

Report by Martin Fryer 2 June 2009

I apologise for the delay in posting so late but there were no internet cafes in either Surgeres or the little town of Arcais that I went to for a few days after the 48h race to recover. Even if there were I was too zonked after the race to even compose a sentence. In fact, now more than a week after the race I am still sore and really tired, despite at least 12h of sleep a day and heaps of eating. Whatever I did in that race switched my body into post-race meltdown and 2 days later I was really scared that I had gone into some severe wasting syndrome – whole body pain, kidney function looked OK with clear urine and not too bad swelling but I had lost 10% of my bodyweight (down to 55kg from 61kg pre-race) despite eating as much as I could throughout the race. It took me 6 days to get back to 58kg and today I have made 60kg – so I have turned the corner, most of the pain is gone, and the muscles are healing, though I have some significant tendonitis around the inside of my left knee- so no running for at least another week might be smart.

I finally got home Saturday lunchtime after about 40h of trains, planes and airports and have slept for most of the time since getting home but now at least I have enough energy to write and thank everyone here back in Oz for their fantastic support. I make no apologies for the random stream of consciousness musings that follow (not really a proper race report) as I am still completely wiped out physically and mentally from the combined effects of the race and the travel.

It has been a blast to read the whole history of the threads and discussions on both CoolRunning and ACTrun Yahoo group and I can tell you that during the race I was thinking about all of the people back home at and wondering how they would have been interpreting and speculating on the hourly updates. I can honestly say that the support and messages that I received from Oz did inspire me to dig deep and finish off the race with style, which I'm glad I did as I knew there was some significance about 433K and I was keen to give it a shot. I had been promised a local crew for the race but it was only intermittent and I largely self-crewed for Day 1, which did get me a bit frustrated, particularly when it got hot and I had to stop and mix up drinks. However, I did start getting some help from Tony Mangan's (Ireland) crewperson –the Scotsman Alan Young- and by the second day and night he was fully crewing for me after Tony crashed out with some bad patches. So Alan became my guardian angel and egged me along with his Billy Connolly-like thick accent (even the French-English translator had trouble understanding him) and was just brilliant at providing me with a variety of food and drinks I hadn't tried before (including non-alcoholic beer, which went down a treat).

I believe that there is no one correct way to run a 48h race – you need to have a broad plan but be adaptable – a bit like classic business strategic management which has the analogy of trying to kick a balloon full of water from one side of a room to another- you can move it in broadly the right direction with some effort but it wobbles about to the side occasionally along the way, definitely not in a straight line.. My key principles for the race that I had thought about carefully were the following: 1) Run my own race aiming for 400K, 2) Focus and flow rule supreme, 3) The Law of Averages – you don't ever have to do anything flash but you have to keep moving and minimise any huge hourly variations, 4) Use a run/walk strategy to preserve muscle groups and maintain better running speed for longer (I was the only one in the field to walk from the beginning), 5) Focus on the process of the race rather than the outcome, 6) Above all - approach the race with good karma, show sportsmanship, be friendly to all and spread goodwill as an ambassador of Australia.

For me it was probably as close to the perfect race as I will ever have- even though it was only my third 48h race I used every bit of ultra knowledge and tactic I knew for every second of the whole 48h – I believe my ability to maintain focus was what got me through and I made the most of Sekiya's time off track, even though I was extremely tired and sore myself. But it was not a fast track- at 301m it felt like you were running curves a lot of the time- also, the race started at 4pm and it didn't get dark until 10pm and we had 3 consecutive afternoons of 28 to 30

degrees C, which I had not anticipated and I had not acclimatised for- finally –the track was really dry and very dusty- I wore gaiters for the whole time and didn't do one shoe or sock change- I also found the surface difficult to generate the walking speed that I normally get. It was highly fortunate for me that Sekiya went so hard in the first day – I suspect he was chasing Kouros' record and was looking for a 250/230 split.. Even better was the fact that quite a lot of the field went out ridiculously hard with him (averaging 11K/h through the first 12 to 20h) and I was content to do my run/walk (from the beginning- only one in the whole field) and gradually catch them and apply tactical and psychological pressure, one by one. I was blown away by the sheer quality of the field- particularly the women who were strong and consistent and, aside from Sekiya in the Mens, I considered the Japanese women and Czech woman Dimitradou as the biggest threats to a podium finish as the race wore on. The Japanese are such a well disciplined and talented team and I do believe that with more even pacing Sekiya will be the most likely person to surpass my 433K total and perhaps even challenge Kouros's record of 473K one day.

The last 4 hours of the race were horrendous as the sun broke out of a foggy morning and we had to endure 30 degrees again with no wind around to give any cooling effect. I had achieved my goal of 400K and had a big lead on Sekiya but I had had no sleep and I was absolutely trashed - all I wanted to really do was just walk it in and end up with a total in the 420's. However, Alan started to feed me a steady stream of messages from home and I felt a strong sense of obligation to bring it on home in style- so I hatched a plan to stay steady for the 3rd and 4th last hour and eat and drink well then maybe launch a final attack in the last 2 hours. A few times when the messages from home were read out to me I started to get emotional and felt tears welling up and the hair on my arms would literally stand on end as the enormity of the whole thing was embracing me. But I still had 4 hours to go in the heat and I battled to not let the emotions interfere with my focus and flow. With 2 hours to go I had changed my mind about running hard as it was really damn hot but then a few things happened- firstly, some unknown French bloke looking like a shady drug dealer kept walking up to me and telling me that I had to go for the record, though I was not sure what record that was. Then Alan poured the messages from home on to me thick and fast and told me that I was never going to get this opportunity again and that every K counted- "Embrace the pain" he said to me in a thick Scottish accent and then explained that I needed 2 hours of 9K/h to make 430K, which seemed to me to be doable and hence changed my focus to a more positive one. With about 90 min to go the unknown Frenchman and Alan teamed up to help me - it was hot and on alternate laps they would give me a sponge or a swig of drink. As the runners had to wear a fluoro vest with the Sponsor's name on it for the first and last hours of the race they planned a fast, Formula One style pit stop for me 5 min before the last hour started. They ripped off my shirt, sponged me off, put on my fluoro vest and told me that I had to do 1:45 per lap for an hour to make 430K. This was great help to me as even my poor tired brain could do the maths to realise that this was somewhere not too far under 6 min/K. I started pushing a bit and I didn't see my lap times but Alan told me that I did not need to go any faster and not to overcook it too early in the hour (I suspect I was running in the 1:30's). As the last hour progressed there was more and more noise from the crowd that was lining the circuit with shouts or "Allez, allez Martin" and lots of encouragement in general. However, I was finding it hard to have to run around many of the runners that were walking in pairs on the inside of the track, thus making me run wide- some showed consideration and made way but others couldn't care less and I almost fell a few times trying to get the inside line when a small gap had been left.. With about 40 min to go I distinctly remembering the unknown French guy telling me I needed 4K in 25 minutes but wasn't sure what this meant.. With about 30 min to go the announcer was getting hyped saying "C'est incroyable!" and I sensed I was closing in on 430K as I could translate the French. I was next told I needed "quatre tours" to break 430 and Alan told me I could just ease off and take it all in. Everyone went nuts when I broke 430 and then all of a sudden things went all quiet! But I knew there was some kind of record around at 433 and saw that I had about 18 min to go so I didn't stop to smell the roses like everyone else was doing. I was quite totalled at this stage but locked into a steady but relaxed rhythm and tried to think how close it was to all of this being over. Tony Mangan had told me that at Surgeres they only counted full, completed laps and so with about 4.5 mins to go I went hard hoping for maybe 3 laps at a stretch, but knew this might not happen. As it

turned out I did only get about 2.5 laps in before the gun and then walked around to pick up the Aussie flag and celebrate in front of the lap counters and officials and main crowd. I had managed over 11K in the last hour which capped off a hell of a run.

Some of the Cool Runners picked up from the videos on the Surgeres website that I managed to get some strange, dirge-like national anthem played at both opening ceremony and the prizegiving which, while disappointing, sort of summed up the absurdity of the whole adventure and I struggled hard not to crack up laughing in my great moment of honour on the podium with everyone standing and looking serious.

Overall, I am very satisfied with my result from a performance point of view but even happier for the publicity and recognition it generated about Australia overseas and the excellent diplomacy and sportsmanlike conduct that I believe I displayed which has left a part of Australia in a little French town forever. It was way cool to be King of Surgeres for a few days and the locals spoilt me rotten. I was really pleased that I had made the effort to relearn my French from 30 years ago – I listened and repeated French lessons on my MP3 during long runs and commutes over the last 3 months getting many strange looks indeed – but I am so glad I did now as it allowed me to engage more fully with the locals and not look like an arrogant foreigner. I had a great lunch the day after the race with the volunteers and organising committee and no one spoke English and amazingly my French just got better and better with each glass of Bordeaux red!

It appears that my performance should be ranked only 2nd to about half a dozen or so all done by Kouros – so I'm pretty amazed by that. I hope that this effort has helped to put fire in the belly of at least some other Aussie ultrarunners – I can't believe what I have done and it can only go to show that we all have some performances in us well beyond our wildest expectations if we have strong self belief. My split of 224K/209K was better than the 220/180 I had planned. Tony Mangan told me that he believes that that are only 3 people in history to repeat 200+ in consecutive days – himself, myself and Kouros (many of the other 400K+ performances were lopsided efforts with sub 200K days on day 2).

Re: media- while I have had a radio interview for ABC Canberra and an article in Canberra Times it has been fairly quiet but I really don't mind- as CR's Whippetman perceptively pointed out- the recognition and accolades that flowed from my peers were brilliantly touching, greatly appreciated and are that I need. I will not get the race prizemoney until my drug tests have been cleared (I was told about 3 weeks) and that will be enough to pay for my trip expenses, so that's good, except the Aussie dollar is appreciating against the Euro.

It still hasn't quite sunk in what I managed to achieve in Surgeres- it defies my own belief and seems like a crazy dream. Like all races I learnt many valuable lessons which should help me in races to come.

My most sincere thanks go to the race organisers (particularly Michel Landret) and the volunteers, the wonderful people of Surgeres and other parts of France that made my whole trip most enjoyable, the other runners and crews that I was privileged to meet (particular thanks to Tony Mangan for donating Alan Young to crew for me on Day 2- Alan you're a genius and I've helped boost your crewing CV), the unbelievable encouragement that poured to me from my running peers as well as complete strangers, the power of love from my wife Lynn and son Luke, and the lashings of blessings from the good Lord above- all of these came together to provide me with the Race of My Life, and for that I will be forever grateful.

Martin "Flyer" Fryer

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