

[TRAIL] ZERO

TO [TRAIL]

HERO

WILD ENDURANCE IS A TRAIL WALKING AND RUNNING EVENT MORE FOCUSED ON ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS AND FUNDRAISING THAN COMPETITION AND WINNING. SO WHEN DAN SLATER SIGNED ON FOR THE FLAT OUT FIFTY, HE DIDN'T EXPECT THE COMPETITIVE SPRIT TO SUDDENLY COURSE THROUGH HIS VEINS...BUT WOULD HE SHED BLOOD FOR THE CAUSE?

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I NEVER THOUGHT I'D BECOME AROUSED DURING AN ULTRA-MARATHON. I MEAN, WHEN YOUR BODY'S SHUTTING DOWN HOW CAN YOU EXPECT IT TO TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PLEASURE AND PAIN ANYWAY? SO WHEN I ACCIDENTALLY BRUSHED MY LEFT NIPPLE AT 39KM I COULDN'T TELL IF THE RESULTANT WARMTH WAS PLEASURE OR ... WAIT A MINUTE. IMMEDIATELY MY MIND CONJURED UP IMAGES OF PAINED RUNNERS WITH TWIN BULLET WOUNDS ON THEIR CHESTS, WEeping BLOOD LIKE SONNY CORLEONE. I PEERED FEARFULLY DOWN MY SHIRT BUT THANKFULLY THE CHAFING WAS STILL IN THE EARLY STAGES.

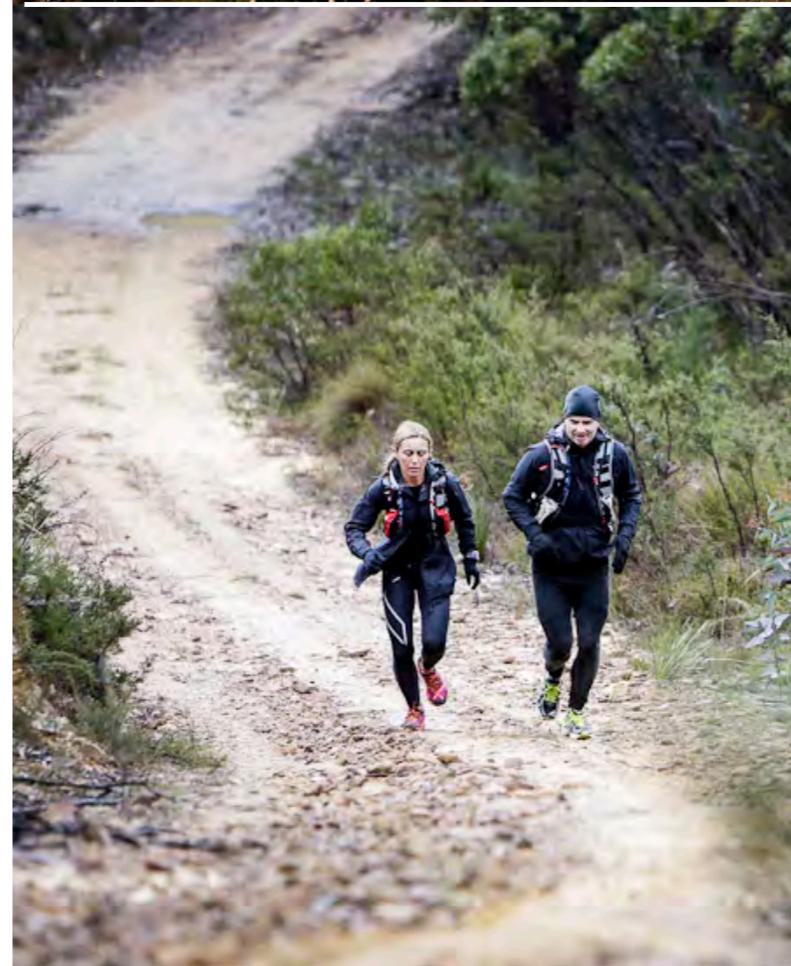
I alerted co-runner Jared to my predicament and, still running, he fished out a block of Bodyglide, which I applied to my tender regions, praying it would be enough to last the final 10km. With pain sensors alerted, I then felt a similar burning sensation down below. I shut it out and kept on running. 'Pain Is Weakness Leaving The Body', goes the mantra. It felt like a lot of weakness was about to depart through my left testicle.

When I was invited by workmates to walk 100km non-stop, I laughed. I was more likely to go mountain bike bog-snorkelling in Wales. Walking for 30 hours straight sounded like a thoroughly unpleasant exercise to me (and still does). Despite repeated urgings I could not see any valid reason to agree. So when cajoled to get involved, I opted instead to run the 50km alternative. They thought I was mad,

yet my reasoning had me done and relaxing in the pub, counting down the 24 hours of hard graft they would still be facing. Still, however you dice up the distance, I was committed to participate in an event called Wild Endurance (WE), a 50km or 100km team challenge in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney. Established as a fundraiser in 2008 by the Wilderness Society, WE was originally more of a bushwalking event but is now firmly established on the trail running calendar and attracting its fair share of dirt demons.

The Wilderness Society is Australia's largest not-for-profit environmental organisation, formed in Tasmania in 1976 by a small group of volunteers to protest the damming of the Franklin River. Its fight raised national awareness and in 1980 the society began campaigning against other issues Australia-wide. The Franklin was saved in 1983 and remains an amazing destination for all wildlife-lovers. But the Wilderness Society didn't stop there: for over 30 years they have taken part in almost every major environmental campaign in the country, successfully protecting some of the most pristine and important wild places in Australia.

In Western Australia, over 66,000 hectares of Ningaloo Reef has been protected. Fraser Island was declared a World Heritage Area in 1992. More recently, a new national park was declared on Cape York Peninsula. These things don't just happen by accident. They happen courtesy of the passion and energy of organisations like the Wilderness Society. In my personal and continuing struggle to determine which of the countless charities >>





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on this distressed planet are actually worth supporting, the Wilderness Society comes pretty high on the list.

So, I was bound by pride and motivated by altruism. I still needed a couple of things: fitness for a start. It's not like I hadn't run trails before - I'd run plenty. I'd got into trail running when I lived in Cape Town, South Africa. With Table Mountain in my backyard, I'd leg it up to the contour path any chance I got. I did all the local events: the Bat Run, Fisherman's Run, Hout Bay Challenge, Table Mountain Challenge. I loved it.

But that was seven years ago. Since then, I'd moved to Australia, become allergic to dust mites, grass and ibuprofen, grown nasal polyps, got married, turned 40, drank several thousand beers and developed vertebral subluxations leading to spinal degeneration (or so my chiropractor claimed). On the plus side I could run four kilometres without a break - that was nearly a twelfth of the distance already - and I had four months to whip myself into shape. I'd start training on 1 January, I told myself. Well, maybe a few days after. 5 January? Or

thereabouts. No sense rushing things. As long as I could run 25km I'd be able to fudge the second half, I reasoned.

This being a team challenge I needed a partner, but despite the obvious pleasure of running 50km through the mountains I had trouble finding volunteers. I didn't know many runners and friends I did ask pretended they'd misheard. "Fifteen kays? You must be joking!" The task was made more difficult by the fundraising component. After paying the \$180 entry fee each participant is also required to raise a minimum of \$400 in sponsorship, a task which certainly discouraged some of those whom I asked to join me (at least that was their excuse). If, as seemed to be the case, the charity aspect was the alienating factor, I fear for the future of society.

On paper Jared was an awesome running partner - his parents lived near the start line and they were happy to put us up and act as our support crew. He had a Salomon S-Lab vest, Hoka One Ones, Dirty Girl Gaiters, the whole bit. He even had a Suunto watch so we could time ourselves. [I'm not a big spender on technology; when I ran the Knysna Forest

Marathon I didn't even have a digital watch - I had to wait on the start line until the second hand hit 12 so I could pace myself accurately.] I was using my seven-year old Montrail, a borrowed pack and some out-of-date energy gels. I didn't even have a mantra, and they were free! I was in way over my head.

Nevertheless, I set my mind to the task and trained hard. Living in Inner West Sydney most of my runs were limited to uninspiring loops between Redfern station and Erskineville station, but I did get out now and again to Manly Dam and gradually increased my long runs to 16km, 18km, 20km. By the time May rolled around I'd reached my target and was confident I could finish. We were aiming for a time of between eight and 10 hours.

The morning of the event was a miserable, misty Saturday, but spirits were high as a crowd of almost 500 entrants gathered in the drizzle donning waterproofs, adjusting trekking poles and sucking down a last hot drink. The crowd was a cross-section of the outdoor community: bonding corporate groups, stoic bushwalking veterans, enthusiastic young guns and trail

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runners hoping to post a personal best. The atmosphere was hardly that of an Iron Man triathlon, with competitors more likely to strike up a friendly conversation en route than shove each other out of the way.

The temperature was 6°C so we were itching to get away and pump some blood to our extremities. The only thing standing between us and 50km of agony was Sarah Williams, the Wilderness Society's Wild Endurance Co-ordinator, bouncing around on the mini-stage by the starting line.

"Are you ready?" she yelled.

Sarah's enthusiasm for her job is painfully obvious: "I absolutely love it," she tells me later, "Do you know what would be awesome?" she says, without missing a beat, "Is if we could take Wild Endurance to Tassie, being the birthplace of the WS. I would love to do that if it were viable."

After a few last-minute words of advice Sarah counted the crowd down and we were off.

The course began cruelly with a steep hill but we soon settled into a steady pace as we

hoofed it down to Medlow Gap as part of a loose group. In the spirit of co-operation the drizzle slowed and had eventually fizzled out by the time we reached Mount Debert, one of the few sections of single track on the course. This was the start of a long uphill which culminated in Taro's ladders at the tip of Narrow Neck Plateau. It was there that I heard a race official call out to the team ahead that they were in fourth position. That couldn't be right; that meant I could almost see the leaders.

"How's your competitive spirit?" I asked Jared, grinning. He shrugged. Until this point neither of us had even considered the possibility of placing highly, it just wasn't on our radar, but now I began daydreaming: what if we did get on the podium, even third place? How cool would that be? It'd make an awesome Facebook status update. I even began wording one in my head as I ran along, lost in la-la land.

Then I realised: we were going too fast, too soon - schoolboy error.

"The race isn't won in the first 10km," I heard my training partner whisper in my ear, "Take it easy". But we weren't even trying; in an attempt to avoid exhausting ourselves early

we'd agreed to limit our speed to 8km/h, which we were achieving quite easily. And so we settled into the 10km-long stretch of Narrow Neck Plateau. A considerable percentage of WE is on fire trail, the Bluey's default surface. The packed gravel and dirt may not be the most enjoyable terrain on which to run but it does improve both safety and speed. The clouds were lifting and the views of the Megalong Valley from Narrow Neck were inspiring, at least until we plunged down the Golden Stairs to Federal Pass.

It was around here that we became preoccupied with the empty trail we were leaving behind. "Where is everyone?" we asked each other. The soreness in my legs I had expected, but the crick in my neck was purely from looking over my shoulder for the teams that should have been snapping at our heels. The leaders had looked so much fitter and more confident than us - we couldn't quite believe we'd overtaken them in the first place. They'd only stopped for a leak and we'd jogged casually past, sure that we'd be enjoying the view of their heels again within minutes. But

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it somehow hadn't happened. Maybe they'd had an accident, or got lost? I hoped not (but secretly I hoped exactly that).

Having descended the escarpment there was always going to be a wicked climb up the Furber Steps to Katoomba Oval - halfway mark for the 50km teams. "You've done the toughest section!" welcomed a sign at the check point. I had been imagining a nice sit down and a meal, maybe a power nap, but after only eight minutes we were refuelled and ready to leave. That competitive edge had started to cut into us; already we had got so used to the lead that we didn't want to lose it. I no longer cared what had happened to the other teams as long as I stayed in front. I was becoming - a (competitive) ultra-marathon runner!

We took off along the cliff top walk to Echo Point, threading through surprised Asian tourists and down past the Three Sisters to the Giants Staircase and a near-vertical descent. At around 32km we began the long, steep trial of Kedumba Valley Road. I think this is where the 'endurance' part of the WE name was coined - 10km (700m vertical) of knee-jarring descent followed by 8km (600m vertical) of

back-stretching ascent. The gradient felt like it was 45° in places.

It was on this uphill stretch that I noticed the tingling in my nipples and realised it was not just the excitement of being in the lead (although that may have contributed). That wasn't all: my right knee was shot and the sole of my left shoe had started to delaminate. Jared, having maintained a stoic silence for six hours, now admitted to feeling dizzy and spaced-out. I'd never run as part of a team before but I envisaged two people running alongside each other, nothing more. I was unprepared for the mutual encouragement, but Jared had kept up the pace when I had been flagging on the way down Kedumba and now that he was fading I needed to motivate him.

His Type 1 diabetes prohibited me from bellowing at him like the Drill Sergeant from Full Metal Jacket - "Are you quitting on me? Well, are you? Then quit, you slimy f\*\*king walrus-looking piece of shit!" - but I gently encouraged him while making sure he didn't collapse.

"Four kilometres to go, mate," I urged, "You can do it".

Even 30km after taking the lead we were still

convinced someone would sprint up the hill behind us to overtake on the home straight. The time was coming up to 3pm and I realised we might be able to finish in under seven hours if we pushed hard.

"C'mon, Jared, sub-seven! Let's go!" I shouted. 3km, 2km, 1km ... The Suunto ticked over to 6hrs 59mins as the Queen Victoria Hospital appeared and I coaxed my tired legs into a sprint, surprising the crowd of seven volunteers standing around the finish line completely unprepared for our glorious arrival.

We'd done it - we'd won. It was unreal. Far from the madding crowd I'd pictured, the only people in whose admiration we could bask were the milling volunteers and Jared's folks, but that didn't matter. In the back of my mind I knew that Wild Endurance was not a major event on the trail running calendar, and that Sydney's serious runners were out training for The North Face 100 or down in Victoria at the Wilson's Prom 100, but I was willing to ignore that for a few moments and high-five Jared, savouring the taste of victory. The fact that I'd come through with my nipples intact made it all the sweeter. **RUN**

## KEEN TO HAVE A RUN NEXT YEAR?

Wild Endurance 2015 will be held on the first weekend of May. The time to beat, and new 50km course record, is 6:59:30.

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