

EXPERIENCING A LIFETIME IN ONE DAY AT ETR: DOWER

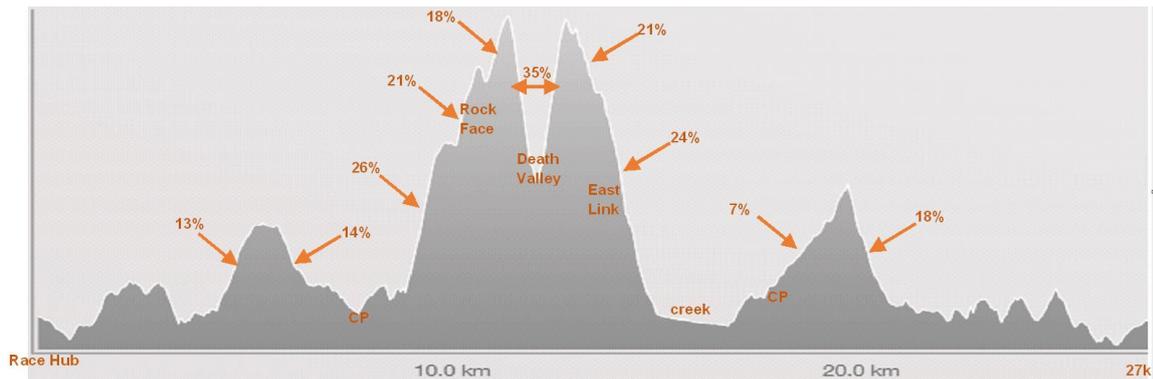
Posted by [Kate Dzienis](#) | Jul 30, 2022 | [Race Reports](#), [UltraMag](#)



The Elephant Trail Race takes place in the hinterland of Port Macquarie and is known for its particularly brutal and technical course. The event offers 4 ultra-distance and 6 sub-ultra distance races. The 100-mile race has 8,800 metres in elevation gain and loss. Mt Everest is 8,849.

The course is a 27km loop and those running the miler are asked to run 2 laps in reverse, then change direction for 2 laps in the clockwise direction before turning around to complete the final 2 laps in reverse. Mount Cairncross is the highest point on the course at 536 meters. Although lower than the ranges beyond, Mt Cairncross forms the dominant feature on the western skyline and its distinctive shape explains why it is known locally as the 'Sleeping Elephant'.

This elevation profile of the 27km lap (in the forwards direction) highlights several of the more notable sections and shows the average grades of the climbs and descents.



The race is perhaps most well-known for its notorious Death Valley section, which borders on the ridiculous. Death Valley goes straight down and straight up a valley adjacent to the telecommunications tower at the summit of Mt Cairncross. At an average grade of 35% Death Valley is wickedly steep.

Our first 2 laps were run in the reverse direction. This involved a long steep technical climb up Mt Cairncross on the east side ('East Link'), and a seemingly even longer and steeper but not quite as technical descent on the western side. Once at the summit, runners in the ultra-distance races must descend and ascend Death Valley before traversing down the other side of the mountain.

The race director is Mat Williams and the safety officer his wife, Kerry. It is a family affair with Mat & Kerry's children, Liana and Cooper both taking on leading roles as 2IC and official photographer respectively. Mat and Kerry are salt of the earth types. And they sure know how to stage an event. Every detail properly considered. No stone left unturned. The giant inflatable white elephant, affectionately known as Ken, stands tall over the Race Hub and takes great delight in seeing all of the runners pass under him at the start and end of each lap.

It was 2 years ago that I took on and won my first 100k race at the Elephant. After finishing Mat W said that I would have to come back and try the miler on for size the following year. 2021 didn't happen for me due to covid lockdowns. And so here I was at the Elephant, ready to do just as Mat had suggested I do 2 years earlier. My build up was less than ideal, having contracted the dreaded Coronavirus a mere 10 days before the race.

Race

This race was an intense spiritual experience. My psyche is changed forever. I had heard that to complete a miler was to experience a lifetime in a day. Now I realise the extent to which that is true.

It was 7.30pm on Friday evening. I sat in the athlete's tent and checked the contents of my vest one last time. I eyed up the competition, including a couple of young fit looking guys. Okay, ready to roll. Race briefing time. A few seconds prior to the briefing I got chatting to Mat W. He said that the course was in a really poor condition due to all the bad weather of late. "Oh no" I said "...does that mean there's water in the creek?" "Yep" he said "...there is

heaps, you are going to get wet feet. Not just on the creek section, but there is water across the trail at other points along the course as well.” Mat said that if you try to keep your feet dry you are going to lose a lot of time. Not worth it. I reserved my opinion. I would wait and see, but I was sure that I would be doing whatever I could to keep my feet dry. At this stage I was still wondering how the body would respond to the demands of the race. I felt okay now that the adrenaline was starting to flow. But up until late the day earlier I was feeling really poorly: head full of zombie from this nasty virus. Add in wet feet for what 30 hours and that might just tip me over the edge. I had resolved to finish this race. And in the back of my mind I thought that if everything went well I might even manage a podium, depending of course on who else had turned up to race.

The race briefing was short and sweet. We had all read the comprehensive race briefing notes online. A few light-hearted jokes and a few nervous laughs. Then it was 8pm and we were off.

Lap 1

It was cold. We ran as one for the first few hundred meters. Someone said it was forecast to drop down to 2 degrees during the night. I was only wearing a short sleeved football jersey and shorts. A few runners commented on my lack of clothing and we got chatting about how different people perceive the cold differently. I said that I had done several night runs recently and found within a couple of k’s that I was peeling off the layers.

But cold was just fine. Persistent rain had been falling for weeks, right up until several days before the race. And then it started again on the Tuesday after the race. So for a brief window over the weekend of ETR, the skies were clear. We had been blessed by the weather gods. Better than all that, there was a large bright full moon in the clear sky. How fortunate.

Down the first fire trail, around the corner and out of Ken’s view. I found myself towards the front of the group. I struck up a conversation with Angus G, who at 22 is half my age (he was one of the young fit looking dudes I had seen in the tent earlier with a steely and focussed look of determination in his eye) and Leonie M. Leonie had recently completed the Run Larapinta Stage Race for her birthday and spoke very highly of the experience. Some time passed and I fell behind while I ate my first pack of rice, bacon and egg. Then I caught up to them again. I didn’t feel particularly chatty, probably because I was so unsure of how my mind and body would respond after my recent illness, but also because I had never tried to run this far before, nor had I ever attempted to run through a whole night. I was very unsure as to how it would pan out. Still there was more chat here than there would be for the next 30 hours and I was thankful for that.

The graphic above shows the course in clockwise direction. We were running the first 2 laps in reverse so we climbed East Link to the top of the mountain. The section immediately preceding East Link, the creek, is the flattest section of the course. However, to add to the immense challenges that this course throws at its runners at every turn, the flattest section of the course is also one of the most technical and therefore one of the slowest sections.

By the time we reached the first checkpoint I was happy with my pacing. I had estimated an hour to this point and it was 1.15. I was in about 5th or 6th place I guessed. All of the volunteers, at this CP and at every other, were amazing. They were incredibly responsive and helpful. I'm sure Kerry and Mat would agree that the volunteers are the backbone of the event. They create the fun and welcoming atmosphere as we approach with cheers, cowbells, music, awesome costumes and fabulous light displays. They provide us with the encouragement that we need to keep going.

As much as I love the aid stations, I generally don't stick around long. I blew through the first CP without hardly stopping. This moved me up a place as the guy all in black, who I later learned was Tim S, took a seat. I refilled a soft flask with water, said thanks and I was on my way.

The first creek section was a stark reminder of how brutal this course is. I ran the 2km section alone. I remembered seeing the inflatable unicorn that marked the start of the section from 2020, but this time there was a lot more to see. Most of it glow in the dark kids' inflatable toys and water equipment like mini boogie boards, life jackets, a pair of oars and a life ring. But my eyes were now trained to the less interesting pink reflector tape that hung from branches and indicated the 'general' direction. Criss crossing the creek from side to side, rock hopping, balancing over wet slippery logs and generally trying to keep my feet dry while still moving at a reasonable pace. As there is no marked track on this section, the challenge was to pick a route that was as straight as possible and had the fewest obstacles to negotiate around or over. This was no easy task, and I found myself tangled up in vines and getting stung by stinging nettles on more than several occasions. At least I managed to keep my feet dry.

I caught up to Angus G at the end of the creek. He was with someone else. It was Rob L. His bib said 'Coach Rob'. I could tell immediately that he was in great spirits. He said he had just gone straight up the middle of the creek. I guessed he had taken Mat W's advice and he was happy to run with wet shoes and feet in order to save a heap of time. I said something along the lines that I hoped his feet would last the distance. He replied that he thought foot care would probably be the number one cause of DNF for the uninitiated among us. Coach Rob told us he was part of the CTTR team and that this was his backyard. He spoke about their efforts in recent months to clear the trails and told us all about his shoulder replacement and how excited he was to be getting back on his road bike soon. He said that he had advised the guy who took off ahead of us all to keep on going, even if that that meant hiking the last lap or 2. He said it was possible to hike an entire lap in around 7 hours, which I duly noted. Going off what Rob L had told us, it was reasonably safe to assume that there was only one runner ahead of our group who was leading the race.

We had just started up East Link for the first time, when Rob stepped aside and motioned for Angus and I to go on ahead. We did so and soon found it was just the 2 of us. Not too much chat, but it sure was nice to have company still. We plodded up steadily and silently, each of us thinking our own thoughts. The trail was steep and technical. We made good progress (probably a little too good in retrospect) and got to the top in 40 minutes (2.36km, with 436m elevation at 16.40 pace). The full moon was bright and at a couple of points the

trees cleared and we could admire a spectacular view of the lights of Port Macquarie and other smaller townships further in the distance. I don't recall noticing the wind chill on this first ascent of the mountain.

I had my waist light fired up now, in addition to my head torch, and was pleased with the extra light it threw down on the trail at my feet. I knew it only had about 6 hours of burn time so I used it sparingly in the hope I could make it last all night long. Then I could plug it into my portable charger during the day to have it ready for the 2nd night where I had calculated I would hopefully only need it for about 6 hours. Wrong!

There were two points on the course where we could gauge the distance between those in front of us and those chasing us. Death Valley was the first. At the bottom of this wildly steep and technical descent was a timing mat and an unmanned tent with a chair. The latter presumably for those who thought that a rest at the bottom was the best option before scaling the ascent. Then straight back up to where we had just come from to complete the out and back section aptly named Death Valley.

I descended for the first time with Angus G. The runner that we were confident was leading the race, the runner that Rob L had told us about an hour or so earlier, was James H. James was about halfway back up when we passed him on our way down. We said hello and gave one another some good ol' trail running encouragement. I calculated that James H had a good 20-25 minutes on us. I think it was pretty much straight after seeing him, after we turned at the bottom of Death Valley and started the climb up, that I began to put a little bit of distance on Angus G. First Death Valley section chewed up 29 minutes (1.4km, with 247m gain and 247m loss at 20.37 pace).

The other point of the course where we doubled back and could see who was following and how far was at the Race Hub turnaround.

James H completed his first lap in 4.08. I was next in at 4.21 with Angus G close behind at 4.29. It was very early days, but I thought my 4.21 was about right – it was roughly aligned with my pacing plan at least. I had not seen James H leave, but Angus G arrived as I was getting ready to depart. I reloaded nutrition, refilled soft flasks, exchanged the damp clothes for dry. Stop time approx. 8 minutes. As I left Race Hub, Mat W, the Race Director, remarked that I would get in another lap before dawn. He made me feel like this was some sort of an achievement, which gave me a little boost. And every little boost counts....a lot.

Lap 2

I was on my own, as I had been for about the last 15km. Unlike the first lap, I had now stopped checking my watch to make sure I wasn't moving too fast. I knew I wasn't. I knew my pace was about right by feel; it was sustainable. Aside from an intermittent cough, I felt good. My head felt the clearest it had since before the virus and my legs felt strong.

This time round the East Link climb from the end of the creek up to the tower took me 46 minutes (2.36km, with 436m elevation at 19 minute pace). So only a few minutes slower than the first time round. But it felt harder and longer because I was alone. The wind chill on

the mountain was noticeable now. My thermal gloves, buff and 100 weight fleece top were doing their job.

This was my first of 5 completely solitary laps. And besides venturing off course momentarily it was largely uneventful. I had run straight past a turn off and by the time I realised there was no hanging pink reflective tape around, I checked my map and could see that if I kept on the trail I was on I would soon re-join the course. If I was going to veer off course it couldn't be much less of a stress than this I thought. In fewer than 10 minutes I was back on track, and I'd probably only ran an additional kilometre or less. It was a good wake-up call though. To stay present and focused. To always be looking ahead for the next piece of reflective tape.

Aside from the perennially pleasant encounters with the aid station vollies, I only saw James H and Angus G in Death Valley. James was on his way back up as I was heading down. I could tell I had gained a little bit of time on him from the last time our paths had crossed on this section. But not much. I calculated he was now 15-20 minutes ahead of me. He said "damn it is definitely longer and steeper this time! Relentless!". "For sure" I replied "...and it gets steeper and longer each time we do it I bet!"

The problem I had trying to catch up with James H was that it was very difficult to 'race' down a mountain with an average gradient of 22% that had a long wet and slippery section called 'rock face'. At the foot of the descent was the only other CP on the course. It was always a relief to reach this CP mainly because it was only another 8k to Race Hub which signalled the end of another lap, but also because the final 8k back to the Race Hub was the most runnable of the course.

It was around this time that I guessed it was probably going to be a race between the 3 of us to the finish line. Although in thinking that, Tim S in 4th was looking strong, and I thought that he may just be executing the perfect race. Given my health issues the week prior, I had re-evaluated my expectations leading into race weekend. Instead of running for a podium I had told myself I just had to try to complete my first miler. But given how well I was feeling nearly 50k in, I began to feel my innate competitive psychology fire up. I now dared to dream that I could potentially win this race. Only 20 minutes separated the 3 of us at the end of the lap 2. Angus G had mentioned that he would be picking up a pacer for the last 2 laps. That would be nice, I thought. Advantage Angus.

Two laps down. James had 5 minutes on me and I had 15 on Angus. My second lap was just over 5 hours, which included the 8 minutes taken to change clothes and restock. I took a bit longer at the end of the lap this time. I ate a well salted boiled potato, changed into clothes for the day and restocked nutrition and water. I also tried to change my shoes. But they felt too tight so I aborted.

Lap 3

Back out on the course, and perhaps in first place now, I thought. I am intentionally quick with my stops. My best guess was that James H was still at the Race Hub.

The first sign of light hitting the sky is a special time any time one gets the opportunity to experience it, especially when one is away from the bright city lights and immersed in nature, but even more especially when one has been running all night through the forest.

I recall that it was the bird sound that first alerted me to the changing sky. All shades of burning orange and deep red ensued. I had heard accounts of runners feeling surges of energy as a new day dawned. Now I got to experience that for myself.

The climb up to the tower in the forward lap direction is massive. It feels interminable. At just over 3km long, with a gain of 471m, it took me a little over 50 minutes at about 15.20 pace. Ouch. I had to cling on tightly to the uplifting feeling of the sunlight hitting my retinas and firmly focus on moving forward and up.

At 8am on the dot I found myself at the bottom of Death Valley for the 3rd time. I had been running for 12 hours and was only halfway through my 3rd lap. I ran some rough calculations in my head. A sub-30 hour finish was looking out of reach. I'm pretty sure my paths crossed again with James H as I was nearing the top of the climb out of the Valley and he was starting his descent. I did my best to look fresh and vital. It occurred to me at some stage that the Hardrock 100 was probably underway about now. This was our own version of Hardrock I thought.

When I got back to Race Hub this time I sat down. As usual Kerry W was at my beck and call. Yes please dear Kerry a cup of hot tea with milk and sugar would be amazing. And it was. I reloaded the vest and summoned the nerve to head back out.

Lap 4

There were several points along the course where a substantial body of water ran across the track. The largest of these was about 2 or 3km after the Race Hub (in the forwards direction). I had seen some of the 50k runners just bolt straight across, going knee deep. In my continuing battle to keep my shoes and feet as dry as possible, on this crossing as with the others, I took a bit more time to find a way around. Sometimes that involved bush crashing up-stream until I found a good collection of felled trees to scramble across. It was never pretty, it chewed up time and sometimes the shoes and socks got a little wet, but I told myself that my cost-benefit analysis was solid and I stuck to my plan.

I went down and up Death Valley and passed Angus G when I was about two-thirds of my way back up. Mat W, the Race Director, was at the top near the tower with his 4WD. He later told me that he and other race managers drove up the mountain to evacuate a total of 17 runners. Most years he said it was maybe 2 or 3.

It was about 1.30pm. Mat saw me move in the direction of East Link and he said "Hey aren't you going the wrong way?" I stopped dead in my tracks. A stunned look on my face. What was he saying? Had I made a monumental error and either changed direction too early or too late? Was this it. My race over because of a rookie mistake of not following the course directions? I replied "No I'm on my 4th lap – my final lap in the forwards direction. I'm going down East Link." "Right you are" he said. 'What was that all about' I thought for a nanosecond as I ran off, and then the thought was gone. Like all thoughts. Fleeting. Back to

the task. Focus. In hindsight I realise that Mat may have been testing my cognitive faculties to ensure I was in a fit state to continue.

I reached the creek in good time and my legs still felt good. In previous laps the creek had got the better of me. It was so hard to find a good rhythm anywhere on this course, but especially along the creek section. On at least 3 or 4 occasions on each attempt I would pick the wrong route and end up having to backtrack. Perhaps Coach Rob was right – straight up the shallow edge of the creek with no regard for dry feet. But on this lap I found my flow on this section, a combination of luck in choosing the best lines but also due to the familiarity I now had with the topography of the creek section. I completed the 2km in 25 minutes and change which was several minutes faster than previously. It helped immeasurably that it was broad daylight now.

Lap 5

Change of direction. Chance to reset. 4 down, 2 to go.

As I prepared to run under Ken and back out to face the music Mat W, the RD, approached me with his warm radiant smile and asked me which way I was headed (ie, forwards or reserve direction). This was becoming a comedy act and we were the main characters, I thought. In my sleep deprived state my thought process was blunt. I looked at him quite seriously and announced I was going this way (I pointed the wrong way). “Wait” I said “No, I’m going this way! I’m on to my 5th lap so I’m going this way.” We both laughed.

I was looking out for the other milers running towards me. How far did I have on Angus G? On James H? On Tim S? I don’t recall exactly when I realised I had not seen James H for a long time; but that is when I comprehended that this was now probably just a 2 man race to the finish.

An experienced ultrarunner once told me that you can’t complete a 100 mile race without sustaining an injury. And somewhere around the 120km mark I learned just that. I started feeling the tell-tale tightness in the back of my right knee. I had had a baker’s cyst once before so I recognised the sizeable lump on the back of my knee. It was pretty sore and starting to hinder my ability to move freely. Especially on the ascents. I began to consciously try to lead with my left leg. Easier said than done. I had been out on course for 24 hours now, eclipsing my previous longest run by 8 hours.

Angus G and I crossed paths about 20 minutes into my 5th lap, which meant I had a 40 minute lead plus the overhead time he would take at Race Hub to turn around. At least 10 minutes. So I estimated I had about a 50 minute lead. I yelled out “Go Gus. Looking strong mate! Keep going!” He was so gracious. He congratulated me on the win and said that if we don’t catch up again then it was a pleasure to meet me. Absolute legend. But wait, was he conceding? We were only 110k in with 50 to go. He looked like he was moving well. And he was about to pick up his pacer. A fact that I thought might give him wings. I turned back and yelled out that IF I reached the finish line first I would wait for him. He said he would do his best to not keep me waiting too long. I dwelled on that exchange for a short while. I recalled the final few kilometres of a trail marathon in the Glass House Mountains that I ran with

Kieran O'Brien in January 2021. I was stunned by his confidence: here I was stressing about our pace, eager to cement our 2nd and 3rd places in the book and worrying about the runners that were hot on our heels. Meanwhile KOB was floating along in a sea of calm. As long as we keep moving forward at a reasonable pace he said, no one will catch us. That's experience – something he has in spades and I'm slowly acquiring.

Tim S was coming down East Link as I was going up. He was on his way to completing his 4th lap where he would choose to end his race. A phenomenal effort. Tim stopped and moved to the side of the trail to let me climb over the large trunk that blocked the way. "Awesome effort mate" he said "What do you need? I've got water, juice, food, lollies." What a superstar! I'm good, thanks Tim. And then I was alone again.

Down and back up Death Valley and no sight of anyone. This buoyed my confidence levels. The race was now mine for the taking I thought. I just needed to keep moving forward.

I arrived at the Race Hub at around 10.15pm. I felt completely broken. The lap had taken me a little over 6 hours. Another whole lap to go....really?! Another minimum 6 hours, possibly significantly more?! Once again I was back out on course in under 10 minutes. There wasn't any need to take longer. If I sat down for too long I may not get up, or at least it would be even more difficult to get started again than it already was. In her usual customary fashion Kerry W was phenomenal. She asked me how I was and what I needed. She filled my flasks and offered me hot food and drink. She laughed when I said my legs were shot and that I needed a new right knee. And she noticed how serious I was when I remarked that I really didn't want to go back out there. Just one more. You can do it. Once more I peered down at the pink CTRR band around my wrist and read the 3 words inscribed in large bold black font "Never give up".

Lap 6

This lap, this 27km run with approximately 1,465m of elevation gain and loss, having already run 136km and climbed 7,325m across 2 nights and a day, was at the risk of understating things, the most difficult and challenging 6.5 hours of my life. I had to draw on every last skerrick of courage and determination. I went places that I didn't know existed. Positive self-talk and visualisation was about all I had left at this stage. My mind felt completely unencumbered.

This is where the gold is. As ultrarunners we love learning about our potential as human beings and redefining our own personal limits as to what we believe our mind and body are capable of.

I grit my teeth. It was dark and there was a cold wind blowing. The course was quiet. Eerily so. The first checkpoint was still and silent; devoid of any sign of life aside from the flood lights. It was midnight. The volunteers tucked up in a warm cosy bed in the back of a wagon. Big day tomorrow on the Elephant. They need their shut eye. I dropped down to a seat and devoured several oranges. I braced myself for the business end of the race. Only one more creek, only one more East Link, one final Death Valley then the long descent to the final checkpoint and home.

There was a fair amount of cursing on this lap. I remember thinking how totally unreasonable this all was. I worked hard to keep from spiralling under with these negative thoughts. I told myself that after this I would take a long break from running. I smiled as I thought about Mat & Kerry conjuring up the toughest most brutal course they possibly could – a course that would take more souls than most others.

I was descending down the mountain for the last time. The going was slow. My quads had well and truly blown out. My head torch started flashing. Then it was gone. I hadn't planned on being out a full second night and I was ill prepared – mainly on the nutrition and lighting fronts. I managed to supplement my dwindling food supply with the offerings at the aid stations in the last 2 laps. But I was running short on battery power, both figuratively and literally. Now my spare head torch battery was almost gone. Fortunately my waist light had a little light left on the lower 400 lumen setting. It was enough. And much better than having to pull out my phone to use its light.

The final checkpoint was within reach. Less than 8km to go. There was someone there. The wonderful 'Ms Jen'. I let her know of my lighting issues. I probably had enough battery to get home I said, but I was stressing about it. The wonderful Ms Jen, who clearly embodies the generosity inherent in all aid station volunteers, didn't hesitate to reach into her bag and place her head torch on my head. Thank you, Jen.

The final lap took me 6 hours and 20 minutes. I crossed the line, elated, some 32 hours and 49 minutes after I started. Angus came in shortly after at 36 hours and 16 minutes. The cut off was 40 hours.



The DNF rate in the miler this year was 80%. In the 100k race it was 72%. In her event recap, Kerry W wrote that she thought the reason the Elephant claimed and broke so many souls this year was due to the volume of water in the creek and on the course generally. With all the precipitation all over the east coast in the past 6 months or so, the Elephant is not alone in this respect, I'm sure. For me personally, 2 out of the last 3 races I have run have been extremely wet under foot. I think what distinguishes the Elephant from other races though is that it is a tough nut to crack in the best of conditions, and the cut offs are unforgiving.

I am extremely grateful to Angus G who was the only other runner to finish the 100 mile race. I imagine that my feelings of gratitude towards him are similar to how the winner of a LOS feels towards his or her 'assist'. Without the competition from Angus driving me forward I wonder how different the back half of the race would have been for me? How much more would I have hiked rather than shuffled if I had learned that I was the only runner left in the race?

I run because there is no other activity in my life that I can think of where what I get out is so directly proportional to what I put in. I also run to connect with something in myself, something buried deep down beneath all the conventional worldly layers of identity and responsibility. Ultrarunning in its simplicity, its pure brutality, peels away these layers and reveals the raw human underneath. It's a rare & special thing to experience, everything stripped bare. It is very confronting, alone at 3.27am on a trail in the middle of the forest after having been running for 30 hours already. I was way out there. Fully immersed in nature and exploring the outer limits of human endeavour. It was all I could do to stay deeply connected to the present moment. I will carry this experience with me for the rest of my days and I'm certain it has enabled me to be more connected to myself and the universe, which in turn makes me a better father, husband, coach, colleague and friend.

In retrospect my perception of time during my 33 hours out on the ETR course was not linear. If I was to try to summarise what I mean by that, the first night went by relatively slowly, the day light hours seemed to fly by, and I only clearly recall fragments of the second night. For long stretches I was deep in a moving meditation and time stood still.

Running against fellow athletes and against myself is one reason I enter races. I enjoy seeing how my strength and fitness stacks up against others and compared to where I was a year ago, 2 years ago and so on. I like to challenge myself with a distance and a course that intimidates me, and the Elephant certainly ticks those boxes. The other reason I race is because it affords me the opportunity to connect with the ultrarunning community. And it is a such a special community of people that make up this sport.

*Aaron Dower
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