

Racer's 2014 Oxfam Trailwalker Report

Melbourne Midday Milers Betas (Rafa, GG, Xmas & Racer)

THE LEADUP

Much of this is only vaguely remembered. What I do remember is that Rafa first floated the idea of putting a team together somewhere around the 2013 Melbourne Marathon. At the time there didn't seem to be many milers NOT floating the idea so the initial conversations were around us being the C team.

I think the initial team was Rafa, Damo, Gerard and Xmas, with Rog and me as emergencies. Not long afterwards Rog started his globe trotting marathon ways and realised he had chewed through too many leave passes, and I was well behind the training program I had planned for myself so we were back peddling at a rate of knots.

Then Damo broke himself and Gerard followed suit which left Rafa sniffing around for replacements. Either he wasn't buying my under trained and overweight excuses or he was so desperate that he didn't care, but he commenced chipping away at my resistance until I gave in and signed up about 6 weeks out, leaving only 1 place to fill.

We were struggling, and GG put himself in the crosshairs by helping out on some of our training runs. Now on the other side of the fence, I wasn't buying any of GG's under trained and old rubbish so Rafa and I put the hard word on him and GG, probably realising that he had me well covered, jumped on board with about 4 weeks to go.

Training was simple; Rafa and Xmas did plenty, I did two runs (45km and 30km) over different sections of the course, and GG jammed as much in as he could given the limited time available to him.

We had a plan, something about heading out at 5:30 pace with 300m walk every 2.7km. I had a fuel belt which held 950ml so I planned to drink about 500ml of Gatorade each CP and have water in the fuel belt. I was also planning to take a sandwich out with me for most legs. You know, really scientific.

RACE DAY

It would be fair to say that for the week or so leading up I was fairly nervous and a little bit scared about how the day would unfold. Nervous is normal, but I had never felt scared about a race before so that was new.

I usually view my chances through rose coloured glasses (marathon predictions anyone) and Oxfam was no different; how hard could walk/running 100km really be? Conversely, Blind Freddy can see 15 hours is a long time to be on your feet, especially since prior to Oxfam training the longest run I'd done was about 3 hours. Also, I was running with 3 team mates I assessed as being in better shape than me.

I think there was a bit of intellectual dishonesty going on as I tried very hard not to reconcile my optimism with Freddy's pessimism.

We got up at 4:00am and left home at 4:45am to collect Adam who, with Marty (Mrs Racer), would be our support crew for the day. Adam was surprisingly chipper which made me think he was likely still drunk from the night before. Having arranged to meet everyone at 6:00am we arrived at Jells Park about 10 minutes early and wandered around for a bit.

It was a fantastic feeling. After planning and talking about it for so long, all the unknowns, it was great to get there and soak up the atmosphere.



Bring it on!

The rest of the team arrived over the next 20 minutes and we were introduced to Andrew, Rafa's mate who formed part of the support crew for most of the race. We completed paperwork, moved gear from car to car, got kitted up etc. Saw Smoothy and said g'day, none of the other Alphas were having a bar of us to the point of dressing incognito to avoid detection!

About 5 minutes before the start we were still finishing things off and had to jog over to the starting chute which by then was pretty much packed. Fortunately the Betas were all wearing our MMM singlets; it was like Moses parting the sea as people moved to allow us to walk through to the start line. I had absolutely no hesitation soaking up the well wishes and high fives from people who had clearly mistaken us for the famous MMM team of 2009 and 2012 ☺

When we got to the front we saw the Alphas and exchanged well wishes in the 45 seconds remaining before the start.

RACE

Its funny, in the earlier stages my recollection of the course is hazy but the CPs is clear, but as the race went on I can remember the race more clearly but not the CPs.

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

Somewhere, somehow, the race plan changed and we headed out at 5:00 pace, although we did stick to the 300m walk in every 3km. Having started at the front we had very little traffic to deal with and

very quickly the field spread out. We did note a team dressed in grey who went flying ahead of everyone else. I suspect they were *Steve has been chicked* who went on to win by almost an hour in 10:31.

Our walk/run strategy had us passing then being passed quite a lot which was a minor inconvenience, however early in the race we were all feeling fresh and it was nice to chat with people around us.

The Alphas were not far ahead and I think slowed down to have a chat with us but we were still going too slowly for them. Mitho, clearly sick of their group conversation only 10 minutes into the day, came back and chatted with us for a while before heading back up where they headed off behind an all female team who must have been *Trails Plus* who finished 2nd in 11:20. We didn't see either of them for the rest of the day, Steve didn't get chicked, but all the Milers did 😊

Went past House and Handman who were marshalling at 1.8km, I was very disappointed that I forgot to bring my (now Handman's) pink slipper to hand over, poor from me. Never fear, it's on its way 😊

About 5km in I started feeling a hot spot on my toe. I mentioned it to my disbelieving team mates who took turns in critiquing my clearly inadequate pre race preparation which included no Vaseline between the toes. I defended myself by observing I had never experienced blisters before so how dumb would I have been to try something new on race day. It was a very strong argument, undermined only by my brand new fuel belt which I had purchased less than 12 hours previously.

There is a Part B to that story which I didn't feel confident sharing at the time but I think we can all have a laugh about now. On race morning I started to tape my toes with the view to Vaseline them as per Smurf's recommendations. I got one toe done and it felt very uncomfortable so I decided to leave it for a few minutes and reassess. In the end I decided not to tape the toes for the above reasons but I forgot to remove the tape from the one toe I had already done! Sure enough, it was the toe next to the big toe that blistered up.



My bad

The St Johns paramedic at CP1 was almost as disbelieving as my team mates, having got the plumb posting at 12km she must have been settling in for a day of reading books, surely no-one would be needing first aid so early into the race.

Courtesy of our increased pace we hit CP1 at 8:10am, 5 minutes ahead of schedule and as this was a no support crew allowed area we pretty much went in and out (except for my trip to the first aid tent).

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

With immediate relief after having my toe taped up we were off. The start of this stage has a decent climb for about 2.5km which we walked most of. The pre race plan was to walk anything other than slight inclines and we stuck to that. It was a fairly uneventful stage, we were still in cruise mode and chatted with a few teams as we passed.

We passed one team halfway up the hill and the guy I was chatting with already had the white residue around the corners for his mouth, I suspected they were in for a very long day.

Feeling good, chatting away, how easy is this running caper? Came into CP2 and felt like we were somewhere between 10th and 15th place. Arrived at 9:08am, 12 minutes ahead of schedule.

This was the first time we had seen our support crew and we were very impressed with their setup. Table out with chairs around, all our kits and food laid out for us and them hovering waiting for things to help us with. I grabbed some fruitcake, salted potatoes, Gatorade, and slammed a banana down on the way out the door.

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

Very quickly I realised I had consumed too much and it was sitting very badly with me while we were running. Because of this I struggled to take on water for much of the stage which I knew was a really bad situation.

I don't remember much of this stage beyond the indigestion issues, but it was early and we were still travelling pretty well. Towards the end of the stage it was observed that we were starting to feel a bit tired however it was also pointed out that we'd run nearly 32km!

We were well up on time by now, and actually left CP3 at 10:45am, 5 minutes before we were scheduled to arrive.



Cruising early

Support was once again a treat, took the opportunity to change some gear over and I put an extra shirt on.

CP3 TO CP4 - 10.9km (Ferntree Gully to Olinda)

In training I discovered that although the other guys were all fitter than me, I seemed to be a better walker. Clearly all those races I walked parts of while they were running came good for me 😊 What this meant was I basically prayed for hills, and boy did this stage deliver on that front!

It starts with Lyrebird Track (next to 1000 steps), then goes up and down a few steep hills before ascending into Olinda. This was definitely the first stage I started to really hurt, and I think we were all in a similar situation. GG was starting to feel the downhills and I was just feeling exhausted. I was definitely starting to have concerns about my ability to go the journey with the group.

What I did find was that I seemed to go OK on the downhills whereas I struggled to maintain pace on the slight inclines we were still running, so I started going ahead of the others on the downhills and they would pick me up on the inclines.

It wasn't disastrous until the ascent into Olinda. I started to focus inwards so I only had a vague awareness of how the other guys were travelling but it was clear we were all struggling. We went through our first marathon shortly before the end and it hit me that I had 1.5 more to go yet I didn't even know if I was capable of doing the 1km to the end of this stage! At this point I was genuinely concerned about my ability to finish.

The weather also closed in, it became really overcast and started to rain, and it was very cold and windy. I'm sure the weather didn't help our frame of mind given we'd been expecting horrible weather for the day and we thought this might have been the start of it.

Lastly I was starting to chafe and once it starts it generally only gets worse.

We arrived at CP4 at 12:25, still 15 minutes ahead of schedule but all in a world of hurt. The all star support crew were on their game and had parked next to a fence and strung up a tarp between the car and the fence to shelter us from the rain. Genius.

It was so cold and windy that I don't think any of us wanted to sit around, I felt like we were in and out pretty quickly having put some warmer weather gear on like gloves, beanies and rain jackets.

After the race the support crew all commented that we all looked in bad shape at that stage (particularly me my wife assures me) and that they were starting to worry.



GG hating everything and everyone in the universe

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

I'm going to get this out of the way first. Oxfam runs a great event. They get a massive number of volunteers who give up lots of their time to get out and make the event happen which is fantastic and full credit to all involved, really.

BUT

Some of the signing, in particular the signing on this leg, was woeful. Yes there is an expectation that all teams be familiar with the course but I just couldn't figure out what they were thinking in parts of this section. There were straight paths with no turnoffs which had arrows pointing ahead to tell us to go straight, but then there were hidden turnoffs which had no signing at all. In the first 200m we took 2 wrong turns and at the end of the stage the turnoff to GC Reserve had no signing so we missed it too.

The fact that the section that we got bent out of shape over the signing also happened to be the section that we were in a low point as a team is entirely unrelated I'm sure ☺

The take home from this is probably that Oxfam runs such a great event that relatively minor issues like this stand out so much.

We headed off and the first section was nice downhill that we were able to shuffle along to warm up. After about 10 - 15 minutes we were well below the summit and the wind stopped, the rain stopped, and the clouds cleared and I was warm enough that I took my warm weather gear off.

We all recognised we had been running on red during the last stage and this was probably a good stage to back it off and perhaps use some of the time we had in the bank. Xmas' hips started to give him grief along here, and GG's everything below the waist was causing him concern, especially when going downhill. Perversely I was so close to breaking point that it was almost a relief to realise that we were all doing it tough and it wasn't going to be me being the handbrake on the rest of the team; one of my biggest pre race fears.

Rafa still seemed to be doing it comfortably, I'm sure we all hated him at some stage of the race for that 😊

Towards the end of the stage we hit the Warby trail which is a smooth, flat, gravel path lasting about 30km.

We managed to find our way to GC Reserve and checked in 2:54pm, 9 minutes behind schedule. The penny dropped when I turned to GG and made a comment about the next stage being good for us to get back on track. He gave me a wry smile and surmised that our petrol tickets had been spent. We took a long break there and I think everyone was on the same page; damage control.

Having it out on the table seemed to release the pressure valve and everyone was in a pretty good place, especially considering how we looked coming into Olinda.

Xmas and I also took the opportunity to discuss the finer points of climate change science semantics much to the amusement of those around us. House will be astounded it took 8 hours for this type of conversation to arise.

Just before we left I was confident enough about the situation that I joked to the support crew that we were cooked, but I wasn't prepared to rule out a massive comeback. The idea that we could do anything except stumble home was good enough for me to consider a joke.



Not pictured: theological climate change argument

We also saw Gerard there, I don't remember talking to him but do remember his moving around asking how we were going and generally trying to help us out. Someone commented that Gerard had a look in his eye that suggested next year it will most likely be him running.

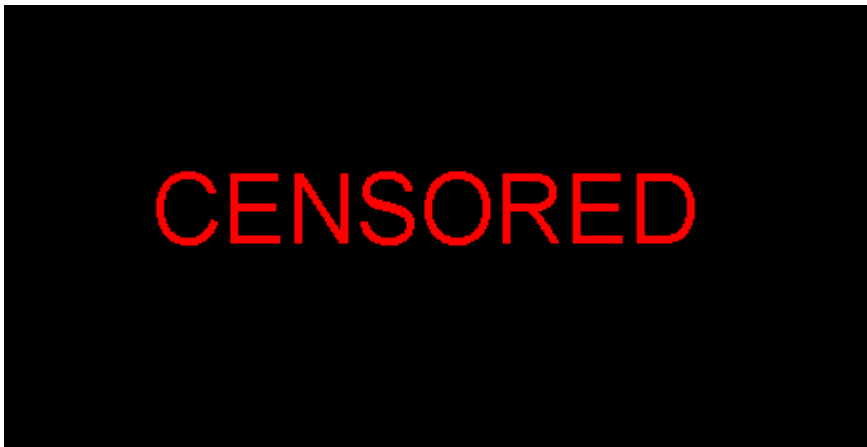
Note: Rafa's general recollections of this CP meeting might be very different to mine, I suspect he was far from throwing in the towel and figured he'd let us have our pity party before cracking the whip when we moved away from the support crew 😊

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

We headed out from GC Reserve and immediately it was clear that my chafing was bad, enough so that I contemplated turning back to deal with it. In the end I went ahead hoping it would settle but after about 1km it was clearly not going to happen. I was wearing 2 layers of bike shorts and made

the executive decision that the bottom layer was the problem and needed to go.

That was the first time that day I got nude in public, it was bound to happen.



You're welcome

By this stage my team mates had endured about 60km of my bad jokes and general idiocy, I was surprised they didn't take the opportunity to run off into the distance and be rid of me ☺

The new plan was to walk briskly, and break into occasional jogs for a few hundred meters where possible. However as the stage progressed the runs started to get longer and quicker and the walks shorter as we realised that rumours of our demise were premature.

GG was the catalyst for this. Having pretty much had his legs give up on him on anything downhill he clearly wanted to make the most of the flat while it lasted. He would call out for a 300m jog and shoot past at sub 5:00 pace with Rafa in his slip stream and Xmas and I taking it easier behind them.

GG is getting old so we need to make allowances for him, but by the 3rd 300m rep that actually lasted 800m I was starting to wonder if he was still with us mentally.

Somewhere along here I added to my list of stupid comments for the day with what may be the winner. There were green signs along the trail which looked to me like bus stop signs. I observed to the guys that it seemed odd that they would run a bus along the trail to which I received 3 disbelieving looks and a patient explanation that they were emergency markers for people who needed to call emergency services.

Xmas had taken some Panadol earlier and he said his hips had come good (although he still looked pretty sore to me so I suspect he was largely sucking it up and working through the pain), and although I was knackered I still seemed to be able to jog out 5:30 pace without feeling like it was going to end my day.

Rafa was still flying.

There was another group who passed us also walk/running so we crossed paths a number of times, but it was nice to actually see someone else as for much of the race it had been clear in front and behind.

We went into this stage with all weight of expectation removed and by running to feel we were able to get a lot more out of ourselves than I think any of us thought was possible. During some of the walking sections just looking around at the scenery while the sun was setting lifted my spirits a lot.

We checked into Woori Yallock (CP6) at 5:01pm which although was 11 minutes behind schedule, this meant we had picked up a lot of time on that stage, especially given the really long pit stop at CP5.

Rafa was starting to crack the whip and was really hustling to get us out and on the track, clearly he had a sniff of something good (not downwind from me obviously) and didn't want another 30 minute pit stop 😊

For the first time we put on our headlamps.

Support crew awesome as always, any chance one of you wants to carry me for a while?

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

Out pretty quickly back onto the Warby trail and back into the walk/running. GG and Rafa were discussing possible times and what we needed to do to achieve them. There was talk of being confident we had 15 hours covered, and we thought 14:30 hours was a chance.

Knowing that we only had about 13km of Warby trail left before we would run out of terrain we could run on GG stepped it up another level. I was definitely red lining along here, but I pushed hard confident that once we hit the walking sections I'd be relatively stronger and able to recover a bit. Also my problem seemed to be soreness as much as fatigue, and running was no more painful than walking.

Xmas made a comment about not wanting to think about how he was going, he just wanted to focus on one foot in front of another so I think he was working pretty hard too and we spent most of this section side by side.

Except when he had to pee. Which was every 5 minutes. All day. The man has a thimble for a bladder!

GG had clearly hit a good patch and Rafa was looking strong as always so we settled back into the 800m on / 500m off pattern. At least that's what I think it was, early in the day I saved my GPS to use later in the day when others batteries died, but later in the day we had enough between us I still didn't want to switch mine on because I didn't want to know how badly I was travelling.

Somewhere along here the team we were playing cat and mouse with went past us strongly enough that I mentally waved goodbye to them.

After about 5km I was fatiguing pretty badly and suggested that I go in front as I seemed to be OK when doing a slow jog, but GG's faster pace was not working for me. By doing this we were able to get some longer runs in, it perked me up a bit when GG pulled the pin on one of the runs rather than me. For me, the finish line was the end of the Warby trail as it was the running that was killing me so I definitely had a sniff.

Somewhere in here the cat and mouse team had apparently died and we went past them and quickly

lost sight of them. I mentally waved goodbye again.

Having struggled with water earlier in the day I was now taking on plenty so when got to the water point at 13.5km I refilled all 4 and drank what felt like a litre. Also somewhere along the trail we had turned out headlamps on.

From there it was a short jog to the bottom of Dee Rd which takes us up to the aqueduct trail. The map shows it as about 1.25km but it felt like 10. GG, true to form, observed the turnoff is about 300m ahead with about 800m to go.

We went past the old water point in the car park at the top of the hill and headed to the 4km of aqueduct trail. My recollection of this trail from a training run with Smurf and Dozer 3 weeks earlier was that it was pretty average and in the dark not suitable for running.

Perhaps that was just wishful thinking as the trail was in fantastic shape. As opposed to me.

Group consensus was to run/walk along here, and having factored in nothing but walking this was mentally tough for me. I just got in behind Rafa and followed his feet knowing that it wasn't too far.

Somewhere along this section the cat and mouse team passed us again looking really strong and I mentally flipped them the bird.

We came out the far end and knew we had about 2km to the Golf Course. Good news, only 2km to go and it was on road and downhill. Bad news, downhill now hurts more than uphill and 2kms feels like 20kms!

Rafa and Xmas took off ahead while GG and I struggled down behind. I suspect GG might have gone better if he hadn't been SMSing half a dozen people on the way ☺

We got to CP7 and there were quite a few people here which was great. The Dozers were there as were Mitho and AW and we learned for the first time that they had finished 3rd in about 11:45. Great effort, but they still got chicked though ☺

As we walked into the checkpoint within the clubhouse there was a big cheer which was a massive boost. At this point I was latching onto anything I could to get me up for the last stage. 2 people have separately reported a forgotten conversation in which Dozer suggested we might be able to jog a few of the sections of the final stage and I told him to f... off, I was done running for the day ☺

We left CP7 at 8:15. Having allowed ourselves 3.5 hours for this stage we picked up about 20 minutes which put us back ahead of schedule.

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

Never has 6.8km felt so much like 100km. For those who haven't gone over this terrain let me assure you it is crazy. Hitting it at 93km should amount to cruel and unusual punishment.

It starts by climbing a winding dirt walking track which goes up about 250m in 3km, then descends a bit under 200m in the next 2km, then climbs a gravel access road which goes up about 125m in 1km before descending about 150m in 1km.

The walking trail has tree roots to avoid, and the access trails have loose rocks and gravel, as well as lots of rocks in the ground good for tripping over.

Also dark.

We just wanted it to be over. With only 75 minutes to get under 14:30 hours I knew that was gone, but on the other hand I knew 15 hours was in the bag. The first climb wasn't too bad, although I struggled to keep up with the group and dropped back about 20m a few times. We got to about 4km and were feeling OK.

But this just messes with your head. I've done this section of trail 4 times now, and every time you see 6.8km knowing the course record is 55 minutes so you know its going to be brutal. But the first section is hard but not diabolical and you hit 4km thinking there's only 2.8km left, how much could they possibly throw at you in 2.8km?

Gotcha!

The first downhill went forever, and in the dark it's impossible to see when it ends so you just mess with your own head. I can't tell you how many times I thought to myself that must be the bottom there only to go around a corner and keep descending. GG and I were walking together here (given the state his legs were in I can only imagine the pain he was working through) and by about halfway down the hill he was commenting on how much he was looking forward to the next uphill.

Then we hit the uphill and the first few hundred meters aren't too bad and you convince yourself that you've remembered it incorrectly. Then it kicks up a bit and the relatively stable footing gets rocky and they have raised mounds to stop water flowing down the road which feel like palisades to get over. Then you play the same game again, how far can it possibly be, this must be the top of the hill for sure.

Finally we crested and we both observed that we weren't sure how much further we could have gone. There's a short flat section and then the final descent which although really steep and rocky, I didn't find as tough because there were marshals at the bottom with torches I could see.

I don't think it was the hills so much, it was the not knowing and playing mind games with myself that messed me around.

But there's one last mental game the course played with us. Once we hit the bottom of the hill we walked along a moderately flat track, paralleling the finish area. We could see the finishing area through the trees but we had to walk past a number of access tracks before we got to the track we were allowed to use to go through. Then we had to walk back the way we came along the oval before heading towards the finishing chute.

I would liken it to making a dog balance a biscuit on his nose before letting him eat it.

El Capitan pulled rank and managed to get us running again which was a miracle in itself, and we went through the finish in 14:44 and being so close to 14:45 continued straight through to the check in.

Support crew and family and friends going ballistic in the background, it's good to be finished!



Yeah baby!

POST RACE

Knackered!

Who rules? We do! High fives all round

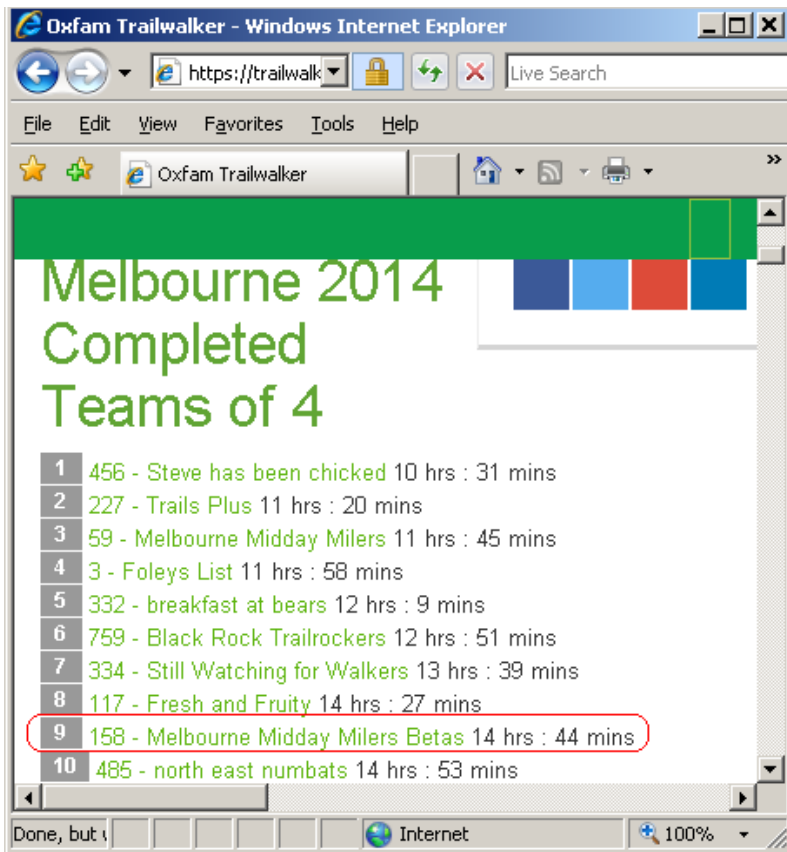
Supporters get us over to the photo backdrop thingy and take some photos. Then it's over to the chairs to change into warmer clothes and say hi to our people. Have a moment on the chair where I feel a bit overwhelmed but it passes quickly.

My brother and Adam clearly have some sort of competition going to see who can get me to have a beer. Ordinarily I don't have to be asked twice but tonight, no chance. Might be something for AA to look into?

I'm hungry, but the thought of food makes me feel ill. I settle for my final bottle of Gatorade and a heap of water. Get around, try to chat with some people, but I make very little sense at the best of times so I doubt I was doing better after 100km. I remember Gerard spoke with me for a bit but again I cannot remember anything of this conversation.

Start to feel my head clear and soak it in, how great is it to have so many people come out and support us over the line!

WRAP UP



14:44 for 9th place - we'll take that ☺

Well done to the team for a massive effort. I think we got just about everything we could out of the race. Nothing but support all round, we looked after each other really well and I couldn't be happier with how it all played out.

Captain Rafa trained his backside off over the last 12 months to get in the shape he was in. Don't take my observations of how easily he seemed to be travelling as a suggestion that he didn't work just as hard as the rest of us, he just worked much harder prior to race day which allowed him to be in control and steer the ship on race day. There were large sections of the race that I was on auto pilot just following team directions, and most of those directions originated from Rafa. Well led.

Xmas came in with great form and looked to be cruising early, but had some issues kick in midway and did really well to get himself back up and run the day out the way he did. I suspect he downplayed what he was going through in a number of latter sections of the race.

GG came in on short notice and under done and was able to get more out of himself on the day than I suspect he thought possible. Like Xmas he found himself hurting midway through the race and was able to work through it. His work along the Warby trail was the difference between us being under/over 15 hours.

I was less fit than the other guys, and I think the early pace taxed me more than them over the first 30km. However once we got into the hills I felt more able to match their efforts, Olinda notwithstanding. I didn't have any significant physical problems (fatness doesn't count), I just got fatigued to the point that I really felt I was unable to run effectively in the latter stages of the race.

All 3 of the guys got around me at various stages to help me when I was struggling, and without that support I would have been in trouble.

In the latter stages of the race GG and I talked about where we could have looked to improve. The obvious area that we as 'normal' runners lack when compared with the ultra types is long training runs, heading out for 7 hours or more. Realistically I don't think many (if any) of us would be interested or willing to sacrifice the time to do those type of runs, especially given this is a novelty event for us and our main focus is much shorter.

First thought across the line; never again! Woke up on Saturday and put a post on Facebook with the same thought.

Later on Saturday having put together this race report, probably again

Reviewing this report on Sunday, definitely again, sign me up!

Well done to the Alphas, in particular Smurf who never ceases to amaze me with his ability to bash himself into shape when it counts.

Last but by no means least, massive thanks to our support crew, Marty, Adam and Andrew. Magnificent and just one thing we didn't have to worry about on the day, we really appreciate you taking a large chunk of time out to help us achieve our goals. The service was outstanding.