

## **Oxfam Trailwalker 2014**

**By Ewen "Smurf" Vowels**

### ***Melbourne Midday Milers team 59***

Richard 'Dozer' Does – Instigator, organiser and team captain. A great mate who invited me into the Milers fold in late 2011. Previous winner in 2009 and runner up in 2012.

David 'Smoothy' Venour – Running royalty with the best looking hair in the field. Previous winner in 2009 and runner up in 2012. Took a spot in Dozer's team after House pulled the plug on a record attempt.

Anthony 'Mitho' Mithen – Previously walked Oxfam in 22 hours but keen to experience the challenge of a faster attempt. Was foolishly suckered in to the madness by Dozer.

Ewen 'Smurf' Vowels – Previously jog/walked Oxfam in 2012. Was also foolishly suckered in to the madness by Dozer.

### ***Pipedreams and nightmares***

I think it was Dozer who first brought up the topic of Oxfam. He must have taken a knock to the head because I thought he was done with the event. He said he wasn't going for the record again and was looking to field a "slower" Miler team. I said I thought that sounded interesting and next thing I knew he'd locked me into an ironbound contract.

When the team was first filled out we were all in decent shape and 11-13 hours sounded achievable.

However the fates weren't kind to us over the next sixth months.

Mitho had eight weeks off with stress fractures to the back. He made an impressive comeback doing three Ultras in Victoria and New Zealand in the lead up to the event.

Dozer was hospitalised with heart and lung issues, and as a result missed a lot of training over the summer.

Smoothy was in fine form winning the Maroondah Dam 30km but then tore his hamstring 4 weeks out.

Not to understate the issues that my teammates had but the last three months of 2013 were the hardest three months of my life and it was compounded by the fact that my usual stress outlet (running) was not available due to injury.

Since early last year I had been struggling with hip flexor issues which turned into Osteitis Pubis (OP), this first surfaced during Two Bays January 2013 and was very bad after 5Ms in March 2013. An injury interrupted Melbourne marathon campaign ended up with a painful and soul crushing race and mild stress fractures to both sides of my pelvis.

Following this my uncle passed away in November after a prolonged and horrible battle with cancer.

To cap off a devastating three months my dad passed away suddenly on Christmas Eve. I was shattered.

It's fair to say I was not in a good way. I ate like I was still training, over imbibed and wallowed in my own misery. In a 3 month period that John 'The Job' Hand would be proud of I stacked on the weight to the tune of 11-12kg.

### ***The Road To***

Now that the race is out of the way, I have a confession to make.

Just before the race I checked my running data for this year. I was underdone. Horribly underdone. To the point where my teammates would have given me the boot (and spat on me) if they'd known just how little running I had done for an event of this nature. I kept offering to Dozer to find a replacement but he insisted I was legally obliged to stay on the team.

My only saving grace was I was finally able to ride the bike in January and so I started back the hard way trying to keep up with Paul 'PM' Martinico and his super fit cycling mates. It was a sufferfest but gave me the rude wakeup call I needed to kickstart some training and dieting.

My training plan was simple; always make it out to the Wednesday morning WKK run, ride as hard and fast as I could every Saturday morning, do 20 minutes of physio exercises a day and lots of rest days after long runs. I did have a solid block of training towards the end; we did a combined Alpha/Beta team run in the Dandenongs (46km which nearly killed Racer and myself), 30+20km the next weekend, 5Ms the next week and finally 45km with Dozer and Racer at Warburton. My speed work was irrelevant and non-existent – really just getting dragged around the Tan by Hally, LG and Slips on a Wednesday morning.

Total running distance covered from October 14<sup>th</sup> to December 31<sup>st</sup> 2013: 1.5km (not a typo)

Weekly totals from January 1<sup>st</sup> 2014 to April 31<sup>st</sup>:

0, 9.57, 15.19, 26.42, 20.4, 26.55, 45.36, 54.85, 39.38, 77.73, 67.38, 80.85, 31.98, 68.74, 55.83, 25.7, 4

Total running in 4 months: 649.91km (less than Joji's monthly KMs) in 58 hours @ 38.2km per week.

Riding training (mostly January-March): 765km in 28 hours (all good cardio workouts of 3-4 hours).

Time and dollars spent at physio, doctors and massage: A lot

Anzac Day team lunch at Balnarring was an eye opener. Dozer hit us with his spreadsheet showing kilometre split guesstimates and a finish time that was way faster than I was mentally prepared for. For someone who wanted to have a "slower" attempt, it wasn't that much off his previous cracking races.

### ***Race Day***

I am not normally scared of a race or a challenge, but in this case I was. Not so much the formidable distance (which is daunting), but the fear that I would let the team down. Given the training the

other guys had put in and my lack of training combined with long term injury issues I felt like a pretender. There was a very real possibility that the body would just give up and I'd have to step off. It just goes to show that there's a very different set of motivators when it comes to a team event. I can't speak for everyone else, but I'm sure that none of them want to be the weakest link in the chain – and that's exactly how I was feeling.

The other key motivator was that last time I did Oxfam in 2012 my dad was part of the support team – so I wanted to do the best job I could in his memory.

Stayed overnight at my mum's in Blackburn since Rach (Mrs Smurf) needed to get the kids to school. Woke up at 5am to eat, tape feet and pack bags. Took a wrong turn on the way to Jell's but thankfully was there in time. Found Dozer and Mitho easily enough and transferred my gear to Stacey's (Mrs Dozer) car. 4 spare pairs of shoes was overkill but given the weather forecast it was better to be over prepared than not. At the last minute we were introduced to Dozer's mate Paul Cooper (Coops) who was working with Stacey as part of our support team. Smoothy was near the registration area so we headed there and got our bibs and nervously awaited the start.

**Caveat:** My recollections of the day are a bit hazy, my team mates are welcome to correct or disagree with any or all of this. Some of it may be out of order too. Who knows?

#### *START TO CP1 12.4km (Jells Park to Churchill National Park)*

There was a call over the PA that the race was about to start so we moved to the start line and found the Melbourne Midday Milers Beta team. They'd clearly gotten the memo about the team singlets and really looked the part in Miler Red. A few quick words of encouragement and we were off and racing.

A few KMs in and Stephen 'House' Paine and John 'The Job' Hand were on marshalling duties. We had a betting pool to see if The Job would have a beer in hand (he didn't) but it was nice to see them nonetheless. The field had quickly spread out and a team in grey hit the front and were soon out of sight. Mitho dropped back to say hi to the Betas then caught back up as we settled in to our rhythm. That left two similar paced teams around us – Trails Plus Girls (who we knew were quality Ultra runners) and a bunch of Lawyers (Foley's List).

Everyone was in good spirits and we chatted away. I decided to play bad cop and put the handbrake on when we sped up to 4:30 on the flat. There was no way I wanted to overdo it early on. We were fourth on the road at this point but overtook the Trails Plus team before CP1.

#### *CP1 TO CP2 8.8km (Churchill National Park to Lysterfield Lake)*

The team in 2<sup>nd</sup> was just up ahead and each time they walked a hill we walked as well – no point blowing a gasket. There were kangaroos all around us and Churchill was every bit as beautiful as ever. Over the top of the last hill in Churchill Dozer put the hammer down (not sure why), clearly he'd been doing some work on his downhill running and he was soon out of sight.

First stop of the day and Stacey and Coops had everything laid out perfectly. At times like this you realise the benefit of top notch support. A very quick turnaround followed with some of Garth 'Licka' Calder's potatoes (boiled and salted potatoes), fluid refills and a banana for the trail.

### *CP2 TO CP3 11km (Lysterfield Lake to Ferntree Gully)*

Spirits were still high and we made very good time along the trail and through the streets of Ferntree Gully. I caught my foot at some point and in regaining my balance I felt the groin and pelvis complain violently. Oh oh...

As we got into Upwey it was clear that Mitho should not be at the front as he was confused as to which side left was when directed to cross the road by the volunteers. I dropped a gel and Smoothy picked it up, I'm ashamed to say that later in the day when the legs were shot I did not repay the favour when he dropped a drink bottle (sorry Smoothy).

Later I had a chat with Smoothy about his motivation for joining us – when House's record attempt plans fell through he decided he may as well sign up. Not that I'm complaining, it's a huge boost to the team to have such a gun runner along for the ride. If he is feeling any discomfort it certainly doesn't show, he just jogs along effortlessly mile after mile.

OP (tightness/pain) is starting to rear its ugly head. Was hoping it would hold out until 50-60km. I have Voltaren in the backpack just in case but want to hold off as long as possible before using it.

### *CP3 TO CP4 10.9km (Ferntree Gully to Olinda)*

The Thousand Steps in Ferntree Gully marks the start of one of the hardest stages of the day. It's a relatively short stage but none of it is flat and all of it is steep. Support crew are perfectly setup and ready to go, Dozer and I elect to change to trail shoes and we kick off again.

Immediately up the Thousand Steps the pecking order is settled. Dozer first, Smoothy second, myself and then Mitho bringing up the vanguard. Mitho is feeling the pinch early on, which surprises me since he'd had the most long training leading into the event. It shows that despite the best preparation, the body can do weird things on the day. At the top of the climb Dozer does a Mitho and gets his left and right mixed up and almost heads the wrong way, despite some locals telling him repeatedly to go the other way.

Strangely enough, the change from running on flat to walking steep hills seems to have settled the OP discomfort – for which I'm very grateful. I'm starting to feel a lot better as we go on the roller coaster of sharp climbs and steep descents. The final climb up to Olinda is a very long and steep one (320m gain in 3.2km), Mitho is hurting a lot at this point. We keep checking he's in sight as we continue to push on. Light rain and strong winds make it very cold all of a sudden. We keep expecting the heavens to open but it thankfully holds off.

Just over the top of the hill the first Marathon ticks over – I tell Dozer that I still get excited every time I see 42.2km on the Garmin, then reality kicks in when we realise we still have one and half more Marathons to go.

At the checkpoint another Miler (Anthony 'AW' Weiland) has joined the support crew. Great to have him on board, he takes over duties to look after Mitho for the rest of the day which hopefully makes it easier for Stacey and Coops.

We're 15 minutes ahead of schedule, which unfortunately means we just beat Stacey and Coops to the checkpoint and it's their turn to panic as they rush to get everything setup. They do a great job despite all this and we're quickly sorted.

#### *CP4 TO CP5 15.1km (Olinda to Graham Colling Reserve)*

My fingers were cold and numb and I struggled with the simple task of refilling the water bladder in my backpack. I somehow managed to pop the top off it and spray myself and the backpack with a lot of cold water. Mitho and Dozer headed off as I tried again to fix the problem and I got even clumsier as I tried to rush the process – stupid fingers. I put on some arm warmers and ran to catch up to the boys.

A few hundred meters into the descent Mitho caught his foot and his calf cramped. Not a good sign with well over 50Ks to go. He stretched it out and said he was ok, but it was clearly bothering him. As expected Mitho, Smoothy and I put large chunks of time into Dozer on the steep and slippery descent out of Olinda. It still perplexes me how a guy who goes uphill so fast, can be slow downhill. I guess it's just all part of the enigma of the great man.

The section of fire trail from Olinda to Mt Evelyn must rank as some of the worst on the whole course. There's large and small rocks, each of which seems sharp and most are unavoidable and by the time we make the football ground at Mt Evelyn our feet are battered and bruised. I wish I'd swapped to thick soled road shoes for this section, the thin trail shoes I had on were way too thin to absorb the punishment.

Off the trail and up a track to Graham Colling we cursed the extra distance we had to travel in order to get to the sign in tent. We ended up running through an equestrian dressage area which was soft gravel – not the smartest decision. The day could have ended very badly here as Smoothy grabbed a heavy fence rail for balance. The rail proceeded to break away from the fence and fall on him. We extricated him from the chaos and he seemed ok, but said it caused his bad hamstring to spasm. The hair was still immaculate so all was not lost.

Some welcome and friendly faces awaited us here. In addition to the support crew was the great Anthony 'AL' Lee (previous winner with Dozer and Smoothy) and my previous team mate Liz and her baby Max. It was very nice to see our friends and a huge boost to morale. If you are ever in the position to stop in and cheer on an Oxfam team – do it, it means the world to us.

The support crew has done everything again. The shoes we wanted are ready to go. Water bottles refilled and mixed with electrolytes. Most of us have opted for a shoe change and Smoothy has a massive blister on his foot which is surely going to hurt the rest of the day. I give him a liberal smear of Vaseline over the blister and hope it will help stave off any further damage. The Trails Plus Girls check in as we check out, they're slowly gaining and we know that it's a matter of time until they catch us.

#### *CP5 TO CP6 13.2km (Graham Colling Reserve to Woori Yallock)*

Say our good byes then we are quickly back on the Warby trail for a very long but easy section.

Most people dread this section of trail. For me it's the opposite – I've done this trail at least fifteen times each way on bike, on foot or a combination thereof. We've had plenty of great family rides from Lilydale to Warburton, stayed the night then rode back. In fact I like it so much I've run both ways on a weekend when training for Oxfam in 2012 (45km Saturday and 42.2km Sunday). I find it almost meditative to just trundle along this stretch of trail. Unfortunately it is also now tinged with sadness since my dad always was the main support person for these family trips.

I am well and truly in my element here. Slow easy running at 5:15 is what I'm good at. I'm feeling great and believe I could hold this all the way to the Aqueduct. This is irrelevant because this is a team event and Mitho is finding the 5:15 a pinch too much. We slow down and start adding some walk sections to help him out. It's been a while since he's said anything and judging by the look on his face it's not a pleasant time on the trail.

I did get a bit emotional coming in to Woori Yallock Station as this is where John (my dad) would always meet us with a big tray of pastries from the Woori Yallock bakery. I moved to the front to have a bit of a tear in private but it soon passed and I resolved to keep pushing to the end of the race.

The support team was again on their game, with another flawless setup ready for us at the primary school. Not that he'd ever say it but I think Dozer has just about had enough; it's definitely going to be a rough last 28.6km.

#### *CP6 TO CP7 21.8km (Woori Yallock to Warburton Golf Club)*

As we left the comfort of the Woori Yallock primary school the Trails Plus Girls are checking in. We give them some high fives and head back for some more Warby trail slogging. They've gained some time on us and we know the writing is on the wall.

Mitho and now Dozer are at their limit. The calls for "walkies" are coming every few kilometres. I try to get us going after each 250m break as the longer I spend walking, the harder it is to get going again. They may hate me for it but at least if we are slowly jogging, the time to finish is coming down faster. Mitho and Dozer don't complain. In fact, at this point I'm not sure Mitho can talk. He has gone deep into the hurt locker and is sucking up the punishment without a word of dissent. I can only imagine what he's feeling, but I know he won't give up.

At this point Dozer looks like he's hit the wall, or might be about to hit me if I tell him to run again.

No idea what the other guys are going through as there's very little talk, but I'm sure they are having an internal dialogue along the lines of "when will it stop" or "I hate the Warby trail" or "I'll jog to the next tree" or "F\*\*\* I hate Smurf". Who knows? I'll leave that to them to divulge.

All along the trail one of the Trails Plus support crew keep leapfrogging us to cheer their team on at each road. The gap between his appearances is shorter and shorter as they close in on us. Could be part of their tactics to wear us down? Well it's clearly working.

Our own support crew break the monotony of the trail with a much needed sip of coke at a cross roads. Always nice to see them in the distance! In hindsight we should have grabbed more water though.

We hold the girls off through Millgrove and out toward the road to the Aqueduct Trail. My Garmin watch clearly has an ego as it ironically decides to run out of battery about 500m before the Trails Plus Girls finally pass us. I had been secretly harbouring thoughts of finishing a race without getting “chicked” for once but it looks like that will have to wait – my hat goes off to them as they are clearly in better shape and they still look comfortable running four abreast in lockstep. Well done girls.

The road up to the Aqueduct is long and gets steeper with every step. Some SES volunteers drive past in their four wheel drive and shake their heads in disbelief that we are not coming first. Clearly they thought they had a lot more time to clear the upcoming trails. We see the SES team several times over the next few hours as they clear the trees which have fallen in the past week.

Mitho and I are well off the back of the other two at the top of the road but we know that the Aqueduct trail is relatively flat and easy so we’re not too worried.

First real error of the day in terms of planning. Mitho and I both run out of fluids on the Aqueduct trail. Thankfully Dozer and Smoothy have some reserves to share, but it could have gotten very bad if they’d gone dry too.

We’ve hit an awkward team dynamic here, Dozer and Mitho would clearly prefer walking but Smoothy and I would rather keep jogging slowly. Every time we start or stop jogging the hips, groin, pelvis and lower abdominals complain fiercely. Thank you OP. It’s amazing that the body would prefer to run at all but nevertheless Smoothy and I find ourselves in this predicament. I think Mitho and Dozer are feeling a bit better and we do a fair bit of running along the Aqueduct.

Smoothy is the time keeper now and he assures us that if we can hold it together then our sub 12 hour goal is still in touch. The hill down from the Aqueduct to the checkpoint is just quad smashing pain. How can downhill feel worse than flat or uphill? Another oddity of these long endurance events.

Finally at the Warburton Golf Club – Rach and my daughter Lily are here as well as Smoothy’s wife Jann. It’s such a big boost to see them at this point. We know we’re close to home but we really need all the help we can get at this point. My tactful wife and daughter both comment about my delightful aroma after a quick hug and kiss – sorry ladies, how do you think we’d smell after 10 hours on the road?

### *CP7 TO FINISH 6.8km (Warburton Golf Club to Wesburn)*

The support team has everything laid out for one last refuel. This time potatoes, followed by Jelly Beans washed down by half a bottle of coke. Not exactly textbook but at this point anything will do!

We all don our Milers Red singlets and say our farewells to the family and crew.

Did I mention that some of the day is a bit hazy. That could be because the brain turns to porridge after pushing so hard for so long. About 500m past the checkpoint I realise I forgot to get my headlamp. I remember I was looking for it, then we got the call to go to the check point – I would have kicked myself if I’d had the energy to do so. There’s zero chance of me turning around to get it, so I hope the twilight holds out long enough before I have to run in the dark.

We make it up the first hard climb and it is now pitch black. We leapfrog the SES volunteers again who are hard at work clearing another tree which has fallen across the track. Dozer is clearly in the same porridge brain situation as myself and can't tighten his headlamp strap which I am happy to assist with – the cost of which is that he has to let me run next to him so I can see where the hell I'm going.

Observation – Dozer and Mitho both have head lamps but the Smooth one has an old fashioned torch. I spend a few minutes trying to work out why when it dawns on me that it would ruffle his tremendous hairstyle. One must always maintain appearances – nice one Smoothy.

Thankfully the boys generously let me share their light beams for the rest of the night. It's a big PITA for them but there's no other option due to my brain fade at the previous checkpoint. The following few Ks are flat but rocky so it's treacherous terrain when you are tired. A few stumbles but we all stay upright.

Mitho has come good and is leading the way. Second last descent is hell - it's long and steep. You can't see where it ends and by this point even the tireless Smoothy has had enough. More words are said in this section than in the previous 2 hours, most of them begin with F... True to form Dozer drops off the back but we see his light behind us and call out to make sure he's ok, we keep plodding because we know he'll catch us very quickly on the final ascent.

The last climb is short and very steep. The run off channels are big speed humps which make it very hard to climb over. Mentally it gets easier as we know there's no more climbing after this. The SES crew come up the trail behind us and disappear into the distance. We keep looking for the turn off, but it seems to take forever to get to the top.

We turn onto a small flat section then finally spot we have all been waiting for. The view from the top of the descent is a sight for sore eyes, you can see the finish tent and the flood lights in the distance. One more tricky descent over slippery grass and rocks and we're on the home trail. The SES crew tell us there's only 800 meters to go – you have no idea how good that sounds. Smoothy informs us he can run that in just over two minutes – knowing him he can probably do it. The rest of us are happy to jog as we know now that we have sub-12 well and truly covered.

Any pain we've been feeling dissipates when we see the finishing chute. The PA calls out "Melbourne Midday Milers" and there's cheers from the support team, the volunteers and loudest of all from the four of us. We did it. Great to see Mitho spark up!

Triumph. Relief. Elation. Jubilation. Words can't adequately describe the explosive combination of emotions when we crossed the line. Suffice to say we were a very happy group of Milers.

Massive hugs and kisses with the support crew and family. Just what we needed, even if the smell must have killed them.

After checking in to the final checkpoint we had a few photos taken – Dozer needed help to get up a ramp to have a team photo taken and I almost fell over while standing still on said ramp.

The Trails Plus Girls are celebrating with beer and we congratulate each other a great race and battle. They smashed the existing ladies record by over an hour!



I celebrated with 2 Voltaren and the best tasting burger that Rach bought me.

One last hug with Dozer and we're on our way home. There's a stream of wet and tired walkers still on the trail, we beep to show support.

One last insight into Smoothy – he says that the best part of finishing fast is watching everyone else suffering while you are headed home warm and dry.



### **Aftermath**

We had finished 3<sup>rd</sup> in 11:44:46 – well ahead of the 12 hour goal. For the record I honestly thought 12 hours was a fantasy given our preparation.

My team is remarkable in every sense. It is hard to find such a tough group of individuals. The trail was very quiet the last 2 stages, but we knew that we were all there for each other.

Apparently I lack Smoothy's flexibility to reach over my shoulder and grab a bottle from a backpack while jogging at full pace. My team mates humoured me by getting my water bottle in and out of my backpack every time I asked for it – if they resented it they kept it to themselves.

Next time I'd advise the team not to take an idiot who can't remember to bring a torch for night time trail running. Thanks for keeping me safe.

Mitho had a very tough day out - from the Dandenongs onwards he was struggling physically. However he persevered without a word of complaint and would jog when asked to (even if he wanted to stop). He's not returned my calls so maybe we pushed him too hard?

Smoothy is a freak - in the best possible way of course. He can run fast or slow and never appears to tire. He had some nasty blister issues but didn't let it slow him down, if it had been hair issues that may have been another matter.

Dozer – He tears along the flat so easily, can fly up a mountain like a gazelle, yet descends like a grandpa on a walking frame. He's also been there for me when I've needed him over the last six months.

Smoothy and Dozer now have Gold, Silver and Bronze from three Oxfam attempts. You can't beat that pedigree. Well done you two.

What an experience, one I won't ever forget. We were disparate group of runners who all dug very deep on the day to achieve a great result. It was a privilege to be part of something special.

As rewarding as running solo is, it's hard to compare to the satisfaction of completing such a tough event with a team of good mates.

Personally I've never achieved a podium finish for any race before, but for it to happen so unexpectedly and as part of this Milers team was phenomenal. I rank this up there with my 2012 Marathon PB.

Congratulations to the Beta Milers. 9<sup>th</sup> place with two last minute replacements. What an effort!

### ***Thanks***

Firstly to our stellar support crew, families and friends:

To Stacey, Paul and AW who made the day so easy for us. We were perfectly looked after throughout the day and it was always a big boost to see them on the trail as we arrived at each checkpoint. The reality of the event is that you can't finish unless you are well supported on route. You need food, drink and most importantly encouragement and comfort to finish the day. Thanks to all of you.

To Rach, Lily and Jann who were there at Warburton when we needed the lift.

To AL and Liz who made the effort to drive out and cheer us on in person. Thanks for supporting us on the day.

To our donors:

Thanks for your generosity in supporting our team this year.

To the Milers:

Thanks for all the support, messages and encouragement.

Ps. Licka's potatoes are gold. If you are planning an endurance event of any kind, then you need these in your arsenal.