

Ultra North 25Km Event June 4th



My son and I were looking for a training run to prepare us for the lakes 58km Ultra in July. The obvious candidate was the Lakeland trails marathon however finding reasonable priced accommodation proved difficult and so the Ultra North in the Newcastle area seemed a good alternative.

We were kept well informed by the organizers on the run up to the event and were told we'd be expected to wear masks, placed in a holding pen social distanced and progress to the start line in waves of 6. On arrival at registration it immediately became clear that was no attempt to enforce any of the covid rules, the holding pen was so packed I doubt you could put a cigarette paper between the runners. My time slot was between 10:10 and 10:20 but because wave numbers were not enforced I finally managed to wriggle myself to the front of the pack at around 10:30. Once there, the 6 of us were separated by 2m (bit late) and following a brief talk were sent on our way.

The first 4 km is relatively flat and easily runnable. At just after 4km you turn right up a very steep section of around $\frac{1}{4}$ km which certainly wasn't runnable. It was at this turn that the first of the signage problems presented itself. There were no marshals on the entire 25k route, green tape and small arrows marked the route. At this change the direction sign, I later found out had been placed at the end of a bench and had been obstructed by members of the public. Like many other runners I didn't see the sign but fortunately a passing runner directed me in the right direction but it seemed many others were not so lucky and went wrong.

After the steep climb there followed another 8km of climbing to the checkpoint. This was the second disaster point for many runners. The checkpoint had been placed about 100mtrs off the course requiring a sharp right turn. Again the sign was either missing or at least I couldn't see it but once again luck was on my side a local walker had passed it and stopped at the turn to warn runners of the turn. The checkpoint was extremely well stocked, with a huge range of food, energy bars, and gels. Here covid rules were applied and of course the downside was a delay of around 8 minutes.

My son and 14 other runners around him realized they'd missed the checkpoint because their watches had recorded a distance further than where the

checkpoint should have been and so used the gpx on the watch to retrace they're tracks but since the checkpoint was off the course and they couldn't find any sign, he phoned the organizers for advice and was told to give the race numbers of those involved and told to carry on.

Coming out of the Checkpoint there's a much needed respite from climbing and there followed approximately 2km of steep downhill, but where there's a downhill section there has to be an up hill section and sure enough another climb of around 2.5km along an urban area, but it seemed to go on far longer.

Another right hand turn taking us from urban back to trail, this time I spotted the sign well in advance to crossing the road turn. The next sign clearly directed runners across a field but once across which direction was unclear and so I decided to wait for the group of runners behind me to catch up, however they too were unsure but by general consensus the right direction was arrived at. The route from this point was a long steady gentle downward smooth track however, by this point the extremely hot day along with a rookie error of not eating but simply relying on gels had destroyed my energy levels and hence although it was a lovely run-in, I spent much of the time walking more than running.

I arrived at the finish totally exhausted and worrying how on earth would I manage 58km in 5 weeks time.

The post run seemed to be mostly negative around the fact that there was not one marshal on the route and the poor signage. This is in stark contrast to the Lakeland Trails Marathon, which took place the next day where all entrants were required to have proof of negative lateral flow test. Strict adherence to social distance and wearing of masks. In addition, like all of their races, marshals were placed at all points where runners might go wrong.

On the positive the Ultra North 25k T-shirt was excellent along with a interesting looking wooden medal.

The overall impression of this event was that the organization could have been better and that the course was definitely challenging.