

By ANDREW MEENAHAN

When seven long-distance runners raced the length of the historic Six Foot Track from Katoomba to Jenolan Caves in 1984, they had no idea they were launching an event that would soon rival the big-budget, corporately-sponsored marathons of the capital cities.

But that is the story of the birth of the iconic Six Foot Track Marathon, which celebrates its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary on March 8, this year.

The race now attracts about 800 runners making it Australia's fifth largest marathon behind only the Gold Coast, Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra marathons and it is clearly the nation's premier off-road event.

Six Foot, as it is affectionately nicknamed, is a race organised by runners, for runners. Many competitors return year after year, addicted to an almost spiritual experience that challenges mind, body and soul and evokes tremendous camaraderie.

Running Six Foot within the seven-hour time limit has become a rite of passage for many endurance runners and the event attracts competitors from around the world. This year's race has entrants lined up from France, USA, Germany, Finland, Singapore and New Zealand.

The Six Foot Track starts at a national landmark – the Marked Explorer's Tree near Katoomba, where the early explorers Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth are believed to have carved their initials. It winds its way through rainforest, farms and bush tracks; it crosses a river, climbs mountains and eventually descends dramatically into the World Heritage Listed Jenolan Caves where hundreds of spectators gather for a raucous and spirited finish.

That original race in 1984 was held to mark 100 years of the Six Foot Track, a famous bridle trail built as a shortcut to Jenolan Caves and so-named after the original tender reference for the width of the trail.

Today's event is a superbly organised fundraiser that nets about \$30,000 a year for the Blue Mountains Bushfire Brigade which provides manpower on the day. The course is well marked, there are 17 well-stocked aid stations, personalised electronic timing, and even a commentator to announce finishers to the crowd as they cross the line.

This is a far cry from the first race between those original seven runners who quenched their thirst from puddles, had one barley sugar lolly between them and relied on maps and a whistle to prevent them straying off course and getting lost.

One of the original runners, 65-year-old Max Bogenhuber, has completed every race within the seven-hour cut-off and will be among the starters again this year for the 25<sup>th</sup> running. "I keep lining up for the race because I'm the only one who has run every year," he says. "I will try to keep the record going as long as I can but as soon as I miss one year because of injury or if I fail to make the cut-off that will be the end of it."

The Six Foot Track Marathon is a brutal race – estimated to be the equal of one-and-a-half normal marathons. First-time entrants need to demonstrate they are fit for the challenge by completing one of several qualifying events within a set time or running a sub-four-hour road marathon. It is promoted as Australia's toughest marathon and few who have run the 45 kilometre course would argue.

The race start is staggered with four waves of runners sent off 10 minutes apart to enable them to safely negotiate a treacherous drop of more than 400 metres in less than three kilometres down the narrow bush rock stairs of wet and slippery Nellie's Glen.

The next 13 kilometres represent the most pleasant part of the course as it meanders along fire trails and across paddocks before a scenic bush track takes runners to the Cox's River where they have a choice of wading through the cool Blue Mountains water or sacrificing 200 metres and keeping shoes dry by stepping across some rocks upstream.

Then it is race on!

Runners face the first serious challenge as they climb 400 metres in four kilometres to Mini Mini Saddle before dropping 200 metres to Allum River. The relief is short lived with another severe 400 metre climb over four kilometres to Pluviometer.

By this time, all but the most seasoned elite runners have resorted to a walk/run, many are battling cramps and most are wondering why they are not on the golf course or at the beach.

Once the Pluviometer is conquered it is common for runners to breath a premature sigh of relief. With 26 kilometres and the infamous mountain climbs behind them, they anticipate a more comfortable run over the last 19 kilometres.

However, with fatigue biting deeply and energy sources become rapidly depleted, the run across Black Ranges can be soul destroying. The track rises another 200 metres and includes some steep pinches over rough terrain.

Eventually runners cross Jenolan Caves Road with about eight kilometres to go. By this time, the early March temperature has usually hit the high 20s or 30s and the heat is taking its toll.

Runners yearn for the final two kilometres, a downhill run which plunges to the finish line, family, friends and refreshment at famous Caves House. They expect to enjoy the scenery as gravity helps bring them home but again the reality is cruelly disappointing and the sharp rocky, descent offers no relief as pounding feet send shudders of pain to aching quadriceps and calve muscles.

Max Bogenhuber believes it is the extreme physical demands that are responsible for the growth of the race. "It is such a challenge," he says. "It is much tougher than a road marathon."

The other six original runners other runners were Ian Hutcheson who was the organiser, Bob Marden, winner of the inaugural event, Chris Stephenson, Ian Taylor, Bill Miller and George Fitzgerald.

Ian Taylor and Bill Miller were working at the Central Mapping Authority in Bathurst in 1984. "We had no idea what we were in for when Ian [Hutcheson] first asked us to enter," remembers Ian Taylor. "We took out the maps and, because we knew how to read topography we got an idea what we were in for. It put the wind up us!

"Luckily it was a cool day."

Max agrees: "If it was a hot day I doubt we would have made it," he says. "In those days there were no trail markings as there are now. You either knew your way or you got lost."

In the back half of the race, when the route became more straightforward, Max, Chris and Bob broke away from the others. “But things were getting rather tough,” says Max. “We expected to be out there for about three hours or so but we had already spent more time on our legs and were nowhere near the tar road that starts 36 kilometres into the race.

“Bob pulled out a barley sugar and we decided we should share it. He suggested he could suck it for a while, then hand it on. We declined. We drank out of puddles. It tastes alright when you are really thirsty.”

To put the difficulty of that pioneering run into perspective, the winning time, five hours and 26 minutes would have scored only 323rd position from the 764 finishers in last year’s event. This is no reflection on the ability of the original seven, it demonstrates the benefit of aid stations, organisation and better signage that have made it possible for runners to focus on racing rather than merely surviving.

Max Bogenhuber finished in the top 10 six times in the mid-80s and early 90s and as a 60-year-old still managed to break five hours. Last year, aged 64, he finished the race in five hours and 20 minutes – 15 minutes faster than the time he ran in the inaugural race as a fit 41-year-old.

“I’ve got bad knees these days so I have to adopt a run/walk strategy,” he says. “I don’t wait until the pain becomes unbearable before I walk. I pretty much walk/run from the start of the race.”

Fitness, experience and strategy are critical in all endurance races but Six Foot will break any runner who does not pay special respect to the unique demands of the course.

Over-confident runners who run too fast early will invariably be found out in the second half of the race and the result can be ugly. Every year organisers have to drive exhausted and injured runners to the finish after they are forced to succumb to the demands of the course.

Sydney runner Tony Fattorini scored an unexpected win last year, breaking the long standing race record with a dramatic 20 minute improvement on his 2006 time due largely to the greater respect he paid to the course.

“There is so much that can go wrong in such a mountainous race,” he says. “It is difficult to hold back on race day. The atmosphere is electric and your adrenalin is pumping hard but you have to take a few deep breaths and relax. You have to feel comfortable in the run.

“The trick is to hold back in the first half of the race and run at a comfortable pace, particularly over the steeper sections,” he says. “You can’t afford to let rip until you are in the back half of the race.”

Don Wallace, who set the previous record in 1991, agrees. He says his record only lasted so long because so many top runners in ensuing years went out too fast and fell apart when they needed to finish hard. They didn’t pay the course enough respect. “You need to run your own race and make sure you have energy left for the back half,” he said.

Wallace ran the final 19 kilometres from Pluviometer in 80 minutes, a couple of minutes quicker than even Fattorini managed in his record-breaking run last year, emphasising how much energy he preserved for his finishing surge.

Both elite runners will line up this year but neither is expecting to win. “I’m not in as good condition this year and I’ve heard rumours there will be some pretty quick runners lined up,” said Fattorini.

Race director Kevin Tiller has been the driving force behind the recent growth of the race, virtually living and breathing the event for four months of the year. Not only does he devote hours to organisation but he has two top 10 finishes to his credit and his wife Dawn has won the women's title six times and held the record for 10 years before it was smashed in 2006 by the young champion Emma Murray

He understands more than most why Six Foot is so special. "It is one of the few large races put on by runners," he said. "Runners see it as their race. On the running website, CoolRunning, a discussion forum about the design of this year's T-shirt went to six pages. No other event generates that level of passion."

Kevin says the start and finish of the race are inspirational. "The scenes at the start – behind this famous tree just outside Katoomba – are incredible. So many runners crammed into a small area, all laughing and chatting. It's a great feeling.

"And there is no more exciting finish to a race. I've seen spectators who have turned up to cheer home a friend, become so captivated by the atmosphere that they vow on the spot to train for the following year. It becomes their goal. It is infectious."

Even a seasoned veteran such as Kevin Tiller is moved by some of the scenes he witnesses but he struggles to nominate one favourite moment. "It generates so much emotion. Almost every year you see runners burst into tears of joy; tears of exhaustion; as they cross the finish line," he says.

Kevin remembers a cancer sufferer who used the goal of completing Six Foot as motivation to fight the disease. "He overcame cancer and then trained up and finished the race.

"I never fail to be inspired by Max Bogenhuber racing so strongly every year and Trevor Jacobs' effort to run three hours thirty-seven minutes as a 52-year-old was amazing. I remember the first 70-year-old to finish. The first over 60 female."

"The race continues to throw up inspirational efforts," says Kevin, who is systematically handing over control of the race to Sydney's largest running club, Sydney Striders to ensure it retains its special character as a runner's race.

He wouldn't speculate what the race might throw up this year but with 800 passionate runners determined to win their own personal battle with the unrelenting Six Foot Track, anything is possible.