GNW100’s – Vlads day in the mountains.

“So you won, good time too. Must have gone to plan”. Almost always there is a lot more behind a time and placing in a race. The longer the race possibly the more there is behind that result. This is exactly what happened to me, here is some background to what unfolded on race day!

The GNW 100’s is a low-key Ultra running trail race now in its 13th year of running organised by the Terrigal trotters. The field size has never been that large however over history it has always attracted some of Australia’s most Elite runners. Its brutal, containing many sections that force runners to walk and it covers just about every type of terrain to challenge runners of all levels. 3800 metres of elevation gain in the 100km (actually 104km) and with the last 12km completely pancake flat, that’s some run. Add to this, the track is not specifically marked for the race, another challenge for those that dare to take it on!

My GNW 100’s journey started when I finished the Comrades Marathon in June this year in a disappointing time just under 7 hours and 30 minutes. I had wanted to finish near the front but my body gave in. It was in those last brutal 30km of the Comrades race where my body was hurting that I made the decision that to excel in these events – things needed to change!

I’ve got the leg speed and the results to back this up on shorter road running events, what I needed was further endurance adaptions to carry this for longer. If I could get it right I knew that I would be amongst the most competitive Ultra runners globally and it’s a journey I’m on right now.

I needed to change my training program to focus on the longer events and I decided that ahead of a massive 2018 I wanted to complete my first 100km Trail race. Researching the options threw up some interesting possibilities. Then there was the type of terrain and race to consider too. GNW made sense in the end, the race started only 15 minutes from home, I could run the course in training, I had friends that had raced it before, so they were able to impart knowledge AND it was the toughest of the options in terms of terrain and vertical gain. If I truly wanted to test myself this had to be it!

My training always has a quality session in it at least weekly. This could be a Vo2 Max interval session or a training race. It is critical for maintaining one of my competitive advantages, being my speed. Ill never change that. These sessions for me included Track sets, Cross-country races and a couple of Road races in the months leading up to the race, I maintained a mid week long run somewhere between 20-30km on road which was almost always flat (to focus on good running economy) and used my Fri/Sat/Sunday sessions to do either 2-3 long runs OR a Short run am/Race pm and Long run the next day strategy. Then I added to this all my other runs, a weekly recovery session and 2 strength sessions. The strength sessions were my own Runstrong sessions. I did one with my Runlab group either on a Wednesday or Friday and the other Id do Solo during the week – This was critical, now proven! Come along to a session if you want to find out the best exercises to complement your running and not get injured!

So after all the work was done it was race week and time to get everything ready for the day. My fear leading up to the event was how dry it was and sure enough on Monday there were bushfires in the area of the GNW track. Initially it seemed like it was far enough away from race day to cause concern – how quickly that changed. Skip ahead a few days and there was real concern as to whether the race would even be on. I booked a ticket to Melbourne to race in the Surf coast century (another backup) just in case. But no decision was made until very late Thursday. The extra stress of this was felt my all concerned and true credit to the Terrigal trotters especially Kevin Andrews.

So on Saturday we started, a little later with a completely new Leg 1 and no course map of this section. That’s a real concern for me being closer to the front of the field most races. We had to check in earlier too – So race day was throwing some extra challenges up that we were all dealing with.

Restless night, up just after 3am, quick breakfast and off to rego then another 35 minute drive to the revised start – passing the still burning fires along the way at Heaton! We got off at 6:30am, it was cold, but that quickly changed as we headed up into the bush, smoke in the air and dust everywhere.

Leg 1

A completely revised section supposed to be about 25km ☺. I just ran and focussed on getting into my rhythm, I heard footsteps for a few minutes then silence, I was alone! I followed the lead car for a short way and was then guided onto Mt faulk road doing an out and back – at the turnaround I already had a 8 minute lead, whilst running quick it was very controlled. DAMN at 18km I took an incorrect turn, Id likely reached the marshals before they were ready and I was faced with a fork in the road on a section Id never seen – knowing that the first checkpoint was to my left eventually that’s the way I ran. I ran following this narrow road and thinking every step about that turn – then dead end! Actually I was very luck because it forced me to turn, now I knew Id taken the wrong turn so I powered back up that hill and as I almost reached the junction second and third passed me! So id lost at least 10 minutes and Id run about 3km in error here – so the race completely changed. Ryan Lowe and Brendan Davies were the runners – Brendan doing the 100 Miler so having another great run. Not far from this point though we entered the really technical section “The Jungle” so we still got the really hard bits of the old Leg 1 course! Through here I was unsure of the strategy of Ryan and Brendan, as we were going hard, I was just trying to not get left behind as they had picked up the pace. This section was 30 minutes of hard work and we were all working hard taking some slips and falls along the way, into the clear again I then regained the lead in and out of checkpoint 1 first by only a minute or so.

Leg 2

Leg two is pretty good, lots of longer flat and downhill sections and a section of dirt road for the last 5km. I was pretty worked up in checkpoint 1 annoyed Id lost so much time, so I was revved up a bit and had told Cheryl I was going to open up in Leg two to regain some time. That didn’t really eventuate though, whilst I did put time in again in this section, I was constantly self assessing how much that hard burst could come back to bite me – so I just ran steady and eventually halfway through the race I entered Congewoi school for a gear check. One of the harder things about leading is when you have no idea of by how much.

Leg 3

The third leg of this race is brutal! It has the steepest and longest climbs, and good chances of taking incorrect turns if you switch off for even a second. Being 28km too its also the leg that forces you to take on and with you more nutrition then the other legs. I totally stuffed up! Id raced into Checkpoint 2 still wound up and having no idea how far in front I was, I had to do my gear check, weigh in, reload and I also took the opportunity to use the bathrooms. All up here I was about 5 minutes and wasted valuable time. Despite the best efforts of Chez putting extra fluids into my hands at all times I actually didn’t even drink here and took with me less than half the fluid I planned. Heading out I was pleased enough with the gap I had now build up again somewhere between 5-7 minutes was my estimation and I was running well. My newly affirmed positivity quickly soured 4km into this leg, I felt my pockets and realised I only had 2 500ml bottles on me that were full, I was so annoyed – I whipped out my phone and texted my crew. This is actually what I wrote ME “Please give me water next time” CHEZ “I did sorry but you kept putting it down” ha ha! Now in my head I was thinking FFS, 3 hours 1 litre I’m going to struggle. Pretty quickly I had to refocus, I was racing and I could throw it all away now. I had to Calm down and work out what to do. I had to hold back to ensure I got to Checkpoint 3 without having blown my race apart by dehydrating. I also new there was a water tank 30 minutes up the road – I filled up my spare bottles here (The water was brown) and decided id use them ONLY if I desperately needed fluids. And on I went…. I stopped again about 30 minutes later in a place we call Siberia trying to get some fluids from some farmhouses but they were all abandoned and no taps I found were working. In the end, I ended up having to start drinking that water about 40 minutes out from checkpoint 3. I did so sparingly, not wanting to get sick.

Leg 4

Running into checkpoint 3 was a relief – toughest, longest leg done! 22km to go only. I purposely took a long time here to eat, drink and refuel… Id got here just without ruining my chances of the win. I left, recharged and feeling good, surprised though only a couple of minutes out at Ryan (Second place) passed me on his way into Checkpoint three. His stop was a lot quicker than mine as he could clearly see the size of the gap and realised I was still within range. On this section out of the Basin Campsite I made my next navigational error, slightly unsure of where a false turn was I found my self-running up and back a section of about 300 metres 3 times, the third time Ryan caught me. A had a right to be really annoyed at myself but surprisingly I was totally of matter of fact with my reasoning and just focussed on pressing on towards the finish. The last section is half trail half road, but I was never in doubt I wouldn’t win anymore eventhough I had been caught. As soon as the last section of really steep uphill was over I broke away on the runnable sections and extended my lead very quickly. As I headed towards the road I was excited and all I focussed on in that first bit of road was good form and turnover and my splits quickly came down closer towards 4:30 pace. For each of the first 5 kilometres in this last section I simply concentrated on bringing my time down by 10 seconds per kilometre. I calculated if I stayed under 5min/km at this stage the record was also mine.

10 minutes into the last road section I heard a shout from behind, “Vlad”! Totally surprised I turned around and there was my mate Peter Storey on his bike, that was awesome he’d ridden out and despite a couple of flat tyres and not knowing exactly where we came out from the bush onto the road, found me about 9km from home! This was a great lift and more – see we were to run on the right hand side of the road and despite warnings there were a couple of hoons driving around and Pete was able at least to warn and instruct cars to slow.

Kilometre by kilometre the gap to the finish closed, Pete left me with a Kilometre or so to go, I shed a tear simply because I was really happy I had nailed the race. Despite adversity and errors within the day my training had adapted me perfectly and there was an overwhelming feeling of relief and satisfaction that just swelled through me and as I ran over the last hill sighting the finish friends and family I was totally ecstatic.

My day went well! It could have fallen apart but I was mentally capable of holding it together. The GNW100’s was the perfect race for my 2018 build. The training for the event and the lessons on the day just like completing a test. I enter the next stage of putting it all together and racing 100km ultra’s with the worlds best and I cannot wait. Not too much has to change, just a honing of the specific training I have been doing and LOTS of hard work and sacrifice!

In the end with my wrong turns I ran 104km – it’s actually remarkably the length of the usual course. I was 6 minutes under the record and my estimations spot on! Take away the water searching in Leg two, the wrong turns and some extra time in the checkpoints and there is at least 30 minutes there lost.

I must say a huge thankyou to Cheryl. Competing in events does impact those around you – in more ways positively and that’s why we do it – but there are challenges and sacfices. Crew to an Athlete is NO FUN ☺ Chez you are a champion. Terry you weren’t that bad either. To every one of my friends and Runlabbers that supported me before and after and have asked me about the race thanks heaps – those that came out to see me on Saturday are legends!

Mr Scotty Baker stand up son! A friend, a Runlab Coach and now a mate. Your runs with me, imparted course knowledge allowed me to prepare like an athlete should. We ran most of the course together and you were out there with me pal on the day running along in my head. Feel free to borrow the trophy whenever you want!

I actually have some amazing sponsors personally in addition to all the Runlab supporters. We are going to have a crazy 2018 guys so hold on “Its time to fly” HOKA One One, SKINS, GARMIN, ISOWHEY and am generously supported by the PACE Athletic team, Apexgen, Outer Edge Mag and more.

Its 13 days post race, Ive just come back from a run – you guessed it out on the GNW track with Adam Clarke, that’s how I roll. See you at another race soon!