

Cairns Road Runners Club Inaugural Spiny Cray Ultra Trail Marathon, 17th October 2010

Race Report by 57k winner, Chris White.

On a cool and very wet April day while preparing for the 2004 Quoll, Shane and I (Chris White) had run out and back on Mt Lewis Rd from Bushy Ck. Finishing with a swim, extensive chafing, two very tender nipples (each) and a thirst that required immediate satisfying at the Highlander Tavern, we agreed it was a fantastic long run.

So five and a half years later, when the plan for the 2010 Trail Series was being created I was not all that surprised when Shane suggested using the same course for an Ultra. Given the progression of distances through the calendar and the crowd of other endurance events through the NQ winter, it was decided it would have to take place in October.

My sceptical visions of a mere handful of entrants starting the event with varying levels of sanity and finishing it with varying doses of heat stress were balanced by an excitement at being able to have a crack at an ultra myself. Ignoring the fact that a 57km ultra marathon with over 1550m of altitude gain (and descent) held in North Queensland at the start of Summer could present a few challenges, the idea did have a lot going for it.

The race would start and finish at a pub. This pub has a deck with glorious views of the mountains through which finishers had just joyfully jogged (or despairingly stumbled depending on the accuracy of memory and the length of time since completion). The course was very well shaded, attracted very little vehicular traffic and being a driveable road, was of a width allowing easier avoidance of common rainforest running impediments like wait-a-while and large venomous Red Bellied Black Snakes. The extensive climbing meant heights above sea level of 1200m would be reached where it just had to be cool almost all year and surely half of the run would be downhill. Local accommodation options meant it could be a good weekend away for locals and visitors alike and the chance of spotting some very groovy wildlife (Mt Lewis Spiny Crayfish, pure white Lemuroid Ringtail Possums, Blue Faced Parrot Finches, Tadpoles bigger than your thumb and Blue Earthworms longer than the tallest entrant – including Struan) all added to the attraction.

However, I was still quite surprised when over six months out there was already a few entrants in the ultra event. My surprise continued and excitement grew as entries continued to regularly appear from as far afield as Canberra and Melbourne and a month out I was no longer joking about the superfluousness of the permit conditions 'capping' the number of entrants to 100. Come 4am on the Race Day, it was with a real enthusiasm I greeted my alarm and by 7am, with a crowd of around 70 eager runners gathered on the start line, I couldn't have been happier my initial scepticism had been proven completely misplaced. With unseasonably cool conditions and an absence of the showers that had soaked the region in the previous weeks, a great day of running awaited.

For the first two hours in fact weather conditions were widely and repeatedly described as perfect for running. Course Marshalls did a wonderful job maintaining morale and hydration levels while dispensing goodies and encouragement, resident birds helped distract at least this runner from most feelings of fatigue with an impressive variety and volume of calls, the water tumbling down the lush creeks crossed proved cooler, cleaner, clearer and more refreshing than anything I could have hoped to drink and the vegetation provided shade so complete and extensive I'm sure I was forced to blink each time I did occasionally pop out of it. Even the Snakes proved cooperative by keeping their fangs to themselves and with the exception of a couple of larger lazier specimens, calmly moved off the road to give way to runners.

Long runs are always a great opportunity to gather one's thoughts. During the Spiny Cray I realised this ultra running caper is not nearly as much about racing others as it is about convincing yourself of a couple of things. Kilometres are really just numbers. Our legs and lungs can't count kilometres so it is crazy that we allow our brains to use them to create such strict limits on what we believe we can (or more importantly can't) do. If we convince ourselves of the enormity and certainty of our positive thoughts – how great it feels to be running amongst such stunning surroundings, the joy of the downhill, the satisfaction of running up and over the uphill, lungfuls of cool, cloudy mountain air, the generosity of volunteers giving up their time, how much easier this will be next time as a result of our efforts this time and of course cold beer – our negative thoughts such as those focusing on fatigue, pain or the remaining distance become minor considerations rather than overwhelming obstacles.

Mt Lewis Rd. was overrun with examples of such mental strength and courage during the Spiny Cray. There were those attempting a distance far greater than anything they had previously tackled (or possibly prepared for) but possessing the desire to challenge themselves and push beyond the limits they'd previously set. Or those who knew niggling injuries would make a DNF likely but still turned up and refused to let the start line view of seriously large mountains dent their confidence. Perhaps there was no greater example than that shown by those who knew they'd be out there for many hours after the winners had finished, running through the hottest part of the day (for the 57km event) yet ran and finished with the highest spirits and widest smiles of all. Inspirational and courageous stuff!

It is possibly unfair to single out individuals but amongst a heap of outstanding and noteworthy performances there was a few that many others commented on. Steve Cunningham – 1st Master Male and 3rd Overall – seems to get fitter, faster and tougher not just with every year, but with every event. Not only that he crossed the line and before even grabbing a drink for himself went off and purchased a couple of random draw prizes for the volunteers. Sue Crowe – 1st Female and 5th Overall – Sue's splits show she finished as strongly as anyone in the ultra and quicker than all but a few in the half! And Steve Appleby who travelled from Canberra for both the Gold Rush and the Spiny Cray (not to see his brother as claimed by Neville) and exudes positive spirit on the course and obviously enjoys his running as much as anyone.

It would be grossly unfair not to mention the many people who helped out and without whom the event wouldn't have been nearly as successful. To the Course Marshalls – Max (28.5km), Doon and Pam (10.55km) and Neridah and Tracey (5.5km) – who gave up so much more than half their weekends by volunteering to get up at 4am, stand around for up to 8 hours in what was forecast to be rain and inspiring and encouraging a group of largely strangers – a massive thanks. Ivan took on the role of Race Day Manager and did a top job of it. His experience and generosity allowed Shane, Shawn and I all to run for which we were greatly appreciative. Lorraine's assistance and commitment to local running events was as reliable and helpful as it has been all year. She was ably and generously assisted with registration, recording and timekeeping by Jim, Lucy and Ivan. Shawn Depper is as helpful and cheerful on race day as he is generous with his time leading up to all trail events. Antony and his staff at the Highlander Tavern didn't hesitate to host and support the event. If there is a better venue for post event presentations than that deck I'm yet to see it. Turning up to work at 5:45am on a Sunday morning after a late Saturday night just so there was a toilet available was widely appreciated. Local businesses Its Extreme (130 Gu's, thanks Roy!) and Adventure Equipment (Random Draw Prizes) are long term and wonderful supporters of local events – please support them.

And I'm sure all runners will join me in thanking Shane (once time has dulled the memory of just how difficult it was to walk on Monday) for his vision in creating the Spiny Cray and the countless hours he put into making it a success. I hope it grows into an event that we look forward to for many years to come and inspires many to get out there and run further, higher and more enjoyably than we normally would.

Race Report by Andrew Compson – winner of the Half marathon distance:

It was early August during Melbourne's coldest and wettest winter for many years and training for October's marathon was progressing at pace. My wife, Em, had been an absolute legend as always, accepting early nights, supporting my early mornings, feeding an insatiable hunger and tending to various aching body parts all in the hunt for a sub 3hr time. In an attempt to redress this balance I said that the choice of our post-race holiday in November was completely up to her - after all I had been more than an influential factor in choosing trekking in Nepal as our honeymoon location the previous year!

Now, just to explain, there is almost 100% trust in our relationship - except when Em hears words from me along the lines of "of course I can relax for a week; if you want a beach type holiday then that's absolutely fine with me". A few days later I get a cryptic email at work saying "how long after a marathon is it sensible to compete in an ultra?!" And so it came to be that flights to Port Douglas were timed to allow access to the beach, the Great Barrier Reef, the Daintree Rainforest and also the Spiny Cray trail running event - the latter designed to tire me out enough that I would sit still and enjoy myself for the rest of the week.

So the 10/10/10 rolled around and the Melbourne Marathon went perfectly to plan - of course there was more than noticeable pain for the last 10k, but a chip time of 2hrs 58mins and 46secs made all of that bearable. The next question was how would the legs pull up? The resounding answer was given when attempting to bend legs getting up and down stairs in the next two days - but fundamentally no injuries! Still it was decided that the ultra event would be a step too far just 7 days later, so in the middle of the week I reluctantly emailed Race Director Shane White and asked to drop back to the half marathon distance.

After that significant preamble it brings us to the morning of Sunday October 17th - a 5am alarm, the ritual jam on toast followed by a beautiful drive from Port Douglas to the Julatten Highlander Tavern, 400m above sea level. It is a cool morning by local standards, (though not for a pom who is only just acclimatised to Melbourne after 5 years living there), and the day before my 34th birthday. The whole day certainly felt like an early present starting with the friendly reception given by everyone at the event. I registered with Cairns Road Runners club president, Lorraine Lawson, who I had previously met at the Roadies Club Run whilst up in Cairns with work a few weeks before and chatted with people from near and far - one lady had driven 6hrs from Townsville which made my 3hr flight pale into insignificance! Over the last 12 months or so I have entered a few trail runs and the atmosphere is so far superior to the faceless big city centre runs that it is hard to even draw a comparison.

The race briefing is held by Chris White at 6.50am and a few announcements are made including an admission that the 56km ultra event is actually 57km - there are a few smiles in the gathered crowd, but looking at the field for the headline race you know that an extra 1000m was not going to bother these extremely fit looking athletes. There is also mention that the water stations are manned by friends and family which further enhanced the cosy feel of the day.

7am then ticks around and we all set off along the Mt Lewis Road. A gentle downwards slope of bitumen almost lulls you into a false sense of security, but the course profile provided on the event website showed that even those completing the half marathon

with me will face a continuous 600m climb through the rainforest before reaching the turnaround point. I set off at the front of the pack with Chris White who it is clear would have blown me off the track had he not been pacing himself for the 57km to come! As it happens we have an equivalent pace in mind and push each other up the climb on a dirt road which is wonderfully soft underfoot due to the recent rains, but not enough to remove the required grip needed by the trusty trail runners.

As promised the slope is almost relentless, though at one point there is enough respite in the gradient for Chris to pass on some knowledge of Queensland flora. Apparently we have just skipped over a branch of the 'wait-a-while' tree that has fallen onto the track. Wikipedia later told me that 'the spines of this tree have been known to trap weak sheep'. Fortunately it is early enough in the race that I have more strength than an old mutton, though I do for a second wonder if that was a motive for Chris telling me of these harmful barbs only *after* we had skipped over it! Then I remembered we were in different events, but still the Aussies do like to have joke on us unsuspecting poms - I have only just stopped looking for drop bears in the trees of Australia!

My turnaround point is marked by the second of two drink stations where voices of encouragement urge us on. We have gone slightly past the half way distance for a half marathon as a flat spot was required for the tables - trail running was never meant to be easy or boring! I wish Chris all the best for his continuing journey and to say I am impressed when I later see his time is 4 hrs 57 min 30 sec is a significant understatement. For my own race there is now only a quad thumping downhill to come, which I have never particularly enjoyed, and last week's marathon aches came back in abundance. However, 1hr 40mins and 41secs after setting off I return to the Highlander Tavern in 1st place - I only started running in 2004 on the other side of the world in the Bath half marathon and the Spiny Cray is the first race I have ever won so I'm pretty pleased with my holiday activity.

After the finish we cheer in other runners, partake in the delicious fruits provided by the organisers and look longingly at the beer that others are enjoying whilst realising that this particular pleasure will have to wait until the driving is over for the day! Again there is no shortage of conversation to be had with those returning from the half marathon and 5k races. Ivan Whittle has done a brilliant job as race coordinator and as the presentation comes to a close we spare a thought for the 57km runners that are still running under a sky that has broken its cloud cover and started to heat up another far north Queensland day. However, for me it is time to return to Port Douglas with my wife and keep that promise of a relaxing holiday - for a couple of days at least!