



# Ultra Competitive

Two best mates go head-to-head in THE NORTH FACE 100 ultramarathon with bragging rights at stake



Brutal: Justin Jones attacks the Blue Mountains course



Caption: Ilor iustiscidunt alit aut alisl utpatē modolor alissi.La faci bla aciquatem

Sweat pouring off my brow, I feel like the fat kid running to be first in line at the tuckshop. Only 40km down in the North Face 100 ultramarathon, and my heavy legs are cramping as I try to comprehend another one-and-a-half marathons to go. I've gone out too fast and now, with my head spinning, it is no longer about finishing, but surviving. Oh yeah, and kicking my best mate Justin Jones's butt. I don't care how long it takes me to complete the race, just as long as I'm in front of him.

## WE'RE OFF

We've both smashed out decent training miles in preparation for this gruelling 100km trail run in the NSW Blue Mountains. Trail running is brutal on the body and getting ready for these ultras requires a fine balance of running enough clicks to be fit, but not overdoing it and injuring yourself. We built up to about 120km each week, with the most effective training being a 25-40km trail run each weekend.

The event is in its third year and has attracted a massive 600 entrants from all over the world this time around. And with more than 4500m of rugged elevation gain (about half the height of Mt Everest), it's going to be tough. Sure, the elite runners have the physiques of Ethiopian greyhounds, but the vast majority of the field are recreational runners with an adventurous spirit looking to explore their own personal limits. The camaraderie among the runners

is overwhelmingly supportive – we are in this thing together.

Jonesy and I go pretty hard from the start as the field of runners thins quickly. Masochistically we want to hurt, but, more importantly, this is war. For the first 20km I feel bloated because of the amount of food I've

eaten in the days leading up to the race. You burn an insane amount of calories in these events, so athletes (not that either of us think of ourselves as that) carbo-load to build up reserves and push hard well into the event. I learn that sitting in a bakery prior to race day drinking coffee and stuffing piles of pastries into my mouth was slightly off the mark. Carb-loading shouldn't be confused with gorging like a pig. Lesson one learned for next time.

## OPENING A GAP

After four hours, Jonesy is a little behind me, but I have no idea how far back. With the pastries jiggling around my belly I feel like a wallowing donkey trying to swim. I'm slowing down. I've gone out too hard and I'm suffering. Great. I nervously keep

looking over my shoulder waiting for Jonesy to mow me down.

I've ticked 40km off – just another marathon and a half to go. Arriving at the 54km checkpoint, I'm wheezing like a pack-a-day smoker. After six hours on the trail pretty much by myself it's a huge morale boost to see my support team waiting in our campervan. It looks like a candy shop with the piles of sweet food and drink spewing from the windows. Stuffing my face with a handful of jellybeans, all I can ask them is, "Where's Jonesy? Where's Jonesy?"

"He's gone over on his ankle and is way behind," they say. "He's probably going to pull out."

"What?" I blurt out, feeling cheated. I wanted a fair race. Winning by default is hollow.

## FIGHTING DEMONS

I quickly find my rhythm after leaving the checkpoint and start thinking of Jonesy's bugged up ankle. There's no way he's going to pull out. He always pushes through the pain barrier.

Over the next stage, my legs start cramping and, with no salt tablets in my pouch, I change my race hydration strategy and start drinking a sports drink instead of water (something I hadn't tried in training). It makes me nauseous. Bad timing. It's the 81km mark and I'm about to attack the most brutal section of the course: the infamous

800m climb of Kedumba Pass. After dry-retching a couple of times, I spew angrily on the fire trail. I've learned my second lesson: don't switch strategies midway through an event.

With the trail now cloaked in darkness, I hypnotically stare at the circle of light created by my headtorch. With only 10km to go I pick up the pace to finish in 13 hours, 52 minutes, just in time to earn a Texas-style silver belt buckle (quite random, I know). I'm stoked to finish in the top 50 out of 600.

Drifting in and out of sleep that evening, I keep thinking about Jonesy, still fighting it out on the trail. Although leading up to the race we'd joked about beating each other, I realise that doing so isn't anywhere near as satisfying as just getting to the end in our best possible times. These races take you on an amazing mental

**Jonesy has fractured his fibula. Is he brave or stupid? I'm not entirely sure.**

journey, which is way more satisfying than beating an arbitrary time or mate. I feel like a twat having had so much "ego" riding on this. Jonesy ends up limping to the finish line in an epic 19hr 42min.

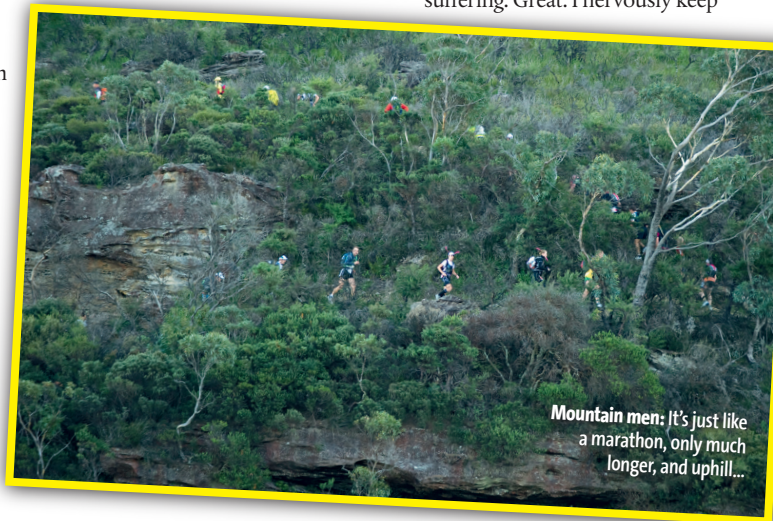
Within a few days of getting back to Sydney, an MRI reveals he not only tore a whole lot of ligaments, but he's fractured his fibula. Is he brave or stupid? I'm not entirely sure.

With Jonesy's foot in a cast for six weeks, he's already planning his training for next year's North Face 100. Me? I'm thinking about running with him... Not against him.

– James Castrission

## YOUR TURN

Interested in having a go at next year's The North Face 100? Head to [www.tnf100.com.au](http://www.tnf100.com.au) for more info.



Mountain men: It's just like a marathon, only much longer, and uphill...

PHOTOGRAPHY: MARK WATSON INCITE IMAGES.