

Bush-Dashing

You've ticked off a marathon. Time to man-up for a real race

BY DOMINIC CADDEN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK WATSON

IT'S AFTER MIDNIGHT and I'm half-walking, half-running as I try to find my way back to my hotel. It's around here somewhere, not that you'd ever know from the dense, wet mountain undergrowth I'm battling through. It's freezing, but I'm sweaty. My legs are wobbly, but I'm on an incredible high. I'm starving, but I want to throw up. Yes, endurance trail running offers many of the same features as a drunken Saturday night, minus the liver and brain damage.

The monotony of road running bores me to tears. I figure if you're stuck on a road a long way from somewhere, the practical thing to do is to hitchhike or call a cab. But charging cross-country through bush, scrambling over rocks, crossing creeks, climbing down cliffs and braving the elements through day and night, on the other hand, is altogether less dull to me.

I'm not alone. Some 360 runners (300 of them solo) line up on a cold May morning outside Leura's York Fairmont Resort to start the The North Face 100, a trail run that snakes 100 kilometres through the Blue Mountains west of Sydney.

I've got five kilometres to place myself in the right position before we hit the narrow, single-file track through steep bush. Too far up the front and I'll be overrun by impatient athletes trampling me into the mud, too far back and I'll be stuck behind slowpokes. It's toes-to-heels stuff along cliff tops before we drop down 300 metres of ladder-like steps into a lush, green, dark forest. Suddenly, it breaks at a landslide area and the field slows to a crawl over boulders so jumbled that poles have been erected to mark a recommended route.

Back in the bush, the field has spread by the time we take the Golden

Staircase, the first steep climb of the run. The rough steps hacked into the bush set my calves on fire. At the top, after 17km, we're greeted by drinks and snacks at the first checkpoint.

As I get into stride again under a bleak sky, the wind whistles over the ridge as the field spreads out over the wide gravel track that climbs up to Narrowneck Ridge.

The slippery climb is worth every bead of sweat – and there are lots by now – as the ridge drops away steeply on either side, showing the sheer rock walls across the valley. As pretty as they are, I register that I'll have to climb my way round one of those peaks later. I try to put the thought out of my mind, especially when a wind squall rises out of the valley to whip a rogue sheet of rain against me. It's like nature's warning shot. ➤



From a packed start (inset), it's not long before the only thing you are battling is the terrain – and your own demons.



Breathtaking and heartbreaking: the TNF 100 is the ultimate endurance-running challenge, but Dominic (left) was well-equipped for the conditions.

The tourist buses have long departed when I pass Echo Point to descend the 900-plus quad-busting steps of the Giant Stairway. To save my legs, I swing myself down using the rails like crutches. The tiny lights of other runners chase me down the 300m drop, but there's no sound above the freezing wind.

At the bottom, there's a new complication – all the pink ribbons marking the course have gone. I stop to get out my back-up light and the next runner is upon me. It's the rubber-band man who flew past me at Nellie's Gap. His name is Ky and he's befuddled without the markers.

We head off together. At this point, the body is weak, as is the spirit, so I think we're both glad of the company. My strategy was to make a fast run of

the downward slope that lasts for another 9km or so before a 10km hill that rises some 600m, but you try explaining strategy to lead legs.

Ironguts next to me doesn't mind. He's downing some five-course meal while keeping up a fast hike. I feel sick just watching him. His discipline seems stronger than his stomach, given the way his backdoor's trumpeting. At least it keeps the animals away.

Only a short way into the 10km hill, we come across our first victim. The body is so cocooned in clothes and space blanket that I can't tell if it's man or woman. The muffled voice assures me it will be heading off again after "a little rest". A kilometre up the hill, a tall man packs it in when I tell him the checkpoint's another 7km. I take his race number in case there's no phone coverage, but soon an SES member comes towards me and I outline the broken-down runner's position and condition. It all takes time, but I'm happy for the distraction. My glutes are yelping, but the spirit-sapping sight of turning every corner and seeing

WHAT?

Rated by ultra-running legend Dean Karnazes as "the hardest 100-kilometre race I've ever done", The North Face 100 covers over 4200 metres of elevation changes through the World Heritage-listed Blue Mountains west of Sydney. Starting and finishing in Leura, the race passes through five checkpoints, with support crew permitted at the final three. The relay option sees runners change over at checkpoint three (54km).

WHY?

The tone, the century – there's something special about 100km, but you also do this race for the spectacular scenery and the incredible variation and challenge of the terrain. It helps that the course is well marked (apart from the one spot Dominic encountered) and has the full support of local State Emergency Service crews.

The change in weather spurs me on and I charge down the steep slopes of the ridge, every stride really just a controlled skid. The plan is to accelerate to overtake runners who might hold me up on the Tarros Ladders, where only one runner can pass at a time. I overtake half a dozen competitors, but there's a line of 30 more stopped in front of the ladders.

The icy wind rips into the rock face we're pinned against. The runners rug up, joke and chat, eat and drink, but you can sense the underlying frustration. Some of the Aussies take the chance to psyche-out overseas runners with stories of savage "drop bears" and tree snakes that hitchhike on backpacks. After so long stopped in the cold, some runners are concerned about getting injured when they head off again. "I just hope there's a doctor at the bottom," one weighs in. "I'll need half a Viagra just so I can make my dick poke out far enough to pee."

Half an hour later, I head down the two ladders, each enclosed in a

rope mesh that makes for an awkward chest-to-rungs technique to stop my backpack snagging. At the bottom, I turn on the pace on the rocky crags through the bush to break away from the pack and make up the lost minutes that have upset my race plan.

Increasing my speed has the adverse effect of knocking about my ankles and feet over the rocks, and I'm more than aware that the biggest cause of retirements the previous year was foot injuries. Today, I've got Blistex patches held on my heels with Leucoplast, silicon sleeves over each of my toes, taped-up ankles and heels, two pairs of thick socks and compression socks over the top. If I'm lucky, it might just be enough. In trail running, a strategy for minimising damage plays as big a part as being prepared for the elements and sustaining energy.

The course is throwing everything at us. After checkpoint two, an out-and-back section along Ironpot Ridge has us running into one another along the

"A strategy for minimising damage plays as big a part as being prepared for the elements and sustaining energy"

narrow, rocky path, before a hellish descent. I zigzag side-on down the near-vertical drop, bouncing off the trees like a pinball. At the bottom, there's another contrast – the soft grass of farm country. It's a brief respite before the hard gravel starts again, and the last grass we'll feel underfoot until the finish line.

Checkpoint three is like a mountain base camp, with some runners finishing their relay leg here, others starting, but most continuing on like me. I force down some food, but I can tell that my stomach is close to squeezing shut like a fist. I stuff my pockets with fast sugars – jubes, glucose tablets and dried fruit.

The bush is flat for a while, but I'm saving my energy for Nellie's Gap – a 350m scramble over rocks up a rise that appears as a vertical line on the relief map of the course. After climbing 100m, I've lost the trio of runners who'd been on my heels since checkpoint three. By 200m, my four-kilogram pack weighs on my lungs like

a 10-cigar-a-day habit and I'm stopping every dozen footsteps to gasp for air, then rushing on as daylight fades. If any of these rocks start moving, I at least want to see it coming.

A young Chinese runner with rubber bands for legs leaps past me, weaving and bending his way over the terrain. The narrow path at the top is punctured with jagged rocks, stumps and tree roots that come up to take your legs out from under you. By now I'm operating by headlamp and I'm at the mercy of the fine line between speed and risk.

Soon, I'm back out on bitumen and quickly see Katoomba, civilisation that's rushed up so fast that I feel a bit of culture shock. At checkpoint four, I'm shivering uncontrollably once I stop moving, a combination of the cold and fatigue. It's time for a serious clothing decision. Clothes that are too light or wet put you at risk of hypothermia as you plunge into Jamison Valley for over 20km. Too warm and the sweat and heat can slow you down.



manual adrenaline

an endless rise disappearing into the blackness is worse. By contrast, Ky appears bright-eyed and sprightly and I worry that I'm holding him back. I use my altimeter to count off each 100m of the climb as we power up the hill with a fast walk that looks like it might turn into a jog any second, but never quite makes it.

Finally, we hit the flat and the last checkpoint is like an after-party zone for stoners in the middle of nowhere. People are slurping down instant noodles and kicking back with cups of tea around an open fire they stare at while chatting and laughing with strangers. Yep, 89km is a good place to be, but this is the first time I've fallen behind my projected times. I resist the temptations, stay away from the fire and lay out on the icy grass under a thermal blanket to stretch. For months in training I'd worked on glutes and iliotalband stretching, but now my hips are so tight that if I stuck a couple lumps of coal in them, they'd be diamonds in a fortnight.

Ten minutes later, I'm shocked to find that Ky is less than raring to go. He's found a chair and the hot noodles – and I've lost him. "I'll catch up to you," he tells me. That's about all the motivation I need.

With all the acceleration of a rusted-up locomotive, I get my legs up to running pace on the bitumen road out of the checkpoint and soon I'm diving back into the bush. For me, it's important to run – it's the difference between surviving the course and racing it. Besides, my best projected time is still teasing me. The final leg is also the most enjoyable technical running of the course. The bush is dense, the path narrow and the ground gently undulates constantly through

The Three Sisters provide a breathtaking backdrop to the TNF 100; top right: the welcoming sight of the finish line; bottom right: cramped, swollen calf muscles tell a tale of pain.



“
It's hard to run on what you can't see, which throws up a new sensory experience – tasting dirt

rock scrambles and creek crossings, ducking under low cliff overhangs. It would undoubtedly all look spectacular if I could see it, but the flipside is that every sound, every smell, even the cold spray off the waterfalls is enhanced. Still, it's hard to run on what you can't see, which throws up a new sensory experience – tasting dirt.

As enjoyable as it is, I'm peering through the blackness looking for a clearing, lights, listening for noise, any sign of the finish line. At last I see a European fir tree, an oddity that must mark civilisation. No lights, still. After a few hundred metres more, I wonder if my mind's playing tricks on me. I catch up to another runner and there, like a light through a keyhole, the bush tunnels out onto the lawn of the resort.

It seems impolite to brush past the other runner at this stage, and instead we urge each other on for a strong but staged finish that would make an F1 team proud (my time of 18:31:47 puts

WHEN?

The race is held mid-May (May 15 in 2010), when it's too cool for snakes, mozzies and heat exhaustion, but not cold enough for snow or ice – hopefully. It starts at 7am on Saturday and the cut-off time is 30 hours.

HOW?

There's no qualification to enter, but all runners must comply with a mandatory gear list. Random checks are made during the race to ensure runners are still carrying all their safety gear and adequate food and drink. thenorthface.com.au/100

me in 143rd place). At this distance, over this terrain, I figure we're all competing against the pain and the elements, not against one another. It's been a day-long battle against the bush and everyone's a winner. 

ESSENTIAL GEAR

Shoes

Trails require a more rigid shoe with greater stability than runners, plus good shock absorbers and protective toecaps. **The North Face's Arnuva 50 Boa** has got the lot, plus the wind-up Boa lacing system that leaves no slip area anywhere inside the shoe.

(\$289.95; thenorthface.com.au)



Tights

Through sun, freezing wind and rain squalls, I never felt too hot, cold or wet in **Body Science Athletic longs**.

These tights also prevent chafing, but the clincher was the shield their focused compression offered against calf strain and shin splints. (\$139.95; bsccompression.com.au)



Socks

Blisters can cut you down, but the five-toe, seamless design of **Injinji Performance Series socks** prevents any friction. The socks repel water, so they don't bunch up. Toe separation also helps improve balance and grip. (\$27.95; injinji.com.au)

– DC

Headlamp

Comfort and decent vision is a difficult combination to nail, but the **Petzl MYO RXP programmable headlamp** has a wide beam and a focused beam that can light up to 72m, plus a flashing setting that's great for roads. (\$169; spelean.com.au)



TOYOTA RAV4 THE ORIGINAL SUV

oh what a feeling!

rav4.com.au

