

Return to Running Wild...

After two years of Achilles tendonitis in both ankles deteriorating with hip problems, I'm slowly recovering and starting to enjoy running again. At its worst, I could only muster a little over 1K before the hip gave and I had to resort to walking. Not much fun and requiring sheer stubbornness. Injections, shockwaves, PRP, ... (by the way with excellent support from Melbourne's Olympic Park Sports Medical Centre) but ultimately it was forced rest which led to very slow but steady improvement.

After a struggle through an out-and-back half marathon in Bayside Melbourne, I qualified for the Dromana to Cape Schanck Two Bays Trail (28K) early January. Finished that in 3 hours, definitely not a PB on a very runnable trail with a few hills. Yet, I felt sufficiently good to register for the TMR as the next step towards recovery. I am a creature of habit, as for the past 5 years (prior to injury) I ran the same set of races: Two Bays, TMR, Wilson's Prom, Eiger 101 and finishing the year with the GOW100s. After 6 previous outings on the TMR (with two to Holdsworth), I can visualise every rock, mudpool, and tree-root. Yet every time I think: *how hard can it be... a mere 36K with lots of brisk walking?* I tell myself it's good for the soul and toughens the legs and ankles. Of course I know better. It's a beast of a run, with howling winds on a razorsharp ridge of flowing mud and a constant threat of breaking something. There hasn't been a run without getting bloodied. New Zealand really is a land of contrast with the perfectly groomed Great Walks (think Kepler) offset by the gnarliest trails that really only exist in the twisted mind of the race organiser.

I arrive on Friday afternoon in Wellington. The weather looks great and is predicted to stay that way for the days ahead. The first signs of Corona virus impact is the snail paced traffic from the airport to the CBD. According to our cabbie, that's because everyone avoids public transport. So we arrive late at the hotel, with just enough time to shop for some food on the run. Then it's a quick meal and (re)packing the mandatory gear.

After a typically restless sleep, I get up at 5, shower and gobble up a hefty breakfast to last the day. After a last obsessive gear check it's off to the Railway Station to catch the bus to Kaitoke. After a snooze, we arrive and get checked in, gear tested, and shipped to the starting line. I was hoping for an early start, but still end up in the 7:15 group. Despite Bec's warning of mud, the first climb (which is normally slick with yellow/white mud) is pretty dry. The pace is therefore steady and I get overtaken by most of my group. Not a big deal as I run my own race and find it usually hard to "team up." The climb up Marchant ridge is a real teaser: Occasional glimpses of magnificent panoramas of the Tararuas. Little bits of flat, stone- and root-free, that just gets you running again. And then you crash to a halt under the somewhat claustrophobic tree cover. But mostly it is long, draining your energy levels and never-ending. There's the false steep climb, when you think you have crossed the saddle, but then it's back down for more punishment, until finally the second climb releases you to Alpha Hut clearing. Four hours have ticked over, but who's keeping track...

Refill the water bottles, have a lolly, and off I go to get some fresh mountain air. After a short section under the trees, I'm finally out in the open where the unfolding mountain ridges are a feast for the eye. That's why I'm here – as close to flying as you can be. Except

that running it means that you have to navigate the unrelenting buttock grass forcing you into the muddy trench (I was literally crying on my first outing when it was so muddy that even standing still made you slip and slide without control). It's not so muddy this time though. And somewhat eerily, it's completely still. No howling winds, no cloud-cover mist, no fluttering ballooning jackets, no frozen fingers... Just calm, and astonishing views from Kaikoura to Palmerston... I really like this section but I can feel my energy and fitness being low – so have to pace myself in the climbs and runnable sections. At the turnoff I find the SAR team. Normally they're checking for the vital signs of life, but under these conditions it's all cheery banter. Thanks SAR volunteers! A little later I can see the cross on Mt Hector – a beacon if ever there was one.

The Cross is not quite the final climb. First a steep stony descent. Then one final nasty climb to go, but encouragingly it has two guys shouting encouragement from the top, and alas, there's Kime Hut in full view. After a helter-skelter descent and circular approach it's time for a drink, re-stock, and snack. I arrive after 6h44m. It's not going to be a PB. And there's always the frivolous advice that it's all down from here. Well, it's not.

First we go uphill again, and then the rocks and boulders take over. Again, there are very runnable sections, but also some real ankle twisters (I end up with four blue toe nails). Stony is an understatement, and I think this classifies as technical descent. It's getting quite warm here, particularly once we re-enter the canopy. Busy with uphill walkers too, and there seems to be a crowd at Field hut. They're all very friendly though and give me a wide berth (or do I look that scary by now?). The late starters have pretty much overtaken me by now, so it is getting a little lonely. Here it's the carpet of mossy tree-roots that are a real danger to negotiate. But all good things come to an end as I hit the gravel. On my previous runs, this was the section to bolt (I'm good at that kind of dumb – as opposed to technical descent) and finally overtake some runners. But not this time. There is nothing left in the tank, so I just jog at a leisurely pace down the zigzags and through the paddocks until I hit the bridge at Otaki Forks.

I cross the line after 9h14m, a PW on my seventh, but boy am I happy to have finished this. Unfortunately, my late arrival means that I can forget about that freezing dip to clean myself up, as I'm bundled into the mini-bus for the trip back to Wellington. Not feeling so great, but that clears up when we arrive back at the Railway Station. A few hours later I'm fully recovered with a Belgian beer in hand in nearby café Leuven. Weirdly enough, I recover much faster than I used to. Slow pace has its benefits.

Thanks Cat and all the volunteers. I hope to make it to 10.

So what's next? Well, with hills temporarily out of reach due to COVID-19 restrictions, it'll have to be self-isolated HM's and 30Ks on the flat along the Port Philip Bay beach. Still hoping to do the Great Ocean Walk 100s late October.

Stay safe and keep running!