Harry Jame's Personal Experience of the 2019 Great Naseby Water Race

The 2019 Great Naseby Water Race was shorter than expected for me – see my transcribed verbalisations below – but there were many valuable experiences. Rather than tell you what happened in a short story, I have transcribed 13 recordings I captured while running (and eventually resting) the 200km race, in an effort to show you what was going through my mind at times during the race. I begin where I ended – in my van – but what follows are my musings as they relate to me making sense of my thoughts during the race. A word of warning, some thoughts are exposed that reveal how I was trying to make sense of my academic endeavours, I apologise for any inconvenience if the reader gets confused. Thank you for reading. Harry.

Verbal 28 (last recording)

It's about 6:03 AM [24th August], I pulled out of the race about 120km in. My left knee was very swollen and quite painful, and I was sort of struggling to walk, so I decided to pull the pin. Not sure if that is a sign on mental toughness or just being aware of injuries and pulling out when necessary. Yeah, I'll leave it at that.

Verbal 1

It's 7:27AM on 23rd of August about half an hour before the race start at the 200km Great Naseby Water Race. Slept in my van last night near the start line after getting here about 6:30pm. Got about nine and a half hours of interrupted sleep, I'd say; well, not interrupted, I just kept tossing and turning. There were some weird musings where I thought like I was not ready at all for the race, kind of felt like I was too blasé or too relaxed towards it. It was quite uncomfortable; I remember having to wake myself up from that and then talk myself into it. What did I do to talk myself into it? As soon as I felt like I had calmed down, and I don't actually know what self-talk strategies I used other than thoughts in my head to reassure myself that I had done 160km before so I could do this again. So, I guess it's just self-reassurance and waking up from this sleep-like state where I was worried. Anyhow, now, it's about half an hour before the race. It's really cold out, I've got the van on to turn the heater on to warm up my feet because my toes have gone cold as well as my hands. I have my watch charging on my laptop, my phone charging on my laptop, in case batteries go flat because I need my phone in case the batteries on this [Dictaphone] might go flat throughout the race. I have a backup phone to record my thoughts. I have my journals handy so I can write during transitions if I have to but I'm not sure if I'm going to write during transitions, I think I'm just going to record as I go. I had two pieces of banana bread, a banana, and I'm going to have the rest of my smoothie. I had [my medication] around 7:55am. I met with the race organizer this morning briefly, just to have a quick chat and say hi. I met with another runner that I've seen at previous runner events, and also another runner from the same running group and club that I affiliate. Pretty relaxed right now, there's about half an hour to go, not much I can do other than finish my smoothie and get ready to go to the start line. I'm going to talk about my thoughts of mental toughness and flow throughout the race, I think. I have to remind myself: what is mental toughness, and what is flow, and how do they relate to my experiences in ultramarathon running. So that could be my question. What is mental toughness and flow in ultramarathon contexts and how do they relate to my psychological experiences: an autoethnography. That may be it, we'll see.

Verbal 2

About 3km in on the first loop, 22 minutes in, averaging about 7:40 minute/km. Feeling pretty heavy actually, the body is a little drowsy, hopefully it wakes up. There have been moments where I have been imagining my family and fellow runners coming here to see me when I'm tired further down the track and how great that will feel. That's where I'm at, at the moment. My goal is to maintain 7:30 min/km for the entire race, which might be fairly difficult so already in my first lap I am considering reappraising my goals. I'm not sure how that relates to flow or clutch nor mental toughness, because my goal is to try and beat my 29 hours, 30 minutes last year 100-mile time this year, and then see what happens for the remaining 40 km of the 200km race. So, the flow component, I guess may come in a bit more according to Swann et al.'s critiques of the flow scales and how flow and clutch may be similar constructs based on the ambiguity of the open goal facet of flow. So, I'm thinking the last 40km may be more flow experiences and then the first 160km may be more clutch experiences. I'm feeling quite happy, I don't know, the sun is just coming up now, there's pretty beautiful surroundings, there's a water race to my left, so flowing water, there's birds chirping in the background, so there's something about being in nature, and actually there's a hard frost under my feet. I'm just running over a sign of a stickman spray-painted into the ground of someone smiling. And then, the mental toughness we'll see what happens when I get really fatigued. I'm anticipating the early hours of the night especially when it gets colder and lonelier, and there's no one to talk with. So how do I cope? It will be interesting. Last year I coped by doing a lap and trying to come up with foods that started with a certain letter with a fellow support runner. So that dissociative strategy worked, but this time, what am I going to do?

Verbal 3

It's about 31 minutes in the first loop. The reason I'm recording is because I sort of just drifted off before. I'm jogging along the water race now, and I found a pace that matches the challenge, I guess. I'm averaging about 7:30 minute/km and yeah, I felt like I kind of spaced out there, wasn't really thinking, I was just running along the water race, and that may be flow, I think I just came out of a flow experience, I think. What was it like? It felt like I was gliding, going through the motions, and just jogging, just easily, wasn't thinking of anything, I was listening to the birds. Actually, I wasn't aware of the birds I was just lost in my thoughts, so that may have been dissociation, because I was thinking about my project a little bit, but it wasn't in depth, it was kind of like a drifting thought pattern.

Verbal 4

I just had a thought earlier on, that maybe my research question needs to be focused on the types of goals that I set as they relate to flow or clutch states, and then how do I overcome the stressors that I face depending on my goals and goal reappraisals throughout an ultramarathon race as they relate to mental toughness. So, I guess the question is: what coping strategies do I use to overcome stressors I face in ultramarathon running and also what types of goals determine flow or clutch states in ultramarathon running and how do I overcome them in a mental toughness context?

Verbal 5

About 1:43 hours in, my watch says I've covered 14 kms, I'm averaging right now about 7:03 minute/kms. Feeling okay, a little flat, but I wanted to record now on the second loop an area where I think on the first loop, I experienced flow, so I'm just going to describe the physical surroundings. So, to my left is a water race, it's moving fairly calmly actually, starting to pick up a little now but actually it's very slow, it's kind of almost still; and baby pine trees to the left, to the right slightly more mature pine trees; there's little frozen puddles, I guess, on the trail that I'm avoiding; this is like a four-wheel-drive width track; now I'm coming into a really well cleared previous forest area; blue sky to the left, the sun's to my west but I'm heading south; to my right there's still broom and dead broom, then pine trees around; a lot of rabbit and sheep poo around too, maybe possum; there's a Fantail flying around me to the right, it just landed in the tree; can hear the birds chirping, quite nice; all I can hear is my footsteps and the rhythm going; and there's a Fantail going above, it's kind of cruising around above; it's a beautiful day now, the sun's at my back, so I'm heading more south-south-east; the water race still to my left and will continue to be to my left until I start taking a right turn. It's quite beautiful, really, I'm just going to leave it at that.

Verbal 6

Just finished a burrito, and I had a slice of orange at the aid station. I've done 16.4 kilometres now…my average pace now is about 9:44 minutes/km and that's because I'm walking, so I'm going to jog now.

Verbal 7

Two hours, six minutes, thirty (seconds) in, averaging about 7:03 minutes/km. Just had a flow experience I think, again, similar surroundings – water race to my left – although this time clear open views to my right of mountains with snow-caps on them. On my left, I don't know, I was just kind of plodding along and not thinking at all – just going. I don't know how else to describe it I wasn't aware of it. How do I capture that? I don't know, because I'm only able to capture it after it happens, 'cus then I'm consciously 'switched on'. I'm able to maintain the pace now, I think I was just doing them a little slower at 7:20 minute/km on my watch, but I'm not sure how to capture it (flow). Now, coming North I was heading south-east, now coming north I've done a hairpin loop, looking at the mountains that have a lot more snow on them than the ones to the south, and the sun's just into my face. It's quite pleasant, really.

Verbal 8

It's about 19.08km into the run, two hours 20 minutes in, and I'm walking again, I'm averaging about nine minutes, or somewhere around there, nine to ten-minute minutes per kilometre while walking. I'm noticing I'm recording this because I'm already starting to break down the race into smaller goals. For instance, I'm just about finished the second loop, so I've just about done 20km. So, I'm noticing that I would have completed one-tenth of the course, for instance, and then be feeling quite good about that but I still have 90% of the race to go. Another example is: I'm imagining when my brother will be here and the social support, he will give me when he arrives in a couple of hours and how far through, I'll be then. I would have hopefully done about 30 to 35 km and having him give me a quick boost. So that's usually when you expect to hit the wall, around 30km into a run when, I'm pretty

sure you switch from burning stores to fat burning stores, but I'd need to look up that literature. Other than that, I'm feeling okay, my left hamstring is a little average but it's okay; and my hips are tight, but they'll loosen up, I think. Still a beautiful day. Heading north-west, nor-nor-west slightly, the sun is to my nor-east, nor-nor-east. I'm also starting to visualise what it's going to be like when my family arrive and when my other support runner, Jonah, arrives. It's just to visualise what I'm going to be like physically, mentally, and emotionally. And, I'm also worried about my watch because I didn't set it to the correct setting, so hopefully I can collect as much data as I can while I go.

Verbal 9

It's about three hours into the run, 24.7 km according to my watch, averaging about 7:11 minutes/km, and about ten minutes ago I just got passed by the race leader, Glenn. He's an incredible runner, he's just able to lap us in less than three hours. So, his pace that he's able to maintain for significant periods of time is incredible, really, in my opinion. He's just got back from completing one of the toughest ultramarathon races in the world, the Badwater 135-mile race. And now, I'm just passing the location where I had a flow experience on the first loop and now, I'm on the third loop. The body's feeling okay, just progressing along, slowly.

Verbal 10

Chris Bisley just passed me about three hours 29 minutes in. It took him an hour and a half to lap me. I was actually 15 km in when they (160 km runners) started, so he's nearly done 20 km. His enthusiasm as he ran by was incredible, very positive; he was interested to see how I was going, so conscientious, and then aware of his own pace, and he assured me that he was going to see how long he could keep going. Gosh, he flew by. It's about 28km according to my watch but I think it is off. I was going about 6:20 minute/km.

Verbal 11

Three hours, forty-two, forty-seven seconds on my watch, averaging around 6 minutes/km, 30km on my watch but I think it's off because I'm just coming around to the final left turn on to the home straight back to the finish line. Two other runners passed me from the 100-mile category. I'm feeling okay, my right hip was a little sore there for a bit but it's okay now; my mental thoughts are actually pretty good. I had a piece of orange at the last transition about 20 minutes ago (again, my second piece), and I had another piece of banana bread. I put my vest on and took my long sleeve off because it's a lot warmer. Now coming onto the home straight, averaged about 5:48 minutes/km coming down the hill. Feeling pretty good.

Verbal 12

About three hours, fifty-eight in, according to my watch, 32.52 km, averaging 6:30 minute/km. Just going to verbalise how I imagine running downhill. I guess I just imagine falling with the gradient and then, kind of trying to pick my steps up and cadence; that way, I'm kind of falling down the hill – falling with the gradient – to try and be as efficient in my movement as possible. I also heard that from the Science of Ultra podcast, where one should lean forward and let the legs go with the body as you lean forward but imagine falling down the hill like water flows down the hill. So, another way to do that would be to pick a line going downhill where you see there may be a rut or general gradient where water has fallen through a channel and try and visualise or find the line like that.