

Cradle Mountain Run: Feb 2007

A personal account by Shaun Brewster



While it's still fresh in my mind, I thought I would put down my memories of my first Cradle Mt Ultramarathon.

I'm convinced that when God created Tasmania, he was showing off. I think breaking it away from the mainland and filling the gap with one of the most dangerous sections of water in the world was a good way to make sure it would be difficult for us to mess it up. Of course, as humans, our natural tendency to demolish things and make them more "inhabitable" has altered a large part of Tassie forever, but there is still quite a large section called the Cradle Mt Lake St Clair National Park that remains the way it has been for millions of years. This national park is like nothing I have ever seen. There is a track that runs from the north of the park to the south for approximately 82 kms called the Overland track, it takes about 5-6 days to walk the track. 27 years ago, a small group of people decided it would be a good idea to see if they could run it in a day... they did and the Cradle Mt Ultramarathon was born.

Now, 27 years later, in my 27th year of being alive, I decided it was time to see if I could join the list of crazies that do the run every year.

After applying for entry into the race, there was a month or two where all I could do was wait for THAT phone call and do my best to prepare for a run that I might very well not be allowed to do. The information on the run clearly outlines that acceptance is based on good strong experience in this type of event, two reliable references and a sub 4 hour marathon time. I had a small amount of experience, two good mates that vouched for me and 3:33 hr marathon. Luckily, this was just enough. After I received a phone call/interrogation from one of the run's committee members, I was told – "yes, you are mad enough to do the event"!

Joining me on the trip to Cradle Mt was my good friend and long time training partner Chris O'Driscoll. Chris has run with/against me in about 95% of the races I have done. Unfortunately due to injury, he was unable to train for and enter the event with me, but having him there was the next best thing, and I really appreciate him taking the time away from his family to be there for me.

On the bus from Launceston to Cradle Mt, I got to meet a great bunch of guys, most of which had done the event before, some as many as 10 times... this was a good sign.

The thing that struck me most about this group of individuals was their manner. Not one of the people on that bus talked about their best times at races, what they did for training, etc; this was a group of people that simply loved life and lived for adventure. The stories I did hear about were the amazing sights they had seen and glorious pain they had felt after seeing them. I liked these people right from the start and knew that in coming here I had made the right choice.

After having dinner that night, we were given a race briefing by the committee and told the following – "There are a lot of people who believe the Tasmanian bush is their church, tomorrow they are letting us use it as a gymnasium. We have to treat it with respect. Do the right thing with rubbish, stay on the track, and if you see a snake (which many of us did) give it right of way – it is working and you are just visiting". This was all good advice and clearly followed to the letter by everyone out there, because apart from the construction of huts at the campsites and the track itself, humans have changed nothing about this amazing section of the world.

Race morning I woke at about 3:30am and laid there restlessly for nearly an hour before I started to hear movement in the cabins from the other runners. It was time to start getting ready.

Nervously we all stood at the start line just before 6am waiting for the signal. The clock ticked over and off we went, single file on a duck boarded track just wide enough for one person walk on, but we were running... in the dark.

Just after the start, we began a steep climb up to Marion's lookout. From here we were greeted with a spectacular sunrise over the shoulder of Cradle Mt and a setting full moon on the opposite horizon. Breathtaking! Unfortunately, all concentration was needed just to stay upright on a track that had turned into an endless pile of fist sized rocks.

In the race instruction kit, we were supplied with timeline to follow for a 13hr finish. All I had to do was to reach the various landmarks by a certain time and stay on that pace. By the first landmark (Kitchen Hut) I was already behind the 13hr mark by a few minutes. Not a good start.

The scenery through the first few hours was nothing short of mind-blowing. But the track was tough, so countless times I almost fell to the ground because I had lifted my eyes just long enough to glance at a mountain or a crystal clear creek flowing past.

At one point I had looked at my watch and saw that I had been going for about 4 hours, longer than it takes me to run a marathon, and I felt fantastic, really alive. No doubt that is the way everyone feels when they pass through this place

The first major checkpoint (where someone had hiked to for hours, so they could check your name off a list so that the organizers knew you were not lost in the bush) was Pelion Hut. Once again, I was behind the 13 hour pace that I had wrongly assumed would be fairly easy to achieve.

After leaving Pelion Hut came Pelion Gap. Sound good right? A gap, fairly flat, open space? Wrong! This "Gap" was a soul destroying climb up a rocky, tree root infested trail that seemed to go forever. After reaching the top, you reach a plateau that gives views that make the hill you just climbed seem so insignificant.

At this point I was feeling really tired. My ankles had taken an absolute beating on the rocks and tree roots that were now pretty much the entire track. Onwards I pushed, by myself at this point. I had run with other runners at various points, and had either left them behind or been left behind... mostly the latter.

Eventually I reached Kia Ora Hut at about 1pm feeling absolutely wrecked. If I was on a 13hr time I should have been there at 12:15. This was another check point and the marshal told me that if I held this pace, I should still make it to Narcissus Hut (the last check point) before the cut off time. I have never come close to being disqualified from a race for being too slow, and the thought of missing out on completing this one got me moving a bit quicker, or at least as quick as the tree roots would let me.

Just before the race began, Chris said to me "Pain is only temporary, but failure is forever". It didn't matter how much it hurt, as long as I was allowed to continue, I would.

After Kia Ora Hut came Du Cane Hut, and according to the map this was followed by Du Cane Gap. Another GAP! Fortunately Du Cane Gap was not quite as painful as Pelion Gap, but it was no less treacherous underfoot. After the race I found out from someone that was wearing some high-tech navigational thing, that all the up-hill climbs of the run equated to 1.9km of vertical ascent. The highest mountain in Australia is only a few hundred meters higher. He also measured the track at nearly 86km instead of the estimated 82. But after a full day of running, another 4kms probably makes little difference.

At this point my ankles had started to become less painful but the downhill began to play havoc with my knees. By the time I reached Windy Ridge Hut at about an hour behind the "magic" 13hr pace that I had originally planned on, my knees were giving me a lot of grief. Here a marshal told me that he had taken 2 hours to walk there from Narcissus Hut earlier that day and if I held a steady walk/run pace I would be at Narcissus in about an hour and a half. That would leave me with 30mins spare before the last cut off. I made it to Narcissus in about 1 hour 45 minutes. Obviously at this point, almost 11 hours into the toughest thing I had ever done, my body was pretty spent.

All along, the runners that had done this event before had told me that the last 20km section from Narcissus along the west side of Lake St Clair to the finish at Cynthia Bay was the hardest. It was apparently an absolute mud fest with tree roots that try to rip your legs off and endless ups and downs. It takes about 3-4 hours for most people.

I had now reached the beginning of this section, and knowing that I had passed the last check point, the last point at which someone could say "sorry, but you can't go on, it will be too dark for you to finish", I felt renewed.

As I entered what looked like an enchanted forest from some evil fairytale, I finally found what I had been looking for all day. The wall. For runners, pushing through the wall is an out of body experience. All the pain and torture you have put yourself through fades away and you begin to run with you heart. I have only ever experienced this in the last stages of the 3 marathons that I have run, where you feel nothing, only the wind against your face and finish line draws you like a magnet.

Well this time I had pushed through the wall with an estimated 4 hours to go. What a feeling! For the first time all day, I started to notice animals! Up until now I had to concentrate so hard on staying on my feet and not breaking an ankle that my mind was too preoccupied to really experience what I was doing. Sure, the mountain ranges, ancient trees and countless creeks were visually spectacular, but now instead of seeing things, I was feeling them.

The track was dangerous and very tricky, just as everyone had told me, but because I was feeling the way I was it didn't seem to matter. I was running with a huge smile on my face and there was nothing I could do about it. What happened next topped it all off.

While I was cruising along on cloud nine and after not seeing a single person for nearly 2 hours, I heard a voice say "There's someone I recognize". Chris had spent most of the day traveling by bus to the finish line and then walked one and a half hours just to offer his encouragement! That is a mate. Seeing him was like a shot of adrenaline. He asked me how I had been going, what food I had eaten, etc. At this point I was running fast and talking even faster and for a while Chris was just able to keep up. The adrenalin shot faded and I slowed a little. The rest is all a bit of a blur.

My legs were tired but I couldn't really say that they hurt. In fact my body didn't seem to matter at all. All I knew was that I was going to make it and it felt good.

The last kilometer or so is on a gentle undulating gravel road that made me feel very privileged to have been able to spend the day in the very treacherous but utterly perfect Tasmanian bush.

I had decided before I began that no matter what, I would make sure there was nothing left in the tank when I crossed the line. So I sprinted to the finish. I was handed a drink and Chris and I walked the few meters down onto the beach at the south end of Lake St Clair. From here I walked straight out into the water up to my thighs, shoes and socks still on, fully clothed and feeling 10 foot tall.

I looked north over the lake and could see the mountains that I had run through what seemed like days ago, and felt completely content. I could have stood in that lake forever.

Within a short while the pain made its way back into my body with a vengeance. I had run the last 20kms in about 3 hours, about 15 minutes faster than that elusive 13 hour pace. Of course I hadn't made up enough time to make it to the end in 13 hours but I didn't care, I had run for me, not a clock.

I had started at 6am that morning and finished 13 hours 58 minutes and 59 seconds later.

I returned home to the smiles and congratulations of my family which for me was the cherry on the cake.

Now I'm sitting here 2 days later, with legs that feel like they have been run over by a truck, and still wearing a smile... only now it's on the inside.