

Only my second Sunday in the country and I found myself at the start line of a 'trail race' in the Serpentine National Park, about an hour south of Perth. I use the inverted comma since although being advertised as the third of 5 races in the Perth Trail Series, <http://www.perthtrailseries.com/index.htm> it was a 14.6km route with 650m ascent (9m/2130ft) which makes it very close to being a Cat AM race.

This was the long option, a shorter 11.5km/450m also being on offer. Trail & off-road running seems to be a very new sport here, with the masses mainly participating in road running and triathlon. 79 started the long course with 50 starting the shorter version today. The interest seems to be growing however, with numbers for each of the races increasing and word of mouth doing its work. The chap I caught a lift down with had completed a 50km mountain race in Tasmania the week earlier and has an entry for Leadville in August this year. He says the interest is definitely there, just a lack of organisation and also in variation in the types of runs that can be completed in the Perth area of Western Australia due to both the weather and terrain.

It was a 7am start and already had hit 29 degC. I'd lathered on the factor 50 and some zinc based sunscreen on my face as recommended by the organiser whom I had chatted to during the week. I had joined a local club on the previous Wednesday evening for a reasonably quick (45min) 10k through the park and the heat had absolutely knocked the stuffing out of me so the plan was to just see how it went and try and deal with the temperatures.



The first 4km was a gradual ascent on a very rocky track and the field spread out pretty quickly with everyone getting into their rhythm. There was a lot of chatter, I spoke to quite a few people along this section, most had never done anything off road before but had enjoyed the first 2 races of the series and were very keen. I was quite adamant not to get carried away, to just go at a steady pace and make sure I kept sipping liquid every 5 mins or so. Another bit of advice was to wear something to keep the sweat from getting in the eyes, and after 10 mins, sweating like never before, was thankful of the advice.

We had been told in the pre-race briefing that crossing a felled tree marked the first 'technical descent' of the route. I can vaguely remember the organiser advising people on switch-backing down this section, almost contouring to take the strain off the quads...I'll fully admit I was much more interested in watching the wild kangaroos hopping about behind her while she was talking rather than the brief itself. So, at the top of the descent I went for it, and I am by no means a great descender, very average indeed, but by comparison to others made up about 10 places within the first 50 yds. However a female runner a good 10 yds ahead at this point who was adopting the switch-backing technique, suddenly changed direction right into the path of where I was heading. With zero chance of stopping, how we both didn't end up in a heap at the bottom, I still don't know. I made my best effort to avoid her but still clipped into her, turned 90 degrees so was going down sideways, still managed to do the British thing and apologise at the top of my voice, then somehow managed to twist my hips back to the direction I wanted to go, and get my legs facing forwards which my torso then followed to regain some control and carry on. I saw her at the end and apologised again for the contact, she just said she was absolutely amazed that I had managed to stay on my feet and was very impressed by it all! Slightly shaken but with a heightened sense of confidence, the rest of the descent took very little time and a few more places gained. The route then went straight into a second huge climb which was made harder by the very dry, loose dirt and stone all the way up. About halfway up, the front runners started to come down for the long course was a there-and-back route. It was a hand's on knee's job for the next 10 minutes to the top, then a loop round a marshal and back down again.

This descent was a lot of fun, almost like a scree section but made of red dirt. There were some good views across the valley and thankfully the cloud cover had remained for most of the race so although the temperature was high, the glare and the radiant heat were kept at bay.





Another slow slog back up the course to the point of the felled tree (going back up that section still had me shuddering about exactly where I would have ended up if I hadn't have kept my feet!) and the point came where it was more or less all downhill to the finish.



Another 5 places were made up on the way back and ended up having a real sprint finish with a chap who after I passed with about 1k to go, stuck to me like glue all the way to the final couple of meters and just managed to hold off. In fact with about 10 meters to go he eased off, I suspect hoping that I would ease off too, before giving it another final spurt just before the line! Very cheeky, maybe some Aussie gamesmanship in there!



I came in 26<sup>th</sup> place out of the 79 in a time of 1:32:41 so was reasonably happy. Only 3 second separated first and second at 1:07:26 and 1:07:29 but then another 8 ½ minutes passed before third came in. Considering the heat and the fact I've done very little running over the last couple of months with the move at the forefront, I was quite pleased. It's the strangest feeling, having completed a relatively long/tough course and its only 8.30am too! Talking to others this race was quite a jump up from the previous 2 in the amount of ascent and rougher terrain, although they also said it was a remarkably mild morning given the time of year. I think there is still a lot of acclimatising to do!



But the real reward was just round the corner from the finish and across the car park in the form of a natural pool with waterfall. I've stood in streams and rivers after races before for that refreshing chill on the legs but this was something else! I think more or less every competitor was in there not long after they finished, which gave a really friendly, jovial end to the race.



The series seems to be very well organised by a hugely enthusiastic Canadian called Bernardette. She is adamant that trail running is going to be the next big thing in WA and if these first few races are anything to go by, I'm sure it will. Next race, in the Wungong Regional Park is Sunday the 26<sup>th</sup> so a bit more time to get used to this heat!

Jamie Wilkinson