

Rewind the clock 12 months to Oxfam 2013 where I had eagerly volunteered to help out GG (Glenn Goodman) with checkpoint co-ordinator duties at Graham Colling checkpoint. I started the day by clumsily slicing a rather substantial gash in the webbing of my right hand, but finished the day full of adrenaline from having witnessed other team's endeavours, their phenomenal support crews and the vast number of volleys that rock up looking for ways to help out. By the time I got to bed there was little doubt I'd be participating in 2014.

Putting the original team back together was not an option. AL (Anthony Lee) had retired from competitive running while House (Steve Paine) and Smoothy (Dave Venour) looked like they'd be running with a super team that was being assembled.

Still wounded by the consequences of my body letting me down in 2012, I decided I wanted the 2014 campaign to be all about the experience and camaraderie, and really didn't care much about the finishing position. 23 May 2013 I sent the following email to Smurf (Ewen Vowels), Licka (Garth Calder) and Bacchus (Paul Marsh).

Subject: Nibble nibble

There's a little imp sitting on my shoulder that won't leave me alone. He keeps telling me I want to do Oxfam again, and I think he's got me convinced. Any interest from you guys for 2014? I know it's a loooong way away, but you need a loooooong time to build up for it.

I'm not interested in chasing records this time around, to try and fail again would send me to ga-ga land for good. In any event, it looks like House and Smoothy are assembling a super power that is capable of putting the thing well out of reach of us plodders.

My motivation is that this is an awesome event to be involved in as part of a team, and is an experience worth every minute of the hell you will go through at various stages. I reckon over this distance we'd be well matched in terms of capability. My goal would simply be for us to run (very slowly) as far as we are capable on the day, without worrying too much about the clock and raise some money for Oxfam too. I'm guessing we'd be in the 11-12 hours space.

Anyways, have a think and let me know. At least now the imp is off my shoulder and on to yours :)

All responded with enthusiasm, but Licka was unable to commit due to work travel requirements and Bacchus decided he wanted to focus on Tokyo marathon. Smurf babbled on about how his body was being held together by fraying pieces of string, but he forgot to say 'no'! That was good enough for me, I had one team mate.

In the weeks that followed I heard on the grapevine that Mitho (Anthony Mithen) was keen, so we soon had a 3. When the super team failed to materialise and House instead locked himself in to Tokyo marathon, Smoothy was swiftly approached and seemed quite comfortable (dare I say it, relieved) with the idea of running with a slower team. So we had our final four. When you consider all that happened in the months that followed, it's quite remarkable that there were no forced changes to the line up.

I was stoked when it became apparent that Rafa (Dale Nardella) was assembling a 2nd Midday Miler team, which would become known as the Beta's. The original team included Xmas (Glenn Carroll), Damo (Damien Arnold) and Coalminer (Gerard Koelmeyer). Lord knows how many Oxfam emails and chats Rafa and I have exchanged over the past 8 months. Unfortunately injuries intervened to knock out Damo and Coalminer, but so it goes that the records will show Racer (Rory Heddles) and GG (Glenn Goodman) swapped the red substitute vest for the red Miler singlet with minutes to spare.

Apologies must go to 700 (Rob Dalton) as there was a bit of confusion on his return from that crazy NZ ultra. I'm still not sure who/how/what/where he was told he was in one of the teams, but our wires obviously got crossed somewhere. Fair to say he'd have been a very handy addition to either team, possibly the best of the lot over this distance. Thanks for understanding our misunderstanding Rob.

So with the team settled, I mapped out my training program. It included pacing the 3 hour group at Melbourne marathon in October, Marysville 50km in November, Two Bays 56km in early January and thereafter a few 50 – 70km training runs on the Oxfam course. Great plan.

6 days prior to Melbourne marathon I'm in the back of an ambulance gasping for air. By the time the marathon was done, Smurf had shattered his pelvis. So much for plans! At least Mitho's progress was looking a little better as he headed to NZ for a challenging trail run. Smoothy was largely being consumed by work, however occasionally he'd turn up to a lunch time session and smash the group so all seemed good there.

It would be 10 weeks before I could undertake any exercise at all, it certainly felt much longer. Amazing how quickly us runners fall into the abyss when we can't train regularly. Three failed comeback attempts before I could finally walk further than the corner without my heart rate exploding. Thanks to the many of you that monitored me through this period, but especially Marbles whose experience with pleurisy was the guiding light back.

By mid December I was starting to move again. The opportunity to sweep the 56km Two Bays course in early January seemed an ideal platform to relaunch. I'd be on my feet for 8+ hours, forbidden from going past the slowest runner/walker. Coming off such a low base it was a very tiring day, very enjoyable though, and I took some confidence out of being able to keep moving forward for such an extended period. However I needed to carefully manage my return to full fitness, and so it turned out that this would be the longest run I would do before Oxfam, in terms of both distance and time.

Smurf was recovering somewhat ok from his physical issues, but the loss of his dad on the eve of Christmas was obviously devastating. Perhaps having Oxfam on the horizon eventually turned out to be a silver lining, somewhat forcing him back to the training track where the endorphins would inevitably kick in to lift his spirit. It was a privilege to spend some time on the Flinders trails with him (and Suzy of course) during this time and to learn about what a remarkable man his dad was. John's life work was largely dedicated to the needs of vulnerable children in our society, and he was clearly a much loved father and grandfather.

Not to do any disservice to Smurf's emotional state, but there was still the rather significant problem that his OP was very obviously affecting his gait. Our first group training run on the trail (Churchill to Mt Evelyn) was a tough day for Smurf, and you couldn't help but wonder whether his body was ready for it. Smurf kept offering to stand aside given his predicament, and kept babbling on about how his body was being held together by fraying pieces of string, but I kept waving such nonsense away. We'd become pretty close mates via recent events, and I seriously wanted to cross the finish line of this together. "You're not getting out of this" was my message to him, but I won't deny Smoothy, Mitho and I were starting to investigate what sort of headlamp we might need.

On our last long training run Smurf's luck changed, in a glass half full kind of way. A sink hole opened up under his foot as we ran along the Aqueduct trail, it was at least shin deep. He had a nasty fall, but could easily have snapped his leg. As I upped the tempo on the last couple of km's of that run, he went past me like I was standing still. Fellow Midday Milers might say he Dozered me. Off the back of a strong performance at 5M's a week earlier, you could sense he was back.

A week prior to the event the team and families gathered for lunch on a stunning autumn day in Balnarring. In order to give the support crew some very rough guidelines as to when we might arrive at each checkpoint, I'd had a go at putting a spreadsheet together. Based on starting out at 5 min/km pace and allowing for the impact of the hills, checkpoints and inevitable slow down, the estimated finish time was 11 hours. Smurf nearly choked on his wagyu burger, Mitho went very quiet and Smoothy said something about "this was meant to be a slow team". I assured everyone that I didn't think we had a hope in hell of achieving 11 hours, it's just that I couldn't possibly guess where the walking would start. Never the less, with an hour up our sleeve it did give me some confidence that 12 hours was not an unreasonable goal.

The day after the lunch was Stacey's 50km walk. Although starting at Jells and finishing at Ferny Creek reserve, only a few kms of trail were the same as Oxfam – most notably the track parallel to the 1000's steps. It was great to switch places and play the support crew role, and she seriously nailed it. Had an awesome day and it was a nice adrenaline booster 6 days out. It also made me appreciate that the hilly sections of the race were very nasty.

So Oxfam day rolls around and the weather forecast was diabolical. Taking this into account we decided to meet at Jells Park at bit later than what would otherwise be the case. Going through the rego area it was nice to see a board showing each year's winning time – our 2009 win still looks good to me ☺ As it turned out the morning was dry and we could have done with the extra 15 mins. In the end we swaggered onto the front of the start line with less than a minute to go on the countdown clock, a quick g'day to some familiar faces, and off.

There's been plenty already written elsewhere as to how things unfolded during the event. If you'd like to read a bit more about the various stages of the event, here's a link to [Smurf's report](#) - Rather than repeat stuff I'll instead stick with Racer's self indulgent philosophy.

Biggest test for me early was the unusual occurrence of struggling to keep my food and fluids down. Not far out of Lysterfield I had a nasty flavoured burp ☹ Fortunately it didn't get any worse than that but I certainly needed to run straight into the toilets at both Olinda and Graham Colling checkpoints to prevent any accidents. Things finally settled after Graham Colling at about 60km.

I can't believe how lucky we got with the weather. As we set off I remember thinking it'd be awesome if it stayed dry just long enough for us to warm up properly. Stacey was carrying pretty much my entire running wardrobe with her in the expectation that we would arrive at each checkpoint soaking wet. As we got closer to the hills, still under dry skies, I dared to think that we might be lucky enough to get up to One Tree Hill before the heavens opened. Given my lack of descending ability, you can imagine how happy I was to then also make it down the other side still dry. And so it went on. We got 10 mins of light drizzle on the approach to Mt Evelyn, and not a drop more. When I later saw a photo of the Beta's miserably dressed in raincoats and beanies, we were getting a considerable advantage further up the road. A set of arm warmers is all that was required to deal with the chilly air.

I carried some trepidation with me on the descent from Olinda. On both previous campaigns by the time we had got to the bottom of the track around the golf club my cramping issues had started to surface. Although my arms (which also cramp) were getting quite sore, my calves were behaving and I was becoming cautiously optimistic that they would stay strong for a good while yet. Turning into the bush past the golf course the descent goes on for quite some time. Parks Vic had clearly spent some time clearing the trails, but some recent fallen trees and branches made a long running game of unders and overs for me. I wondered whether the obstacles I was having to almost crawl under would even be seen by the substantially shorter Trails+ girls who were hot on our heels at this stage. Although the calves were ok, my right adductor was not enjoying this section at all.

Along the Warby trail was an interesting time as the fatigue really set in and Mitho and I needed a walk every couple of km, whereas Smoothy and Smurf bodies were better served by maintaining a slow jog rather than stopping and starting. Alas for them the walkers are always going to win that debate. Keeping in mind we'd barely made it to 50km in our training runs, it was hardly surprising that we were all needing to find ways to deal with our fatigue. Morale remained pretty upbeat and although conversation dried up a bit, I was certainly enjoying the moment and the challenge. Very content to not be chasing a crazy time though. All the while I was quite amused with Mitho's drinking habit – a massive “ahhhhh” immediately followed every sip. I suspect that until he reads this he has no idea he does it. I remember thinking his drink must be tasting better than mine.

If I am to improve over this kind of distance, I need to learn to be able to run slowly. Once the pace drops to 5:15 min/km my gait becomes terribly inefficient and I struggle to settle into a sustainable rhythm. Clearly I'll be better served if I can hold a 5:30 – 6:00 shuffle rather than needing to stop for walks. Also my size 13 shoes were kicking up quite a bit of gravel as we shuffled along, and the resulting stones in my shoes were not appreciated. I was happy to empty them out each checkpoint.

Somewhere along the Warby trails Mitho announces that he had now run further than he'd ever done before. I think it was around 70km. That prompted me to look at my watch for the first time in hours, and strangely it was telling me we'd done 85km! Although I liked that thought, it promptly got ditched at the next checkpoint and I substituted it for a bracelet my youngest son had made for me – worked a treat as it helped me to stay in a happy place. Upon later inspection of the data file, it seems my watch went for a quick solo side trip of its own while I was on the loo at Olinda!

True team spirit on the aqueduct trail as Mitho and Smurf start running out of water on this long section between checkpoints. I think Mitho and I may have superseded the umbilical brothers, Mitho drinking from my bladder (how else can you say it) as we jogged along side by side. Would have made an interesting photo. Mind you the “ahhhhh” was a little more disturbing at close range.

Completing the last section in the dark was a unique experience. My headlamp was fresh out of the box a few days earlier and it fitted a treat so I didn't need to bother with figuring out how to adjust the straps. However I forgot to allow for a pre-race haircut! Looking at the adjustment mechanism on the run and in fading light, for the life of me I couldn't figure it out. I passed it down the line where Smurf's apparent experience with such devices swiftly resolved the situation.

As we headed up the first climb of the last stage indian file on the narrow goat track, there is the occasional 10 metre flattish spot where, with the right motivation, you can jog. I was on the front here and at the first flat spot I endeavoured to break into a jog. Much to Smoothy's amusement, it lasted 2 steps I reckon. Brain fade on my part, and we walked to the top from there.

I quite like Smurf's description that I run downhill like a grandpa with a walking frame. I'm wondering whether a frame might even speed me up. In any event I can assure you I don't get any quicker when the sun goes down.

Some last minute directional challenges before finally making our way out of the bushes and across the finish line. It was very satisfying to get the job done comfortably inside the 12 hour mark. I won't deny I was relieved to get through it this time without any major dramas.

The finish line celebrations at Oxfam are quite unique. There's no-one rushing you away to keep you in order, get timing chips off or anything like that at all. It's a place where you can take as long as you wish with your teammates and support crew, really enjoy the moment and try to take in for a few moments what you have just done.

I'm still scratching my head about Smurf's performance. How on earth he was that strong for that long beggars belief given his preparation. Two days before the event Smurf called me to babble on some more about how his body was once again being held together by fraying pieces of string. He was preparing me for the possibility that if his hips demanded it, then he would need to stop. I wasn't listening.

Smoothy was steady as ever despite starting it with a dodgy hammy and then giving it a fair old wrench when he (rather hilariously in my opinion) fell through the equestrian fence at Graham Colling. As he lay on the ground there I'd say it's the first time I've ever seen him look genuinely pissed off. Probably lucky for someone that he's not still employed by WorkSafe. As he regained his feet and composure, he still had the courtesy to try and put the railing back in place! Three times now we've gone the journey together mate, and we're averaging 10:57. When we started, the course record was 11:20. Fancy a 4th go?

Mitho was the one digging in awfully deep the longest. I think it was somewhere around 70km he announced "longest run I've ever done". Pretty intimidating to reach that point and still have so far to go but you certainly hung tough, made several important decisions under pressure that enabled you to keep it under control and brought it home strong. Well done mate.

Congrats to the Beta's. Rafa prepared meticulously for this and I suspect he'll continue to pursue ultra's and improve. He certainly executes race plans very well, and looks more comfortable than most in the 2nd half of the long stuff. Xmas made a ridiculously quick transition from track to trail, and Racer and GG's efforts off such short notice was super impressive.

Massive thanks to the support crew. Stacey, Coops & AW did an awesome job attending to our every need throughout the day. Apart from the logistics of keeping us fuelled up, your support and encouragement is such an important part of the day. It's amazing how much you look forward to seeing the support crew and to take on board a few encouraging words. Thanks also to AL, Kylie, Natalie, Rachel, Jann, Lilly, Liz and Kim who popped up along the way too. Apologies if I've missed anyone. We all really appreciate you giving up your day to help us over the line.

Thanks also to all others who supported and sponsored us. Your contributions have exceeded \$3,000, and the Beta's have raised a similar amount. Collectively over the 3 campaigns the Midday Milers have now raised approximately \$14,000. That is seriously awesome.

And so the sun sets on another Oxfam. When I look back at the objectives set out in my original email, I'm very content that we ticked all the boxes. Will there be a 4th attempt for me at some stage? I certainly hope so ☺

Pre race, fresh as daisies



Swaggering up to the front of the start line



We're off



Fueling up at CP2, Lysterfield Lake, 21km



**Arriving at CP3, Ferntree Gully picnic ground.
32km**



**Arriving at CP5, Graham Colling Reserve via the
dressage ring which was like running on soft
beach sand, 58km**



Smoothy's trail of destruction



Service with a caring smile, thanks fella



Yes Smoothy, it's that way



**Arriving at CP6, Woori Yallock primary school,
71kms**



Mitho refuelling - "Ahhhhhhh"



Some moments are tougher than others



Support crew in action



**Arriving at checkpoint 7, Warburton golf club,
93km. Happy to see the support crew!**



Home sweet home



Group hug



The team

