

# Australian Outback Marathon

26 July 2014

Race Report

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<http://australianoutbackmarathon.com/>

## Background

I returned to running at the start of 2011 after a long layoff (from late 80s/early 90s) when I was in the RAAF and before that as a teenager. I started by running up to 3 times per week during my lunch hours (just to keep fit) but it snowballed from there with my brother talking me into running the Canberra Marathon in 2012. So from late 2011, I began training seriously for Canberra (which I thought would be my one and only marathon). My goal for this race was <4 hours, but I surprised myself with 3:36.

After the dust settled, my brother and I decided to take on the Melbourne Marathon later in the year following our trip to Peru, however fate had other plans. Unfortunately, I got a bad case of food poisoning whilst in Peru which led to a disease known as Reactive Arthritis and I returned to Australia in July 2012 crippled and unable to walk. This disease is a very painful auto immune condition and causes severe joint inflammation. For me, affected joints were in the left ankle/foot, right elbow/wrist/little finger and sacroiliac. I was off work for 2 months and on crutches until after the Melbourne Marathon. At this stage, I didn't know whether I would be capable of running again and was taking steroid medication, immune suppressants and powerful anti-inflammatory drugs. This was a frustrating time because I have always been an active person and played a lot of sport over the years (football, cricket, squash, and tennis) and now couldn't move without pain. I started noticing how effortless it was for everyone else to walk and move around without any discomfort and remember being very envious of their good joints.

By late October 2012, I was off the crutches, but continued to walk with a noticeable limp for many more months (particularly when getting out of bed in the mornings and getting up from my desk at work). I remember looking out my office window towards the River and the tan and watching the runners wishing I could be out there too. By late November, I was sick of the inactivity and decided to start running again. At this stage, my Rheumatologist was recommending paddling in water, but I wanted to run. By this time, my hard earned fitness from Canberra was well and truly gone and I was forced to rebuild from scratch. I started off by running one lap of the Fitzroy Gardens a few times per week and then one lap of the tan (walking there and back) throughout December 2012. I found that the first km of any run really hurt my foot, but after that, the joints got warmed up and I was able to run reasonably comfortably.

From January 2013 onwards, I gradually increased my mileage and started trusting my body again to the point of targeting the Gold Coast marathon in July 2013. In order to run more consistently, I saw a Podiatrist and he customised a pair of orthotics for me which resulted in the worst blisters I have ever had, but at least they enabled me to run on consecutive days - which was important for the upcoming training load. Every time he tweaked the orthotics, I would get a new set of blisters.

Eventually, we got the orthotics just right and combined with taping before every run I was able to run comfortably. Despite this regime, my left foot would hurt after runs, but gradually the pain subsided, although it has never gone away totally. My foot will never be 100% again, but I have learned to live with it.

## **Earlier Marathons**

Following the Canberra marathon in 2012, my brother and I set the goal of running a marathon in every state/territory in Australia. In 2013, we both tackled the Gold Coast marathon, where I was able to improve on my Canberra time for a new PB of 3:19.24. Following Gold Coast, I tackled the Melbourne marathon (just 3 months later) and improved on my Gold Coast time for a new PB of 3:09.59 (after targeting 3:10). I felt that this had been the first time I had really extended myself and had nothing left to give. I remember running into the G all out of time and madly sprinting for the finish, with no time left to soak in the atmosphere. Unfortunately, my brother could not run Melbourne in 2013 due to ongoing back issues, but given he had already run his home town marathon in Sydney in 2009 and I had just run my home town marathon, we decided that for 2014 I would run Sydney in September and he would run Melbourne, which would make us even in terms of marathons. We also decided to target the Outback marathon at Uluru in July. The only problem with this strategy was that I would be running 2 marathons in 8 weeks and he would be running 2 marathons in 11 weeks – still, it sounded like a plan.....

## **Training**

I decided to follow the Pfitzinger 18 week schedule (up to 88km per week) and officially started training for the Outback marathon on 24 March. After the first month of training, I tackled the Geelong Half and ran 89:31 (which was just outside a PB), so I felt that the training was going well. Throughout April, May and June, I didn't miss a single session and was able to run consistent high mileage weeks. I ended up running 1,337 km for the 18 week program with an average of 74km per week and a maximum week of 93km (despite the fact that the maximum week for the program should be 88km). I made sure I got down to every Tuesday/Thursday Milers session and really felt that my running was steadily improving with these quality sessions. This was manifested in PBs for 5km (19:11) and 10km (39:39) in June. Early in the program, my wife Meg started attending a craft workshop at Kensington every Saturday afternoon for hours at a time, so I used this free time to go on my long runs. I ended up doing 7 runs > 30km, including one run of 40km when I couldn't find a river crossing on the Maribryong trail.

I also started incorporating swimming into the schedule immediately after the long run and on the following day to aid in recovery.

## **Lead up to Outback Marathon**

Arrived at Ayers Rock on Thursday, 24 July and checked into our accommodation. My brother and I had booked the cheapest package (Red Earth), with an extra two night's accommodation and we elected to stay at 'Sails in the Desert' with a small courtyard looking out towards the desert. You can't just enter the Outback Marathon only. You have to book a package, which includes accommodation, meals, tours, activities, events and of course the marathon - so it is really a tourist marathon and quite an expensive event. There are also platinum, diamond, gold and silver packages, with each package containing different options and durations.

After checking in, we immediately set out on a reconnoiter run and familiarized ourselves with the resort and some of the tracks that we would be running on in a couple of days time. My heart sank as it became immediately apparent that there would be no PBs set at this marathon, so I decided to treat it as a training run for Sydney marathon in 8 weeks time. The tracks near the resort were very sandy and quite difficult to negotiate with deep red dirt and corrugations. We made our way to the resort lookout and gazed at the huge monolith contemplating the race ahead.

On race eve (Friday, 25 July), we went for an early morning run in a futile attempt to acclimatize to the conditions. It was absolutely freezing and I was wondering how I would strip down to my milers singlet the next day at around about the same time. Nevertheless it was wonderful running in the desert in the early morning with sensational views of the mighty monolith. We spent the rest of the day relaxing as much as possible - attending a spear and boomerang throwing class, leisurely swim in the hotel's pool and short walks to gaze upon the mighty monolith from various angles, distances and times throughout the day. Towards the end of the day, we attended the merchandise sales for the event, where we both picked up a free event shirt and bought a cap. It was then time to attend the opening address and traditional "Welcome to Country" ceremony, followed by the race safety briefing and then the carbo load dinner which was one of the few inclusions in our Red Earth Package.

## **Outback Marathon**

Woke up early on race day and headed to the hotel's breakfast which had been opened up an hour early to cater for the runners. After breakfast, taped up the nipples and applied Vaseline to all the relevant areas, then changed into my running gear. It was very cold at this time (but not as cold as the previous day). We had to be at the front of the hotel by 6am to catch the bus from the hotel to the start line.

At the race briefing the previous day, people were told that the bus would leave at 6am sharp. Predictably this turned out to be an idle threat, as people were still rushing to the bus in various stages of undress at 6:15am. In any case, we eventually got away and headed out to the start line.

There was a great atmosphere at the start line, with lots of nervous, but excited runners. I went for a short warm-up run along the road and felt great. There was a great view of Ayers Rock from the start line (about 10km away) and we were able to watch the sun rise before the race started.

The marathon and half marathon started at the same time (7:45) and would follow the same course for the first 18/19km. There was also an 11km and 6km race which started a little later at 8.00am. Most of the tracks were on private aboriginal land, so it was a rare opportunity to run on these tracks and see Uluru and Kata Tjuta from different vantage points along the course. It was a cool morning (probably only 2 or 3 degrees at the start) and I almost considered wearing a long sleeved shirt under my Milers singlet - which would have been a horrendous mistake. Conditions were good with the average race temperature at 15 degrees, humidity at 44% and the wind at 11 km per hour. There were 112 runners from 14 countries entered in the marathon and it was a great atmosphere at the start with Australian music pumping and helicopters in the air with cameramen on board ready to catch all the action.

For the first time ever, I started in the front row of the grid. A didgeridoo signaled the start of the race and we were off, however despite my great positioning at the front, I was immediately swamped by the wall of runners around me as the course narrowed into a bottleneck of sorts and I had to thread my way through the pack to get a clear run. My plan was to emulate my Melbourne Marathon strategy and aim to stay under 4:20 pace for at least the first half, then hold on at around 4:30/4:40 pace for as long as possible and hopefully finish strongly. The eventual winner was already out in front running with his mate (who would eventually finish behind me) and suddenly an American fellow (who would eventually finish second) zoomed passed me. I didn't see either of them again until after the race.



I felt really good for the first 5km running 4:12, 4:11, 4:14, 4:08 and 4:12 with little effort and felt really light on my feet. At this stage, the track was relatively easy to traverse and I thought that a PB would not be out of the question. The contrasts in colours were stunning, with clear blue sky, green desert shrubs, rich red earth and of course the red rocks (Uluru and Kata Tjuta). I alternated water and Gatorade at each drinks station and didn't take any gels (they don't agree with me). There were lots of road crossings and twists and turns on the course and the red dirt/sand was quite deep in places. I found that I had to keep my eyes fixated on the track to work out the best place to put my feet next.

Between the 5 and 11 km section of the course, I was still running easily and stayed around 4:20 pace – so I felt things were going to plan and found myself in 4<sup>th</sup> place (surprisingly).



From the 12 km mark onwards, I felt that the course became more difficult with more deep red dirt/sand, sand dunes and a very strong breeze (as there was no real protection in the middle of the desert). I began to slow with my pace ranging between 4:24 and 4:44 up to the 21km mark. Despite my slower pace, I somehow managed to reel in the fellow in 3<sup>rd</sup> place and eventually passed him and then put some distance between us around about the halfway mark or thereabouts. I went through the halfway mark in 92:21. I couldn't believe I was in 3<sup>rd</sup> place and wondered how far behind I was from 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup>.

After the halfway point I slowed even further with my pace ranging between 4:50 and 5:02 per km up to the 30 km mark, but remained comfortably in third place. From 30km onwards, I was mostly running at >5:00 pace, but that didn't bother me anymore. I knew there would be no PB, so the focus was on 3<sup>rd</sup> place. For the first time ever in a marathon, I was regularly looking over my shoulder and protecting a placing. My focus at this point was to stay out of eyesight of the fellow in 4<sup>th</sup> place so that he wouldn't get inspired and pick up the pace.



Up to 38km, I was still running by myself and couldn't see anyone behind me, so started to believe that I would actually finish 3<sup>rd</sup>. However, I lost concentration at one of the road crossings and kept going straight instead of turning right after crossing the road. The volunteers had stopped the traffic in both directions for me to cross the road but failed to notice that I had missed the turn. As I ran on along the road, I felt that something wasn't right and my fears were realized when I heard some faint shouting behind me. I turned around and to my horror, saw one of the volunteers running after me screaming and frantically waving at me to come back.

I think I must have run about 400m the wrong way and cursed myself as I ran all the way back to the road – all the time thinking that I had just blown 3<sup>rd</sup> place. As I neared the road, I saw that the fellow in 4<sup>th</sup> place was about 200m from the road – so cursed myself again and pulled out a 4:31km. Amazing what you can do when you're challenged. I didn't have much left in the tank after this effort and just wanted to finish, so could only plod along and recorded my slowest km at 41km. I knew I would have to run close to 43 kilometres because of the extra 800m I had run earlier. I remember looking over my shoulder on the final straight to the finish line and could see the fellow in 4<sup>th</sup> place and it looked like he was gaining on me, so I figured if I could run a faster last kilometre, he would need to pull out something special to beat me – so ended up running a final kilometre at 4:39 – and that was enough to secure third place.

Usually as I cross the finish line in a marathon, I just give a sedate fist pump, but since this was a special occasion (finishing third), I thought I would be a little more animated – so crossed the finish line waving my arms around like a goose. The winner's time was 2:58.45 and second was 2:59.31 – then a massive 20 minutes to me in third place with an official time of 3:21.59. 12 minutes outside a PB, but I was absolutely delighted. For the same race in 2012, my time would have given me 3<sup>rd</sup> place and in 2013, 6<sup>th</sup> place – so got lucky this year. As soon as I finished, a finisher's medal was draped around my neck and a photo taken for posterity. About 30 minutes later, the presentation ceremony was held and I received aboriginal rhythm sticks as a prize for 3<sup>rd</sup> place.



I would have to say that the Outback Marathon provides the best post-race recovery snacks, with lashings of hot soup, sandwiches, muffins, fruit, as well as the usual water and energy drinks. I just pulled up a chair and watched the other runners come in as I waited for my brother. He eventually came in 35<sup>th</sup> place with a time of 4:16:27.



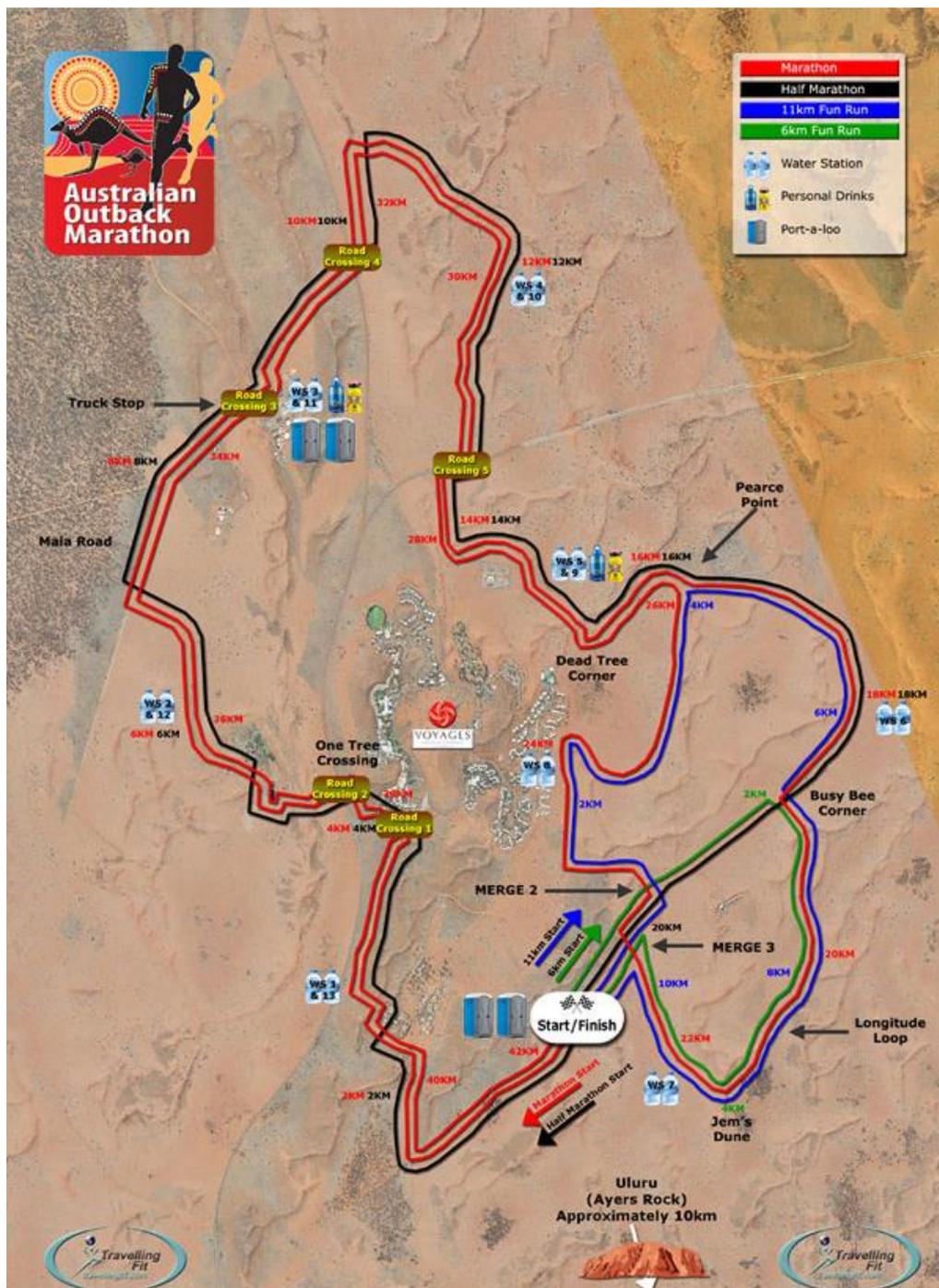
After the race, we went back to the resort and relaxed for the rest of the day before indulging in a delicious banquet and a Heathcote red at dinner. This was my first drop of alcohol since March. The following day, we commenced our marathon recovery program which consisted of hiking around Uluru and Kata Tjuta for the next two days before we returned home.

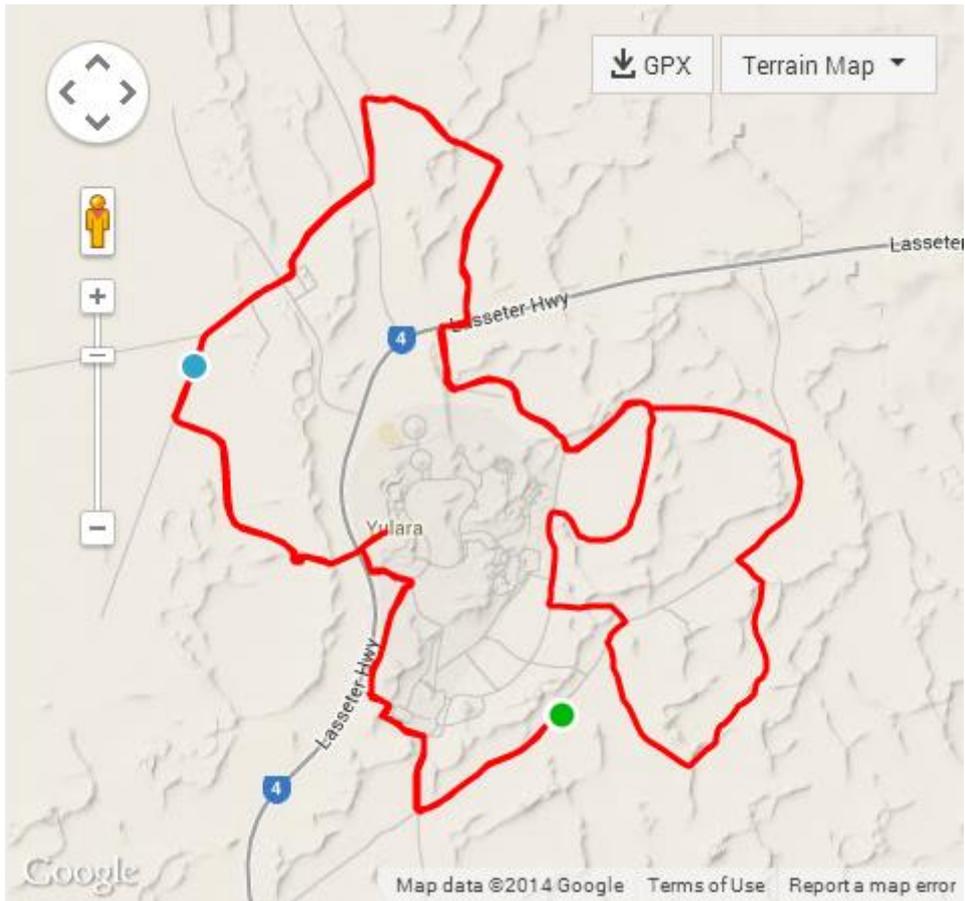
I am running better now in my middle age than at any other time in my life and I have the Milers to thank for that. I joined the Milers in May 2013 and have received the most wonderful support, and encouragement in all aspects of running which has helped me improve enormously over this time. I am doing sessions that I never would have dreamt up or done by myself. The camaraderie of the Milers is fantastic and I have made lots of new friends – so a huge thanks to all of the Milers for the part that you have each played to help me run PBs in 5km, 10km, half marathon and marathon distances.

Special thanks to my running mentor (Xmas) who has been a regular training partner over a number of years and has provided valuable training tips, advice and guidance to help me reach my goals.

So, no PB at the Outback Marathon, but maybe that would come in Sydney in 8 weeks time, but that's another story.....

Refer to the following pages for the course map, race analysis and splits.





Race Analysis



Lap	Distance	Time	Pace	GAP	Elev
1	1.0 km	4:12	4:12 /km	4:11 /km	0 m
2	1.0 km	4:11	4:11 /km	4:07 /km	4 m
3	1.0 km	4:14	4:14 /km	4:16 /km	-3 m
4	1.0 km	4:08	4:08 /km	4:13 /km	-5 m
5	1.0 km	4:12	4:12 /km	4:07 /km	5 m
6	1.0 km	4:20	4:20 /km	4:24 /km	-4 m
7	1.0 km	4:18	4:18 /km	4:22 /km	-3 m
8	1.0 km	4:15	4:15 /km	4:16 /km	-1 m
9	1.0 km	4:23	4:23 /km	4:26 /km	-3 m
10	1.0 km	4:19	4:19 /km	4:21 /km	-2 m
11	1.0 km	4:17	4:17 /km	4:18 /km	-1 m
12	1.0 km	4:44	4:44 /km	4:42 /km	2 m
13	1.0 km	4:24	4:24 /km	4:21 /km	2 m
14	1.0 km	4:18	4:18 /km	4:13 /km	5 m
15	1.0 km	4:30	4:30 /km	4:33 /km	-3 m
16	1.0 km	4:35	4:35 /km	4:34 /km	1 m
17	1.0 km	4:29	4:29 /km	4:29 /km	0 m
18	1.0 km	4:31	4:31 /km	4:32 /km	-2 m
19	1.0 km	4:29	4:29 /km	4:26 /km	2 m
20	1.0 km	4:37	4:37 /km	4:34 /km	3 m
21	1.0 km	4:44	4:44 /km	4:40 /km	3 m
22	1.0 km	4:52	4:52 /km	4:58 /km	-6 m
23	1.0 km	4:45	4:45 /km	4:40 /km	5 m
24	1.0 km	4:59	4:59 /km	5:07 /km	-6 m
25	1.0 km	5:01	5:01 /km	5:00 /km	1 m
26	1.0 km	5:02	5:02 /km	5:05 /km	-3 m
27	1.0 km	4:41	4:41 /km	4:38 /km	2 m
28	1.0 km	4:58	4:58 /km	5:03 /km	-4 m
29	1.0 km	4:33	4:33 /km	4:35 /km	-2 m
30	1.0 km	4:53	4:53 /km	4:54 /km	0 m
31	1.0 km	5:19	5:19 /km	5:12 /km	4 m
32	1.0 km	4:58	4:58 /km	5:06 /km	-6 m
33	1.0 km	5:04	5:04 /km	5:00 /km	3 m
34	1.0 km	5:09	5:09 /km	5:10 /km	0 m
35	1.0 km	5:06	5:06 /km	5:03 /km	3 m
36	1.0 km	5:05	5:05 /km	5:04 /km	0 m
37	1.0 km	5:17	5:17 /km	5:11 /km	4 m
38	1.0 km	5:08	5:08 /km	5:05 /km	0 m
39	1.0 km	4:31	4:31 /km	4:35 /km	-4 m
40	1.0 km	5:08	5:08 /km	5:03 /km	4 m
41	1.0 km	5:20	5:20 /km	5:16 /km	2 m
42	1.0 km	5:01	5:01 /km	5:04 /km	-3 m
43	1.0 km	4:39	4:39 /km	4:39 /km	0 m
44	0.0 km	1s	3:26 /km	—	0 m