

ANCHOR MILK OTAGO – ALPS 2 OCEAN ULTRA, 23-29 Feb 2020

A life changing race for me



by Harjinder Singh Chander (Harrie)

Total Distance – 322+km. From Mount Cook to Oamaru. 132 runners from 24 countries

Since I started running a bit seriously in March 2018 the A2O ultra adventure race was the biggest event I want to complete. The A2O started in the same year 2018 when I started to compete in events and do some training.

So in early 2019 I decided to enter the 2020 event as a supported runner. “Supported runner” means that you have to just carry essential items and a total of 2200 calories. For the rest of the event the organizers will supply your gear to the next stage. “Unsupported runner” means you have to carry all your stuff with you all the time including food, essential items and sleeping bag and mat too.

For my training for the A2O I just took it easy and I didn't train enough until December 2019, but in December 2019 and January 2020, I competed in something like six to seven 40+km runs including a longest run of 65km in over 10 hours with a 3500+ meters elevation. As the event got closer my excitement was getting high but at same time I was getting nervous too (Will I be able to complete it? What will I do if I got blisters or got injured? Have I trained enough? Blah blah blah)

I barely did any training in February so as to recover well from the January long runs and to store some carbohydrates. My strategy was just to walk and make it to finish line.

Day 1:- Big Collection

Finally the race week arrived and I was allowed to take 10 days leave for the race (but my boss extended them to 2 weeks as he and my work mate were to come and see me on day 6 of the race). My wife Pawan and I arrived in Oamaru for my bib collection on 20 Feb. My legs were shaking when I collected my bib. Having collected my Bib, the first question from Pawan was “Will you be able to complete it?” I just smiled and said “You are only asking about finishing it? I am thinking of winning it.” I said to her that she should leave me at the race and go back home so that she should not get too worried about me. She gave me a big hug and said “If you believe in yourself, sure you will.”

Day 2:- Kit check in

On check in day when I had a look at the list and tried to recheck all my stuff, I noticed that the most important water flasks from my running vest were missing and realized I had washed them and they were still sitting at home in our kitchen 120km away.

First we thought we would drive back in the early morning in the morning and pick them up. Then we decided that we would try the Oamaru shops and we were lucky enough to find two 750ml Adidas water bottles and decided to buy them.

I prepared for 2200 calories a day and total of 15400 calories for the next 7days (I had an extra bag with 2500 calories too, in case I went hungry) and all essential gear of approximately 14kg in weight. About double of the lightest weight a women had of 7.5kg as an unsupported runner. But my weight was still 2kg under the weight limit so I was happy with that. All went well and it was so organized at the check in it that it didn't take us long to get all our gear checked. On the same day we had race briefings at about 1pm and then a train ride and dinner for all runners at 5pm.

Day 3:- Final Preparations

We had a bus ride to Mount Cook and had a stop at Fairlie to have the most famous Fairlie Pie. Trust me, there was a long line to get a turn. We finally arrived at Mount Cook airport to get out our weights and all the other formalities were completed for the helicopter ride next morning to the start line.

We also had lunch (Subway) served by race organizers. Then we went to Mount Cook village and the tents were up and we got ourself sorted. Then it was time to have a final good meal at 6pm served by the race authorities.

RACE: Day 1

Stage1 (7km)

We all walked together from Mount Cook village to the airport for the helicopters to get us to the start line and it was a “no timed” stage.

Stage 2 (approx 53km)

Mt. Cook to camp area at Hayman Road, Pukaki

As my strategy was to mostly walk and take it easy I just tried to stick with it but after few kilometres in my pocket I tried to do it a bit differently, that is a 300m walk and a 700m run and walk all up hills. Trust me it worked out really well and I had no trouble until 45km when I started to feel a cramp and just walked the last bit. The mistake was not to have any salt tablets or cramp fix liquid while on the run. I was not sure whether I should take the tablets as I never had them before, but I still was able to finish it in 21st place in 6 hours 45 minutes.

The best part was the lake next to the tents, so I had a dip in the cold water later and my legs started to feel fine as I came out.

RACE: Day 2

Stage 3 (approx 51km)

Hayman Road camp area - Pukaki to Lake Middleton

The loud music in the morning woke us all up. We had breakfast and got prepared for the next stage.

It was going to be mostly flat with just a 380m elevation so I had my strategy to stick with a 300m walk and a 300m run and it went perfectly until just 3km from the end beside the lake I had a walk as we had to make our way through the stones on the side of the lake.

I kept salt tablets at each checkpoint and was eating enough while running but I started to have troubles with the water bottle. While running, it was hitting my chest and gave me bruises. And at the end of the day I found out that my bag was a bit loose and was moving and that was causing the bottles to hit my chest. It was a great day and I finished in 17th place in 6 hours 30 minutes.

At the end of the day a list was out that the top 20 finishers would start 2 hours later than the others and everyone would be starting earlier than normal time as it was going to be super hot day.

RACE: Day 3

Stage 4 (88km)

Lake Middleton to Benmore Dam, Otematata

We were woken by the same loud music at 5am and had breakfast and farewelled the group one at 7am and waited 2 hours and finally at 9am all 20 of us started. It began on the road for about 3km and then we hit the hills. It was a fast start for me compared to the first two days as I wanted to reach the 70km mark before it got dark. I was lucky to run about 4km and tried to stick with Dunedin running legend Glenn Sutton. He really pushed me and we both ended up running about 30km together and he pushed me to go harder as he thought I was feeling much better and I took his advice and left him and tried to put on some pace. As I reached checkpoint 2 at about 44km I was 31st overall. I got fuelled up and continued.

As we were getting kilometres under the belt it was getting hotter and hotter and I saw so many runners feeling it out there. I was using every water creek and check point to fill the water and keep myself hydrated. At checkpoint 3, I felt like I had a blister and I took twenty minutes to have some rest and fix my blister as I didn't want it to get any worse. As I was leaving checkpoint 3, I had a look at the list and I was at number 8 overall. There were just two runners ahead of me of those who had started at 9am and the rest were those who had started at 7am. After looking at the list, I told myself that this is my day and I should go for it and at checkpoint 4 at about 70km I made it by 6:45pm and I was more than happy. I was well under my target time by about 3 hours.

This was the point when I was told that we would get a big hill for the next 10km and as I left the checkpoint I was told that two runners ahead of me had just left 5 minutes ago. So my first target was to get to them and it took me 2km to get to them and I saw Jason (1st overall at race) at the top of the hill and I tried to go a bit hard and at the top of the hill I got to him as he was using walking poles. I just had a stick that I had picked up just before checkpoint 4

When I passed him Jason said “Mate, take it, its your day” It was all 7 km downhill and flat from there and I just took the lead and ended up as 4th finisher for the day and fastest in 11 hours 29 minutes. There was still daylight left in the day so I had time to go for a dip in the lake again at Benmore Dam.

RACE: Day 4

It was a rest day for me as a few runners were still completing stage 4. I got well rested and trust me after making it that fast on the longest stage and finishing first as per timing, I had got the confidence back and got to know more about myself and what I thought I was capable of. The big thing was the greetings of congratulations from nearly every runner who came to know that I had finished first.

At the end of the day we had an ice cream from the sponsors Anchor Milk Otago and we had a show where we saw barefoot water skiing, which was real fun to watch. When I saw the list, I had made it to the top three overall, which was really a surprise for me that one day’s run could change things around. At the beginning, I was thinking of just finishing it. Now I was thinking of keeping my spot in the top three. But it was not much difference from number two Scott from Christchurch 30 minutes ahead of me and Tadgh from Dunedin who was just 17 minutes behind me. So the next day was going to be a big challenge for me.

RACE: Day 5

Stage 5 45km

Benmore Dam to Kurow

It was a short stage but the same elevation of 1380+ metres, so I knew it was not going to be easy but I was given enough encouragement from Glenn Sutton and other runners to have a go and make it on top for the day.

As we started the run at 6am (early start due to hot weather) I went out with Jason for 5km but at the down hill I felt fast and took the lead and when we went over the dam on the flat road I tried to get a lead on Jason and after the dam we went up the hills and another surprise was to see a few wallabies out there on the track. Trust me, the hill was steep at some spots, I had to crawl on hands and feet and than we hit the road again. It was 10km and I took my pace up, hitting 4:30-5:00 min per km and at the checkpoint one, but there was no one ready as I arrived they were bit shocked and it took me some time to get the punch and fill water and stuff. After the 10km road section we hit the hills again and I had 30km under my belt and was feeling really good and just went for it and made it in 5 hours 9 minutes winning the stage by something like 13 minutes from Jason. Trust me, it was the biggest day of my life to win two stages in a row as I had never thought in my life that I would even complete 140+km in two straight days and win both days. It was an incredible feeling.

The boat ride from the other side of the river to Kurow was one of the best parts. But the most precious moment was to see my other half Pawan at our campsite, She was shocked and informed me about how famous I was and there was all the support and love I was receiving from friends, family and all well wishers.

While I was really happy to gain my spot to number two overall, I felt really bad for my new run mate Scott Anderson from Christchurch as he had to give up at checkpoint 2 due to injury. He was incredible during the 3 stages.

RACE: Day 6

Stage 6 (55km)

Kurow to Peaks Road.

As discussed with Glenn he again advised me go for it again and he said “Make it on top now, you have just 2 days to go.”

Today it was a flat course and from the start I took the lead and the first 28 km were incredible and done well under 2 hours 45 minutes. When I reached Duntroon for checkpoint 2, I rolled my ankle and the pain I felt in my ankle was so bad I had a minute’s stop and used a bit of cold spray and tried to reach the checkpoint. As soon I reached it, I fixed it with spray and tape, then Jason caught me and he stopped for me and offered to run together with me, but I didn’t want to hurt his time so I asked him to go for it as I would be a bit slow for him.

I was still happy to finish it in 5 hours 19 minutes and about 7 minutes behind Jason. The encouragement from all enabled me to carry on running and make it through. The best part was to see one of my mates and Pawan again at each checkpoint to support me.

But the real shock and surprise for me at the finish line was when I saw my workmate Daniel Dickie and my boss Mark Adam who had come all the way from Dunedin to support me. I was later allowed to have a few extra days off work after the race for rest as he was pretty impressed with my effort at the race.

That evening I saw the physio and was told that my ankle was not too bad. He did some acupuncture and taped me again and I was asked to put ice on the ankle. Talking to Glenn that evening he advised me to take the race now and make it on top on the last day.

RACE: Day 7

Stage7 (28km)

Peaks Road to Oamaru finish line

Total 322+km km 37 hours 30 minutes

2nd overall and 2nd supported runner

On this last day we were divided into 3 groups. Walkers, slow runners and fast runners to make everyone finish close together.

The first group left at 6:30am, the second about 8am and we left at 9am.

I was told from runners who completed it last year was that it was mostly down hill all the way to Oamaru so it was a really fast course and a favourite course for me.

As we started I took the lead within 300m or so and just went for it and made it 7km in 27min and I took a big lead as informed by my few supporters as they went past me and 10km was in under 41 minutes. I was shocked at the pace I was running. However, after that the ankle pain started again and I had to slow down a bit, but I was passing the early start runners and the high fives from them

all and encouragement from them all kept me going. As I reached checkpoint 1, the spectators there were incredible and gave me a real shout to keep going hard. I just filled the water bottles, took salt tablets and headed off. Today we were mostly running on the A2O track beside the traffic road so the beeps from vehicles passing was really encouraging and hitting town was good as a few of the people were sitting outside their houses to support us and when I was about 1-2km near to the finish line through Oamaru Gardens it was like a dream come true for me as I had told my wife on the day of registration that she was talking about just finishing it, while I was thinking of winning it. It was all coming true and I was getting really emotional and I was just saying myself "Harrie, no tears mate, no tears."

While saying these words I crossed the railway line near to the A2O finish. There was a big crowd clapping and shouting, which felt like I had won the world on that day. When I reached the finish line, the hug from the race Organizer Michael Sandri (he was giving hugs and welcoming each runner at each stage finish) was incredible and made me feel really good.

The best part was that I had finished 2nd over the finish line and finished 1st as per timing in 2 hours 15 minutes, which was pretty fast for me after running long distances from over the last seven days. Winning 3 stages out of 6 and winning last 3 out of 4 and being 2nd on day 6 was something I never thought about. And making it to 2nd from not even being in the top 20 in the first 2 days was something of a miracle for me. Drinks and subways provided by the organizers were the first real food I had had in the last 7 days but a coke and a beef burger Pawan got me from a cafe nearby was my best meal.

A2O was a life changing event for me as I came to know that there's nothing impossible and we have no idea what we are capable of and what bodies can go through. Watching other fellow runners and good mates now was something we don't see daily. A few of them were really hurting bad from blisters, ankle and knee pain, but they never gave up and finished the race.

I would take few names like Alex Senior from Blenheim - what a super women she is. She was back for a 3rd year as was she not able to complete it for last 2 years due to injury and this year she made it to the finish. I thought to myself, never give up until you have finished. Andrew what a man he is. He was always staying at last position, not being selfish at all and pushing other runners to make it to the finish line at each stage. Cara Flaws from Christchurch, wow, at either stage 4 or 5 she was on clutches and was hardly able to walk but she is an incredible young girl and she finished it.

And of course our own Dunedin favourite ultra runner Glenn Sutton carrying 11kg all the way to the end was something we might struggle even to do few over a few kilometres was extraordinary and he took 1st place as unsupported runner and 5th overall and he was also my biggest supporter. During the whole race his encouragement and his advice were key reasons I made it this far.

And all the other runners I met through during race were incredible and real role models for me and for others. I have fallen in love with these long events now and will try to make a few more in future as I love how runners support one another during long runs and you make good friends and also you find real strength inside you that you don't even know was there. It makes you realise that you are capable of getting through anything in the world. Sometimes life takes you through hard times when you get angry, and want to scream out loud, or cry and these sort of events make you realize that you can get through everything. Nothing's impossible and you can make it through anything that life throws your way.

Stay strong and remember to keep one foot in front of the other. Be great today.

Harjinder Singh Chander (Harrie)