne for Trails Plus. We started chatting about our goals and expectations for the run. Brett had attempted this event the year before but missed the cut off at Narcissus Hut but he had full intention of making this year. That was my goal as well – 5pm cut off but before then we had to get to Pelion Hut by midday to even have a chance.

Around Cradle Mountain we headed out along more boardwalk to Barn's Bluff – what a stunning piece of rock sticking out of the mountain range, very distinctive. The track followed more flat open board walk along the plateau before a descent into Waterfall Valley Hut.

Two hours into the run we had just covered 12.85kms and by this time I had left Brett and Karen with a couple of other runners. That gives you an idea of how tough the climb up over Marion's lookout was. As I did my 2hr blog I fell off the boardwalk – lmao.

*The view along the Overland track to Barn Bluff at sunrise.*



Once through Waterfall Valley we headed across a barren plateau past Lake Holmes and Lake Windemere to Windemere Hut. This was another undulating section of the course with a bit of boardwalk to assist. At Windemere Hut I took the opportunity to use the drop toilet as I did not fancy heading into the bush with the tiger snakes to even attempt it.

At 3hrs I had covered 20.33kms so I had gained a bit of distance on the time and I was now a quarter of the way through the event. Once I had passed through the hut at Windemere the terrain changed dramatically into dense pine forest where the running became impossible because of the tree roots, rocks and mud. It was also the beginning of the next significant climb to Pelion Creek with a descent into Frog Flats and back up again to Pelion Hut. Frog's Flat was the lowest point of the track before crossing Pelion Plains to the hut and after 4hrs into the event I had only covered 26.44kms. It did offer a bit of protection from the sun as it was now full sun and hot at 10am in the morning. I was now assessing my midday cut-off for Pelion hut and knew I was going to make it as it was around the 30km distance.

Around the 27km distance I came across a group of about eight hikers who asked me my name and then proceeded to cheer me on as I went past them. It put the biggest smile on my face and lifted me to push a bit harder. Not more than two minutes later I took a fall grazing my right knee and elbow,



stupid loss of concentration. At 32kms I began to stress that I had taken a wrong turn as I had not seen any indication of other runners or Pelion Hut coming up anytime soon.

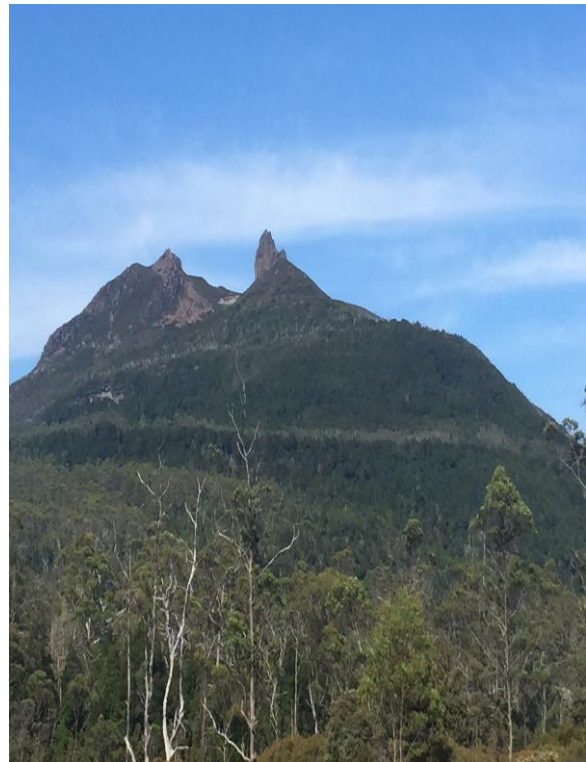
At around the 32.5km distance I saw a sign to Old Pelion Hut which was a great relief and I knew I was not far off. Five hours had elapsed and I had covered 32.88kms so the checkpoint was not too far away. As I came into the clearing there were about 4 volunteers checking in my official time. I was given a bit of water to get me through to the next creek crossing and a lolly python snake for some energy. I had reached Pelion at 11:04am – 56 mins to spare to the cut-off and a big relief. I thought about Karen and Brett and hoped they would make it into the checkpoint on time. It was far harder to achieve than I had expected. I also realised I had to do the same thing again in the same amount of time to make the cut off at Narcissus by 5pm. 33.25kms down with less than 50kms to the finish line. People would think that was just a normal weekend run for me.

Once I was checked off I was on my way and the next section took us past the Mt Ossa turnoff then through Pelion Gap before reaching Kia Ora Hut. Mt Ossa is the highest mountain in Tasmania standing at 1617 metres – thank goodness we were not going to climb it today.

As I came into the intersection with the turn off to Mt Ossa I noticed another runner and followed him to the right. It took me about a 100 metres to realise I was going the wrong way – Greg had told me to go straight so I turned back and returned to the Overland track and the correct markers.

It now concerned me that a runner was going to get lost but there was nothing I could do he was already out of my sight.

*Mt Ossa*



The six hour mark approached and it was midday and very hot. I was now crossing the plain with Pelion Gap to my left – what a view and I had just completed 37.71kms. I could not compare the distance to other times I had run for 6hrs – this was an entirely different ball game but I had told myself that the views were worth every minute of it. I soon came into Kia Ora hut and a beautiful waterfall after 6hrs 44 mins where I filled up on some cold water and noticed I had completed a marathon. I was now half way and I had estimated a time of 13hrs and 30 mins to finish the run.



The next goal was to reach Du Cane Hut before the descent into another forest and a climb up through Du Cane Gap. The trail to Du Cane Hut was technical as I moved into my seventh hour I had clocked just over 43kms. Du Cane Hut came out of nowhere as the forest parted and opened up to a small exposed clearing and an old wooden hut. It was great to see but as I left the hut I entered yet another section of dense forest with tree roots, mud and rocks making it another very technical section to navigate. The signs were pointing to Windy Ridge indicating it was about 2 ½ hrs away and I was still on target to make the 5pm cut-off for Narcissus. I estimated I would arrive about 4:15pm. The hours were now flying by and it seemed like 5 mins instead of 60 as I did my next video blog to indicate eight hours had now passed and I had fallen short of just 49kms.

*Du Cane Hut*



*Du Cane Range*

As I approached 50kms the time elapsed was 8hrs and 23 mins – I was over the technical aspect of this run with dense forest of tree roots, rocks and mud but I was still on target as I climbed out of Du Cane Gap. It was so hard on the knees, the feet, the legs in general and all I had to do was keep moving – 32kms to go to the finish. The climbing never seemed to end as I went through Windy Ridge at 51.5kms in 8hrs 41 mins. I was informed by the volunteers at this checkpoint that I only had 10kms to Narcissus. I think all the climbing was now done and I mentally apologised to Greg for not studying the map closer. I now had 2hrs 15 mins to get to Narcissus so quietly confident I was going to do it. It was still incredibly hot so I was taking every opportunity to take cold water out of the creeks and dipping my buff in the water to pour it over my head to try and cool the body down. I was so thankful this was the case as the water from the rain tanks at each of the huts was not really suitable and I did



not have time to treat it. 53.56kms after nine hours and again the trail was technical through dry eucalypt forest and pockets of rain forest before descending in the valley down to Narcissus River.

Ten hours had now elapsed, it was now 4pm and I had recorded 59.87kms on the Garmin watch. I was definitely struggling in the heat and feeling very lonely as I had not seen a runner for many hours. I was perked up as I came out onto a plateau then to my surprise I came cross the suspension bridge to cross Narcissus River – I was about 15 mins now from the checkpoint. As I came out of the forest I was greeted by the checkpoint volunteers and my photo being taken.



I had my time checked in, had a mouth full of coke and a slice of water melon. I had reached Narcissus in 10hrs 17 mins. Any runners not making 5pm were withdrawn from the run and had to take the ferry back to Cynthia Bay and the finish line at a cost of \$50 – one of the mandatory items we had to carry. The emotions started to creep in as I realised what I had now accomplished – I had about 20kms around Lake St Clair and all I had to do was survive it.

Echo Point was my next goal and was the last chance for any runner to flag down the ferry to be picked up. It was about 7kms through more rain forest along the lake edge. It mentally chewed me up and spat me out, it was dense forest of more tree roots and rocks – my legs were now getting very tired and every step was harder than the previous one. Mental strength was all I could now rely on to get me through and the hope of seeing another runner, and as 5pm came around I thought about Karen and Brett and my instinct told me that they had missed the cut-off time. It was extremely tough for me to make the cut-off time and I suspected that heat and the technical nature of the course had beaten them this time. At least they would have a great boat ride back.



*Lake St Clair*

I finally saw the edge of the lake and took a moment to take a photo and meet a fellow runner doing the same thing. I took a photo of him and we headed off together for a short time. I had run out of water by this stage and was hoping for the next creek to come around the corner soon, when it did I

stopped to fill up and let him continue. I knew I would eventually catch him again as I had someone to keep in my sights.

Twelve hours down and the body is now exhausted concentrating so hard getting around the lake – Greg was not wrong when he said all you can do is just survive it. It is relentless with undulating climbs and I even swore out loud at one point because I could not face another climb of tree roots and rocks. Just short of reaching Echo Point I came across a runner struggling with major cramping. It was a difficult decision but he put out the flag to notify the ferry to pull him out. I continued on with less than 11kms now to the finish line.

I was sure it was going to be a finish closer to 14hrs based on my average pace of 6kms an hour. A few kilometres the other side of Echo Point I came across Corey who was just fuelling up on lolly snakes so he offered me one. That lifted my spirits and we chatted for a bit as I managed to turn my legs over and start a slow jog through the trees following him as best I could. We anticipated we had about 6kms to go so fingers crossed I would be reaching the finish line before 8pm.

7pm came around so quickly and the Garmin indicated 75.31kms. I was so disheartened that I still had about 6kms to go but within the next 2 kms I crossed the river at Watersmeet and the path opened up to a wide travel track. I was less than 1.5kms from the finish line and all of a sudden I had the adrenalin and energy to run. My Garmin had measured about 4kms short which it would have lost the satellite each time I was deep within the canopy of the rainforests but I was completely ignorant to that at the time but who cares I was going to finish way sooner than I had expected.

That last kilometre felt like 10 but as I came around the corner I saw the finishing line flags and Nick standing there waiting to see me. I registered an official time of 13:23:59 on my Garmin as I ran into Nick's arms at the finish line. I also found out that both Karen and Brett had not made the cut-off at Narcissus along with a number of other runners and they had already arrived back at the finish.

As I reflect on the day there were so many highlights compared to the times I hit some really low lows. The views over Cradle Mountain, Marion's Lookout, Barns Bluff, Mt Ossa and Lake St Clair were simply stunning. The pristine clear natural water at each of the creek crossings I got to drink and pour over my head to keep the body cool. The hospitality of each and every hiker out there that I came across encouraging every step that I took. The girls that sang to me the Queen inspired song "you are the champion of the Overland track" and the smile on Nicks face as I crossed the finish line.

That night we all dined at the Derwent Bridge Hotel and spoke of the trials and tribulations we all experienced. Regardless of whether you had finished the run or not there was an appreciation for every single runner because this event is truly humbling.

The next morning we then all met again for formal certificate presentations and a group photo. This run taught me never under estimate the unspoilt terrain of Tasmania and never take for granted the privilege of being selected to partake in this amazing event. This was more than just an ultra ticked off my bucket list, it is memories that will stay with me a lifetime.

