

One to remember...

Running mostly on roads, interspersed with weekend trail runs in the Dandenong Ranges or Lysterfield Park, 2010 was the year of change. Following the 6FT, Frankston to Portsea and the Yurrebilla Trail, I decided to go for the CMR – a long-held ambition having hiked through much of Tasmania’s wilderness in the last 15 years. With a fast internet connection and the blessing of the race committee, I got the good news and started training in earnest. Some excellent runs on Hobart’s Mt Wellington while on holidays were followed by hot and humid weather throughout January making training in Melbourne a bit of a challenge.

Hoping for cooler weather on Cradle Mountain, I flew to Launceston and met Ian (from Perth) on the flight, easily recognizable as a fellow trail runner (the Salomon backpack is a giveaway). The organizers arranged a comfy coach to take us to the start the next morning. Chatting with my fellow runners, I got a seat next to Ian who told me that his preparation included the TNF (a serious notch up from the 6FT). Talking to others, I did get a distinct feeling that I was a little “light-weight” in the preparation stakes. That knowledge just notched up the anxiety level, and I decided to stick religiously to that 13 hour time schedule downloaded from the internet. After checking in at the Waldheim chalets, the pre-run briefing (and bag check) took place on the balcony of the Cradle Mountain Lodge in ‘balmy’ conditions. The ranger warned us not to stray from the track to side-step mud, and boil our water for at least 3 minutes. That advice taken, and boosted by a hearty meal, we duly headed back to the chalets for an early sleep.

As the chalets are only 50m from the start, there really is no need to get up early. Nonetheless, a somewhat sleepless night combined with my standard routine of at least 2 hours to wake up the system, got me up at 4am. Eating and drinking as much as I possibly could (and then some more), I was all set to go – as was everyone else – at 5.50am. Following the roll-call, we were off at 6am under a cloudless sky in a crisp 8C. Morning light was just breaking through so headlights weren’t necessary (saving some weight). Amazing to see the fast runners take off, darting across the boardwalks and running up towards Crater Lake. I decided to hang somewhere in the middle and take it easy at first, with the heart rate rocking up in that first climb to Marion’s Lookout. Getting up on the plateau, the sun was just coming through in a blaze of orange providing stunning views across Cradle Cirque towards Barn Bluff. A stiff headwind was a little breathtaking, but not too bad to run into. I picked up the pace towards Kitchen hut (probably the fastest section of the entire run) and passed it in 43 minutes – nicely under the 13 hours pace. I remembered the next section along Cradle Mountain as rocky, but it was easy to keep up a nice pace and got even easier past the turnoff to Lake Rodway. We got a little “train of 3” (including Joe Sprange – I think – and Sue Rundle, who later ‘took off’ not to be seen again until breakfast the next morning) going for the next 5K or so over the ridge until the Barn Bluff Track where we were greeted by the first (of many) friendly hiker(s) who kindly

offered us a drink. The views were just brilliant out there with bright blue skies and a little veil of clouds draped around Barn Bluff and the other more distant peaks. Then it was down into Waterfall Valley. I never really noticed the hut turnoff here, maybe because we were starting to hit the mud section which arrived unannounced as I plunged knee-deep into the first pool. Quite refreshing and a jolt to the muscles. From there it was intermittent mud pools and old broken boardwalks. Not too far from Lake Windermere, a kindly ranger was keenly inspecting running legs for evidence of mud, which I proudly displayed. I was allowed through and arrived at Windermere Hut for a toilet stop and first food intake as the morning breakfast and drinks were starting to wear off and it was time to dig into my supplies. It was now 2hr15m from the start and some 25mins within the 13hr schedule.

The sun started to warm things up and I was glad I had put on some last minute sunscreen. The next stretch is the seemingly endless Pine Forest Moor (with more mud and crappy boardwalks amid sections of very good boardwalks). A group of runners overtook me soon after Windermere, but I caught up soon after with Amy Hinds who was sitting on the trail. She said she had rolled her ankle (and looked in pain), but implored me to keep going and that she would just tape it up and then continue. I got to see Amy quite frequently thereafter, alternately catching up and losing sight. Amy, I am sure that if you had not rolled your ankle, you would have blitzed it way faster than me. You're an absolute legend that you kept going with two-thirds of the run still ahead of you, undoubtedly in pain (and being asked by that pesky camera-man why you were not smiling at the camera). Just goes to show that women have ALL the mental strength – while men already whine at a bit of chafing.

After a smaller forest section the Moor finally morphed into an eerie forest at the foot of Mt Pelion West, where it was really tricky running with the trail often sloping sideways and covered with roots. I was running by myself here for an hour or so and doubts started creeping in whether I was still on the right track... It took a long time before finally arriving in lowly Frog Flats. From there the trail improved while heading East, slowly running upwards toward Mt Pelion East. It started drizzling and I was feeling a bit flat after this long stage, and a few runners (including Ian) overtook me there checking in just before me at New Pelion Hut. I got there in 4:23hrs – nicely within the 13 hour schedule but no further improvement since Windermere. I took five minutes to eat and drink something, before setting off towards Pelion Gap. Running along Douglas Creek, the trail became ever more technically difficult and I had to walk substantial sections. It also kept going up for 4K which made it really tough going. It was a big relief to finally “burst out” into the open of Pelion Gap where a platform was loaded with backpacks of hikers climbing impressive Mt Ossa just west of the trail. Pretty soon after the Gap, it was beautiful boardwalks amidst the button grass leading down into Pinestone Valley where I caught up with Ian who was now accompanied by Michael Slagter and Amy. Back into the forest, but still on reasonably good trail, we got to Kia Ora Hut (42K mark) in 6 hours –

slowest marathon I ever ran. I also seemed to be losing ground against the 13 hour schedule. By now it had started raining persistently so a quick snack break was taken in the shelter of the hut. Ian, Michael and Amy took off while I went replenishing my water supply in the creek behind the hut.

Du Cane Hut – a classic beauty – is only two Ks from Kia Ora, but it seemed to take a long time to get there. From there, the trail sidles around Falling Mountain and becomes exceedingly difficult for running. Unlike Pelion Gap, it also lacks a visual reference point. You can't really see very far ahead. As earlier, I was on my own again for a good hour or so. At this point, I 'fess up that I yelled out an expletive addressed to the (entirely innocent) Du Cane Ranges. My apologies to the wildlife (I made sure there were no fellow runners or hikers within earshot). Mind you, that's pretty good compared to some of the training run outbursts (what's that again about men being mentally fragile...). Soon after I was overtaken by David Baldwin who suggested that the Gap was nigh and Windy Ridge hut not far beyond. Thanks David, that did give me a boost. While I was anticipating an open Gap like Pelion, it turns out that the incline rather unremarkably changes into a decline while still in the forest. Then the drop became steeper and I managed to put in a run to the timing point.

After clocking in at Windy Ridge after 7hrs48m, I decided to keep the pace going rather than take another break. That was a good choice as the track from there to Narcissus is much better for running than the previous 20K. Not entirely flat, but not too many tree-roots either. The 10K to Narcissus first sidles down the Traveller Range past a bright green paddock (the Bowling Green) – a sight for sore eyes – before meeting up with the Narcissus River and following it towards the lake. After the turnoff to Pine Valley Hut, I knew it was only 5K left to Narcissus. At this stage, I was running intermittently with Amy and we were encouraging each other to keep going as it "couldn't possibly be too far to go to Narcissus". Delighted to see the swing-bridge – and foolishly running up, then almost being catapulted into the river. After crossing, it was still another K or so to Narcissus, where I arrived at 15:16pm with no more worries about cutoffs. Somewhat surprisingly, I had also increased the margin on the 13 hour schedule to almost half an hour – clearly a good stretch from Windy Ridge.

Knowing that this was the last major 'stop', I had a cup of tea, some water melon, and a lemon squash. Probably spend a little too much time relaxing here (10 minutes), but it gave me confidence to tackle the next 3 hours. And these volunteers were just so damn nice ... no-no you sit down, while we top up your water, would you like sugar with that ... Amy arrived soon after and to our astonishment (and his) we then saw Ian show up. While he suggested that we had taken a short-cut, we retorted that he was probably lost somewhere along the way. The latter seems a more likely option, because soon after leaving Narcissus, Ian and Amy were debating which direction to take (over the mountain, or along the lake). I caught up with Amy

again, then got a bit of a boost and just before Echo Point hut (after about 1hr10min) caught up with Ian. That section of the trail is pretty tricky with roots and little ups and downs, allowing very little continuous running. So we power-walked large sections while talking about all matters running, Cuban cigars, whisky, and the Irish economy. With about 6K to go, I noticed that the trail had actually opened up for some time, and politely (I hope) suggested to Ian that we might well start running again. That got us into a rhythm and we eventually arrived at Watersmeet – where a few supporters were gathered to meet up with their runners so we asked them for some reliable info on remaining distance. The feedback was rather ambiguous and we started to doubt whether we would make 12:30 hours. The final “highway” just seemed to stretch onwards forever (the finish is a little unexpected after a sharp left turn), but we could finally smell the finish. Shaking hands on a successful run, we crossed in 12:30:50. Ian, a big thank you for helping keep morale up where needed!

Post-mortem: At the finish it was probably close to 5C in the steady rain (didn't really notice the cold while running). Hitching a ride with one of the sweepers (with thanks), it was wonderful hitting the warm showers at Derwent Bridge Hotel. All wrinkly and with big appetites, the runners ordered large meals at the pub, but most of us took four bites and that was about it... (apart from the big bowl of ice cream). It was great catching up with the other runners and hearing about their experiences (yeah, very disappointing that 9hr run....). Just astonishing to hear how fast some of you manage to go on the trail – strong nerves and rubber ankles, I reckon. There might have been snoring that night, but all I remember was a big black hole. Next morning's breakfast went down much better than dinner, and following prize and certificate ceremony, the bus took us drowsily back to Launceston.

A big thank you to the organizers for looking after us so incredibly well and for allowing me to live the dream!

Paul Kofman