

Time to rogaine my strength! – The Hornsby metrogaine, 09/02/14

Team 87: Martin Dearnley, Graham Field & Tristan White

By Tristan White

“When [the] torches came bobbing across the snow everything seemed to drain out of me; all the fight which had kept me going evaporated... I felt myself just give up and pain came rushing in, the exhaustion, everything. I sometimes wonder if that wasn’t the point at which I was most at risk, whether I could suddenly just have keeled over and died.”

These words were uttered by Joe Simpson in reflection of his extraordinary true story of survival, *Touching the Void*, after breaking his leg and falling through a crevasse in the Peruvian Andes and after crawling in absolute agony yet with determination for days when he finally realized he had made it; made it to safety.

That sums up how I felt, albeit to a somewhat lesser extent, how I felt at the conclusion of the “Hornsbygaine” – except here the enemy (or one of the enemies was) the extreme heat rather than the cold. Indeed, I have done numerous other rogaines over longer durations of time including a 24 hour one, but with the possible exception of the 12 hour Lake Macquarie in August last year, but I doubt I have felt more wasted at the end of an event.

BACKGROUND

Ever since I knew the event’s location, I eagerly awaited the Hornsbygaine with baited breath. It was the first event that I had done on, as they say in a soccer game, “on my home turf” with the northernmost point at the beginning of my road and having cycled, run or hiked along almost all of the tracks on at least several occasion, I was determined to find out just how much “local knowledge” would aid me throughout the event’s duration, and hence it was no coincidence that my return date after a one month trip in Thailand was February 8th. No, no coincidence at all. In order to make my transition back to Sydney easier, I had the event high on my mind, even in the middle of a foreign land. The thoughts of home made me feel less foreign.

A chill was sent down my spine at the Bangkok when I saw that the flight to Kuala Lumpur (where I had a layover) before mine was cancelled, and coming back to the board, I saw that the one after mine was cancelled as well. But I was praised the Lord to see that my flight was still running despite that – missing it wouldn’t have given me much chance of making the rogaine.

Although arriving back in Sydney safely, another cloud came into my horizon as I prepared for bed. My stomach began to do acrobatics and I felt strange. Hoping that getting in bed would solve this, I was mistaken.

I was awake at midnight the evening before with a piercing stomach cramp. I just saw my whirlwind of anticipation; what I had waited a month for, go down the toilet along with whatever else was inside my digestive system. Although in my anger, pain and torment, I

swore that I would not miss the event; in my heart I didn't think there was much of a chance as I slumped back to bed, praying that the cramp would subside and I could get some sleep.

EITHER BRAVE OR STUPID

Awaking at 6am, I was relieved to see that the cramps were gone, and my stomach felt relatively calm, but I nonetheless knew that there would only be two types of people who would go on after such a night; either a fanatic or an idiot - particularly as I still felt lethargic and could hardly eat. Luckily, I could arguably fill the criteria for both, so either bravely or stupidly trundled my stuff down where Martin awaited me – due to the proximity of the event, we met Graham at the headquarters (known as the “Hash House”) – the Brick Pit sports stadium in Thornleigh where we registered and collected the map and control card.

In a rogaine, a series of locations (known as “checkpoints” or “controls”) are scattered around the map marked with a unique 2 digit number – the first, when multiplied by 10, gives its point score, and the second identifies it, and generally, the further away they are or harder they are to get to, the more they are worth. Predictably, on the Steele Bride, a historic bridge used in WWII, there was a 100 pointer!

We planned our route to cover a base length of 18km or so in the south western quadrant of the course, which obviously had the most concentrated region of points available, basically following the Great North Walk for six kilometres in the northerly direction before heading down another adjoining track back to the Hash House, which would allow us to pick up five additional controls should time permit.

THE START LINE

At 9am, the start was called and the teams dispersed. In a well-planned event, all teams will head in five different directions, but due to having only two access points to the HH, a good majority went out the way we did, via the path at the SW corner in pursuit of CP21. Its situation on a lamppost in a park reminded me of orienteering events which I had recently gotten into, which was a typical location of an orienteering control. After another similarly situated 20-pointer, we were in the bush at the quarry near the well-known paved firetrail linking Pennant Hills and Westleigh, collecting CP103.

After shortcutting through an unmarked track thanks to my local knowledge, we were on the GNW, the track that we were to basically stay on for the next two and a half hours. We shuffled along at a reasonable clip, though having several ambitious teams jog by us, and collected 93 easily and eventually 60, despite it seemingly being in the incorrect location on the map. Missing 75, on a detour up 40 vertical metres or so, in order to save energy, we got 92, 44, 81 and 64 easily, which brought us up to Quarter Sessions Rd, Westleigh. As it turned out, that omission couldn't have been a better idea, but not for the reasons we were expecting.



Little do we know what we're getting ourselves into!

Back on the GNW, we collected CP20, located at the Blue Gum Track junction, 76 at a lovely creek crossing and 71 at Fishponds waterhole at 11:15am where we vowed to revise our route. Having made rapid progress, we came to realize that were we to finish the planned route and its extension, there was nowhere else to go, not a very preferable thing to have happen!

So we continued north along the GNW for 2 kilometres, on the particularly well-known "trig loop" which Graham regularly and I occasionally run, getting us to CP100 on the Steele Bridge. Soon after we came to 80, which was located across a watercourse.

THE DOWNHILL BEGINS

It was where the track went uphill over 100 vertical metres that things went downhill for me. The steepness, my lack of food, the heat and my sore stomach became an allied force against me and I struggled, here having to put a lot of thought and effort into every step. *This isn't great*, I thought. But here I said nothing and with my characteristic look of fortitude, plodded forward and eventually made my way to the top. Just after collecting CP77 after 1km of flat fireroad, I stopped at a nearby watercourse, wet a small microfibre

that I had carried for just that purpose and wrapped it around my head. Much better. This heat seemed like a force to be reckoned with, and putting one leg in front of the other was all I could do to get myself up the subsequent pinch climb to CP77, via another local shortcut track not shown on the map.

Reaching 46 a bit after 12pm, I was really not feeling great, acknowledged this and lay down in the shade for several minutes. A local was kindly letting competitors use his tap to fill up, which we did. In these conditions, no amount of water was ever enough, so we made the most of the opportunity.

Getting 95, located in the well know Hornsby MTB track, Old Man's Valley, my morale spiked up as I ran into a riding friend also punishing himself in the crazy heat. We quickly exchanged insane event quips – he was training for the 8-day Cape Epic MTB race – and he headed off. We picked up 41 en route down a steep flight of steps to the beautiful and relatively cool Blue Gum Forest.

Reach 1pm, and there was a small congregation of competitors around the tap, and I waited in line to re-wet my bandana. It was obvious that I was suffering by this point, being consistently at the back and having to put all my effort to keep on walking. In order to liven up the mood, I was asked to rattle off one of my favourite jokes, which I chose the famous “celebrate” joke* of which Martin said was the best one I'd told, which put a stride in my step; or rather a plod, but at least it was movement!

CP72 was where my physique hit rock bottom. A short but very steep concrete hill, it sucked all the life out of me. Although having run and walked this track on several occasions, I don't think it had every felt as bad as it did then, and upon reaching the control, I had to instantly sit down for a couple of minutes to get the energy back into me. Here I had dipped into my dark chocolate supply, which I carry for such emergencies or other low points, but I had not felt much its effect and it was nonetheless a struggle even to go downhill, and climbing over the creek near 33 did not do me any more good.

So Martin had an idea. He asked Graham if he had any Red Bull left in the can. When the affirmative answer came, somehow, despite having only had it once or twice before, I was talked into skulling the whole can so I could get the instant energy hit that seemed to be the only hope for getting me to the finish line in one piece. The shortest route was only 4km and it was only 1:30, so we could get back at a slow stroll pace, but with my current condition, it may as well have been Mt Everest. Sore stomach, next to no energy, and now the back of my legs were beginning to cramp; I did not feel good to put things mildly.

Thankfully, Graham and Martin pulled me along, and I agreed to make the out and back trip to 82, 500m down the track, where it was all I could do to stop myself from sitting down on the side of the track, but I didn't. I kept the legs moving as we followed along to 24 and up a *steep* hill to the lookout at 102. It was just after 2pm and there were only another 2km to go, but it may as well have been 20km the way it felt to me. Collecting CPs 23 and 66 should have been an easy detour, but the steepness of the bushtrack down to 66 forced me

to lie down for ten minutes after returning from it. Nonetheless, with my characteristic determination, we made it back to the Hash House with fifteen minutes to spare where I collapsed down, hardly able to move another step.

AFTERMATH

After struggling my way to the car and going to change my clothes, the combined effects of the impact, lack of nutritious food (all I was able to eat was chocolate, a gel, a minty and energy bar), heat, cramped legs and sore stomach took their toll on me, having to sit in a state of dizziness in the cubicle. I felt horrible, but was very happy it was all over. I've done theoretically much harder events – MTB Marathons and a 24 hour rogaine – but this, with the possible exception of the '13 Lake Mac 12 hour where my feet and knees were so cut up and sore that I could hardly sleep, let alone walk, was the most bugged I had felt, and freely confessed to myself I was an idiot for doing it when I'd been feeling like that. Truth is, though, *nothing* will stop me from doing a rogaine! It's just the way I am. It could have been worse. I was lucky.

Having lain down, I heard that our acquired score of 1630, 200 more points than planned in our initial route, putting us in the top 20%. Although far from a grand result in principle, we were all delighted in lieu of my condition and agreed it was something worth being proud of, considering we only were moving for 5 of the 6 hours, making it conceivable to crack 2000 points had we kept our original pace were I feeling better.

Having accumulated a severe lack of sleep combined with all my other ailments, it was time to quench this thirst, collapsing on my bed at 4:30pm and not getting up until after 7:30 the next morning - that's even longer than my 14-hour siesta at the conclusion of the 24 hour event last year – before riding around and doing my duty at collecting a series of checkpoints; another exhausting but manageable experience.

Looking back, one could reasonably call me a fool. Fair enough. But I'd like to respond to them on of my favourite lines: *"Experiences are temporary, but the memories are forever."* Now I've recovered (or at least am recovering) and I'll hopefully be healed physically of all exhaustion, stomach pains and sore legs. But the lessons I've learned are positive ones and will last. Now I know what it's like to go through a rogaine with basically no food and a sore stomach – you suffer. I know what a great idea it is to have cloth to cool you off with, how to keep in control. We'll all get the same feelings – albeit for different reasons – in 24 hours where there are many more hours to suffer from them, so we may as well suffer now to get used to it!

As for the event itself, it was great. They definitely made the most of the lovely Berowra Valley National Park, and everyone was very positive about how it ran, something I can wholeheartedly agree with.

Bring on the Canberra Twilight 3 hour at Mt Stromlo on Thursday!

* *THE CELEBRATE JOKE: A Buddhist monk has newly arrived at the monastery and is set to work helping the older, more experienced monks copy out the sacred texts.*

"How do you know that the mistakes haven't been carried through in the many times that the document has been copied?" he asks.

"Well we've never had an issue before," says the monk superior. "But nor have you CHECKED the oldest copies of the scriptures, have you?" Realizing it is best not to keep arguing, the older monk goes to the archives at the back of the monastery to see for himself, ready to prove the point to the rookie monk wrong showing the lack of difference between the original and current "editions."

However, hours go by and the older monk does not show, and the younger monk finishes copying down, and wonders what is happening. Eventually, he goes to the back of the monastery to find the older monk in a corner, crying.

"What's the matter?" he asks his superior.

"It's the letter 'R.' They forgot the bloody 'R!'"

"I beg your pardon?"

"The word was meant to be 'CELEBRATE!'"

(Did you know that in Buddhist culture, all males are expected to enter monkhood (often for 2 years) to somehow earn brownie points for their family from their heavens? Not sure if that's a cause to "celebrate...")