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the bibbulmun beat

They say that psychologists are themselves nuts – that’s what drew them to the profession in the first place. Often so are trail runners. So how’s the nut-o-metre going for Bernadette Benson – registered psychologist and ultra trail adherent? In November she set off to run the 1000km-long Bibbulmun Track in Western Australia, in an attempt to become the fastest ever person to tick it off the bucket list. Nuts or just a fiercely determined woman who doesn’t mind pain when achieving her trail to-dos? You decide.

Words > Bernadette Benson • Images > Rolf Schatzmann

“How low?” I ask into my mobile phone, watching my partner Rolf folding up the 4WD rental trailer on our front lawn.

I get off the phone and head for the kitchen cabinet. One ferrous fumarate tablet down, one on the table for the morning, and the container now added to the breakfast supplies for our Bibbulmun record attempt.

After my difficult experience at the Commonwealth 24 hr ultra running championships in Wales five weeks earlier, I had continued to experience nausea on and off, with no apparent connection to time, place, or activity. I’d headed to a GP and requested a round of blood work. And so 12 hours before we were set to leave for Kalamunda, the Northern Terminus of the near-1000 km Bibbulmun

Track, I was told that my iron levels were “4” (apparently 30-300 is good), my hemoglobin was low, and I had some abnormal red blood cells. They wanted me to stay in some time to talk.

Fortunately, being at Level 4 Panic with last minute packing and preparations, I had no time to add “Worry About Doctor’s Tests” to my to-do list.

It turns out that if I wanted to add something to a worry list, it should have been the off-hand comment of my massage therapist earlier that day.

“Hmm. You have some fascial tightness here (here being the left tibialis anterior). It’s a bit too late to work that very aggressively.”





Day 1 > Tuesday 1 November

I'm off with a downhill start no fanfare at 4:58 AM. It's perfect. Despite covering myself in so much DEET I think I must glow in the dark, the ticks are not dissuaded. I know I react badly to their bites, so this is going to be a problem in a few days.

While enjoying the company of expert ultra runner/fast packer Andy Hewat, I stop to announce my intention to have my first meltdown. I am officially too hot. Soaking my hat provides illusory relief for several minutes. I spend the better part of 30 kms imagining a cold soda waiting for me at the car.

After saying goodbye to Andy and my partner Rolf at the 70km mark around 5pm, I head into my second "commitment zone" of the day. These are long stretches where there is no vehicle access. I won't see Rolf now until I finish the day coming off a spur trail at what is called the 101km mark by the Bib Foundation.

I have a river valley, then two "mountains" to summit tonight and expect to do both of those in the dark. Mt. Cuthbert and Mt Vincent each stand at about 500 metres. Before them, I skirt around Mt. Randall, reaching about 450 metres.

I had allowed about five hours for this section, but along the way two important realisations hit. The first is particularly embarrassing.

Eighteen plus eight does not equal 24. I had calculated that travelling 100km per day would likely take me up to 18 hours, considering I had to keep my pace slow and sustainable enough to last the duration. In an apparent separate and independent area of my brain, I had also calculated that I'd need eight hours per day off the trail, spent resting and doing all the necessary chores to maintain my body and gear for a decade. Following quickly on the heels of my maths disappointment came two questions: "When did I last charge my Ay Up batteries?" and "How long are those small ones good for, anyway?"

Around 10pm I press my "I need non-emergency help" button on SPOT, my GPS tracker/messenger. I pull out my Strippen and use the small LED light to start searching for the cairns to get me off Mt. Vincent. I'm only 2km from Sullivan's Rock, but it's going to be slow without a proper headlamp. The tops of these peaks are long undulating slabs of granite and boulders and instead of waagals (the distinctive reflective yellow Bibbulmun trail markers), cairns mark the way at summits. These have an annoying way of camouflaging themselves in darkness.

Data logged: 107km; +2574 mtrs; 18.5hrs

Day 2

I drag myself out of bed after four hours' sleep. Rolf is motionless. I announce that I'm leaving and remind him to be in Dwellingup to meet my pacers for 8am.

He sits bolt upright and yells: "What time is it?!"

I look down, "5:38."

He repeats in a frenetic stupor. "5:38, 5:38, 5:38!"

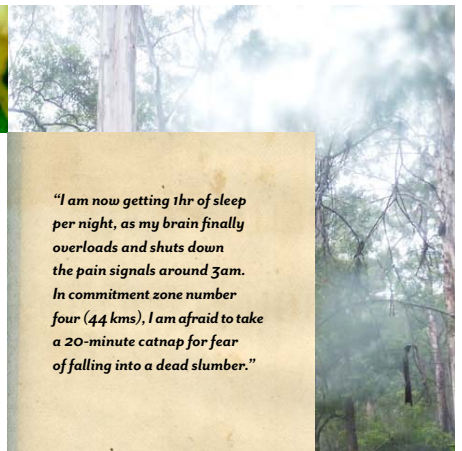
He clearly doesn't know what to do with this information. As a psychologist, I can see his motor cortex is firing, but his frontal lobes are still lying on that pillow. I leave him to sort it out.

The adrenaline and cortisol rush he just gave himself will keep him awake.

Later on, knowing I am suffering in the unseasonably hot weather, Rolf packs some ice in a towel and a cold Coke and heads out at a 5min /km pace to be a hero for me on the trail. Waiting with the jeep, my pacers realise moments later that he has gone the wrong way. He runs over 8km, uphill, before he appreciates why he hasn't run into me yet.

The section with the pacers marks the third commitment zone in two days - 54km. At 2am we're finally off the trail and at the caravan park in the nearby town of Dwellingup.

Data logged: 95km; +2005 mtrs; 20.5 hrs



Day 3

It's a late start after a late night trying to get at least four hours' sleep. I wake feeling good. A fresh pacer comes out for the day. As we jog, his father rings to warn of torrential rain near Collie.

But now that I'm pulling back from the 100k/day plan, I say, "That's okay. We won't get to Collie today."

Torrential rain doesn't know where the Collie town limits are. It dumps rain on us all afternoon and evening as we descend into the Murray River valley. I experience top-of-foot pain and chalk it up to tight laces, making an adjustment I'm confident will solve the problem.

Data logged > 61kms; +1097 mtrs; 12.5 hrs

Day 4

The tick bites have set, as has the tingling and stabbing pains when I put my feet up to sleep each night. I am now getting 1hr of sleep per night, as my brain finally overloads and shuts down the pain signals around 3am. In commitment zone number four (44 kms), I am afraid to take a 20-minute catnap for fear of falling into a dead slumber.

I keep moving fuelled on jellibears while singing children's songs in time with my stride. Three pacers have gathered with Rolf at Harris Dam when I finally arrive and the atmosphere is of excited kids at Christmas. Amid their beaming smiles, I ask, "Can I get a chair, please?" I still have another 17km to run tonight.

Data logged > 74 kms; +1391 mtrs; 15 hrs

Days 5-6 > The First Weekend

Descents become painful for my left leg, then my foot gives out on the flats. Having spent most of the day walking, I switch to sandals and take an antihistamine in the wild hope that the problem is simply a reaction to tick bites. Pacers leave for the city, taking their sad cow eyes with them. Although they were still saying all the right things, their eyes gave away their fear that my record attempt was gone. In the evening, I move a bit easier, but am icing and elevating at all opportunities.

Data logged > 66km; +1236 mtrs; 13 hrs / 47 kms; 772 mtrs; 11.75 hrs

"I am now getting 1hr of sleep per night, as my brain finally overloads and shuts down the pain signals around 3am. In commitment zone number four (44 kms), I am afraid to take a 20-minute catnap for fear of falling into a dead slumber."





“Scenery? Images of beauty and breath-taking vistas? Yes, there are lots, but in my world, I am drowning in endless forests and if I am fortunate enough to get a vista, it means that I have climbed yet another punishing hill that is going to have an even more punishing descent for my left shin, ankle, and foot.”

Days 7-8

I pass the Bib Foundation’s official halfway point and break into a very short hyperventilating-type sob. This is the first of three times the chemical chaos in my body will leak out of my tear ducts. There’s no time for drama or pity though. Ice and elevate the foot, check the map of the next section, grab the requisite number of snacks, and move on. Relentless forward progress.

I spend considerable time cursing my parents, who gave me the mutant genes to make me want to do things like this. I briefly contemplate “why,” as I know I’ll be asked by so many people after the event. Indeed, I am now mildly curious myself, as it seems distinctly odd to be enduring day after day of leg pain, stabbing nerve pain in the bottoms of the feet, sleep deprivation, all manner of insect and plant stings and bites, my own stench, the stench of our mildewed trailer, and running in a choice of either pouring rain or sauna-like humidity.

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One afternoon I ask my pacer to run on ahead, as I find it’s better to be alone with my pain. I break out the jellybeans and start singing the alphabet in time to my stride. I find it easier to ignore my gasps of white hot pain when there are no witnesses. I’m afraid others will think I’m soft and tell me to toughen up or will think I’m too injured and pity me. Either way, I don’t have the mental energy to be on a stage this way, thinking about how others might feel. On my own, I can use my energy to calm and focus myself.

Data logged > 58km; +1009 mtrs; 12.5 hrs / 79 kms; +1758 mtrs; 16.5 hrs

Days 9-10

Rolf is now a scarred and hardened ultra runner/crew person/partner. He stands back and takes photos while I grimace with the stabbing pains when we meet at road crossings. We have entered the 100km or so “seasonally inundated” area after an unseasonably wet WA winter (which I hadn’t fully appreciated the implications of, having usually spent those months in Canada, my homeland).

Rolf takes Billy, our jeep, and trailer in to meet me and sees a wet section on the road. He stops, gets out to inspect, and finds it’s not quite ankle deep. He gets to a second one and finds the same thing. At the third one, he doesn’t bother stopping. This time, Billy sinks to the doors in some vehicle ruts. The inundation claims the laptop and one camera. Rolf runs my large pack in to a trail junction and leaves it on a post with a note attached. Now carrying both packs, I camp at a shelter without benefit of a mattress pad. Staying up all night gives me lots of time for self-massage. My right iliacus has been tight and the hip feels like someone’s poured glass shards into it at times. Probably from favouring the left leg.

Data logged > 65km; +1257 mtrs; 12 hrs // 73 km; +1082 mtrs; 14.5 hrs



Days 11-12

I hate food. The slow pace of an event like this means I can – and therefore need to – consume nearly the same amount of calories as I’m burning. This equates to over 5,000 calories per day.

I’m sick of everything. Rolf does his best sales pitch every time I see him – he’s buying new foods at every shop he sees. The food bin is now larger than what we started with, as I reject one thing after another.

While on the trail, my mind runs up and down grocery aisles, trying to think of what I might eat. “Instant cuppa noodles,” I say at the next meeting. He buys every brand and flavour he can find, but my interest is short-lived.

I nickname my poles, Nearer and Further. Every step is nearer to Albany and further from Kalamunda. I consider at the same time that I am getting nearer to my goal of Albany but further from my “A” goal of 12 days.

In all honesty, I hardly believed 10 days was achievable considering the distance, the elevation, and that the record was currently at 16 days 8 hours 15 minutes.

Friday morning I can barely walk and spend much time as a do-it-yourself physio, sitting on the trail between boggy patches, trying new taping techniques. Consider a neuroma or cyst, as I have pain in the bottom of my foot now. But taping around the foot to mimic the inferior extensor retinaculum, accompanied by removing the insole of the left shoe seems to work like magic (my feet, especially the left, are so swollen I have been wearing Rolf’s shoes with two pairs of socks for some days now). I run through the afternoon and evening pain free, cautiously optimistic.

Saturday afternoon, my low grumbling shin explodes on the 1km descent off Giants campsite near the Tree Top Walk. It takes 30 minutes to get down to Rolf. Billy, feeling left out with all the attention on me, fries his starter motor. Rolf drags us both into a motel in Denmark, where we will attempt to find answers to all our problems in a small rural town on a weekend night.

Why am I doing it? Can’t bother with the energy required to think about that one right now.

Data logged > 55km; +880 mtrs; 12.5 hrs / 47 km; +1004 mtrs; 11.25 hrs

Day 13

I wake at 4.15am and prepare to run, but a quick walk around the car park tells me otherwise. My shin lights up on a descent you’d be lucky to get a marble to roll down. At Denmark Hospital the x-ray shows a white spot on the second metatarsal that could be a stress fracture. But there are another five or six white spots on that image. X-rays are rather useless for this. The emergency doc is fantastic, though, and seems keen to see me able to continue. He sends me off to Albany for a CT scan with a requisition that reads “On track to break the record.”

I am limping around Albany, which is what I expected. But not after having arrived in a jeep with no starter motor and a dodgy clutch that has to be pumped four times at each roundabout. Billy smells like a bog. The CT scan finds nothing. I’m apparently fine. I am diagnosed as having anterior compartment syndrome and the recommendation is to rest. However, I’m told that if I can manage the pain, my injury is not one to end up in need of a fasciotomy and no negative lifetime consequences are indicated (they don’t know about the nightmares later).

I decide to continue with prescription anti-inflammatories. Considering the slow pace and temperate conditions now, I feel the risk of using NSAIDs is tolerably low. I hike 11km that evening to take advantage of the light remaining and test the foot.

Data logged > 11km; +148 mtrs; 2.5 hrs

Days 14-15

I come up with a phrase for each letter of “Bibbulmun” which is not G rated. But the ‘i’ stands for insane and the ‘n’ stands for nightmare.

I have reconciled with the fact that I cannot blame my parents’ mutant genes on what I’m doing, but that leaves the unanswered question. I remember the month in 2004 I spent solo backpacking and hitchhiking through Mongolia, where I pushed myself daily, carrying over 25kg of gear, including two or three days’ food at a time. I wondered why then, too.

I lose interest in such philosophical questions and go back to reciting my new Bibbulmun phrase in time with the stride of my poles and feet.

I have a good afternoon with minimal pain, enjoying the sand underfoot. Rolf runs out to meet me for a bit. We’ve decided it’s the day to push through to the finish, even though it means staying up all night. My shin suddenly decides otherwise, about 5km from the car, with the sun promising to set in the next hour. For 20 minutes, I cannot move and sit tenderly caressing my shin. I wrap myself in my space blanket and Rolf’s windbreaker and send him off to bring back thermals. It could be a very long descent to the car. Indeed, it takes about 3 hours.

Data logged > 69km; +1002 mtrs; 16.5 hrs / 58km; +1204 mtrs; 14.5 hrs



World Record
Bibbulmun Track 1000KM
November 2011
Days: 15 Hours: 9 Minutes: 48
Bernadette Benson



Day 16

Ironically, the shin saved us that night. Torbay Inlet, supposedly the easiest of all four inlet crossings, is flowing deep and fast. I spend five minutes navigating slowly two-thirds of the way across, looking for places where I can see the ground below. I hit the last channel and can't find a shallow spot. Luckily, some surfers come out of the water at the same time and offer to find a route. They sink three or four times up to their chests in the soft bits. I get through thigh deep, by following their best route, using my poles to steady myself against the current.

I run well through the early afternoon, although feel I am a ticking time bomb. And I am getting completely sunburnt in what is supposed to be cold, rainy, miserable Albany. I cannot apply enough sunscreen to stop the increasing redness on the backs of my arms and the tops of my hands and soak my shirt at every meeting point with Rolf.

My shin swells as I jog slowly around the bay into town. I can see the shiny redness of it and feel its grumbling.

One kilometre from the finish, I am crippled again. A woman stops to offer me a lift. A few others slow down in their cars, expecting me

to wave them down. I cannot walk the 200 metres to where Rolf is waiting with the car. He comes back to me and pulls out the chair and ice without a word. We both know the drill. Sock down, foot up. I want to just run screaming through the pain to that Southern Terminus sign I can see in my mind. But there can be no running through this pain. This pain – and the Bibbulmun Track – have taught me a 15 day lesson in acceptance. Acceptance is not a hopeless sort of acquiescence. Acceptance is about living in the moment – it's about doing as much as one is able, no more and no less. It is active, not passive, because as the moment changes, circumstances change, and the mind can change.

Fifteen kilometres from the Southern Terminus, I know why. Because I need challenges that test my sense of reality. We are what we believe we are. As David Bohm, the quantum physicist said, "Reality is the thing you think about."

So, if I'm an ultra runner on a beautifully runnable trail and I can't run, am I still an ultra runner? *

Data logged > 42km; +507 mtrs; 9.75 hrs

New Bibbulmun Record

Bernadette overcame that final 15 kilometres. She is a trail runner. An ultra trail runner. She's not crazy. She is determined. She is brave. But not crazy.

Total stats > 1007 kms; +18,927 mtrs; -19,103 mtrs; 213.75 hrs

The Fastest Known Time for the Bibbulmun Track now stands at > 15 days 9 hours 48 minutes. That's real. So too were the nightmares she had for weeks after the run, the elevated heart rate that wouldn't drop, the tick bite reactions, the muscle and nerve spasms that hindered her getting to sleep.

Bernadette ran not just to check in with her sanity, but for a good cause, Inclusion WA. She raised more than \$5000. We encourage you to donate too.

www.inclusionwa.org.au

Keep up with Bernadette's ongoing trail life at

bernadettedownunder.blogspot.com

Adventures don't happen without support. Bernadette was assisted in her run by the good people at Montane / Mainpeak, Hammer Nutrition and a host of friends and support runners.

www.montane.com.au www.mainpeak.com.au

www.hammernutrition.com.au

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