

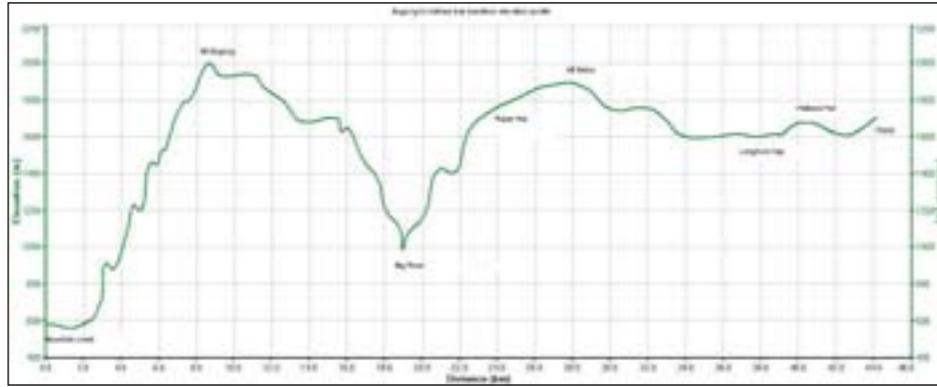
Bogong to Hotham through Neil Harper's eyes

by Neil Harper

ON Saturday January 6th 2006, I was waved off by my wife Tracey and my daughters, whilst my son slept peacefully in his cot. Dad and I headed off to Mt Beauty in the Victorian high country for the 21st running of the Mt Bogong to Mt Hotham trail run. It is the toughest single day running race in Australia. The full event distance is around 63km but the real challenge is the estimated 3000m of elevation gain and loss of 2000m of altitude. It stands out above all others not only for its difficulty but for an opportunity to run amongst such stunning scenery. It includes climbs and descents of huge mountains including the highest point in Victoria, a river crossing and the chance to spend a significant proportion of the event above the tree line when the wildflowers are out. The run has a strict cut-off at the 36km mark in order to continue on to run the full distance. This year the organisers added a marathon option for the first time.

This was my second attempt at this race after running it in 1996. I missed the cut off by 7 minutes and was forced to withdraw from the race after running for 5 hours and 37 minutes. I don't train as much as I used to with a young family, however I have found that provides the benefit of being rarely injured. I have been running consistently for quite a while and after a good run at Fitzroy Falls in October I felt like I had a good shot of running the whole way to Mt Hotham.

Just before the sun rose on Sunday morning, a group of about 15 runners armed with



Elevation Profile for the Rooftop Marathon

I raced up the hill, relishing the fact that I was running in one of the most beautiful places in Australia. My feet were barely leaving footprints in the dust as I charged towards the turn-around point. I cruised past three grazing horses; their well rounded riders lounged nearby on a picnic rug sipping champagne and eating jam and scones. The shade surrounding Wallace hut was a welcome respite from the unrelenting sun and heat that I had experienced all day. I was running at full steam – well that is what it felt like to me anyway. I had run just over 40 km over some big hills and I had started over 8 hours ago in the dark at 5am. Despite crashing and burning earlier in the day, I felt renewed and I was running along well now. To the horses tethered near the hut however, I looked more like a miserable crumpled excuse for a runner who left a cloud of dust as he could barely lift his tired feet off the track or wave the bush flies off his face.

torches toed the line and Race Director Michael Grayling sent us on our way. I decided to carry all of the recommended safety gear which meant my pack ended up being quite heavy and was not sitting well on my back. It is a hydration pack but I didn't want to carry any more weight so I carried a water bottle in each hand instead of filling the bladder. I also wore my GPS receiver to measure distances and elevations.

I took it nice and easy at first and I was thinking about the two major climbs that we had to make in the first half of the run. They were still very clear in my memory from last time I ran the race. After about 20 minutes we started

heading up Mt Bogong and I started to feel a bit queasy in the stomach. This was strange. There was nothing that I could do but keep moving. I tacked onto the back of a group of about 3 or 4 and we pretty well walked most of the way to the summit. It took about 2.10 to travel the 8.7km and climb 1400m.

Once at the top and running I felt so much better. The views were amazing in every direction and it seemed like I could see forever. The footing is a bit tricky once up so it was quite important to concentrate on where my feet were landing and at the same time making sure that I was drinking. I also took on a couple of carbo squeezes. I enjoyed this part of the run but things got a bit tricky running down towards big river with plenty of bark and sticks on the track. I stumbled several times. One guy went flying down the hill past me like I was standing still. I couldn't believe it.

When I got to the bottom of the hill there were a bunch of people crossing Big River using different methods. Some were taking their shoes off and walking through the water, some were using interesting ways to shimmy across the log. I decided to stand up and balance across the log which was a bit wobbly but I made it across quickly with no problem.

I then headed up the track along Duane Spur which is the second major climb of the race. I had been running for three and a half hours and the sun was beating down hard on my back. Within about 5 minutes of the start of that climb my stomach started feeling bad again and

all energy seemed to just drain completely out of me. I had another squeeze but it seemed to have no effect. I could barely put one foot in front of the other for the whole climb. I had many stops up this hill in order to get my breath back but they didn't really help. At one stage I was sitting down in every shade patch that I could fit it. Most of the field went past me up this hill and all offered plenty of encouragement and checked that I was ok.

When a black snake went across my path I didn't even break stride. I knew that if I stopped at that particular time it would be a struggle to get going again. I could relate to a story that Ray, another competitor, told me after the race when he said that he also struggled up that climb and

felt like he wanted to be put out of his misery by a snake. The climb from Big River to Ropers hut is "only" 750 metres in altitude over 5.7km but I spent 2 hours on that hill! I plan to come back and beat that hill one day.

As I approached Ropers Hut at the top of the climb, a small breeze was blowing which cooled me down and really helped me recover. I was seeing the world through different eyes and I was able to walk consistently again. I didn't want to over do it so I walked for a while. I made a call on my cell phone to Dad who was at Langford Gap and told him to not expect me in there for a while. I also called home to let the family know that I wasn't having a great running day but was enjoying the wonderful scenery above the tree line and that I was planning to stop at Langford Gap.

After a while, I started running the down hills. I ate an orange at an aid station manned by a guy who had ridden in on his bike. This orange was perfect and it wasn't long before I was running the flat sections as well. I wasn't enjoying running with all that stuff on my back though. By the time I got to Langford Gap I was keen to keep going to finish off the marathon. I looked around and Ray ran across the line right behind me and promptly sat down in a comfortable chair. Michael said we were too late to go on to the marathon and Ray looked like he had no intention anyway. No problem, I stopped my watch. A couple of minutes later, Michael had spoken to Olga who was running the Langford Gap aid station and they were more than happy to let us continue on.

I walked with Ray for a few km and then decided to run it in. I got a lot of satisfaction from being able to run all of the way to the end from here. At the end of the marathon I had been running for almost 9 hours and according to my GPS had covered 44.2km. I had climbed close to 2500 metres of altitude and lost about 1500 metres of altitude.

The organisation of this run by Michael Grayling and John Lindsay was beyond anything I have seen before as there are so many details to consider. Also the commitment of the volunteers was amazing. Some of them had to hike in to their positions the day before carrying supplies for the runners. I would still like to do the full distance to Mt Hotham one day - hopefully it won't take another 10 years to get back there. **RAYL**



Running above the tree line

The Whole Hog

ELITE marathoner, Magnus Michelson, a runner with a 2.14 marathon personal best was always going to be hard to beat over the full distance, but two time Aussie mountain running representative, John Winsbury, certainly gave him a run for his money. They ran together during the early stages of the race, before Magnus opened a gap, which was extended once John took a wrong turn around the half way mark. Magnus continued strongly to finish the race in seven hours, a bit off the course record of 6.41 set by legendary ultra runner Andy Kromar in 1996, but never-the-less a wonderful debut performance.



RESULTS	
Bogong to Mt Hotham - 63km	
Male	
1. Magnus Michelson	7.00
2. John Winsbury	7.43
3. Damon Goerke	8.34
4. Jeff Rudd	9.40
5. Simon Goddard	9.46
6. Ian Wright	9.50
7. David Turner	9.52
8. Ray Waschl	10.03
9. Simon Krantzcke	10.07
10. Rudi Kinshofer	10.17
Female	
1. Tamsin Barnes	11.31
Roof Top Marathon	
Male	
1. David Spargo	6.10
2. Wayne Gregory	6.56
3. Andrew Pirola-Merlo	7.01
4. Sean Greenhill	7.27
5. Cameron Gillies	8.07
6. Gary Wise	8.18
7. Brendan Mason	8.28
8. Neil Harper	8.53
9. Ray Wales	9.15
Female	
1. Fiona Spargo	6.42
Bogong to Langford Gap	
Male	
1. Jarad Kohlar	4.31
2. Peter Mitchell	5.24
3. Dan Kirby	5.54
4. Ian Twite	5.55
5. Andrew Hewat	6.33
6. Andrew Wear	6.46
7. Richard McCormick	7.10
8. Trevor Marsh	7.50
9. John Lindsay	8.31
10. Mark Homewood	8.31
Female	
1. Sarah York	8.31



Pre-dawn on the start line