



Andrew Meenahan (circled) at the start of this year's Six Foot Track Marathon.

In its short life the six foot track marathon has become a legendary event. Hundreds of runners converge on Katoomba each year for a 46 km run that is unlike any other marathon, up and down steep hills, through a waist deep river and through the pain barrier — several times.

Six foot of pain

By
Andrew
Meenahan

SWAP the tranquil bush setting for a bustling dockside scene; swap the running shorts and shoes for military uniforms and boots and you could have been witnessing the fond farewells of young soldiers headed off to war.

"Well, this is it," one young man said to his sweetheart. "I'll see you when it's all over."

"Take care darling," she replied. "Don't be hurt."

But the couple weren't standing on the wharves of Garden Island, they were at Explorer's Tree, Katoomba. And it wasn't the terror of military combat the young man was contemplating, it was the pain of the gruelling Six Foot Track Marathon, an annual foot race described by race director Kevin Tiller as 46 kilometres of pleasure and pain.

I ran in my first Six Foot Track Marathon on March 2 this year and I reckon Kevin only got it half right — the second half. Any pleasure came several hours after the 46 kilometres, once the cramps in the legs, the aches in the joints and the burning muscles had given way to the immense satisfaction of completing the race within the seven hour cut-off.

The Six Foot Track Marathon was first run in March 1984 to mark the centenary of the opening of the historic bridal track that runs from the historic Marked Tree to Jenolan Caves.

The original event was contested by seven runners. This year's 19th marathon involved



Runners in action in the 19th annual Six Foot Track Marathon.

more than 700 runners and raised about \$24,000 for the NSW Rural Bushfire Services in the Blue Mountains and \$2000 for the Six Foot Track Heritage Trust.

The race begins with a steep descent into Nellies Glen. This is probably the most spectacular part of the trail but you get little chance to admire the scenery as you concentrate on your footing during the drop into the valley.

From Nellies Glen to the Coxs River, you negotiate a combination of dirt roads, pleasant farmland tracks and narrow winding trails. It is all very civilised and the spirit of camaraderie between runners is a feature. (On second

thoughts, perhaps Kevin was right, the first 20 kilometres are rather pleasant but this sense of false security only highlights the pain to follow.) Once you cross the Coxs River, which was waist deep, the first serious test begins — Mini Mini Saddle, several kilometres uphill that takes you from 270 metres above sea level to 700 metres. You then drop sharply to 550 metres at Little River before the real challenge — the long steep run up The Pluvometer to 986 metres and then a relentless steady climb to Caves Road at 1200 metres above sea level. In total, it must be 14 to 16 kilometres of steep uphill running. The physical pain in the muscles and joints comes

as a shock. I had run in four marathons prior to the Six Foot Track but nothing prepared me for this experience. At one point I fell down with severe leg cramps, fearing the shame of withdrawing from the race, and I was frequently reduced to a pathetic walk on many inclines.

There are 16 aid stations where volunteers provide competitors with water, sports drinks, bananas, water melon and lollies for energy. The stations are perfectly placed and most welcome. The organisers really look after the runners.

The final spectacular descent to Caves House is a sharp drop from 1200 metres to 790 metres above sea level. After so much uphill terrain, you would think the downhill section would be welcomed but the pressure on your legs is immense as you also negotiate a very loose, rocky and rough surface.

I crossed the finish line in 5 hours 49 minutes which was comfortably within the cut-off but well outside the 4 hours 30 minutes I had set as my target (I had declared a 5 hour target but that was to give me 30 minutes grace — I needed nearly another hour buffer!).

A few minutes after finishing a running mate and fellow competitor asked if I would be back for the 20th event in 2003. “No way,” I said immediately. “That was just too hard.”

But within a couple of days spent reliving the event in my mind many times over and rejoicing in my personal satisfaction, I had a change of heart. I’ll be back in 2003 but this time I’ll know what to expect — 46 kilometres of mostly pain.