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SURVIVING VERSUS RACING AN ULTRA

BY BEN DUFFUS

In 2016, I completed two 100km trail races. In May at Ultra-Trail Australia, just 500m from the finish line, I surged up a 1,000-stair ascent and stole second place from Yun Yan-qiao. And at Surf Coast Century, in September, I was carrying an illness and walked the entirety of the final 50km, only mustering a slow jog in the final 100m (to look good for the finishing photos). At UTA I raced to my limit for the entire day, but at SCC I simply fought to survive.

What is it actually that separates racing from surviving? The most obvious difference is that 'racing' implies a focus on achieving your best possible time or best position on race day. 'Surviving,' on the other hand, conjures up just getting the job done and finishing without any consideration about your time or placing.

Ultimately, the two are really just different states of mind. Above all else, running should be fun — but at our year's main

event, we are going to experience discomfort at some point, and this is the deciding moment in which we will either start to 'race' or 'survive.'

Survival mode tends to kick in when we realise that we have perhaps bitten off more than we can chew. At SCC, I raced well for the first half, until I suddenly began feeling off and knew something was wrong (which later turned out to be the flu) — from that point on, I didn't know if I could finish, but I wasn't going to be left wondering.

Do you feel like your next race is out of your league? Is it much longer or hillier than anything you've done before? If so, you too might not be worrying about times or positions, but just want to finish, desperately.

While racing can refer to competing against oneself, often it also refers to competing against others. And so arguably 'racing' is not merely constituted by your finishing position.

When my competitive juices start flowing, I start monitoring how the runners around me are faring. Are they breathing hard? If I pick up pace, do they stick around with me? What are their strengths and weaknesses? Do I set the pace or let them do it? Should I try to pull away on a climb or descent?

The answers to these types of questions (along with closely monitoring how I am feeling) help me determine the best strategy for finishing ahead of competitors. But if I'm at the state of simply trying to survive, none of these thoughts about other racers matter. Sure, if I'm running with someone else, we will both encourage each other to stay positive, but I lack any intentions to try and finish before they do.

During UTA, I was hurting badly by the marathon mark, but constantly played mental tricks to distract myself. By shifting my focus away from the pain in my legs to something external, like on catching the runner in front of me, or by repeating simple positive mantras ('You're doing well,' 'Everyone else is

hurting more than you,' or 'Push!'), I was able to tap into my competitive drive — lowering my perceived effort and pushing myself harder.

At SCC, I had to rely on a different set of techniques, as, frankly, I wasn't doing well, and I wasn't catching anyone in front of me! In this case, I could still shift my focus by appreciating the views (which at full speed is difficult) and by generally avoiding negative thoughts (reminding myself why I was there, or counting backwards from 100, over and over).

At UTA, my checkpoint routine consisted of getting out all my empty bottles and nutrition flasks on my way into the aid station. I would fling them at my crew's feet as I approached and would grab the new full ones, without breaking stride — I wasn't going to waste a second!

On the other hand, at SCC, I would relish the smorgasbord on offer, spending several minutes chowing down on a range of cookies and slices, and then would wash it all down with some warm soup. When I'm 'racing,' because I'm pushing hard my

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stomach doesn't allow me to eat such a spread of foods (too much blood is being diverted to the working muscles, suppressing my hunger) — but here I was, ravenously feasting, and not leaving until my appetite was satisfied. There was no point risking running out of energy, and the delicious food was an incentive to get to the next checkpoint.

This last point nicely highlights one of the key differences between 'racing' and 'surviving.' After all, surviving suggests a life-

or-death scenario. While a DNF certainly isn't death, when 'surviving' a race we derive our motivation from more-primal urges, such as food, water, or the safety of a warm blanket, comforts that keep us moving to the other side of the finish line. Conversely, racing tends to feed from higher motivations, like the esteem of a faster time or achieving your full potential.

While I (like many runners) have a fiercely competitive side, and will continue seeking to race the best, even on days when things go wrong (like they unexpectedly did at SCC), I can still find great satisfaction tapping into my innate survival instincts. Whether you race and finish first, or survive the longest race of your life to finish last, completing a task as challenging as an ultra trail marathon will be a deeply fulfilling experience. **AT**

Ben is an elite ultra marathon runner with podium finishes all around the globe. If you want help pursuing your trail-running goals, he also offers online coaching at Mile27.com.au.



Survival mode. Photo: Supersport Images