

I blame the snakes ...

What a privilege to be given a second go at the Cradle Mountain Run. The spectacular scenery, the difficulty of the trail, the small number of participants, the camaraderie, the outstanding organization. All, in no particular order, contribute to a magnificent experience to “float on” for a few weeks after the event!

Last year’s adventure felt like unresolved business. Surely I could do better than 12h30 given the protracted rest breaks taken at the timing stations and some relaxed chatting on the final Lake Saint Clair section? A handicap time of 11h45 seemed perfectly manageable. To toughen up, my lead up training included the Tararua Mountain Race, supposedly the toughest mountain race in NZ. That has to be good preparation as Dave Heatley, this year’s CMR winner, also uses it for his lead-up. After enduring that rocky mudfest in zero degrees with a howling westerly, the CMR trail would be comparatively gentle....

After flying in to Launceston on Thursday night, I caught up with Ian Dunican. We ran together last year, but this year Ian has much bigger fish to fry with the Leadville 100 on his to-do list for 2012, and he set himself an even more ambitious handicap time for the CMR. After shopping for supplies on Friday morning, the bus took us to Cradle Mountain where the runners assembled at the CM Lodge for the pre-race briefing. After receiving some stern warnings from the NP ranger, we were handed our pink ribbons and timing chips. Formalities out of the way, tucking into a hearty meal seemed like a smart idea. For the next 24 hours food intake would be absolute rubbish and last year’s experience suggested that post-run appetites can be deceiving! Bellies full, we were driven to our overnight accommodation at Waldheim lodge where I shared Beltana 2 with new and familiar faces – great catching up and exchanging stories. Some weird ultra-running stuff going on as well, but I will leave that to others to describe in some detail. With final race prep done, it was lights out at 9:30!

With the alarm going off at 4am, it was final feeding time. It’s difficult to convince your stomach to accept large quantities of food at that time, so a little activity to kick-start the bio-rhythm was called for. Filling bladders, repacking gear (you can’t do that often enough), lacing up, and applying copious amounts of zinc and anti-chafing cream make those two hours pass quickly. At 5:50 it’s the roll call, final briefing and a happy photo shoot. Unlike last year when some 20 runners were jostling for position, only 5 runners take their places on the boards. That seems a waste of space, so I convince Ian to join the fray. At exactly 6am we were off and our “preferred” start requires a serious pace from the get go. Helter skelter down the valley and back up on the other side before a very fast walking climb to Crater Lake. Past the lake we climb up the chain onto Marion’s Lookout. Unfortunately, no beautiful sunrise like last year as a misty cloud obscures the views. But, no icy blast to bring tears to your eyes either. Neither Cradle Mountain nor Barn Bluff can be seen, which is a pity as the views can be truly astonishing from

up here. Once up on the plateau it's a mad run to Kitchen Hut – the first timing station. This is where Ian takes off and I lose sight of him soon after. I check in at 41:50 which is, somewhat disappointingly, only about a minute and a half faster than last year. Ah well, the bigger time gains are to be made on those pesky climbs to Pelion/Du Cane Gaps. Better conserve a little energy on the sections that went well last year. The section from Kitchen Hut past Waterfall Hut to Windermere Hut is one of those. Plenty of running and only occasionally some walking. Even the mud pools seem to have mysteriously disappeared (there are new boards on this section). It's more dusty than muddy now. This benefit is somewhat offset by the ever so rotten old log 'boards' that have not yet been replaced with new boardwalk. It's easy to step between the cracks and do some serious ankle damage. That keeps the eyes focused on the trail. The misty cloud has pretty much burned off by now and the sun has come out with only a few wispy clouds. You can immediately feel it warming up.

Arriving at Windermere in 2 hours and 10 minutes tells me I'm now 5 minutes ahead of schedule. Unlike last year, I don't feel the need for a stop so keep going straight through. Sue, Peter and James have caught up with me some time before Windermere and our group has a nice pace going onto Pine Moor. Lots of boards and good running for quite some time. The first little pocket of trees (and their roots) puts an end to the easy trail. At this stage I lose the connection with Sue's group who are way faster on technical trail and I'm exiting the trees on my own. Back onto the Moor for more boards before finally disappearing into the trees. It's actually not so bad here with a mix of running and jumping tree roots. It feels a lot faster than last year when I ultimately descend into the clearing at Frog Flats. Then it's steady uphill towards Pelion Hut. While walking some bits, I manage to keep running parts and when the forest clears I know that I'm getting close to the Pelion timing station. Just about here a brown snake slithers off the path just a meter or so ahead of me. Oops, better be careful, I'm not wearing gaiters... I'm passing a few runners here (who will pass me just as quickly after Pelion) and am feeling strong. Just before I speed up to the Pelion timing station I see Sue, walking. Knowing how fast she is, that is a little surprising. When she holds her leg, it's obvious something is wrong and she tells me that she tore a hamstring. Ouch! Amazingly, she walks out all the way to Narcissus.

It's now 4 hours 12 minutes into the run and I'm ahead by 11 minutes. Again, I feel sufficiently strong to not waste any time and walk through while digesting an energy bar. Then it's back to a slow run (it is getting noticeably warmer) up the hill to Pelion Gap. This time the climb seems shorter, with a better view ahead towards the crest of the Gap, and the emergence at the Gap is as good as it gets. Brilliant views towards Mt Ossa, cheering walkers and a good trail ahead of me. Down the hill, it takes me longer than I recall to get to Kia Ora Hut. I get there after 5 hours 50 minutes. Hey, that's disappointing, no further gain on last year. At this stage it starts to sink in that my "predicted" improvement by 45 minutes is unlikely to happen. Ah well, the next

section should be my best chance to gain time, so I might still get close to 12 hours. I do need to replenish my water supply though, and take my first 'real' break to eat some dried fruit and nuts. I do recall the slug to Du Cane Hut from here and it seems timely to rest the legs for a few minutes. Getting back up is a bit of a struggle, but a slow jog gets me going. It's only 2K to Du Cane but it seems to take forever over fairly difficult track. A sharp left (the sign is almost illegible but I remember being warned about it last year) and then it's the long haul up Du Cane Gap.

With all the roots it's quite some power walking here. As this is the section where I encounter most walkers, I feel obliged to put in a bit of a run whenever they give me a cheer. When they see me hesitating, a group of picnicking walkers is kind enough to wave me in the right direction at the Fergusson/Hartnett Falls turnoff. Too right, as their backpacks were stacked against the sign. At long last, the terrain opens up a little (which is the Gap) and almost unnoticeably starts to descend. That's the sign that Windy Ridge is near. I catch up with Peter on this section. A steep descent, more snakes (including a green one), and quite unexpectedly there's the Hut and the third timing station.

It's now 7 hours 36 minutes into the run and I'm ahead by 12 minutes on the schedule. I obviously failed miserably in making a significant gain on this section. That bodes ominously as I know that the next stretch to Narcissus went pretty well last year with lots of good running. Hence, I make the (stupid) mistake to go straight through rather than eat a bit to up the sugar levels. The fact that there's not much shade at the Hut also contributed to that decision (what ridge? ..and where's the wind?). Nonetheless, almost immediately I feel the energy draining away and every little hill becomes a struggle. I was hoping for some shade on this section, but it's actually very open forest so the sun keeps bearing down on you. Fortunately, there are lots of little streams and I dunk my cap on every occasion to cool the head. Still surprising how far the energy level needs to drop before I conclude that I really-really need some sugar NOW. After a few bites, I feel sick and need to sit down. It takes some willpower to get up and only very slowly I get going again. A tiger snake confronts me, turns around and reluctantly starts moving away. Normally they move off the trail, but this one decides to stay on it and just slither ahead of me. I shoo-shoo it (yeah, real smart), but then I realize it's almost going at my pace anyway (you work it out), before it finally disappears in the bush. A very strong looking Kathy overtakes me just a little later. Good thing I walk again rather than being doubled up trying not to vomit the o-so-necessary sugar – never a good look. It takes time for the sugar to dissolve, but when it does I feel much better. By the time I reach the turn-off to Pine Valley Hut, I finally get a run going. From there it's much easier. Less rocky, and once I hit the boardwalk, I know that the swing bridge is nearby. This year I'm forewarned and come to a complete stop before walking across the bridge (although a plunge in the river does seem attractive at this stage). The

lure of Narcissus then gives the necessary energy to keep running for the next 1-2K sidling the river until you reach the hut.

It's now 9 hours 18 minutes into the run and I'm BEHIND by 2 minutes on last year's schedule. Given my troubles on this section, I'm not really surprised. Still well inside the cutoff for sure! Why is it that I even considered dropping out at Narcissus just an hour earlier? That really makes no sense, but is probably a sign of the mind playing tricks on me. Nonetheless, a PB seems out of the question now. Christine and her marvellous team make me a cup of tea (this time I remember to ask for half tea, half water – last year, I wasted 5 minutes to let the tea cool down to drinking temperature), pour me a coke, and replenish my water supply. And all of that in 5 minutes before I'm off again, feeling so much better (THANKS!!!!). Peter has caught up with me at Narcissus and we leave more or less at the same time. I manage to put in a good run in the next 2K (boardwalks) and as a consequence waste too much energy early on. I should have realized that it's still 3 hours to go. Nonetheless, I manage to run the short bits where it's possible and keep a reasonable pace up to Echo Point Hut (about one third of the way in). Up till there, I again use every opportunity to dunk my cap in the shallowish streams. It's certainly cooler here as this whole section is shady. Shortly after the Echo Point, I run into my second sugar deficiency. I am a little surprised by that as I did eat some dried fruit at Narcissus. This time I decide not to postpone and push on, but quickly eat some fruit. But, the damage is already done and I struggle for the next 15 minutes before the sugar kicks in again. I'm feeling flat and ..yikes .. a big fat tiger snake appears out of nowhere at about knee height (where the trail is a bit of a gully). Both of us seem to dislike each other intensely and quickly move in opposite directions. Didn't expect that in the half-shade of the Lake Saint Clair shoreline. It really must be warm today. With some trepidation I then run through a section where the ferns have overgrown the path. Really tricky as you can't see any obstacles ... including snakes.

By now I start hearing voices and even see a man peeing right next to the trail – until I realize it's a tree trunk. It is a little eerie being out on your own at this stage. It's not until 2h45mins have lapsed that out of nothing Marita materializes and passes me at a brisk pace. Her encouragement does give me some inspiration and as the track has now improved to runnable condition, I put in a slow run. Soon after, day walkers start to appear, which indicates that Cynthia Bay is approaching. It's still quite some distance but before long I reach the bridge at Watersmeet. From there it's the unsealed road to the finish for another 2K. That's shorter than I remember it and only takes about ten more minutes to the little traffic cones indicating the finish chute. I look on my watch and see 18:29 – I manage to put in a massive sprint (well, I like to think so) and cross the line in 18:29:50, a PB by 40 seconds!

So what went wrong in attempting a more impressive PB? It was warmer (24C) and sunnier than ideal for such a long day out. I drank about twice as much as last year when it was in the

low 10s and raining for most of the afternoon. I also wasted too much energy on the sections that went well last year – not leaving enough reserves for the tough sections. But most importantly, my food intake was all wrong. All in, I consumed 6 litres of water (plus a coke and a cup of tea), 1 gel, 1 energy bar, 1 dried mango, the equivalent of 3 slices of dried pineapple and one handful of cashew nuts. Not exactly a satisfactory food strategy. I really struggle with that (any suggestions most welcome!) and it clearly drains the energy on a warm day. That said, I felt much better than last year after finishing. I managed to eat half a bowl of fries and of course the cherished super-sized bowl of ice-cream without feeling squeamish.

The post-run drinks/meals in the Derwent Bridge pub are a great opportunity to catch up with everyone to share experiences. The smiling and very satisfied faces around me confirm that this is one ultra-run to come back to!

Paul Kofman