

WAMC Post card from the six foot track – 14 March 2009

In March 3 WAMC members, Jane Elton, Kate Sommerville and John Collins travelled to the gorgeous Blue Mountains in Sydney to attempt the six foot track marathon. The race is a 45km all trail run on the heritage trail that once took travellers by horse from Katoomba to Jenolan Caves. There are stairs, creek crossings, stiles and hills. Did I mention hills? They are not the Darlington variety but more of the Mount St variety. It's all for a good cause – raising money for the local fire fighters.

We arrived in Sydney and collected our hire car and attempted to navigate the Sydney traffic. We were soon out of the scary city and on the highways which took us to Katoomba in the Blue Mountains. First stop was the lookout for the 3 sisters. We continued on to Jenolan caves and to reach reception we actually had to drive through a cave. Jenolan Caves resort felt like we had stepped back in time to the 1920s. It must have been a very grand place to holiday in the time of horses. Huge ceilings, drawing rooms and a very steep path from the top of a cliff which read 'six foot track'. Oh oh.

We picked up our race kit from Katoomba's Carrington Hotel, a monument to art deco. We took in some lunch and spotted very fit looking runners (what were we doing here?). For our pre-marathon day leg stretch we took part in a cave tour that had the least number of steps. It was quite amazing to view all that was hidden in the mountains just a few hundred meters from our room.

Race day commenced with an early start and windy bus trip from the caves to the start. The start was quite a confined bush location. The fire fighters put on a hot drink and food and there were enough port-a-loos to keep all runners happy. One by one the waves were started to loud cheers. Then it was time for the last wave to head off – our wave.

We all ran off into the bush and down some single track then were slowed to walking pace as we navigated the many hundreds of steps. They were a little uneven and wet, so probably a good thing. The trail then turned in to single track, like the eagle trail in the hills. Then it was good fire trail until the last 3km of the race. For the first 15km it was downhill until the creek crossing. It was up to our hips and was cooling on our thighs that had started to burn. We then commenced the hills. As I said they went up and were quite unrelenting. The first was 5km, a saddle and then another 3km up. Then if you had enough in the tank it was undulating until the last 3km which descended into Jenolan caves. The website has a really detailed cross section and course description.

This race is tough, has a 7 hour cut-off, has limited spaces (850) and qualifying requirements of 4 hour marathons, ultra finishes or trial races in the area. It works as there was only a small bail rate (3%). The race also has 'grim sweepers' which hang back in the field and retire runners who won't make it. They also have 7 hour pacers. These pacers were very encouraging.

John (5:10) and Jane (6:39) did well to finish the gruelling race within the time limit. Jane managed to make her way through the field on the hills to latch on to the wave 3 pacer who was really helpful. I unfortunately got freaked out by the hills and the impending sweepers on my tail. I was running with Jim, 7 hour pacer for wave 4 and president of Sydney striders. He gallantly tried to defend me from the grim sweepers telling them to leave me alone. But the sweepers descended on me as I cowered on the side of the track and took my timing chip. What then progressed was a series of shuttles in fire-fighting vehicles as the sweepers passed through, collecting more retiring runners.

We then were taken along the route to 36km then we travelled by road to the finish. We observed runners along the trail, most of who looked like they were having a hard day at the office, not too many smiles. Guess that's normal then. Retirees were lamenting their decisions. All had either been injured in the run or had an interrupted lead up to the race. I guess this was the bit where I had to admit my fractured wrist from a fall in South Perth whilst running played a part. I was happy to be finished, a 3:40 hour Saturday hills run was good enough for me. I've seen the course, asked people questions and know what to do for next time. It makes victory all the sweeter.

Jane was kinder to my DNF saying that people usually wait to have a cast on their arm after they had been injured during the race, not on the start line. I read a comment by blue dog on cool running: *"Six Foot Track is a pearl of a race. Long enough to test your endurance, short enough to test your speed, demanding enough to test your strength and stamina. For the optimistically under-prepared it will slowly and painfully rip your soul open and expose it to the world"*. My truth is somewhere in between.

The finish line was a buzz. The crowd support was great. The timing chips allowed the commentators to announce and encourage finishers across the line. The more they were limping, the louder the cheers. We welcomed Jane across the line well within the cut-off. It was then to the bar for celebratory drinks.

I stayed on in the Blue Mountains for the rest of the week with my husband. We did a few more cave tours; visited Govett's Leap-Black Heath, Wentworth falls, and Leura Cascades. We took rides on scenic railways in Katoomba and the Zig Zag steam train at Lithgow. Bush walks and lots of steps to a beautiful backdrop that rivals the Grand Canyon and Yosemite National park in California.

The six foot is really well run, has a great atmosphere and is highly recommended. If you are thinking about it then check out the website for training programs, race descriptions and there is all you need to know to have a good trip. There is a medical article about cramping, lots of people cramped so ensure you are prepared. The qualifiers exist to ensure you finish. I did meet a few runners who had 5 hour or no previous marathons; they did shorter Megalong fat arse qualifier runs. They cite hill work more important than the qualifier. You need to treat it like a 60km race as it's going to take between an extra 1.5 hours to 1.6 times your marathon time. John and Jane showed the Darlington hills training is enough to get you through, but I know they were both up at the 80-100km weekly kilometres with a few runs over 40km and a few more over 32km. I am thinking that Mount St and Kokoda steps in Kings Park would be helpful specific hill interval sessions they detail in the training notes. If there's a chance you will be towards the back of the pack it's probably a good idea to take your own drink bottle, spare sports drink powder and Gus – just as insurance.

The field reached capacity in 2009 and entries will open December 1 – so book your accommodation at Jenolan or Katoomba in November and enter on-line early. I'll see you on Mount St then.



**Blue Mountains**

Clockwise from top:

Zig Zag steam train Lithgow

Lucas Cave – Jenolan

3 Sisters – Katoomba

Queens Cascades -Wentworth





## 6 Foot Track

From top, L to R:

- The steps
- The creek crossing
- The stiles
- The hills !
- Jane's finish
- Evil Grim Sweepers
- Runners & Friends