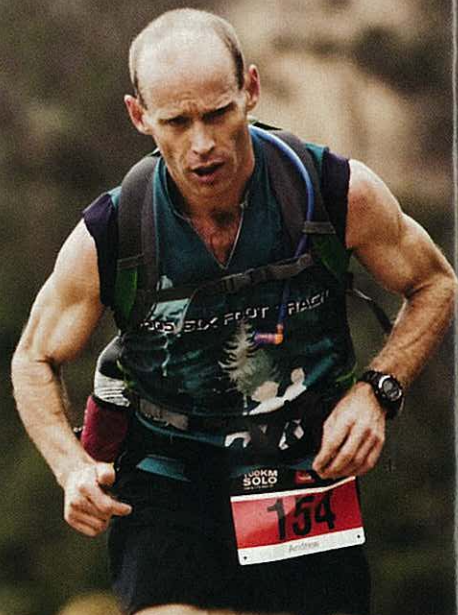


the north face 100



Race winner Andrew Lee

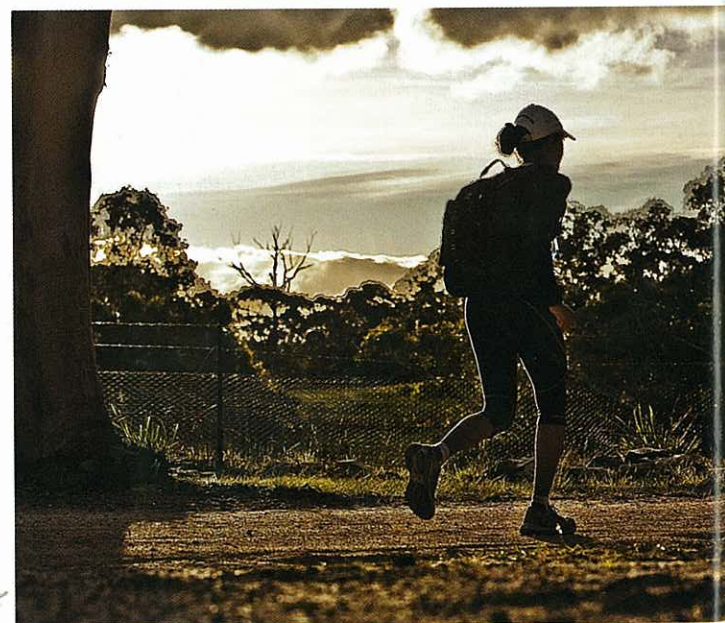
Australia's toughest 100 km trail run tested even the most impressive legs.

WORDS: Sam Gibbs PHOTOS: Mark Watson



It was in the glow of a saturated Blue Mountains dawn that the condemned gathered in the York Fairmont car park for the North Face 100, a gruelling 100 km ultramarathon, on May 16. A bitter wind nipped at the rippled calves of 395 runners, biting through Skins and soft shells to the very heart of the nervous mob. Wives and husbands fussed, partners supplied emergency Vaseline, and support crews double-checked compulsory space blankets, head-torches, energy bars and blister kits. With more than double the entrants of last year's inaugural TNF 100, it was no exaggeration to say that most of the participants had no idea what they were in for. From 21-year-olds to 60-somethings, previous experience ranged from seasoned ultramarathon runners and iron-women to half-marathoners and recreational runners. The hot topic pre-race however, was one

particular pair of stumps. "Have you seen DK's legs?" people whispered in reverent tones. Ultramarathon legend Dean Karnazes had flown in from the US the day before to host TNF 100 after recently finishing a 324 km event. Signing books and having photos with fans at the starting line, many were warmed by his genuine friendliness, despite being intimidated by his pins. "His book was the reason I even considered doing this," one Sydney runner said. "But his calves could poke your eye out." Soon enough DK's chiselled pistons were lost in a flurry of thighs and technical shoes as the pack put Leura's streets behind them, winding along the Prince Henry Cliff and Federal Pass tracks to Echo Point and the Golden Stairs. From the first few kilometres runners were rewarded with spectacular Blue Mountains vistas, though many quickly learned to keep their eyes on their feet; the first ankle



injury disappointing one runner at the 10 km mark. Gorgeous but challenging single track was the order of the day for participants, as they battled 4500 m of unforgiving ascent. The second leg's Tarros Ladders, specially built for the event, proved a small hold-up following one racer freezing mid-ladder, but otherwise all trails were exceptionally easy to identify and follow, thanks to the ever impressive and tireless efforts of the AROC team. Checkpoint three, at the 54 km mark in the Megalong Valley, was the interchange point for runners undertaking the 50:50 relay. Thirty-one relay pairs signed up this year, and many were running half the event with a partner or friend to achieve a spectacular marathon-length distance on the infamous TNF route. As some fresh legs departed from the third checkpoint, while other not-so-fresh legs continued on for their 55th kilometre,

there were still smiles all round, and even a sing-a-long to The Proclaimers' 'I Would Walk 500 Miles'. With 45 km to go, runs soon became shuffles, shuffles became limps and limps became crawls. Runners donned extra layers, covered their frosty ears and adjusted head-torches to face a blustering night and the final push. Jetlagged Dean Karnazes took a little stumble when he fell asleep mid-run, but still finished in under 15 hours. Later he said that although TNF 100 was one of his slowest runs, it was the toughest 100 km event he had ever faced, as well as the most enjoyable. "Grander than the mountains themselves," he said, "was the Aussie spirit out there." The final runner crossed the Fairmont 100 km finish line after 26 hours and 30 minutes of pure endurance. Many racers had already withdrawn, 108 forms reading "dehydration", "injury", or quite simply, "buggered".

The 'Person Who Survived the Fastest' was 39-year-old father of four Andrew Lee from Warrimoo, NSW, who took away the gold TNF 100 belt buckle at 10 hrs, 20 minutes, 51 seconds, breaking last year's record by approximately two minutes. A surprise even to himself, the event was not only Lee's first 100 km, but his first race over 45 km. For 81st placer John O'Reagan, who had flown in from Ireland for the event, TNF 100 had been his final challenge on an extraordinary checklist; "I looked for the hardest run on every continent, and this was Australia's." Taking up running in 2001, John has competed in some of the most extreme marathons and ultramarathons in the world, including the Everest and North Pole Marathons. "I think of it as sightseeing for a man in a hurry," he quipped. He finished in 15 hours, 51 minutes. "This was a great race." "Why do you run?" is a question

commonly asked of ultramarathon athletes, and one asked just as often of themselves. But no one who felt the achievement and community of those who had lined up for TNF 100 could deny its attraction. As John O'Reagan says, "Running is hard. But not running is harder".

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