

Oxfam 100km 2018

Oxfam Australia was born out of a merger between two leading international development agencies – Community Aid Abroad and the Australian Freedom from Hunger Campaign. At Oxfam they believe all lives are equal and no-one should live in poverty, joining forces with people who share this belief, to empower communities to build better lives for themselves. Oxfam are an organisation there on the ground, not only to save lives in times of crisis, but also to develop lasting solutions.

Their major fundraising event in Sydney is the Oxfam Trailwalker, one of the world's leading team endurance challenges of either 100km or 50km.

The 100km trail begins in Brooklyn on the Hawkesbury River. Starting at Parsley Bay, the trail enters the bush and joins the Great North Walk. It then winds its way through the northernmost reaches of Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park and Berowra Regional Valley Park, presenting physical challenges while legs are still fresh.



The trail has many twists, turns, ascents and descents along the rugged bush tracks of the Mt Ku-ring-gai, Bobbin Head, Sphinx, and Warrimoo trails before reaching Garigal National Park. It then traverses the Harbour to Hawkesbury Walking Track (in reverse) as it follows Middle Harbour Creek. The trail offers numerous stunning views, which become more spectacular as you leave Davidson Park and make your way to the Finish line. The last section follows the Spit to Manly walk, with views high above Sydney Harbour, before finishing at Tania Park (Middle Head).

Pre-race

I had prepared well for the event having undertaken extensive training (70-80km per week) on the course having run the first four (4) very technical stages at least three (3) times each, mostly in the pre-dawn dark, and the entire length in multiple stages over a three month period. This was to get myself acquainted with trail running, and in the dark. I geared up, Altra Lone Peak shoes, Salomon ultra vest, blister kit, shit kit, Injini trail

socks, Ay-Up head torch, and taught myself nutrition and hydration tactics for a 24 hour endurance event.



Unfortunately I had undertaken minimal training with my teammates due to conflicting commitments which proved disastrous as the Oxfam is essentially a team event with the safety check-in and out at each Checkpoint undertaken as a team (at the same time). My team mates were not nearly as well prepared. To be fair Lynn only joined as an emergency reserve to give us a fourth member to allow us to start. She was always going to retire after Stage 2, or Stage 1 if she couldn't keep up.

I packed a duffle bag for the support crew the night before with separate food bags for each checkpoint, spare clothing and shoes, sunnies, and a fully charged head torch, Garmin watch and power bank.

And then I walked in the rain the 2km up to Turrumurra Station on Friday morning getting a fairly good soaking on the way, to catch the train to Hawksbury River Station with Duncan, second carriage from the front, upstairs, to carry on the Turrumurra Trotters tradition of getting to an event. I told myself I was acclimatising and if I was going to run in the rain then I may as well start wet.

By the time we got to Parsley Bay, handed over our supplies to the support crew, met up with our other 2 team mates and signed on, the sun had come out and apart from a slight sprinkle at around 04:00 on Saturday morning it stayed dry but overcast for the entire event. My acclimatisation was all in vein and just meant I started with wet shoes.

We were targeting 21 hour 30 minutes. Time to go.

Stage 1 - Parsley Bay Brooklyn to Muogamarra Rural Fire Station, Cowan (15.7km; Difficulty: 4)

Our start time was 09:00. By then over 650 people had already been let loose on the Great North Walk, this was going to be a deciding factor in achieving a good time especially in the technically difficult first two stages.



We made good time from the start to the single trail head at the 10.2km marker getting ahead of most of the people from our start group. Unfortunately we were already catching up with earlier start groups and the number of people moving slowly and bunching around choke points was already starting to build. In addition at this early stage, teams were reluctant to let others pass. Climbing out of Jerusalem Bay to Cowan was a particularly heavily trafficked trail.

By this stage it was obvious that Lynn could not keep up even with all the stopping and starting. She decided to catch the train from Cowan Station back to the start line where she had left her car and the three boys carried on to the check-in at the Rural Fire Station. Coming in we assaulted by a drone which swooped on us, scaring the bejesus out of me. Look out for my saucer sized eyes on the Oxfam 2019 promotional video.

I had to talk our way in to the official's tent as we had already retired one of our team and had forgotten to take her bib with us. In the end we were allowed to carry on and Lynn's yellow sticker was attached to my bib to signify an officially retired team member for future check-ins.

Even with all the holdups and the fast talking we were 6 minutes ahead of schedule. This was going to be a doddle.

Stage 2 - Muogamarra Rural Fire Station to Berowra Community Centre (11.9km; Difficulty: 5)

After a quick 15 minute stop to fill up water bottles, eat a banana, stretch and go to the loo, we were off. This is the hardest section with two long and technical descents into Joe Craft's Creek and Berowra Waters gorges with the inevitable climb up the other side. By now the trail looked like Pitt Street Mall on a Saturday afternoon and at some of the choke points had queues of up to 30 people waiting to go through. We tried to power pass most teams on the long uphill climbs and had a lot of success, but at a price. I was not managing my water intake very well and was getting dehydrated and my quadriceps were starting to cramp up, especially on the climbs. I managed to keep moving on the flattish sections but up and down were very painful and with less than a kilometre to go to the Checkpoint my legs locked up completely. There was another team I was keeping pace with on this last climb into Berowra that had a team member with cramping calves. I would stop and stretch out the cramps and they would pass and then I would pass them as their man stretched out his calves. We leapfrogged each other up the last climb to the Checkpoint sympathising with each other's miss fortune.

Because I was having trouble lifting my legs I found I myself stumbling a lot on the uneven ground. Every time I caught my foot on a rock or root, had a stumble and fought to recover my balance my Quads and lower



back took the brunt of the effort and the pain was severe.

Duncan and Andrew had beaten me to the Checkpoint and were well into what was now a familiar stretching routine. Dermot, Jess and Lynn met us there and I immediately grabbed hydralite tablets and drank a litre of the stuff and as much water as I could stomach to offset the dehydration and cramping. I quickly replaced food and water bottles and wanted to get away as we had been battling the foot traffic and myself, cramps, and had slowed our pace considerably.

We had lost just over an hour on the stage were now 1:02 hours behind schedule. It was starting to get harder.

Stage 3 -Berowra Community Centre to Bobbin Head (15.2km; Difficulty: 4)

At Berowra I threw my secondary torch (a small LED for my bike) in my vest as I was not sure we were going to make the next checkpoint before dark, a fortuitous choice as it turned out. We set off together and made good time along the fire trail, down the single trail to Crosslands and the 'Marshes of Mordor'. I led the way through Lyrebird Gully, passing other teams regularly and with minimal holdup.

Teams were now warming to the idea of being passed. We would let the tail member of the team know we were ready to pass and how many were coming through (3 in our case), this would be relayed to their team mates and they would either stop and let us through or at least make room. As we had our names on our backs there was a lot of personalised encouragement from other teams as we passed. It was fun to hear "go Steve go" being shouted up the trail and I always tried to say something nice on the way through and give a thumbs up to show their encouragement was appreciated.



This is my favourite part of the course and apart from the odd cramp clambering over rocks and fallen trees, I was moving well until the climb up the bitumen road to the M1 crossover. Pushing hard up the hill only brought on cramping so I stomped my way up only passing Duncan and Andrew at the top as they went through their stretches.

The run through Mt. Ku-ring-gai and back into the National Park was painful for my Quads but I seemed to be over my cramping and Duncan and I took turns setting the pace down into Apple Tree Bay. Halfway down Duncan thought he may be getting a blister on the ball of his foot so we stopped to see. In the end it was nothing but as another team was bearing down on us and it was getting decidedly gloomy I set off to Bobbin Head with Duncan and Andrew not far behind with my little torch in hand. I didn't know that Andrew was having difficulty going downhill at this point. He was struggling and dropping behind. I loved the long downhill run in the gloom with a small beam of light picking out the major obstacles. The pressure was off my Quads and I was moving well, concentrating hard in the half light, a stumble or fall here would have been very nasty and painful.

It was well and truly dark by the time I got into Bobbin Head and took 10 minutes trying to find my support crew. They had not expected us to be here so early and were off looking at the height of the tide on the boardwalk through the mangroves. Duncan was 10 minutes behind, with Andrew close on his tail though looking decidedly stiff and sore. A power hug from Jess, massage from the physios, toe taping and liberal application of anti-chaffing lube picked up Andrew's spirits. I also tried to get a massage on my Quads but they were too painful, so as it was getting colder, I changed into a long sleeve shirt and put on my wind breaker and full gloves.



I was starting to shiver in the cold so was pushing the team to leave. A lot of people had set up camp at Bobbin Head and were making a long stop of it. This meant there were a lot less people on the trail and at last we may have clear air and running room. The last thing I heard as we left the Bobbin Head camp ground was “can someone please pass me the parmesan cheese”, now that's a civilised way to compete.

We left Bobbin Head at 18:36 and even after an extended stay we had crawled back a little time and were now only 43 minutes behind schedule.

Stage 4 -Bobbin Head to St Ives Showground (15.3km; Difficulty: 4)

We stayed together as a team all the way up the Gibberagong Track and up the Murrumbidgee Track to the Sphinx. The traffic was still a little heavy and now that it was dark, passing teams was more difficult. Even on low, my head torch was blinding people and washing out the cheaper models. It must have seemed like a Mack truck was bearing down on most teams as they readily stepped aside as I came bearing down on them through the gloom. One guy even said “for god sake go pass, I can't see a thing”. I was starting to narrow my focus on what was directly in front of me. Negotiating each obstacle as it entered my field of vision, concentrating hard on the terrain, trying to keep up a good pace and eat a Cliff Bar each hour and a bite sized Mars Bar on the half hour. Duncan and Andrew were behind me and I thought we were moving well.



I somehow lost track of them on the Warrimoo Track up to St Ives Chase, maybe they got held up on an overtaking manoeuvre. I was struggling up the track to the Park entrance as it just seemed to be a never ending series of climbs that was causing my Quads a lot of grief. I really wanted to get on the roads/fire trail to St Ives to relieve some of my pain and get into a gentle running rhythm which for me is a much more pleasant and efficient way of covering distance.

I got into St Ives Showground about 10 minutes ahead of Duncan with Andrew a further 5 to 10 minutes further back. Paulet and Jacques had joined our support crew here and Andrew promptly stole Jacques's toastie. Duncan was looking very stiff and sore. I made myself eat and Dermot bought me a black tea. A hot drink

was all I needed to warm up and I was ready to go. I waited while Duncan and Andrew stretched and made their preparations to leave on the next stage.

We left together at 23:16. We hadn't planned on stopping here and with the extra break we were now 2 hours and 19 minutes behind schedule.

Stage 5 - St Ives Showground to Frenchs Forest Showground (12.4km; Difficulty: 3)

In the first 500 meters out of the Checkpoint I found myself stopping for both Duncan and Andrew, waiting for them to catch up and then moving off ahead. Duncan then let me know he was in too much pain and was going to retire at the next checkpoint and to go on. Andrew seemed to be in the same frame of mind. If I had thought about it I may have taken their bibs with me but then they would not have had their identification in an emergency.

I forged ahead and found a team of 3 guys that was moving at around the right pace. One of the guys had an artificial leg from the thigh down, he was in high spirits and apart from the downhill sections was moving well. I dropped in behind and we walked on into the night. Somewhere on the Garigal Quarry Track, about half way through the stage I passed my adopted team and picking up the pace made my way on the roads to Frenchs Forest Showground arriving at 01:40 on Saturday morning.

It was very cold and Jess lent me Andrew's down jacket. I didn't want to sit down and stiffen up so made myself busy as I waited for the other two to turn up. Robin, who had joined the support crew at the previous checkpoint was very encouraging and made me promise not to push too hard when I left. "Yes, Mum". In the end Andrew made it in under his own steam but Duncan was not in good shape. After a phone call, where he sounded a little delirious, Jess drove out and picked him up and bought him into the checkpoint about an hour after I had arrived.

I had already used up my power pack and wasn't sure if I had enough juice in the Garmin and Phone to finish so I asked Dermot if he could do something. He fired up the Mustang's V8 and had those suckers on full charge in less than no time. Unfortunately he stopped the Garmin recording and so Strava will always show an Oxfam Part 1 - 69.6km and Part 2 - 31.8km.



As soon as I had Duncan and Andrew's bibs, I checked-in and got two more retired stickers affixed to my bid, a red one for Duncan and yellow for Andrew. I now had the set, the 'Ton of Fun' was now a team of one.

I was not allowed to check-out by myself so grabbed a girl that looked like she was leaving and asked if I could join with her team. I got a check-out and left. We were now 3 hours and 7 minutes behind schedule.

Stage 6 - Frenchs Forest Showground to Davidson Park (11.3km; Difficulty: 3)

I had trained on this part of the course three weeks earlier and so in a hurry, and thinking I knew where I was going, I took off. Unfortunately in the interim the Oxfam crew had found a better way to get through Frenchs Forest and onto the Frenchs Creek Track. I found myself wandering round looking for an Oxfam trail marker losing more time. In desperation I rang Dermot and asked him to SMS me the map and navigation notes. He was driving to Davidson Park so he pulled over, took photos of the trail notes I had left in my duffel and sent them to my phone. I could hardly see without my glasses but managed to read the correct instructions, backtracked, checked maps for the shortest route to Wanniti Road (to be forever burnt on my brain cells in humiliation) and took off. I picked up another lost team on the way and made it to the entrance gate. To see that first trail marker was a huge relief.



I passed the girls team on the Middle Harbour Creek Track and thanked them for letting me hitch a ride. They were great and kept shouting out encouragement as I disappeared into the dark. I was in the groove now, passing teams regularly, answering “just one, last man standing” when asked how many were passing and giving the double thumbs up to the shouts of “you’re killing it Steve” as I ran ahead. One lady even said “you poor boy” as I ran past. I didn’t have the heart to say I was having a ball.

I was however concentrating very hard. The trail was uneven and there were many obstacles. My ankle strapping had saved me twice already and I did not want to take a tumble. I noted every trail marker number as I passed thinking if I came a cropper at least I could ring the Oxfam Ops Centre and let them know where I was. It was very dark and quiet in the bush with everything focused around the spot of light in front and my breathing.



And then the phone started dinging next to my ear. It was safely tucked into a pocket on the left shoulder of my vest. I had ignored it when Caprice and Leigh let everyone know they had landed in Holland and were off to her sister’s house and what the weather was like. I was expecting that and knew it could wait to the next checkpoint. I didn’t know what this was about so kept stopping to check. It was Dermot sending encouraging texts like “I’m in the Oxfam tent with your gear....and a gas heater” or “Pick it up sonny” and “Mental toughness is when you can find fuel in an empty tank”. He was obviously bored.

As I trotted into Davidson Park I saw a team was checking-in and told the control that I was checking-in also and checking-out with them. It was in the computer and I was clear



to go. Dermot seemed to think that the other team needed further explanation so he went over and told them the whole story and let them know I wouldn't actually be travelling with them. I don't think they cared.

My stomach was a little off by this time what with my diet of Cliff Bars and bite sized Mars Bars and Hydralite, so I sat on the toilet for a bit and tried to calm it down a little.

It was 05:30 in the morning, the birds had started the dawn chorus, I could see the play of light on the water of the Harbour and I had less than 20km to go. How hard could it be. We were 3 hours and 37 minutes behind schedule. Drat I was slowing down and had lost another 30 minutes.

Stage 7 - Davidson Park to Ararat Reserve (7.9km; Difficulty: 4)

I left Davidson Park, ran under the Roseville Bridge and climbed up to the top of Killarney Heights. I found I was still wearing my head lamp and wondering why. It was light enough to see and it was weight I didn't need to carry. I must have put it back on as part of my leaving checkpoint routine and now had to keep it with me for this stage. I had come to rely on that friendly spot of light through the night and it was now a necessary piece of equipment. Funny how things become important and ingrained over a short period of time.

We were running on the bitumen and the hard pavement was hurting my legs. For the first time I could feel tightness in my calves so tried to run on the grass beside the road. It was still very hard and I could not find a rhythm.

This was the shortest stage and should have been an easy one but bouncing down the steps into Garigal National Park put a lot of pressure on my still painful Quads and it had started to rain. Not hard, but enough to be unpleasant at this time of the morning. I also had to run through a small, very cold creek which wet my socks and shoes, adding to my general misery. I had also completely forgotten about the 1.4 km climb back out of Garigal Gorge to Ararat Reserve. It was a brut of a climb of 150m elevation with lots of scrambling and ropes to get over the really hard bits. Dermot was still sending encouraging texts. I was beginning to dislike Dermot.

I walked into Ararat Reserve completely spent and sat down. The first time I had been off my feet other than to change my socks at St Ives Showground or sit on a loo, since 08:00 the previous morning. Dermot and I found a team to check-out with and then I ate as much as I could stomach, and thought about moving out as quickly as I could.

I changed into a fresh top and changed my trail shoes for road shoes not bothering to change my socks as my orthopaedics were wet anyway. I was not happy at this point in time. We were now 4 hours and 10 minutes behind schedule.

Stage 8 - Ararat Reserve to Tania Park (10.3km; Difficulty: 3)

My legs were not behaving themselves as I left Ararat, they were still fatigued from the climb and I had not walked or stretched out the stiffness at the checkpoint, so I decided

to walk for a bit to warm them up and get them moving. I walked most of the length of the Wakehurst Parkway and imagine my surprise when this big guy stepped out in front of me in the middle of the trail and said “way to go Steve”. What!

Mike, my brother-in-law, who had come to pick me up at the finish had seen a bunch of walkers cross the road at Seaforth Oval and on a whim decide to see if he could catch me on the way. So he parked his car and walked back up the trail to find me head down concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other, willing myself to get to the end. It was a great diversion. We walked to his car. I thanked him and with a new lease on life started to pick up the pace to finish this damn thing.

From Seaforth it should have been an easy run to the Spit Bridge to join the Manly Walk to Tania Park, but no. The local council had decided to refurbish 5m of footpath and so there was a trail diversion in place that added an extra, almost 2km onto the route. An unwelcome addition at this late stage.



With some help from a couple of friendly volunteers I managed to get myself onto the Manly Walk. I knew there were over 300 stairs to go but I had run this section before and I wanted to finish well so got into a jog and apologised to all the people walking their dogs along this beautiful track beside Sydney Harbour on a Saturday morning. Other teams and people were encouraging with two ladies ordering their husbands off the path so I could run through. Not far to go now and everyone was being really supportive.

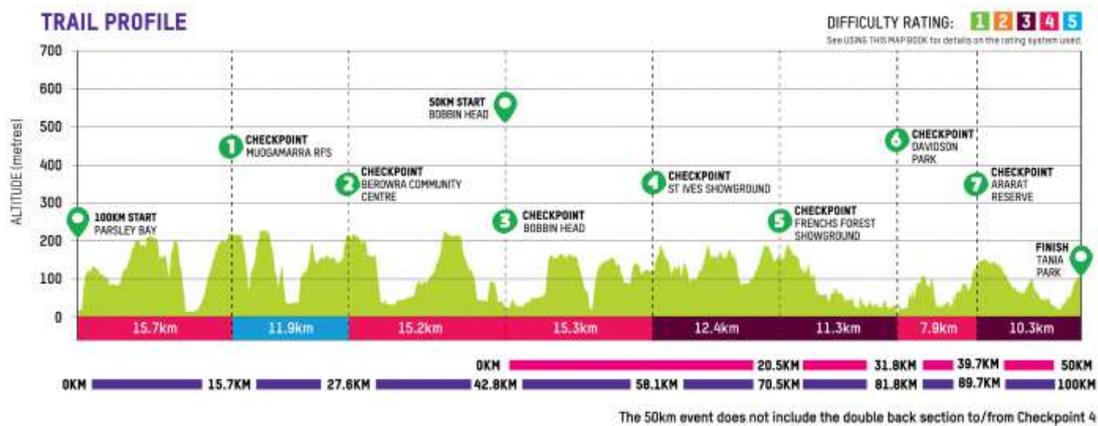
Paulet and Jacques (support crew) saw me at the Clontarf Reserve cafe and offered a cup of tea. I thanked her but declined and kept running and spent the next 10 minutes giggling. 2km from the finish, sure I have time for tea. May I have cucumber sandwiches with that. I was beginning to enjoy myself again.

I caught up with a team of four guys for the last 400m. The front man was limping badly and they were just hanging on so I decided to tack onto the end of their group, catch my breath after all those stairs and enjoy the view out Sydney Heads to the sea. They asked if I wanted to pass but I was happy and said “its only 200m to the finish, frankly I don't give a rat's arse”. They nodded in agreement and we walked the last few metres in silence. Never met them before, probably never will again, but mates.



I topped the bluff saw a few friendly faces and the finish chute and bolted. Jeff Mendoza ran the length of the chute with me calling out “faster Steve, run faster”, right. I was met by Dermot, Paulet and Jacques, Jeff, Andrew and Jess, Mike and Lynn at the finish, a great support crew. Dermot had beer!

We finished at 10:35 after 25 hours 34 minutes and 43 seconds out on course. We missed our scheduled finish by 4 hours and 5 minutes, coming 39th out of 325 teams. Dermot let me know later we had beaten the best ever time by a Sydney Metro team by 10 minutes, set by his team in 2014.



Wrap-up

Team Name: Ton of Fun
 Distance: 101.4km
 Elevation Gain: 3535m
 Time: 25:34:43
 Steps: 146,416
 Money Raised: \$6,903

Overall Rankings

39 / 325 Overall : Overall
 19 / 172 Gender : Mixed
 29 / 278 Age : Open
 3 / 13 Category : Government, Community, Defence, Emergency Services