# Brook Martin

Run, walk or stumble forward.

## Elephant Trail Race 2021 — Time to get Loopy!

JULY 16, 2021JULY 16, 2021
Strap in, you may get battle fatigue or dizzy reading this loopy saga!

In my quest to gain UTMB points, I scoured my options during quarantine in Feburary and Elephant Trail popped up. I'd heard it was challenging from a technical and mental perspective. 6 loops of a 27km circle, reversing direction every 2 laps.

I entered; then called my friends who'd done it. Potentially research was done in the wrong order! Many intimidating adjectives later, I realised completing the 162km course under the 41 hour cut off was going to be a big ask!

Hot off the heels of my humbling, personal worst UTA performance, I spent a course recce weekend with Mum and Pepsi the Wonder Dog. We hiked a single loop over 2 days. It actually made me excited about the race! Beautiful forest, fab views. Just the small matter that one 26km lap took us 7hrs to hike. Maths is not my favourite subject — 6 loops x 7hrs….. what was that cut off again???

Photos from the recce hikes below.

Mt Cairncross really does look like a sleeping elephant!

For the 8 weeks between UTA and Elephant I focused on improving my physical strength and mental attitude. I hadn't done a miler since 2018 and had lost a fair bit of confidence after UTA. Milers are a big head game and I was keen to avoid the negative thought vortex I wallowed in for too long at UTA.

3 weeks before the race Mum got hit in a ski accident and broke a bunch of bones. Very unfortunate for her, however the silver lining was that I was staying with her as she hobbled around on a crutch with a sling thus avoiding covid restrictions. Sadly the restrictions prevented many friends from attending. The race organisers boldly decided to run two races. One as planned for anyone that could make it and a second later in the year.

Fast forward to race day.

8pm start (I loathe night-time starts!) saw a little group of 7 huddling together under a blow-up elephant called Ken! We trotted off into the night together without too much fanfare. Most of the guys seemed to be local or at least very familiar with the course. The only other girl, Nettie and I appeared to be the newbies.

The pack stuck pretty close together and the pace was quick. I felt really comfortable and thought it was well worth the advantage to try to navigate one lap with company. Into the first aid station at 9km and the guys raced ahead. I made a rookie mistake of only stopping to fill 1 soft flasks when I planned to fill 2. I rushed because I didn't want to lose the group as we entered the next very technical 10km section.

Into the famous creek. I'd had many friends tell me about it and the day we hiked it I thought it was beautiful. As we trotted along, I really found my groove. And as one of the guys broke ahead, I went with him.

3km later we popped out of the creek and started the climb up Mt Cairncross on the East Link trail. I climbed steadily and let Jamie (the lead guy) go. He was in the 200km race along with one of the other guys. I truly couldn't fathom how they were going to average around 5hrs every lap. I knew that my laps weren't going to be consistent. I was planning on 'banking' time early on. The mantra for the first 3 laps was "efficient and fast, if it felt easy".

I expected the group behind to connect again on the climb, but there were no lights other than Port Macquarie glowing on the sea. The higher we climbed the windier it got, but the torrential rain from the day held off. Suddenly I heard a 'cooee' to my right. Jamie had taken the scenic route and bush-bashed down to me. The wind had blown pink streamers to the ground and the slightly indistinct single track required attention.

Out popped the photograph team. They were young and did such an amazing job. They showed up all over the place for the entire race and apologised every time for the flash! They even hiked up a bit of a hill to give me encouragement on lap 4. Jamie and I smiled for the photos and then immediately lost the track after passing them! We called back and they directed us to bear left.

And then the top! The RD was up there making sure we knew which way to go into Death Valley out and back. An overly dramatic name, you might be thinking? By lap 5, I felt they had undersold it. This 1.5km at my slowest took 71mins. You read that right….1hr11min, for 1500 measly meters! It was very steep and had loose shale sections that were quite negotiable on fresh legs…

Still in rose-coloured glass phase, I happily trotted to the bottom and then turned to climb back out. As I climbed I had the first hint of nausea.

With my long history of projectile vomiting in ultras, I decided to completely revamp my nutrition plan for this race. Real food was the new idea (something I've never previously managed). I believe my puking is mostly related to a combo of excessive fluid intake and red-lining effort. Since I'd nearly run dry from missing filling 2 flasks, it was time to dial back the effort. I let Nettie and Jamie go. Tummy became a happy camper again and I caught back up to Nettie and Jamie as we trundled into the second aid station happily.

The volunteers at this race were something else. The aid station teams personally introduced themselves before the start and as the race progressed, I so looked forward to seeing them. Meg and her trusty hound Ranger ran the Tower Road Aid Station and they greeted us like long lost friends! One more guy joined the 3 musketeers and we enjoyed rolling through the last 8km of runnable undulating trail. Nettie and I were chatting up a storm and pulled away from the guys without realising.

Into the HQ aid station and Lap 1 was done!

High fashion wind-blown hair…such a flattering sport!

Mum was there on her crutch to crew me. I was so worried she wouldn't be able to come but she's got superwoman healing powers and was ready to rock and roll. A cheery change of water bottles and I was ready to go. As I headed out, she mentioned "that was a 4.5hr loop"…..WHAT!?! I was aiming for 6hr loops so it was a little frightening to know we were that fast. I reassured myself that I was just making hay while the sun shined (even though it was very dark and 1am!). In retrospect, I would not have changed the first few loops pace. I don't feel they damaged me too much.

Nettie and I decided to stay together until Death Valley as 4 eyes were better than 2 for following the trail. She was stronger up. I was stronger down. We worked together and got ourselves over the Kennedys Aid station to see Andrew and his lovely wife. Into the creek and we crushed it! Was super fun to move fast now that we were more familiar with a good line to take. Nice and easy up the climb with time to admire the leeches all over the rocks! At the bottom of Death Valley I let Nettie go and I never saw her again! She ran an incredibly strong race and ended up as overall winner in 31hrs 7min.

I happily paced towards Ken the Elephant (with a small hiccup of having to do a dark switch of a dying headtorch battery). Nettie came trotting towards me smiling. I'm stoked with my mental game for this race. I didn't get negative that she had dropped me, just kept aiming for efficient, fast, easy!

Into HQ and Lap 2 was complete! A huge upside of the loop concept was regularly seeing Mum. Lots of regular mental lifts and a light pack. I was shocked it was still dark and happily reversed my direction for Lap 3!

The Race Directors had devised a genius plan of pink wrist bands. Every 2 laps they switched your armband from right to left. When you lost your marbles you just matched your arm to the streamers to know which way to go. A potential tip-off that marbles had been lost on this course before?

I waved to the guys finishing their lap 2 with the enthusiasm of a lonely runner spending quality hours alone!

I anticipated that the clockwise direction was going to be harder, mostly from the aspect of descending off the technical Mt Cairncross East Link. I didn't anticipate the climb kicking my butt! Accumulated fatigue and the double track that allowed more vision of how bloody big the hill was made the Tower climb unpleasant. Ramped up gale force wind up top made me happy for my sleeves.

Down into the lovely little Death Valley and somehow it seemed much worse in daylight! A big pick-me-up came in the form of the 100km and 50km runners that had started at 6.30am. Having other live bodies around (albeit for short periods as they flashed past me) was good fun.

Down East Link to the creek. I was right, it sucked. Along the creek in reverse and it looked totally different! Kennedys climb, Rollercoaster. I finished Lap 3 content and a little fatigued.

Mum sprayed me with enough tea tree oil to sink Thursday Island and fed me 2min noodles. She said she'd talked to Nikki who was on her way to pace me for the last 2 laps. Off I trotted for one more loop in the "crappy" direction.

Lap 4. Spitting rain. Getting slow. I felt bad that the more I slowed up, the more likely Nikki's entire pacing experience would be at night with no views!

The last 8km Rollercoaster section felt like a slog but there were joyous 50km people finishing that were making me laugh. One guy kept telling me how much his legs were hurting. Then he asked what lap I was on and choked on his water at my answer. I got to wave at Nettie who was charging forward on her Lap 5.

New mantra… just get to Nikki. I failed to remember that I would still need to run 50+km after I found Nikki!

Into HQ and my smiling friend and her amazing husband Cams (aka Crewman) were there with Mum and Pepsi. I told Nikki I'd never been so happy to see her face! I was definitely hitting the 'class 2 fun' portion of this adventure.

Off we set and it was still daylight (winner, winner, chicken dinner)! I'd been slow at the aid station and had got cold. I apologised to Nikki that I'd come off the boil and we settled into a "hike the climbs/trot the flats and downs" rhythm. I've spent thousands of hours running with this champ and there's no one I'd rather by my side when on a trail. She has tons of ultra experience (2x C2K 240km finishes to her name!). More importantly I knew she would be pragmatic and positive when s&*t hit the fan.

Into Kennedy's aid station and I introduced Nikki to my long-lost friends Andrew and his wife! Into the creek and I told Nikki she could keep herself entertained in front finding pink tags while I focused on following her shoes.

A couple sit down rests up East Link. Nikki was surprised at the level of technicality and I told her she ain't seen nothing yet! Down into Death Valley and my quads were getting untrustworthy on descents. A couple unplanned sit-down crashes and we made it to the bottom.

The downside of a loop course showed it's ugly mug. Brook panicked: "I don't know how I'm going to get up here a 6th time". Nikki for the win: "Night 2 is always tough. Just focus on lap 5 now, the rest will come". I finally crawled out of there and we got rolling again.

Whammo….Pukey Pukerson made a sudden and violent entrance. I was disappointed because I'd had 4.5 laps of tummy nirvana. I've tried to identify what set it off and have no bloody clue! Mild alarm that the puke was black….then it dawned on us. Not the bubonic plague, just Coke!

Legs were still rolling on non-technical terrain and we set a reasonable pace to close the loop. As we approached Ken the Elephant I told Niks I needed a nap. My eyes were closing anytime we hiked.

Finish of Lap 5 and into HQ.

I negotiated 15min nap with Mum and couldn't choke down any food. It was odd that I so desperately needed to sleep as I've done 2 nights in a row previously and been ok with no sleeping. I wrapped up like a burrito lying in Crewman's luxury recliner. I don't think I slept and when Mum said get up, I was freezing and a little grizzly. Thankfully my mother has a long history of ignoring whining. She ripped off the blanket and kicked my butt out of there.

Off I stumbled with horrifying thoughts of not being able to run any of the last lap.

Lap 6. A mad funhouse of crazy. I'm deeply grateful Niks was the sane coherent person along for the ride. As we hit Kennedy's climb my eyes kept closing. I tried sips of Coke but the tummy was on mutiny. We decided on a 5min nap and I crawled into a super comfy erosion ditch to get out of the wind. I was out in 10 seconds and when Nikki shook me awake I felt almost human again!

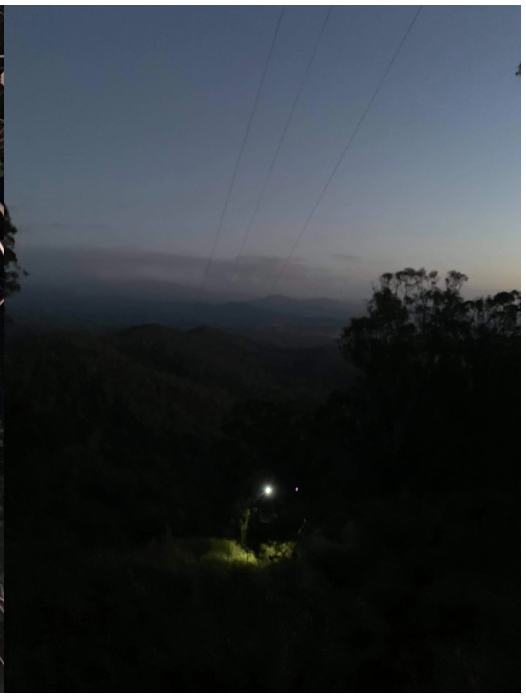
We cracked on and ran down the backside of Kennedys. As we neared the aid station I told Niks that if they had a blanket I wanted to try 10min more sleep. Maybe I was being wussy but the technical mountain section in wild weather made me nervous. I didn't want to be incoherent on the mountain top in the hurricane.

More blanket burrito wrapping and Nikki shook me at 10mins. I begged for 10 more and I told her to not let me slack after that. Off we set and the next 10km was bloody awful. We keep ticking sections off saying "Creek done. NEVER coming back here again." "East Link done. DEFINITELY NEVER coming back here again".

Violent retching at regular intervals with nothing coming out. Maybe the silver lining was going to be a six-pack by the finish from what felt like 1000 crunch contractions. A lot of apologising to Nik for enticing her on to such a fun Saturday night out. Plain water wasn't staying down.

We hit the Tower and the wind was making it sound like it was an airplane taking off. A little "I don't know how I'm going to do Death Valley" escaped my lips and Nik asked, do you want to go down? "YES!??!" Nikki laughed that consent had been given and we were all in!

Cue the Rocky soundtrack. I crashed, puked, crawled.  I'd love to report I was more heroic, but mostly I was just painfully slow. One thing surprised me was how positive my head was. Maybe having Nikki there prevented me being sucked into the dark well of my own head. I was on slug pace, but we were still joking about what a fun sport this was. The sky started to lighten and I was relieved to see the back of Death Valley for the last time.



Descending to Tower Rd Aid was a painful experience. The tendon on the front of my left ankle (an injury I've been nursing for a while) had really started to mutiny. The only relief was pointing my toes on the downhill. Trying to prance like a pony at 30+ hrs looks quite ridiculous!

Into the homestretch and the 25km and 13km Sunday racers started coming towards us. It was so cool! Every single one of them were cheering us on. I felt guilty we weren't running more. The piste de resistance, Andrew our aid station champion came racing towards us yelling "Go Brook and Nikki!" He was babbling about inspirational legends and gave me a hug. I nearly burst into tears. Nikki was laughing as she pulled out a line from our good mate Danielle, "Save your tears for the finish line!"

A couple kms later Andrew's wife ran at us and nearly started the waterworks again!

Across the finish line under Ken's belly and I had my first miler finish in nearly 3 years. 36hrs51min. 162km. 9178m elevation gain. 2nd overall (but only 2 of us finished).

I managed to sit in a chair and then tip it over. Cams had to pick me up off the ground while Nikki and I lost our minds laughing. My quads decided they were on a hard strike.

Thanks to Mum for yet again crewing for a stupid long time and to Cams and Nikki who didn't hesitate to come and help us both. When you have good people in your corner, everything is possible. And they don't come better than Team Burke and Mum.

Gear Used:

Hoka Torrents

Dirty Girl Gaiters

Hilly socks

Lulu tights

North Face Sleeves

Black Diamond poles

OR rainjacket

Icebreaker long underwear

Photo Credits: Dennis Photography, Cams and Nikki Burke, Toy Martin
Uncategorized

## 3 thoughts on “Elephant Trail Race 2021 — Time to get Loopy!”

1. ***Jo Wood***
   JULY 20, 2021 AT 6:04 AM
   Another cracking acheivement Brook! I loved reading this and am super-stoked to hear you remained so positive throughout – THAT is a major win in itself. You even made it sound like fun – like almost fun enough to make me want to do a miler sooner rather than later 🙂 I could just imagine you pulling off those dressage moves on that final lap – great job! Hope you're recovering well and are feeling satisfied with this epic effort. Let's plan a run-chat whenever you're ready (seeing as 2-people running outside is permitted at the mo) – with your post-race-recovery-pace and my normal-not-very-fast-pace, we might be a good match! Jo

   **REPLY**
   - ***brook-m***
     JULY 20, 2021 AT 7:37 AM
     Thanks so much Jo! I think you'd love the miler world! Will message! Would love to exercise outside with you 😊

     **REPLY**
2. ***Stuart***
   FEBRUARY 9, 2022 AT 11:23 AM
   Thanks for the superb report! I'm doing the 100k in July and now I've gone from nervous to terrified … but do appreciate the detailed write-up, cheers.

   **REPLY**

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