



**Melbourne Oxfam Trailwalker**

**Friday 27 March 2009**

**Melbourne Midday Milers**

**100 km, 10 hours 34 minutes**



For those not familiar with Oxfam Trailwalker, it is a 100km walk/run event that was first run in 1981. It now operates annually in each of 11 cities (including Melbourne and Sydney) in 9 countries around the world, and has raised more than \$100 million for Oxfam. To provide some sort of connection with Oxfam's cause, courses are designed specifically to impose hardship.

The Melbourne course starts in Jells Park in Wheelers Hill and ends in Wesburn Park near Warburton. The course winds its way through areas such as Churchill National Park, Lysterfield Lake, up and over the Dandenong Ranges and then along the Warburton trail. Teams must stay together and each of the 4 team members must complete the entire 100km journey (i.e. this is not a relay), with the team checking in together at 8 checkpoints along the way. Essentially your time is taken when your last team member crosses the line.

700 teams participated in Melbourne in this year's event and raised approx \$2 million.

Teams have up to 48 hours to complete the course, so those who just want to enjoy the challenge are very welcome to participate. The Australian Oxfam record of 11 hours 26 minutes was set in Melbourne 2008. The world Oxfam record of 10 hours 13 minutes was set on a comparatively flatter London course.

*Part's 1 – 4 of this report were written by Anthony Lee (AL). I decided to use his words since it was his crazy idea that I do this thing in the first place, and therefore it makes more sense for him to set the scene.*

## **Part 1 - The idea**

Ever since hearing of the exploits of Nigel Aylott doing and winning Oxfam, then having a Miler/ANZ team of Metronome, GG, Denti & Jim Grellis compete a few years back, and more recently guys like Handman, Biggers & James A tackle the 100kms, I have been fascinated by the event and had it on my to do list one day.

Then I crewed for Kylie's (ie Mrs AL) team last year and was inspired not only by the competitors, but the event in general. The logistics, organisation, fund raising efforts, etc are enormous. I decided that I wanted a crack at it in 2009.

## **Part 2 - Getting a team together**

Around mid last year I heard that House (Stephen Paine) was sniffing around for a team to have a go at the Oxfam record. Knowing that House would not be in it just to make up the numbers, I approached him to see if there were any spots available. A few days later I was in a team with House, Handman and Damien Angus. Entries hadn't opened as yet and so we were only a team in spirit.

Entries opened and House had us in there quick smart as teams spots can fill up very fast for this event. Turn the clock forward a few weeks and Damien had realised the event date clashed with an ironman event up at Port Macquarie and Handman went and got himself injured and then suffered a bad case of goodpaddockitis. We were down to 2 team members and things were looking grim. You would think given the hype of the event now that we would be bowled over with offers, but we had to do some smooth talking to fill the last 2 spots.

Smoothy (David Venour) was the first to be persuaded, confident enough now that his hammy had become strong enough to tackle the event. I then approached Dozer (Richard Does) with the offer, and although not saying no, he was about 20% convinced and wanted some time to think about it. The 2 issues were the time away from his family on the long training days and, fear that the event might be very painful. Around a week later he gave me the nod that he was in, but warned me that he was coming after me if this turned into a hellish affair. I said no worries, how much can jogging 100kms hurt anyway!!!!!!!

So we now had our new team of 4 with Luke Yeatman kindly offering his services as our back up emergency.

### **Part 3 - The Training Plan**

How the hell do you train for an event like this?

I was unconvinced that doing lots and lots and lots of slow miles was NOT the way to train for one of these things. Also being 4 months out, I didn't think we could train our bodies to become hard nut ultra types. Surely we were better using our general strength as runners and building an adequate amount of endurance strength through a few dedicated long runs whilst continuing to do some speed sessions and race as required. Well it was a theory that was about to be tested.

There was nothing very scientific about what we did. Train just as you would for a marathon but intermingled with the long runs, do 4 dedicated Oxfam type long training sessions. Our Monday to Saturday training for the most part remained the same and our Sunday training from the 21 Dec 2008 followed the following pattern:

Week 1 Long group Oxfam session. Mixture of walk/run on tough terrain.

Week 2 Shortened long run 80 - 100 minutes

Week 3 Marathon type long training run 2 to 2.5 hours

Our long group Oxfam sessions were something like:

21/12/08 - Jells Park to Grants Pincic Ground with some circle work in Churchill Park. This is the one where our support crew got lost and we were waiting around in Churchill Park for an hour. Dozer and I covered 38.5km and House did around 42km. Big learning's from this day.

1. We had a lot of work to do
2. We need to drink early and drink often. I underestimated just how much you need to drink. After this run we realised that we will need to carry drinks with us as we couldn't possibly get enough into us just at the check points. So now we start training with back packs for the first time in our lives.

11/1/09 Lysterfield Lake to half way up the Warby Trail. We covered 51kms and it was a confidence booster. Mentally great to get over the 50kms and although tired could have gone on.

1/2/09 Olinda to the finish 53.6kms. It reached 35 degrees this day and so this run was super tough. Dozer rolled his ankle about 10kms into the run and continued on until about 45kms. The heat was a killer and I actually found the last stage tougher that day than on race day.

22/2/09 With a lot of the trail under fire threat we hit the Dandenong's instead and did a series of loops. Joined by GG and Luke Y for part of the trip, we covered 55.5kms all in the hills. This was a tough hit out but at least we had over a month to get over it.

#### **Part 4 -The race plan**

Our Cinderella plan was to grab a win, smash the record (11hrs 26 mins), certainly get under 11 hours and maybe get under 10 hours (6 min per km average). House and I had fantasy notions early on that sub 9 was even possible. Any thoughts of sub 9 however were quickly squashed when we started training on the trail. The last section and large parts of the Dandenong's demand that you walk many sections so this really eats into your pace average.

The first 28kms are pretty flat except for one challenging hill in Churchill Park. From 28km to 60km it is up and over the Dandenong's on hilly sections that in parts have very difficult footing. 60km to 93km is pretty much flat to gently undulating. 93km to 100km is steep up and down on what can only be described as a goat track.

How to go sub 10

Even if we were feeling fantastic, at the last stage we would need a serious buffer as this section was going to take at least 75-80 minutes. This puts us about 20 or so minutes behind 6 min pace.

Our plan was to tackle the first 28kms at 5 min average and then track close to 6 min pace over the hills. This would get us to the 60km mark in around 5hrs 35mins.

If we had some legs left we could track along the Warby at 5:40ish average and come into the last checkpoint in around 8:30 and have a buffer.

Surely this plan was foolproof. I suppose however there is that little nagging thing called fatigue that can strike, plus apparently this was a longish race and they say things can go wrong occasionally.

The other very vital piece of our plan was not to waste any time at checkpoints. We weren't here to sightsee so there was no reason to stop moving. This is where your support crew are vital. We had a planning session 8 days out from the race and worked out all of the logistics. We did not want to waste a single minute so our guys were to have stuff ready to hand as we approached them. We would do a quick stock up of drinks/food and then we would go. 1 minute lost per checkpoint over 6 checkpoints could turn a 2 minute lead into a 4 minute deficit. How important this would prove to be.

*The remainder of this report is my story. I should say that not all of my recollections are entirely accurate. I lost my faculties somewhat in the second half of this event, and so my memories become a little jumbled. Now that witnesses have filled in some blanks, I toyed with the idea of updating my words. I decided not to (with a few exceptions), since this report is essentially my personal journal for the day, and you don't usually get to re-draft your own journal. And besides, why let the facts get in the way of a good story,...*

## **Part 5 – Getting there**

Driving through Jells Park gates at 6am, pitch black, you immediately got a sense of a well organised event. Car park attendants had the waves of cars moving through without missing a beat, ensuring no road rage stress at the start line.

You'd think I could walk 100m to the marshalling area pretty safely, but no, I nearly come a cropper in a ditch. Stacey (Mrs Dozer) has a good chuckle at my expense before we both have that spine chilling "imagine if" moment.

Managed to find AL, Kylie, House & Deb pretty easily, with news that Smoothy and Jann would soon join us. Check in procedures all well organised and we were able to spend a nice little while talking last minute tactics with the crew and having a bit of fun with photos, etc.

## **Part 6 – Starting out**

Soon enough we were on the start line. All of a sudden faces were being put to the names of the teams that we had been hearing a fair bit about over the past 3-4 months. What you don't expect to hear in this environment though is someone asking "hey, are you Hayley's (little Dozer) dad?" Sure enough, one of the teacher's from my kids school was lining up with Jogging Upstream.

Looking around and taking it all in, AL was getting his game face on, Smoothy was looking eager to get underway and House was, well, just where the hell was he? Then I got distracted by a lady standing next to the barriers looking like she was desperately trying to get a message to one of the runners. This was all pretty amusing, but where the hell was House? Eventually I joined the dots and discovered the message was in fact a pack of Snakata's, the lady was presumably his mum, and House was somewhere 3 or 4 deep behind me. Ready, set, go!

## **Part 7 – Settling in**

In any ordinary race this starting chute would be hellish. With daylight barely upon us, the first 50m no more than 10 people wide and several hundred eager participants surging to the front for the money shot, this could be a disaster. But this is no ordinary race and everyone was very respectful of each others space. Quite easily the serious challengers were on the front and the first 500m or so is spent trying to make sure your team comes together in its own little pack.

The one exception to this seemed to be Running Upstream (a very experienced ultra-marathon team, different to the previously mentioned Jogging Upstream) who

seemed to be all over the shop. They had one guy who had his events muddled and was off at 10km pace, two running just in front of us and as for their 4th runner, it wasn't until I checked the results page on Saturday that I was sure he even existed. We had a chat about this and figured that given their experience they must just be choosing to run to their individual strengths for a while before presumably coming together a little further along once each had settled into their rhythm. Interesting strategy but I wonder how their weakest runner copes with this.

## **Part 8 – Some moments to reflect**

The course to the first checkpoint is ordinarily uneventful. It just feels like your running to get somewhere as you detour under freeways and around footy grounds. All quite flat and AL decides we should even stride out for a 100m to get a few more muscles sharing the load. I must've been getting another slice of pizza when that tactic was agreed beforehand. Not sure what Upstream and Team Muttley (the defending champions) would've made of that, probably hoping "those stupid marathoners can't help themselves", but two things came of this. One - we were never headed again and two - we never did another 100m stride!

The closing parts of this stage took us through the burnt out section of Churchill National Park. Only a few hundred metres but as black as black can be. Not a single green leaf in sight, and with the course marked out in the most fluorescent plastic barriers you've ever seen it was all quite surreal. The only words that were spoken in this section were along the lines of "can you imagine what it must have been like". Plenty of silence as I think we each reflected on recent tragedies.

Out the other side of this and a familiar stride starts approaching from the opposite direction. It was Moo (James Atkinson) who was looking very bright, iridescent some would say, and cheery. I had no idea then just how important he would be for me a few hours down the road.

In and out of checkpoint 1 with a little stutter as we tried to figure out the routine. We had the support crew stages well drilled (they didn't have access to this checkpoint), but we'd obviously never before got to practice the art of checking in. Kylie had briefed us well based on her experience the previous year, but it was still a little unsettling the first time through. Of course the marshals were also experiencing their first team check-in for at least a year, so we had to stay calm to help them do their job efficiently. We were expecting to GU gels and fruit here. The fruit was on offer but the GU was in self serve cup form. I think AL and Smoothy took some GU but pretty soon declared they wouldn't be doing that again given the taste.

## **Part 9 – To much team training?**

Heading out on stage 2 and we were clear of the check-in before another team came into our sights. I think it was House who mentioned shortly afterwards he could hear some applause so we knew they weren't too far behind.

This section starts with some twists and turns and a couple of km's in heads up the first hill steep enough to have been pre-agreed as walk. Looking down the hill

Muttley were in sight and our differing styles were now obvious. They were running the hill and presumably pleased to see us walking. Our mindset was that steep hills were a chance to "rest" and eat. To us running up steep hills seemed to be too big an investment of energy for little reward. At one stage House was counting down like a rocket launch to the moment he expected Muttley to overtake us, but strangely they never did. I didn't look back again but I can only guess they also must have walked a little. Down the other side and without any conscious effort we were on our own again.

The next 6-7kms is a great area for running. If I lived around here I'd use it big time for training runs. Gotta love the organisers playing with your mind here though – the map states "ignore shortcut walk on left". Thanks guys, we're on a 100km run and you've made the conscious decision to point out there is a short cut which we can't take. Can I suggest next year you change the name of this track for the weekend to "long way around".

The other thing that became obvious through here was that our team has spent too much time training together and desperately needed some new conversation. Seeing kangaroos on Wallaby Track is not the least bit funny, never has been, never will be. Talking about the tiger's Thursday night flop against Carlton thankfully provided some great comedy relief.

Coming into CP2 at Lysterfield was one of the highlights of the day. Being the first checkpoint where support crews could access their teams, there were plenty of people cheering us through. It was a real buzz and with the help of our support crew we absolutely nailed the take-on of supplies and check-in check-out. When we came out of here we were flying!

## **Part 10 – Ode to the support crew**

With a buzz in our step we were now into this big time. Everything on track, approaching 25km and feeling good. Muttley was visible on the straight sections here, but their presence was merely noted and didn't warrant any reactions. Ticking over 2 hours the first little signs of fatigue expectedly present themselves, but nothing of any concern as we head towards Birds Land reserve. A steady uphill section through here but a great place to run. The exit from Birds Land was important for two reasons – its where this thing starts to show its teeth – and it was an intermediate spot to meet our support crew since they couldn't get into CP3 at Grants Picnic Ground.

Fair dinkum, the girls were humming as we passed by. They had themselves so well sorted we barely had to break stride yet amazingly food and fluid was again on board.

You'll probably notice some tape on my neck whenever the photo's come on line. I'd discovered in training that the shoulder straps of my pack would rub away at my neck to the point of bleeding so I'd taken to taping over the probably spots as a preventative. Problem was, even in training it would take a few strips to eventually get just the right spot protected. As we passed through here I asked Stacey to have another piece of tape ready for the next stop since the existing lot wasn't doing the job. Well blow me down within 2.5 seconds she had a piece on me. Unfortunately it

doubled over and stuck on itself instead of me, but you get the gist of the kind of support we're talking about here. Sensational stuff.

Heading up toward Belgrave now, runners aren't meant to tread here. Take the instruction from the map book "... access trail via steep steps". Personally I thought steps were built to make steep sections easier to climb. So if the steps themselves are steep, well, it ain't gonna be good news.

Per race strategy though we walked up these sections eating and drinking. Note for future – I was munching on an apple through here and loving it.

As you get to Belgrave there's a nasty little down hill section going past Puffing Billy to negotiate and you need to cross the train lines before starting the climb again. Now I don't think anyone said anything about it, but you couldn't help but notice the engine starting up – surely we weren't going to get held up at the crossing, surely its not gonna happen, no way,... phew, across and climbing once more.

Heading into Sherbrooke Forest at about 31kms and everyone's spirits were high. Things were going well and we were enjoying ourselves. Smoothy commented though on the fact we had failed to acknowledge passing 33.3km. Maybe trivial at the time but in retrospect probably a sign that we were starting to work a bit and it was noted that we needed to remember to enjoy the milestones. It's not like we weren't being reminded since every 500m by House's Garmin would beep. I'd love to see the spreadsheets he makes out of that thing.

Approaching Grants and the euphoric reception from Lysterfield was noticeably missing. As we approached the checkpoint a few people were looking at us as if to say what the bloody hell are you doing here. We were well ahead of the course record and still heading for sub 10 hours at this point. Smoothy and I ducked into the toilets for probably a little longer than House and AL would've liked, but better to deal with these things as they arise I reckon! No sign of any other teams as we made our way out of the CP.

## **Part 11 – Support crew gets distracted**

The next little while is single file, steady climbing over very uneven ground and barely maintained foliage. Not far up the trail and we could here a smattering of applause as a team, presumably Muttley, arrived at Grants. Bush bashing our way through for a while before eventually climbing a structure that ensures you can safely scale the boundary fence (why don't they have a gate?) before getting back onto more sturdy ground. Shortly after we met the support crew again, another swift replenishment (and this time the tape co-operated) and we were on our way again.

I think Mitho was intending to say g'day around here somewhere but I must admit I don't remember seeing him. Sorry if I missed you buddy.

Stacey would tell me later that the girls were a little unsure about which direction to point us in from here. Apparently someone's eyes (names withheld to protect the innocent) were fixated on a particular sign which was surely meant for trailwalkers. Fortunately we had covered this section of the course in training and knew exactly



where to go without their direction since the sign that will now be known as "Exhibit A" was in fact pointing to the local winery! Hmmm, was fatigue starting to inhibit the support crew also around now, or maybe withdrawals.

Oblivious to all this we were now heading through the heart of Sherbrooke Forest. A beautiful area for walking, some of it good for running, some not. Soon enough all minds were getting set for Hacketts Road, but we certainly remembered to recognise the 42.2km mark. One marathon down – one and half to go!

Now for those who haven't seen Hacketts Road, next time you are in the Dandenong's - go there. Park your car at the bottom, get out, walk to the first bend and look up. When you've done that, lets talk about it 'cause I couldn't possibly do it justice in words here. Its extraordinarily steep. How on earth this poor excuse for a 4WD track got called a road is beyond me.

Given the recent rain it looked like this was going to be a perilously slippery trek, but it actually turned out to be a little tacky under foot which was even better than when we had trained on in it dust bowl conditions. I thought I was feeling pretty good up here but it was noticeable that AL and Smoothy had put 10-20 metres into me. House and I were chatting away and House seemed to close the gap pretty quickly when it got bigger than ideal, but I had to work pretty hard in the closing stages to ensure we reached the crest in reasonable formation. I wasn't overly concerned at this stage but I was also aware that the hard work had well and truly started and it wasn't likely to get any easier for a long long time.

The closing stages of this leg continue the climb up to Olinda. The gradient eventually eases off but its still an uphill slog. When we soldiered down the right hand side of the road a little early a marshal was delighted to be called into action and enthusiastically pulled us back to go up the much more difficult left hand side. At the time we had our doubts as to which was correct but as I read the map book now I can see he did the right thing.

Arriving at Olinda and the girls had cleverly parked themselves about 500m before the CP. I say clever because we had to go up to the CP and double back past them afterwards, so we were able to drop our packs for them to fill and then pick' em up on the way back. Smart cookies those girls.

Coming out of the CP and we crossed paths with Muttley on the bit where you double back. 46.5km and nothing in it, but as we had arrived at the highest point of the course we figured their greatest edge – hill climbing – had been dealt with.

Unfortunately for me the next two stages would be downhill – in more ways than one.

## **Part 12 - Going downhill**

Leaving Olinda and its a lap around the outside of the golf course. Its a respectable descent made a whole lot worse by the uneven terrain, big rocks, and tree roots abound.

As had been the case in each of our group training runs, the serious downhills were the "expression zone" where each of us was free to do our own thing before

regrouping somewhere shortly after at the bottom. Inevitably House would start from the back, wind up the elastics and let it rip. Great to watch. Smoothy would start from the front and latch onto House's slipstream as he went by. AL would take things more conservatively and get stuck in no mans land between them and me, and I'm talking a sizeable gap in a short space of time.

My achilles heel in this game is without doubt running downhill. I've never been able to figure out if it's physical, technical or mental, but I just can't do it. I'm generally happy to stay upright but I knew today it would be critical to avoid damaging my hip flexor (which had been very painfully reconfigured in physio in recent weeks) and the dreaded calf cramps that I also tend to pick up on downhill. So I was in super conservative mode here. The hip was behaving beautifully (thanks Rog), but with maybe 20 metres of descending to go I finally had the confidence to stride out. I'm not joking, one long stride on the downhill and bang – cramp, right calf - shit.

Fortunately the course turns modestly uphill for a while so a chance to run it out and the group quickly reformed. Ran past a sign congratulating us on being half way. Had a laugh at AL's expense as he reckons he didn't see it. Fair enough I suppose, the sign was only two metres wide and bright yellow, easily missed! In any event our Garmins were telling us we had only covered 49.8kms so we held off celebrations for another minute.

After 50 km (ish) I was starting to feel the pinch and began to mentally prepare for the next downhill, the longest and near enough steepest on the course, and also the next 13kms which was the section of the course that I had been least looking forward to - way to much downhill stuff and hard/loose rocky roads for my liking. Our longest training run had been around 55kms, so we were also getting beyond our comfort zone now.

House and Smoothy "expressed" themselves on the big long steep downhill, but I was soon in trouble. Cramp was bouncing from one calf to the other and eventually both at once. I felt like a string puppet here,.. running on the balls of my feet and incapable of getting the heels down. AL must have sensed something was up as he was by my side rather than in no-mans land, so I shared my news with him. "What do you do" he asks knowing that I've had this problem before, "keep running" I answer.

The descent here just goes on and on. I'm guessing its the best part of 2kms before it finally levels out. That was about 1.95kms to long for me, and some damage had been done.

The remainder of the run into Silvan checkpoint was flat enough for me to resolve the immediate issues, though the final 300m - 200 uphill and 100 downhill - into the checkpoint is somewhat of a battle after 54kms. I was really happy to see Stacey at this point, a few encouraging words, some cold refreshments on board in slick fashion and I was feeling reasonable but my confidence had been rocked somewhat.

Tried to get some salty crackers in - cardboard would've been easier to chew. Got whatever nutrition I could out of them but eventually had to spit out the dregs. Should've had a go at an energy bar that was in my pack but for some reason I didn't think of it. Got a banana in ok, but the gels and sports drink (I was alternating

between Endura and Powerade) were starting to taste dreadful and I had to concentrate to keep them down. I was now becoming quite introverted and needing to really focus on getting through the remaining 8kms of this tough patch to reach the luxury of the Warby trail.

### **Part 13 – There's something about Evelyn**

In the map book this stage through Mt Evelyn does not appear to be particularly difficult. 8.5kms, lets call it undulating, one ridiculous descent followed by a challenging climb, cross the highway and your on the Warburton Trail.

About 4 kms is on an unsealed, but reasonably level rocky road. You become exposed to the elements here for the first time in a long while. Fortunately the weather was fantastic.

The descent (ie: drop) is maybe 300m. Underfoot is treacherous, an uneven but solid clay base covered by long wispy grass. This is where I had rolled my ankle in training several weeks earlier. "Expression time". I couldn't tell you what the others did though, as I was focusing on each and every tiny little step down here. It took an embarrassing eternity, but the smiles as we regrouped at the bottom told me it had been entertaining to watch. I was just relieved not to have repeated the turtle roll, and seemed to have avoided any further cramping issues.

The climb back up involves a couple patches of walking. AL and Smoothy were moving nicely and took up the running earlier than I was able to. House still looked capable of punching out a set of 1km reps but stayed back with me providing words of encouragement. One final rise, the highway in sight and GGO's (Gary O'Dwyer) smiling beacon was a welcome sight waiting for us on his bike. I gather Smoothy and AL got caught by a traffic light here as we were suddenly back in a tight group.

Looking back now I made an absolute mess of this stage, more in preparation than in execution. For whatever reason I didn't like this stage in training, and I'd found it really tough. Coming into the race my self-talk was along the lines of "this bit is horrid but you'll get through it, just put one foot in front of the other, block the crap out, it'll be over soon enough". I followed this perfectly. Unfortunately, in a fatiguing body, by the end of this stage my negativity had made me irritable and I would soon pay a price for this oversight. In retrospect I should have found something (anything) positive to focus on through here, lesson learned.

GGO now riding along side for support and bringing new conversation; a tight group; the comfort of knowing we had hit the Warby trail; leading the race; sub 10 hours still possible; and only a couple of kms to Graham checkpoint. Tired, but things were going well, until, the turn into the checkpoint.

In training we had run past, but not into this checkpoint. As it turns out, it's a bit uphill (guessing 200m) on very uneven ground before arriving in a large paddock. The check-in tent is over on the other side of the paddock, maybe another 400m across very uneven ground. I'll bet this place has claimed its fair share of ankles. Definitely not for bikes through here so GGO stayed back at the gate awaiting our return.

So what goes through the mind of a tired and irritable Oxfam runner at this point:

- as soon as I realised there was a climb involved I spat it: "this Warby trail was meant to be flat for #@%& sake"
- one overzealous leap across a little gap and cramp ravaged me: "youve gotta be \$%^&ing kidding me, I thought I'd seen the last of this shit down that big hill"
- on realising the check-in tent was on the far side of the paddock: "who the @#\$% put that over there"
- on discovering the unstable footing: "this is \$%^ing ridiculous, if I go over someone's gonna pay".

Not your normal happy go lucky Dozer anymore hey!

The team had agreed Graham checkpoint was one where those who wanted it would change clothes, shoes or whatever. Those who preferred to keep moving would do so in the knowledge that we would soon enough come back together on the trail. This also gave each of us a few moments of personal space.

As I walked across the final 100 metres to Stacey, I knew I had to get myself back together or this was going to unravel in a big hurry. It was time to pull out of thin air my pre-prepared stick of saving grace, a little phrase I'd kept to myself in preparation for this moment,... "Melbourne 07 or Melbourne 08".

For those who know me well enough, you'd understand what this meant. For the benefit of those who don't, Melbourne Marathon 2007 remains my most satisfying performance and was the fulfilment of a childhood dream, the same event in 2008 was very much the opposite.

By the time I reached Stacey I must have said this phrase 50 times to myself, and had regained my composure.

Stacey knew in advance that I wanted to change my shoes here and that she would have to help me, so I'm not even sure we spoke. I just slumped in a chair and by the time I'd changed my shirt and grabbed a hat and sunnies, she'd changed my shoes. Special women that one! Stacey would tell me later that we did speak, but that I was pretty incoherent.

As I trudged back across the paddock, others have reported that I was showing some serious signs of distress. AL, (who had not stopped moving through this change so buggered if I know how I came to be beside him so soon unless despite his own fatigue he had come back to get me) came over and put his arm around me. I said to him I was having trouble hearing, to which he responded something like "you can only do what your body will let do".

On seeing ALs show of support from afar, Stacey was becoming increasingly concerned for my welfare and was soon enough swallowed up in the support of other crew members.

As we would later discover, by now the Melbourne Middy Miler forum and various SMS networks were in fever pitch with progress reports and support.

While individually this was getting tough, as a team of much more than 4, we were in our finest moments.

Apparently we crossed paths with Team Muttley on the way back to the trail, but I don't remember this. I was reciting my little catch phrase and by the time we got back to the trail I was in quite a zone and ready to deal with whatever was coming next.

## **Part 14 - Along the Warby**

The Warburton Trail is a great place to be. Riding, running, walking, whatever takes your fancy really. It's a well groomed trail, wide enough to run at least 2 side by side. Traversing the whole 30kms in one go though tends to get a bit long in the tooth given its loooooong straight stretches. Many a trailwalker claims this to be mentally their toughest section.

We're up to about 64kms now and had paired up. House and AL side by side about 10-20m in front of Smoothy and I. GGO riding up and back to spend time with both pairs. I reckon the pace was about 5:10 per km but my heart rate was cooking and I needed to slow. GGO relayed the message to House and AL and I think we slowed to about 5:40. Around 69kms the h/r hadn't improved much and I needed a break. GGO relayed my request for a walk at 70kms and the response came back "yep, lets get to that car in the distance", so I focussed on a gate about 50m past it and got there. I think it was AL's suggestion that I be the pace setter from here and it was without hesitation endorsed by House and Smoothy. This was the day's most critical decision since I was now at breaking point. This race is about getting 4 people across the line – if you break the weakest link in the chain your day is over.

And so our group was tight again as I tried to slug out 2km shuffles then 1 minute walks. The 1 minutes were gone in a flash and so tended to become 3-5 minutes, and sub 10 hours became unachievable.

Somewhere amongst all of this we must have met up with the girls (I don't recall it) because by the time we got to checkpoint 7 (76km) at Woori Yallock we knew that Muttley had lost time and were possibly a team member down.

AL was a machine at the checkpoints now, he and House were in that school hall organising the officials while I was like the school nerd standing idle at the door just hoping someone would notice me and not hurt me. I can't actually visualise the girls being here, even though I recall asking Stacey to call me when Muttley arrived, and to call twice if it were true that they were a team member down. My phone was in my back pack for emergency purposes so I wouldn't answer it, but would obviously hear it ring.

Back on the trail and we had without a word spoken gone back to our 2 x 2 formation, House and AL 10-20m in front of Smoothy and I. I was still the "pace" setter though and trying to eek out 2km shuffles between each walk

It sure was a long time before that phone rang, maybe 15 minutes. But there was no second ring. Had we be conned? About 10 minutes later my phone rang again, then again and then again,... what the! It turns out the girls had to move on from checkpoint 7 before Muttley's arrival else they would miss us at the next checkpoint. So Stacey called as they left, but only once since she could not verify if Muttley were

a 3 or 4. The other calls? Well I guess it was about 3:30pm now – about the time each day Connex SMSs its cancelled train notices. Apparently there were 3 cancelled trains on the Frankston line that night!! Ya gotta laugh.

I gather the stop/go strategy in our 2 x 2 formation went on and on and on all the way to the final checkpoint at 90.5kms. Must have annoyed the #\$\$%^ out of the other guys who through my eyes were looking fresh (they assure me they were far from fresh and enjoying the walks as much as I was). I couldn't believe how easy they were making this look. All I remember of this 14.5km section though is GGO getting a flat tyre,... ya gotta laugh, again.

I gather Moo (James Atkinson) had joined us by now (having completed his marshalling duties back in stage 1). Stacey had apparently worded him up to monitor my state. I don't really remember him being their though until the final stage, but crikey I used him up there.

## **Part 15 - Big Joe**

Into the school that was acting as the final checkpoint and I remember some kids in the school yard approaching us. Now in my experience whenever you are wearing a race bib and are within 100m of a group of 10 year olds, they develop an irrational and uncontrollable urge to come and give you a hi-5. So sure enough here they came,.. but,.. I gather I was looking like some prehistoric freak at this stage 'cause the big kid in front stopped about 3 metres short of me with a look of horror on his face while his unsuspecting mates all concertinaed into his school bag. That was as close as they were prepared to come, no hi-5, good decision lads, your folks should be proud of you.

I've no recollection of completing the check-in process here, but I do remember thinking "why haven't we done a u-turn to get back to the trail". We were following some signs that had us all a bit anxious as they just kept taking us further away from where we felt we should be heading. For reasons that remain unknown, we were required to exit the rear of the school and then loop around back to the front. By the time we were heading back in the right direction, it had been confirmed that Team Muttley were down to 3 and possibly as much as 40 minutes behind. Presumably this information came from the girls, though again I can't visualise them at this point.

And so we were off to Mt Little Joe. This last stage was the one leg that I had not covered in training. The day the others covered this was the day that I had rolled my ankle. Based on their experience I was expecting 2km on the flat, then a very nasty climb followed by a very very nasty climb, then a tantalising sighting of the finish line but a steep descent to get there. Who in god's name designed this course? My tip is he/she has never run to their letterbox to check the mail.

So we were off on the 2km flat. I was stuffed and the run/walk strategy was becoming more and more walk, less and less run. With the race now won (assuming death would be avoided) and our time pretty much guaranteed to be sub 11 hours (sub 10 ambitions were long gone, but thanks for your optimism Craig Harris!), the pressure valve was released and I started to emerge from the hypnotic state that I reckon I had been in since leaving Graham checkpoint several hours earlier.

I recall with delight that even House looked tired here, and I take full credit for this. If not for my stop/go tactics he would have been on the second course of his post race buffet by now. Keeping him out there this long was finally starting to have an impact. Gotcha big fella!

AL was looking tired but still had his game face on. When this guy wants to get something done, it gets done, bank on it.

In writing this now I've just realised that Smoothy must have spent kms 60 through 90 by my side. I doubt he had let more than 1 metre come between us. I'm humbled and apologetic that it's taken me 6 days to realise this. Thanks mate.

While Smoothy continued close by, he was finally able to think more of himself than me as James A was now my chaperone. I recall Moo offering to carry my backpack through this last stage, but my determination was still strong and I declined.

And so we arrived at the foot of the mountain. If this is Little Joe, I'd hate to see Big Joe. Up and up and up we went. Apparently there is some sort of plateau in between the two climb's, I must have missed that bit!

Moo was handing me a few lollies through this section. Now I'm not one to ordinarily eat lollies when running, but if a runner the quality of James Atkinson thinks its time for a sweet or two, then its time for a sweet or two.

AL and House seemed to be surging away up the climb, obviously eager just to get things over with now. Smoothy was lurking away a few steps behind me, presumably prepared to stop me should I start rolling back down. It wasn't until Saturday that I remember GGO had rejoined us also. It remains a mystery to me how/where/when he resurfaced, did he skydive out of a helicopter?

Things get so steep on this stage that you can place your hands on the wall in front of you. We must have looked like those guys that use suction cups to scale city buildings. At one stage I had my foot in a rut. Smoothy would say I was stuck. I wasn't actually stuck, it's just that the combined forces of gravity and gradient were momentarily mightier than anything I had to offer. If the next step was misplaced, Smoothy's catching mits would be needed.

In truth, I was loving this now, absolutely stuffed and loving it. As Elliot Gobblett would say, I was going internally beserk. Amazing what the sniff of a finish line can do.

We climbed that hill for ever, one foot occasionally appearing in front of the other. I'm not sure what it was doing up here, but a 4WD was coming down the other way (this will have more relevance later).

Moo (or maybe it was GGO) points out that we are nearing the top. Something about seeing the top of the trees apparently makes this so. Bugged if I know what he was on about, but sure enough it was true. Even better, our trail deviated to a plateau on the right probably 20m before the top. And there, way down below, was the finish line. You little beauty.

Oh no, another wicked down hill section, fear, shock, horror. But I repeat, it's amazing what the sniff of a finish line can do and there were no problems here. Somewhere down here, maybe it was at the bottom, we regrouped. Those last couple of hundred metres before spilling out into the clearing at Wesburn Park were pretty special for the team. No idea what was said, but I'd happily freeze time there for a while.

### **Part 16 - Oh yeah baby**

Emerging from the bushes and onto the most beautiful lush grass I've seen since visiting the turf farm web site 5 years ago (which is funny cause if I went back today I'm sure I be reminded that Wesburn Park is a dust bowl). An impressive looking finishing chute was no more than 400m in front of us.

On the way in I spotted Stacey and the kids along with Natalie (our neighbour) and her girls. Threw my back pack to Stacey, presumably to save some time in the sprint finish! (note: about 15 minutes later some guy comes up to me and says "I think these are yours", being my phone and some food that had apparently gone flying out my back pack!)

All hell broke loose as we crossed the line,... well it would've if we had the energy! The entire support crew was with us and man-hugs and hi-5s were going on all round. Anyone who was even remotely looking in our direction was a potential recipient. Stacey gave me an almighty squeeze and she was absolutely balling. Freeze time again please.

My boys were coming towards me but they had the same look on their faces as those 10 year olds at the previous checkpoint! Fortunately once they got close enough they saw some resemblance of their dad so rolled the dice and gave me a tentative cuddle anyhow.

Some bottles of champa's appeared from somewhere and a spiritual soaking was in order. Unfortunately when 3 of us finally mustered the co-ordination to get the dam corks out (House cork broke and got stuck in the bottle!!), it was more of a spill than a spray. Obviously the good bottles had been sent to Albert Park for the grand prix.

Things gradually calmed down, as they do when your stuffed, and the story telling was underway. This was magic, and then some salty chips appeared, freeze time please!

### **Part 17 - The wrap**

To anyone who dared step onto the track at the start, good on you for giving it a go. To those who finished, bloody well done. To those who didn't, commiserations, learn from it, and go again. This is a very very tough event.

To the Muttley boys, thanks for a good race. Out of all the banter I hope for a healthy rivalry that pushes us all towards even greater achievements.



So many people were part of this challenge in so many ways. I know I'm gonna miss someone but here goes anyway:

Our support crew was awesome. Stacey, Deb, Kylie & Jann, its been great to share the experience with you. Special mention of course to Stacey and my kids, I know my hours of running frustrate the daylight out of you guys, but thanks for letting me do what I do and to be who I am.

GGO, you are a rock upon which the Milers exist. Having you out there with us was fantastic. Sorry for whatever sprays I apparently gave you out there, see Dizzy for counselling! In the aftermath of Melbourne 08, you were genuinely disappointed for me and took interest to make sure I was ok. During this time you prompted me to contemplate whether I would ever do it again. I said something along the lines of "I left my mojo lying in the gutter on St Kilda Road, and I intend to go back and get it." Who'd have thought I'd find it 6 months early washed up on the Warby Trail! What a bonus. Thanks mate.

James, thanks for your help over those closing stages. You are a legend in this game and I appreciate your enthusiastic willingness to share your knowledge with those of us who have considerably less talent.

Thanks also to Theo, who provided support on that first group training run when this thing was still just a pipe dream, and to Natalie for bringing our kids up to the finish line. I really appreciate the support and interest you (and Steve of course!) have taken in my running over the last couple of years. A much better result this time around hey!

Thanks to Roger (physio) and Anna (podiatrist) for getting me to another start line. Roger, you're the only man that takes my breath away,... but keep hurting me like you do and I'm gonna snot you one day! And as for Anna, I'd never consulted a podiatrist before this campaign,... I'm a convert now. 100kms and not even a hint of a blister. Remarkable. I can't recommend the team at Melbourne City Sports highly enough.

To all those who have sponsored (\$5,000 is looking likely) and supported us throughout, we really needed it, and appreciate it. Glad to see you seem to have enjoyed the ride. For your prize, you hereafter carry the title of friends of Australian Oxfam record holders!! Yippee!

And that leaves House, Smoothy and AL. What a team. From our first group run to the time we crossed the finish line, I was always the one most at risk of preventing us achieving our goals. Not once did you provide anything but total support and encouragement, nor expect me to do things I couldn't do. In the days since the race you've thrown some pretty humbling complements my way, and as someone who runs for reasons a little more serious than "just to keep fit", the respect of my peers is the ultimate reward. Thanks. Hopefully you'll still talk to me when you go sub 10 next year.

Will I do it again? Hell no, the report writing is too tough! But seriously, you need an extraordinary amount of motivation to race 100kms. I'd be happy to do it again at a more leisurely pace, but I'm not sure I could get up to race it again. I keep being reminded however,... never say never.

So there it is, ended up revealing a fair bit more of myself than originally intended, hope you enjoyed it, I did.

### **Part 18 - The encore**

A couple of bits that didn't fit anywhere else:

- Remember that 4WD that was coming down Little Joe. Stacey had seen it going up before disappearing over the crest. She thought they had been sent to pull me out!

- An email from the organisers,... "We just wanted to congratulate you all on your fantastic run on Friday. What a result! It's usually my job to call the first team across the finish line and my schedule told me to arrive at 6pm. I arrived around 5:30pm as a rumour was going around that this years team was exceptionally fast. And you were. I missed you by a couple of minutes. "