North Face 100

It was dark and the world had shrunk to a small circle of light bouncing over trails, rocks and stairs cut into stone. I'd been running on rugged terrain and climbed thousands of steps for more than 12 hours. My energy was fading fast and I felt ready to give up , when I heard footsteps ..

Words and photos by Nicky Redl

With over 4,200 metres of elevation, the NorthFace 100 has been called the hardest 100-kilometre race he's ever done by marathon man Dean Karnazes. There are at least 10,000 steps to climb. The longest two staircases have over 900 steps each, snaking their way up a cliff to the outskirts of the town of Katoomba, two hours from Sydney.

It was still dark as buses ferried us to the starting area where runners from around the world were nervously preparing themselves for a very long day. Our packs were stuffed to the brim with mandatory gear – warm clothes, reflective vest, whistle, compass, head lamp, mobile phone, emergency rations and water. We were all carrying a few extra pounds for our safety. Every year, unprepared hikers get lost and some have died, so no one is allowed to start without emergency gear.

We were lucky; it was sunny and dry. In some previous years, runners had to brave wind, rain and freezing temperatures. We set out on a wide road, though with hundreds of runners on the course, we were soon queuing to climb down rocks and ladders and squeezing onto narrow trails. Everyone seemed in a hurry too early in the race and I became nervous. Never a good idea. Sure enough, I tripped twice in the first few kilometers of rugged trail and was lucky to get away with a bloody knee. Injuries can quickly end a race.

I'd jumped at the chance to take part when a spot became free on the waiting list, looking forward to spending a day on the trails in one of my most favourite places in the world. I also was a little underprepared as there wasn't much time left. The cut-off is 28 hours, which is plenty. However, runners who make it in less than 20 hours receive a TNF100 belt buckle. Buckles are usually only awarded for 100 mile (160k) races, not 100k. My at the time visiting US friend Paul Schmidt has a whole drawer full after finishing about sixty 100 mile races, but for me it was a rare chance.

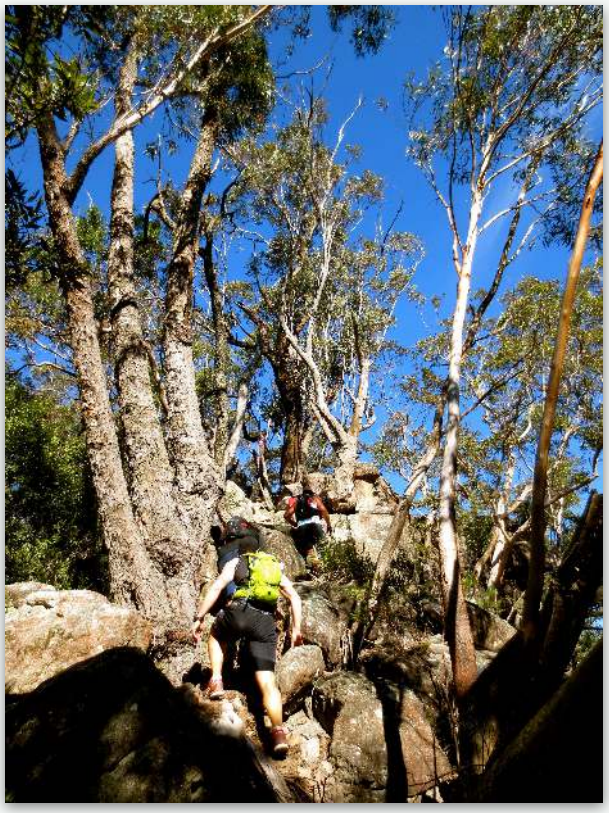
Held in the World Heritage listed Blue Mountains - named so because evaporating oil from eucalyptus trees can make the area look blue from the distance - the course led through a scenic national park, over ridges and through valleys, along bush trails and over streams, all while enjoying breath-taking views. Around each bend there seemed to be another beautiful sight to marvel at. Colorful parrots flew over our heads and the sound of the many waterfalls accompanied us. One of the numerous race volunteers was even doing a spontaneous dance routine to encourage us along and on a remote outcrop someone was playing a didgeridoo. No matter how hard some climbs were, every time I stepped onto yet another plateau looking out over the unforgettable scenery of misty blue and green mountain ranges, I knew there was no other place I'd rather be.

Sometimes, the answer to the question 'why' is easy. For many hours it seemed like every cell of my body was completely alive, I felt one with the spectacular landscape and full of gratitude for being healthy enough to do this. I didn't want it to stop. There were no restrictive thoughts about what I or others can or can't do, it was just about finding out what's possible if we try.

There are times during races where I think I will be able to die in peace when my time has come, because I have truly lived in moments like this.

The course was extremely well marked and the aid stations well stocked. But I wanted to try a different approach to nutrition. After previous ultras, I'd had gut problems and suspected it was due to the high intake of refined sugar through gels and typical race foods. So I carried salted nuts and dried fruit for sugar, fat and protein instead. I only took a couple of muffins and two Clif bars at the stations, and at night some soup and rolls. I ended up feeling much better after the race and recovered faster!

I was full of energy for more than nine hours until checkpoint 4 at 57k back in Katoomba. Just as I was heading out again, I saw Paul. We had wanted to do the race together, but a knee injury had thwarted our plan. "You look great, not at all tired," he said and pulled food out of his pack. I took an apple and was myself surprised how energetic I was still feeling. Little did I know how quickly that would change – the next 21k section would become brutal.



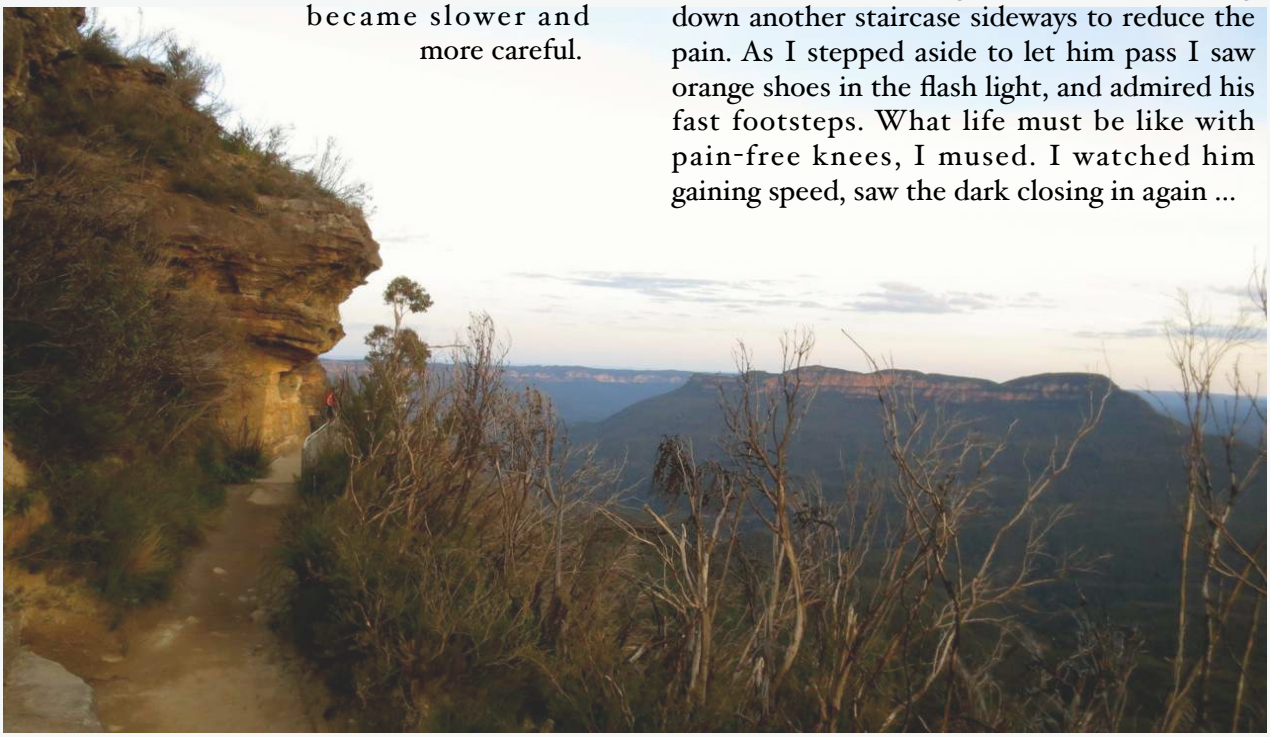
As the sun set over the mountains, the fading light surrounded their silhouettes with a deep pink. The air was getting colder and one by one we pulled out our reflective vests and headlamps. As we were making our way back down into the valley and into the woods, it became darker and darker. Instead of wide, open views, there was soon only the flashlight beam to follow over roots and rocks. My steps became slower and more careful.

And then the stairs began. Even in daytime it would have been a difficult section with hardly any trails to run on. But at night it was a lot worse. If we weren't going down steps, we were climbing them. The organizers seemed to have wanted to include every staircase in the entire region! With no orientation in the dark apart from the little reflective strips that marked the course, I didn't know how fast I was progressing or where on the course I was. The stairs went up and down, and round and round in circles like a bad dream, lost in a maze of stairways and rocks.

I started to hate it. Why was I not in my warm bed? How could I have forgotten how miserable ultras can be and sign up for another one? It was lonely, cold, miserable and the monotony of the night was getting to me. I couldn't see anyone in front or behind and the small light beam made me feel claustrophobic.

My energy was fading rapidly. My knees had started to bother me at around 40 kilometres and were by now so sore that I was trying to support each step down with my arms on the railing to take pressure of my lower joints. I was fairly certain I wasn't causing any damage, but I was in pain. As I drudged through the dark, straining to see the next marker, I could no longer imagine I would even make it past the next checkpoint. I became increasingly hopeless.

Suddenly, I heard footsteps behind me. Someone was catching up as I was hobbling down another staircase sideways to reduce the pain. As I stepped aside to let him pass I saw orange shoes in the flash light, and admired his fast footsteps. What life must be like with pain-free knees, I mused. I watched him gaining speed, saw the dark closing in again ...



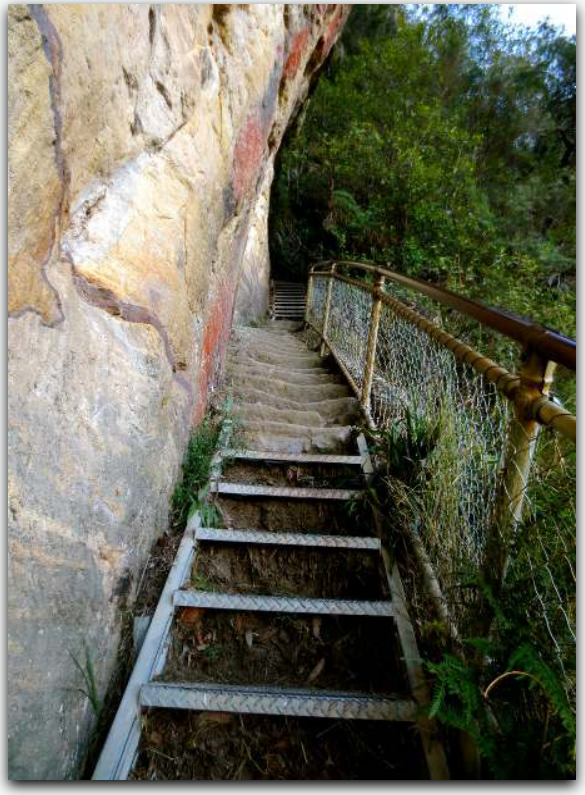
... and started chasing him. I couldn't take being out there on my own any longer.

But it hurt! So I thought of something another runner, Tyler Pike, had said after we had ran much of a 100k in Mongolia together. When I was still hobbling three days after the race and couldn't understand why he seemed fine, he said: "I used to walk funny after races, but then I realised that it hurt just as much when I hobbled then when I walked normally, so I just walked normally after that." I decided that crawling along this trail wouldn't make me hurt less, it would just make me hurt longer.

From now on I followed those orange shoes in the light beam of my flashlight. I was so glad to have someone to stick to. Neither of us said anything for a long time as we put our minds to negotiating the tree roots, rocks and stairs at night. I regained so much energy that at one point he wondered if I wanted to pass. I emphatically declined. "I don't want you anywhere else but ahead of me," I said. He had lost his friends in the race and running together turned out to be uplifting for both of us. The trail didn't get any easier but we both had company now and even started to pass others. By the time we arrived at the 78k checkpoint, I felt better. The last 21k had taken me 4.5 hours - longer than any marathon, which is double the distance. And I still had 22k to go.

To my great surprise, Paul was waiting for me to give me a big hug as I ran in. It must have been very frustrating for him not to be able to run after all the work that goes into training and preparing the gear. And still, he had caught the train and then begged a lift from someone to spend hours among all the support crews and runners. There's nothing like a hug when you've been out on the trail for 14 hours. And there was soup, there were muffins, there were great volunteers to tell me where to find more soup. And within a few warm minutes, the world was a good place again.

In all the excitement I lost sight of orange shoes and missed my opportunity to thank him for going ahead and making it look easy. It was his very first ultra. He was doing amazing.



By the time I left checkpoint 5, I had more than 5.5 hours until the 20-hour cut-off and was in better spirits. The next few kilometres followed dirt roads and it was blissful to be away from those infuriating stairs. We were still in hilly terrain, of course, but all I could think of was the next step and the next breath. Keep eating, keep drinking, keep moving. I went into a nearly trance-like state for the next hours. The physical strain continued and I was only making slow progress. But the mental struggle was over. I was going to finish; it was just a matter of time. There is something deeply rewarding about getting through the tough bits to that point.

When I finally saw the sign that said only 1 kilometre left, I felt elated - until I realised that this was the kilometre with the Furber steps. I still had to climb 933 steps cut into stone and up metal ladders. What else? I was too tired to be tired, I wanted to finish. I wanted hot soup, a hug and that belt buckle and would keep going until that was a reality. Races can greatly simplify life for a while. By the time ran through the gate under the giant timer, it was two o'clock at night. Paul had stayed up and was kindly waiting for me, there was soup, and that silly, precious belt buckle was finally mine - I'd finished in 18:54.

The fastest runner had managed to do the whole course in daylight, while others still soldiered on through the night and some even past sunrise. The last two crossed the finish line after 27:34 hours on their feet.

Looking around, soup in hand, I saw that no matter how exhausted runners feel, they always still have enough energy for big smiles.