

## UTCT 2019

And there it was, my 2019 of racing rounded out with finishing the Ultra Trail Capetown 100km Trail Run (UTCT).



South Africa, whilst it can be a difficult place to visit, has many upsides. Driving from the Airport towards the city the crowded mini vans of dancing workers, the shanty townships built from corrugated iron and at the same time a resilience, beauty with many of the simple things in life providing a freedom lost back in Australia.



I arrived on Thursday for Saturday's race, not ideal! It's a long flight from Australia and my door to door travel was over 30 hours. Staying in Camp Bay (10 minutes from the centre of Capetown) this is a really nice area under the 12 apostles. I spent the afternoon getting all my race nutrition and kit packed and then going to registration, so I could just relax and not have to run around at all on Friday.



Camps Bay - Stunning

Yep I hate to say it but 100km Trail runs are referred to as the “Sprints of Ultra’s” I guess it’s all relative. But to be competitive in 100k Trail races you do need speed still, and this year I maintained a decent level of speed work to complement my longer strength based running sessions. I’d have to say that I was as well prepared as I could be for this race with all my lead-up events going to plan and if not better. I guess that’s why a result like this for me can hurt, but even as the emotions are raw and my body aches UTCT 2019 offered me the chance to learn something different. As hard as it was throughout the day.

So, Saturday the day started with a 1:55am alarm. I had a good night’s sleep considering I had only arrived on the Thursday. I’ve got very used to sleeping in new places with all that brings, this was a one-bedroom room attached to a house. I was in bed by 7:30, asleep by 9pm and woke only once during the night. Still when the alarm went off, I was not quite wanting to get up! Breakfast – Last minute gear check and out I slipped into the night, it was 3am, Uber on time and the 10-minute drive from Camps Bay around to Capetown then up towards the base of Table Mountain to race HQ at Gardens Rugby Field. A small Rugby Oval was the HQ for race start/finish/expo etc. Being a 100km with a tight 17-hour cut-off means the field is limited, so it wasn’t that busy and easy to drop bags, meet my crew and get ready to roll. Most people do the shorter distance options of this race simply because it is brutally tough with a stiff cut-off of 17 hours in comparison to other similar trail runs.

4am was here, head lights were on, purple flare and off we went. The Men’s field was impressively strong this year, I had the lucky number 11! The first 2km is on streets through Capetown, we literally ran on roads behind a pickup until we got led onto the trails, I was actually leading at this point, but pretty quickly I was where I planned to be just running amongst the top 10 or so runners. The first 10km is pretty uneventful although we are climbing gradually and across to the left the city of Capetown can be seen, into the first checkpoint – I was still feeling pretty good, maybe a mistake I made was wearing a light jacket, but not really familiar with the environment I knew we were heading up very soon and it could be very cold at the top.

By 13km things just didn’t feel right! It was actually very humid, but I was also sweating a lot and I really don’t usually sweat that much in comparison to other runners. Unless something more sinister comes out in the next few days or weeks ahead, I’m going to say I had picked

up a small bug on the flight over. I wanted to jam a tissue up the guy sitting in front of me between Singapore and Capetown, that's about an 11.5-hour flight and he kept sniffing LOUDLY the entire way. Anyway, on Friday I had that scratchy throat and runny nose and now 13km into the race my energy levels just faded in almost an instant. Between this point at 13km and the first crew checkpoint at approximately 20km I was starting to do it tough. It just felt so hard to run, like I'd run out of all my energy. Runner after runner passed me and my head wasn't in a great place. I met up with my crew for the first time at around 20km and reloaded, there wasn't much said that I can remember as I was processing my options. I was only stopped here for a couple of minutes, and off I went.

Straight out of this checkpoint is a climb of maybe 200 metres, the first taste of the energetic crowds clapping you on as you start the ascent, then it's a traverse along the base of the mountain for a while before you really go up! Before I started this first climb though I had to stop, I called my Wife back home saying I wasn't feeling great, the lead females were now also running past me. I needed a voice of reason, someone removed from the hype of the event I could speak too about how I was feeling! Throughout this race I was having 3 conversations, when I could handle it (for long periods I simply put my phone into flight mode and focussed on only one thing – moving forward), the conversations were with myself, my CREW including Benn and my Wife who was tracking along back in Australia.



After a few minutes I went on, first up the small steep section before the traverse and then the real climb, this one taking you to the top of Table Mountain, by now I was being passed regularly by runners passing me from behind, I was literally crawling on all fours in sections and 2-3 times on this ascent I stopped and sat down, feeling faint and light headed. At this point, I had made up in my own mind that I was going to just get through to the next

checkpoint and have to stop, I felt so unwell that I did not possibly think I could make it. So now the real battle began! Body and mind were saying stop, but heart keeping me in, just. This actual climb is mainly stairs of stone. They are wide and often big steps. When it happened and I got to look back behind me, the view was incredible. For the runners back in Australia having done UTA, this climb would have had to be like doing the Furber stairs 5 times continuously and whilst I was not enjoying how I felt, it was impossible to not be carried away with the beauty of the course and the sounds of the race, the runners and the spectator support. Bag pipes rang out over the valley as we continued on and up, it was a magical place. At the top of this climb and on the top of table Mountain I was engulfed by the clouds, it was eerie, uncomfortable and almost claustrophobic at this point, I was in this section for too long, just because I wasn't moving quickly at all, and it was really getting to me. There was no reception here, just me and the trails.



When you climb up – This is looking back over your shoulder.

So the next checkpoint was food only, as in no crew and being on Table Mountain it was isolated, so that decision was made for me I'd have to keep going, if I pulled out here I could be waiting a long time for a lift back to the race precinct. The next 8km or so went pretty quickly and I soon arrived at the next checkpoint.



Message to and from Chez!

At the time it didn't help at all, I was telling myself, fuck how bad do I need to feel before I give myself the "Its ok to pull out card"? I was sitting at this next checkpoint and I was wondering can I, should I continue? I sat down trying to process the situation realistically. I was alone, the sights and sounds of other runners coming in and going on, a constant reminder I was in a race and time was ticking. Not thinking clearly, I had also expected to see my crew at this point, but we had agreed earlier that they wouldn't come here, rather go to the next checkpoint (as its possible due to traffic that you could possibly not make it to the next stop in time after being at this one). So again I just had to keep going.

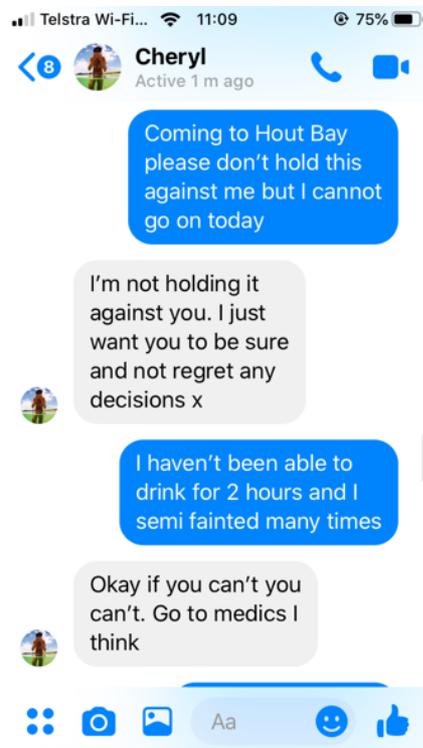
It was a swinging battle, I'd come good in places, and literally start overtaking runners with ease, before just as quickly feeling flat and unwell, my mind was ticking away constantly. I recalled on that first major climb up, as I was struggling, three runners within earshot talking about how the "Elites pull out" I guess they are right it happens a lot. And right now, this section heading towards the coastal town of Llandudno I found myself in conversation with one of the runners. The talk was of mutual respect for how it was a battle today, he wasn't doing it easy, but he was a local and this was the second year he had taken it on. We discussed our challenges at that point, offering support. Somehow it came out that I was one of the expected top finishers, he told me how his respect for me instantly grew. "You are here doing it, it's a beautiful course – just enjoy it today" and a beautiful course it was, magically brutal.

So, I was almost at halfway and it was now really warm and humid, watch glances in sections showed it was well over thirty degrees. This was one of those I'm feeling ok sections, running into the Aid station just positive and with no thought that I wasn't going to run on and finish. But this next section is referred to as the make or break part of this race–

but yeah I'd already suffered and completed the biggest hill, it couldn't be that hard. But for me today this was the death zone!

Pretty quickly off the beach and rocks out of Llandudno you take a steep climb and are shortly at a water only checkpoint, where I grabbed some Coke luckily that was being poured sparingly from 2L bottles, it was warm but still tasted so good, from here is then the most treacherous section of the course, I was climbing pretty well though initially and catching runners ahead constantly. But in this section as we were now getting exposed to the rising temperature, I suffered the most. There were extremely steep sections where you were climbing large step and sections of rock face, often behind you a drop off and a fault here would lead to a fall with potentially fatal consequences.

That severe cramping that was plaguing me today really was accelerated and intensified from this section onwards. I knew I couldn't afford to cramp when scaling a section that I needed to get up, so I'd brace, climb quickly as I felt the cramps taking hold, and then drop and recover usually on the ground, section by section. I was going faint again here at times but continued to the top finally and there I sat and waited in the shade legs elevated for maybe 10 minutes recovering enough to continue. Time was lost here and on a totally runnable section the next 6km into HOUT BAY, all I could do was walk, it was a downhill trail and I couldn't run at that point, I just physically was too unwell and crippled by cramps. But on I went convinced that I'd need to take a lot of time at Hout Bay and likely just have to stop.



Now many hours in – Another message between Me and Chez.



The only photo I took that day out on course is here. I just had to share this with others I though, this is amazing.

But as it turned out, my crew was having none of it. I didn't get a chance to tell them anything about how I was feeling really, I cannot remember either though lol. As I walked in they grabbed me, ice towel was on, I was reloading, they were explaining the next section. See, I think they had become so motivated and excited themselves that, against the odds I had kept going, and had got through the toughest part and was still in front of the cut-off. 10 minutes was all they would afford me, shoe change, clothes change, fuel and refuel (now on the bliss salted potatoes) some motivation, high fives and shouts and I was off – Running!

I was going strong again now, the next section contained another climb, but these climbs were not that bad, the next 75 minutes or so I ran the entire leg and regained time on the gap to the cut-off. This was further motivation for my crew now pretty pumped as I left the next aid station with a real determination that I could now finish. I was giving myself every chance too. The issue really was however the cramps, mostly all hill sections had to be walked so I wouldn't totally burn out. The rocky terrain and tree roots, stairs and more on the single-track sections were causing me grief, any extension of legs beyond a certain range was keeping cramps right there and then occasionally bang, it would come, and I'd have to simply fall or drop. A fall or drop cramp happened to me on no less than 10 occasions in the last 35km. I would have to quickly lay out straight on my back and grab the muscle belly of my hamstring and with every single piece of strength, drive my fingers into the muscle to release the cramp – from here it was still at least another 3-4 minutes before I was able to stand and resume, time was ticking.

A lasting memory, me on my back holding my leg with all my strength as a fellow runner placed a salt tablet onto my tongue I had stuck out for him, all he said was here buddy do you want this, before he moved on suffering himself.

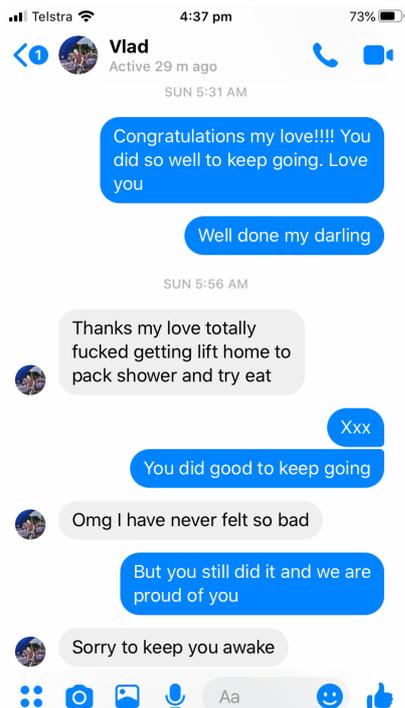
The last sections whilst tough at times – especially the really short steep hill as you head out of the last checkpoint (University of Capetown), were enjoyable. As the sunset and the

headtorches came out, the views across to your right of Capetown below were ever changeable.



Immediately post-race

Here we were traversing a mountain before dropping down and into the edge of the city and the finish line at Gardens Rugby Club



If you asked me what kept me going today, why did you do it. I would have to say this. Today was about learning, it wasn't about my result, it wasn't about me being an Athlete. It wasn't about me being selfish, but it was about a respect for the running community, the effort of so many that goes into these events, the respect for my fellow runners this day and especially those that were doing it tough out there. Sure, it was tough and for almost the entire way, I had this fear that I could possibly not make the cut-offs. I had never been in that situation. Changing the mindset from "I'm here to race and win, to I'm just going to my best today" was an excruciating reasoning between body and mind somewhere made between the 30-50km mark – I cannot remember exactly where, but I do remember the freedom afterwards of having decided to get it done. The hours of preparation, the sacrifices by me and many others the hard work, the real people within the brands that sponsor me all deserved that I simply not be a brat and show them some respect. When I did cross the line, there was no fancy fist pump this night, it was just done, something I had to do for me and you. In the days the followed, I've been cool with it, totally. I have taken more from this race than any race before it, it's made me richer. Get this as an example, I was I guess slightly embarrassed to speak with Nicholas from Salomon/Suunto. This was an A race and yes whilst there is an expectation of performance, that's not the only thing that's important to them. "Vlad it's also about the community – there is even more respect for you now, and we know you will have your good races ahead – This is a good thing for all the runners"

I have to say thank-you to my amazing Wife Chez firstly, together with Benn and my crew Dalene, Jam Ham, Willemien, Rentia, Jeanette (sorry if I missed you), you all helped me to overcome demons today. Thank you to the race organizers, Elite Manager Matt Lennon and my major sponsors Salomon/Suunto Tailwind Nutrition Sout Africa, Lebent, Dusty, Pace Athletic, Air Relax Australia, Aviano, Achieve Podiatry and all my other sponsors, friends, runners Jeanette and Terry and family and spectators. Honestly Thank – You. And for many reasons whilst for worst race it was my best and I'll be coming again at the right time to run your Mountains again.

To follow my training and these races checkout my STRAVA – A direct link to this run <https://www.strava.com/activities/2908977968>

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