

The North Face 100 Race Report – Jocie Evison

The night before the race

During the day on Friday I was swinging between sheer terror and unrestrained excitement. Registration took place in a massive conference room at the Leura Fairmont Resort, and was a rather intimidating affair. I'd been at rego for both other races in 2008 and 2009 (crewing for my husband, Geoff) where there had been a few skinny people wandering around reception picking up their numbers and showing a couple of race staff the contents of their rucksacks. This year, with over 600 entrants, the organisers had risen to the occasion and it was more like a military operation, with queues marked out on the ground and 'procedures' marked up on the wall. I got a bit stressed – so many ridiculously fit looking people, and far too much bad clothing (no-one does ultra running for the cool fashions!).

After rego, back at Crowie's house (thanks SO much for lending us your home as our ideal base for the weekend!), Hally and I spent about 3 hours nervously packing and repacking our rucksacks and going over our nutrition plan while the boys, very wisely, took themselves off to the pub! Although we were definitely suffering from 'night-before jitters', I felt pretty calm and was really looking forward to the next day – a great big long bush run with friends...

At the start

After a predictably bad night's sleep, I woke up with a stitch. WTF?! I think the last time I had a stitch was in 1992 playing twister after Christmas lunch! Luckily there was enough other stuff going on to keep my mind off it, but it was a bit of an inauspicious start to the day! By this stage, I just wanted to get on with it – I couldn't wait to get out there. Race briefing over, and I kissed Geoff goodbye. At this point, I had my first inkling of what the day would be like – an emotional rollercoaster! I got all emotional thanking him for signing me up for the race in the first place, and for believing in me, and giving me the confidence to believe that I could actually attempt something like this...

The start line was a mass of lycra and yet more bad fashion choices – including me and Hally! "Oh God, this is really it!" went through my mind. I looked across at Hally and said some really sappy crap about amazing adventures and great friendships. Big hugs, lots of tears – and the starting gun hadn't even gone off yet! Second emotional breakdown of the day – at start minus 1 minute. Oh boy, was it going to be a long day in the office!!

The 5 seconds countdown was exciting, followed by the gun and an explosion of, well, fast walking! Well, it was uphill, and we had 100kms to go – we were bugged if we were going to get out of breath before we'd left the resort!

Start to CP1 (17kms)

After a very slow start our journey to CP1 was pretty measured. The course was really congested with a lot of single track, so we were getting pretty held up in some sections. We got to the bottom of the Golden Staircase (an almost vertical ascent of about 200 steps) to find a queue going the whole way up. Whilst frustrating, this probably did us some favours later in the race as it kept our excitement in check.

The top of the Golden Staircase is Checkpoint 1 at 17kms. We had made it there in 2hrs 40mins. This was 10mins behind our splits for a 17hour finish, but considering the congestion on the track we were really happy with how the section had gone. We were especially pleased that it was a 2 hour PB on our training run when we had gone unbelievably lost on several, tortuous occasions.

This CP is unassisted (ie no crew), so although Geoff was there to say hello it was just a quick stop to refill our camelback bladders and for Hally to give an impromptu interview to a TV crew (!), before setting off on section 2.

CP1 (17kms) to CP2 (38kms)

This section started badly for me. I was so overexcited that I hadn't been concentrating at the checkpoint. As we set off I realised that my pack wasn't that heavy and began to worry that I hadn't taken on enough fluid. It played on my mind and so I asked Hally if we could stop and check. Sure enough, I had hardly filled my camelbak at all, and didn't have enough fluid for the 3 hour section that we were now facing. I couldn't believe I had made such a 'school girl' error, and was kicking myself. We decided not to go back - luckily, Hally had quite a lot, and - because we had done all the course in training - I knew that there was a stream where we could fill up if the worst came to the worst. I told myself off, and then made a conscious effort to turn it into a positive - ok, so I'd messed up, but it was going to be OK and I wouldn't make that mistake again.



The scenery along Narrow Neck is just sublime, with deep valleys and cliffs on both sides, and it was a joy to cruise along here. We picked off a few people and made quite a few friends along this section. Unlike triathlon, there is plenty of opportunity to chat, and you can stick together in big groups if you like. Lord knows I drafted off Hally almost the whole race - and it's legal!

Next stop was only about 5 kms later. I made the most of Hally stopping to 'admire the scenery' to address some sore spots on my feet. This was a bit depressing as we were only a few kms in and already I had the makings of a blister. However, amazingly, this turned into a really positive mental boost. As we carried on, I was so proud of myself for listening to the experts (I had been warned by experienced runners to treat any signs of blisters immediately), and so pleased that my feet actually felt better, that I got a boost from it and kept annoying Hally by telling her how pleased I was!

We made it to the next checkpoint with both of us having only a mouthful of fluid left - perfect (lack of) judgement! The checkpoint at Dunphy's Camp is unbelievably beautiful, and the weather was glorious. It would have been very easy to spend far too long here, but we had made up our 10mins, and kept to our schedule, stopping only long enough to refuel and go to the bathroom before soldiering on.

CP2 (38kms) to CP3 (54kms)

This was my second downer. At CP2 I was thinking 'now only the nasty bit up the hill and along Megalong Valley Road, then we get to see our crew!'. I had kind of forgotten that there is an additional section that crosses private land, and therefore we had not done in training. This was a bit of mental blow as I wasn't really prepared for it, and I hadn't grasped how hard the section would be. Boy were we cursing Geoff as we stared at the almost vertical, slippery, seemingly never-ending ascent up to Iron Pot Ridge! We made it up, and with a blister-prevention/treatment stop on the top – this time for Hally – we also made it back down the hair-raising descent, too. Whilst I was still loving every minute, this section made me quite anxious for the rest of the race. My quads were being absolutely smashed coming down, and I knew we weren't even halfway.

I think it was during this section that we coined the phrase 'Happy Jacqui Steps'. Jacqui had called to wish us luck the night before, and had told us to 'enjoy every step'. So, when we felt a bit flat, we thought of Jacqui and took 'happy Jacqui steps' – as we weren't allowed a single unenjoyable step! Very quickly, potentially low spots become funny, and our mood was uplifted. Also of help to both of us along the way were Rob's baby steps. I am convinced that had I not learnt, through Rob, to take quick, light, baby steps, my body would have said 'no' much earlier than it did!

Once we got back onto familiar territory, I felt better again. We were on a big hill on a dirt road, which there was no way any sane person would run – so the pressure was off as we settled into a good paced walk. I was further buoyed by the fact that we would be seeing our crew soon. Although we were having the most amazingly brilliant time and everything was going really well, it's surprising how much I was looking forward to the next checkpoint.

I think it was also at about this point that Hally and I started congratulating ourselves on how well we were going. Always with respect for the enormous task that was still ahead of us, we realised that we were in really good shape. Geoff had told us that if we were still running along Megalong Valley Road, then we were doing pretty well. Well there we were, running, chatting, overtaking people, feeling pretty good for two chicks who'd just passed the point of 'the furthest they'd ever run before in their lives', AND 20 mins ahead of schedule!

Arriving at the checkpoint was just awesome. The ever shy and retiring Daffy (not!) was there with the Balance megaphone, and ultra running will never be the same again! You can imagine the scene. A few hardy souls wearing questionable outdoor clothing waiting for their loved ones to come in, clapping politely (and quietly) when other exhausted runners came 'round the corner. And then there was Daffy. Say no more. We 'airplaned' (arms out, flying) down the hill, doing Mary Poppins style sidekicks we were so excited and pleased with both ourselves and our amazing crew!

Here we were fed and watered – hot food and hot drinks this time – and issued various commands to our crew. Mine were along the lines of 'clean shirt, clean cap, neurofen ("how many?" "lots"), and please empty my shoes of stones'. Our every

need was catered to (apart from a warm soft bed and stopping running – they weren't on offer), and Geoff very wisely made us spend extra time redoing our blister treatments. This turned out to be a lifesaver in my case, as my plasters had slipped and would undoubtedly caused me a lot of grief had I not redone them.

CP3 (54kms) to CP4 (67kms)

We left CP3 a little ahead of schedule, even though we'd spent much longer than our budgeted time there. Starting running again after a 20min stop, and with a relatively full stomach, was a pretty big ask, but I think we both knew that it was better to try and run if we could. I was really motivated by how well we were going, and it was encouraging me to keep trying hard. Our 'ultimate' time of 17hours now seemed a possibility, and I was quite keen to keep it in our sights.

Until Nellie's Glen, that is. As I heard another North Face 100 runner say, "I don't know who Nellie is, but if I ever meet her, I'll kill the b**ch!". This section of the race goes up the 6ft Track, through Nellie's Glen and up the steps the other side – all 500+, wet, slippery, uneven, rocky ones. This was my worst patch. I'd done Nellie's before, and in both directions, so the terrain wasn't a surprise for me. However, it knocked me for six and I struggled through this section. I think it was the first real signs of fatigue, coupled with the fact that although it was only about 4pm it was really dark in the dense, overgrown bush of this section. I just wasn't mentally prepared for it to be dark, and – rather than thinking about it in bite-sized chunks, as I had done previously - I started to think about the enormity of the task ahead, and how many cold, dark kms I still had to go. (Yes, I was an 'I' at that point. In the doldrums, I had stopped thinking about 'we' and the support that Hally could offer.) It all just seemed too hard. I remember Hally offering me some apricot energy pieces, which I normally love, and just saying 'no', not 'no thanks, not just now' and thinking 'you can keep your bl**dy apricot crap, it's not going to help'. And – sorry, Jacqui – try as I might, I just couldn't manage any 'happy Jacqui steps' at this point.



Getting out of it was a combination of factors. Firstly, I gave myself a good talking to. I didn't beat myself up, but rather acknowledged my mindset for what it was – a passing phase. I told myself that by the time I was on the 'great big, difficult, cold, dark 4 hour section' that I'd been worrying about, my mind would most likely be in a much better place and I would probably be having fun again. Once I'd recognised

that it was only a passing phase, that I had known it would happen at some stage, and that it wouldn't last forever, it suddenly didn't seem so bad.

The second factor was getting to the top. Undoubtedly the fact that it was lighter at the top with a bit of warmth still radiating off the cliffs helped, but also the fact that it was the next 'section' in my mind helped me to turn a mental corner. The final factor was having something to eat – it was too hard to eat going up the stairs, but at the top the one salty brazil nut I ate at the top was like manna from heaven!

We flew into CP4, again to the very loud welcome of our crew, ably led by the shy and retiring Daffy, and again well ahead of schedule. CP4 is a blur of shivering, it was sunset at the very exposed Katoomba Oval, and god it was cold! I think both Hally and I were keen to get moving again. We put on hats, gloves, leggings, thermal tops, our lights and hi vis vests and once again set off – this time for the 4 hour section to CP5.

CP4 (67kms) to CP5 (89kms)

Now this is the section where I strongly suspect our crew of having slipped something not entirely legal into our camelbaks! The section is generally loathed, being a very long and boring 2 hour descent followed by a very long and boring 2 hour ascent – all in the cold and dark, on completely shot legs, and most likely with a long list of ailments from blisters to vomiting. Not for team Boltison – we flew down the hill, doing magic tricks with our gloves, telling jokes, making up names for all the different types of hi-vis vests (belt'n'braces design, train track design, 80s disco robot design...) and overtaking a stack of people along the way.

Then we sang and joked our way the whole way back up the other side! (Did you know that Hally knows every verse of American Pie?) I like to think that the people we passed (many of them hobbling, most of them cursing and all of them going slower than us at this point) had their North Face 100 experience enriched by hearing us being so happy – but somehow I think that maybe we annoyed a few broken people with our extreme cheerfulness!

I don't know what it was, but it was GOOD! And I thought back to my black time on Nellie's Glen when I told myself that I would probably be having fun again by the time I got to the dreaded 4 hour section... I never thought I'd be having *this much* fun! On the way up the hill, we vowed to each other that even if the wheels fell off and one of us had to carry the other to the finish, we were going to finish this race.

CP5 was at the top of this section, and we ran in – again overtaking walkers. We simply could not believe that we had gone 89kms by this stage, and were still running. Actually, it was more of a shuffle, but it was definitely more than a walk, and definitely more than most of the poor battered souls still out there on the course with us.

There is a saying in ultra-running – beware the chair. Well, the chairs got us at CP5 and we spent 25mins here rather than our budgeted 10mins. However, we knew that we were still ahead of schedule (the 4 hr section had taken us 3.5hours) and that we were definitely going to finish, so we spent the extra time patching up our sore feet, saying hello to Karin and Ice who had made a special guest appearance, and getting some more hot food and drinks inside us.

CP5 (89kms) to the Finish (100kms)

I knew that I was feeling good (under the circumstances) and I was champing at the bit to get to the finish. We were smashing our time, and for me, being so competitive, that actually spurred me on, rather than making me think we had time up our sleeves to take it easy. I also knew that Hally was suffering, and that I was

pushing her. We talked about it, and she promised that she would let me know if she needed to ease up the pace – which she sensibly did, once or twice. I think we worked well as a team, here. As well as just wanting to see the finish asap, I was also concerned that if we dropped off the pace we would both start seizing and suffering more and for longer than if we pushed on. Hally, stoic as ever, pushed on with me and did not complain once (even when we saw the size of her blister later that evening!).

The last 3kms consist of 1.5kms almost vertical downhill and 1.5kms almost vertical uphill over extremely technical terrain. We had both fallen on this section in broad daylight in training, and now we were doing it in the dark on smashed legs having done 97kms previously... Unbelievably, neither of us fell – although both of us said a lot of very rude words very loudly as our knees and quads started screaming for mercy!

As we broke out of the bush and onto the grass of the golf course at the resort, about 200 m from the finish line, we both stopped. We knew we'd done it, we knew we'd done it in style, we knew we'd both had loads of fun, and we knew that this was an adventure that would remain with us forever. We also knew that the finish would be hectic – we could hear them cheering even at approaching midnight on a cold Blue Mountains night – so we took a moment for ourselves. Needless to say, there were hugs, and there were more tears, before we held hands and ran (not shuffled, we ran!) the last 200m screaming 'Yee Ha, we're coming in'!

We crossed the finish line as we had the start line – at exactly the same time, holding hands and in tears.

Afterthoughts

What an amazing experience. I am so pleased that I've done it, and also so pleased to have shared it with a friend. I also still can't believe that we did such a good time (for us) AND had so much fun. A lot of people that I know did much faster times but they didn't enjoy it – they were pushing themselves so hard they didn't have time to chat to other runners, or to enjoy the scenery or to appreciate the experience as a whole. I am most proud that we made sure that we had fun first, with performance coming second. The fact that we also exceeded our expectations in terms of finish time is an added bonus.

I don't want to be too sappy, but I just have to take this opportunity to thank all of you for your well wishes and support along the way. It most definitely helped us. And a very special thank you to our wonderful crew for efficient AND fun checkpoints, and especially to Geoff, for sharing all his invaluable ultrarunning experience with us, for driving us up to the mountains for our numerous training runs and waiting for hours while we got lost, and for encouraging me to take on this crazy adventure in the first place. And finally, to my running partner – nuff said.

So, Hally. Next year?