

Cradle Mountain Race Report Nick Wienholt

<http://www.enduroexplorer.com/cradle-mountain-race-report.aspx>

Posted by Nick 10 February 2011 19:12:00

[Previous Post](#) << >> [Next Post](#)

Retrospect can often makes things that seem sensible in the planning seem less than wise in hindsight. Doing two of Australia's toughest ultra-marathons in the course of a month definitely seemed less than optimal about 50km and 8 hours in during Saturday's Cradle Mountain run.

The preparation going into Cradle Mountain was about as good as I could hope. After a week's recovery from Bogong to Hotham, I got two weeks solid training in, with two good 30+km runs completed in the middle two weekends and a good taper week leading in. The mountainous terrain of the Victorian Alps had caused an ITB flare up on my right side, but a course of anti-inflammatories and a daily routine of ice massage, physio roller and stretching had cleared up the ITB tightness, and I arrived at Cradle Mountain feeling fit, strong and ready.

I flew into Launceston on Friday morning, and caught the chartered race down to Cradle Mountain, arriving mid-afternoon. Like a lot of the racers, I was staying Waldheim (which is located right at the start of the race) and after checking into the accommodation, the bus took us back down to the Cradle Mountain Lodge for the race briefing and a final meal before the race. The briefing was fairly standard, with a warning from a ranger to make sure we stayed on the track regardless of how muddy and boggy it was and to make sure we finished with muddy feet. After sinking knee deep in a few bogs during the race, finishing with clean feet did not present a problem.

After some nervous pre-race conversation and final preparations of race packs in the hut, the eight runners in my hut turned in early with alarms set for 4:30 race morning.

The final race-pack I settled on was a Camelbak Mule for all the mandatory gear (thermals, water-proof top and bottoms, two spare shirts, map, compass, beanie, gloves, bandage, 200g of 'emergency' choc-coated coffee beans, lighter and first-aid supplies) and a [2-bottle 10k FuelBelt](#). Both 300ml bottles on the FuelBelt contained 7 High5 gels each, with the 1-oz level indicators conveniently lining up with the contents of a 30ml gel satchel. On top of the gels, I had 12 two-scoop mixtures of GuBew in small zip-lock bags and a 600ml Nathan hand-held for water and the GuBrew. The final element to the fueling strategy for the race was 6 High5 energy bars cut in half and stored in 3 small ziplock bags. A single bag could fit in the elastic closure at the back of the fuel-belt, and with a GuBrew refill in the small pocket on the front of the hand-held, I only required access to the pack every 2 hours, with a water refill required from a creek every hour. Refilling every hour felt very tedious (it seemed to take 3-4 minutes each time), and two hand-helds and a slower intake of fluid (one bottle every 90 minutes) would have been better in the cool conditions. Creeks and tank huts were plentiful, and there was no problem accessing water as required.

Race morning dawned cool and cloudless, with a gorgeous sunset looming for the ascent out of Cradle Valley. I had some muesli, a 500ml caffeinated drink and 500ml of GuBrew

mixture and was good to go. The crowd gradually built around the race start, with smiles and nervous laughter dominating.



At 6am precisely we were off, beginning a 80km journey down to Lake St Claire. The first part of an ultra is almost as much about waiting as the day or two pre-race - you are so juiced up from both the carb loading and the adrenaline of the event that it can be hard to keep the pace in-check. I settled in mid-pack, and concentrated on maintaining a steady pace and enjoying the scenery (I've never been to the area before). My pulse was high (above 160bpm average) for the first couple of kilometres, but quickly feel back into the comfortable goal zone of ~150bpm. The sunrise and scenery was gorgeous, and I really enjoyed the running.





After a pretty clear morning and some decent running with a small group that included another former defence member Ian Dunican (who recognised me as ex-defence due to the electrical taping of excess straps on my Camelbak), I ended up running solo, and was slowly but surely clicking off the kilometres and enjoying the awesome scenery.





Looking at previous year's results, I was hoping for a time around 11:30-12:00, and I was on track for this, finishing the first 40km in just under 6 hours at 11:53AM. The Pelion checkpoint came and went without any dramas, and I had heard from some of the experience runners that there was good running conditions at some points in the course, so I made sure I wasn't smashing myself too hard at any point. A lot of the footing is pretty brutal. This bit was probably some of the worse but it all seemed pretty hard like this:

I'd stuck to my fueling strategy religiously, but with the cool conditions and intermittent rain, I was barely sweating and 600ml/ hour was leaving me feeling a bit bloated. In the second half of the race I drank more to thirst, and increased gel consumption to try and maintain a steady energy flow in the 250-350 calories range.

Going into the race, I had [three goals](#), and getting through the 6-8 hour range was going to be crucial to achieving the first goal of spreading my effort out evenly over the whole run. I did feel a dip in energy and interest in the 40-50km range, and really concentrated on working through it. The blog post by [Sir Runalot after Bogong to Hotham](#) where he described the experience as falling into a hole came to my mind I was beginning the downward slid . The blog post also states "(e)xperience also tells me to just take it easy, get lots of fluid and sugar in and soon all will be well....". As the hole started getting deeper, I just cycled through my mental check-list of hydration and fuel to make sure I was on track. Going into Windy Ridge the camera captured me looking pretty comfortable. I was aware that I was falling below a 12 hour time, but focused on achieving my three race goals of sticking to the nutrition plan, maintaining a consistent pace and enjoying the experience.



Photo Credit: Bernard Walker

The next 10km into Narcissus were OK and my pace wasn't too far below race average, but it was still a slow 90 minutes into the final checkpoint. I went through pretty quickly with only some water and 3 choc-chip cookies taken in from the wonderful supplies that had been boated in for the run. There was another runner lying down at Narcissus looking pretty crook (I later learnt this was Paul Gladwell from Melbourne) and Hobart runner Jessica Strugnell arrived at Narcissus just after me.

I left the checkpoint with Jessica and we ran and chatted for a while. I had heard plenty of warnings that this section along the Lake was pretty poor running terrain, and though this was certainly true, it was not markedly worse than some of the other sections, and I was still able to maintain a slow jog pace. Jessica stopped after 3km or so for some gear adjustments but I was soon joined by Paul who had consumed some tea and biscuits at Narcissus, made a great recovery, and was now intent on completing the race. Paul said he had become so exhausted and disorientated prior to Narcissus that he had actually end up running the wrong way (back to Cradle Mountain) until another runner had come along and turned him around. Some gentle encouragement at Narcissus had also helped - something to the effect that it was OK to catch the Lake St Claire boat and not finish the race but it was unlikely the organisers would allow him to enter the event again as a previous DNF.

It was great running with Paul - we had a similar pace, and the conversation made the difficult terrain go by quickly. Jessica motored past us about half way along the Lake, but we were pretty content with our pace and I don't think I had any more speed left in me. I cracked open my 125g of my 'emergency' choc-coated coffee beans with about 8km to go (still had plenty of food if a 800 calorie spot check happened at the end of the race) and the caffeine and sugar gave Paul and I a needed boost.

About 5km from the end, Paul's brother joined us, having run up from the visitors center. Having a pacer for this section was great, and the proximity to the end was apparent with the smell from the Visitors Centre cafe and the glimpses of buildings across the water becoming more prominent as we near the line. With 2km to go we reached gravel roads and picked up the pace to 6 min/km, with Paul and I crossing the line together after 12 hours and 50 minutes.

Dr Bianca Scotney from Hobart was at the end collecting blood and weighing runners (as she had done at the start) for a study on hydration and anti-inflammatory consumption, and a weight-in revealed a minimal 2kg loss for me. Given the glycogen depletion that would be expected in an ultra, I'm pretty sure I was close to fully hydrated and felt (comparatively) good at the end. One of the things that stuck me was when giving blood was that I could not even feel the needle go into my arm - not even a tiny pinch. Its incredible the effect that endorphins and related chemicals have on pain sensitivity. I smashed my head on a low hanging branch along the Lake section, and while I could feel that a bit of skin had been removed and there was a bit of bleeding, there was no sensation of pain.

I caught a lift down to the Derwent Bridge Hotel and caught up with Stuart White from Melbourne (who had run a blistering 10:31 for 12th place) who had kindly volunteered a section of floor in his room for me. I had planned to camp by the river (no rooms were available when I tried to book), but it was raining hard and the thought of a wet night in a tent wasn't attractive.

The presentation was held in the hotel the next morning, with Stu and Beth receiving the winners trophies. I pulled up pretty well, with some ankle swelling the only real physical trauma apparent. Like the other ultras I'd done, I felt pretty lethargic and listless over the proceeding week, and struggled to get my energy back. Being out running for that long has a big impact on the body's reserves.

The obvious question is "would I race Cradle Mountain again"? When I felt crappy at the seven hour mark, one of the motivating factors was to finish with a decent performance so I wouldn't be compelled to return just to even my score with the race. Finishing with a slightly slower time than I had aim for but an overall respectable performance, there is no need to go back just for the sake of combating a race demon. The conditions of the track made my ankles really sore during the race, and that wasn't enjoyable. Also, running most of the event solo made it a bit of a drag. All that said, I'm slowly building a network of ultra runners like Paul and Ian (Ian finished in 12:30) who have an ability near mine and would be great training and event partners to help push me through an ultra in a good time. One thing is for sure - I won't be doing the Bogong to Hotham/ Cradle Mountain double next year.

The scenery of Cradle Mountain is spectacular, and the race is superbly organised. Being able to do the whole event with just support from the race organisers made it easy to schedule in without needing to enlist family and friends as crew, and I had a wonderful ride back to Launceston with Stu Gibson which gave me a chance to discuss ultra-trail racing with one of Australia's premier ultra runners. One of the greatest features of trail running is the 'democratic' nature of the sport, with the elites mixing freely with regular runners and the loudest cheers often reserved for the less pointy end of the field.

After less than a week's contemplation, its very likely I'll be back...