

Why do I Run & The Vibram HK100 2014

Dominic Rigby

December 2012 having been injured for the best part of 20 months my only venture out in the hills were Sunday morning strolls up the morning trail to the peak for breakfast. Having seen a few people who couldn't identify my issues, I was having a coffee at the peak one Sunday that December with someone I had met a few times previously. I was told 'I know exactly what is wrong with you, can you come and visit me in the office next week?'

Two days later there I was on the physio bed, the only questions I had were, 'will I hike again?', 'will I run again?' and the last one 'will I be able to run a 100km race in a year's time?'. The answer that came back was 'if you do what I tell you, yes'. At that moment the seed of the dream to enter and finish the HK 100, my first solo 100km race, was planted. I was going to do all my exercises religiously and not just from the fear of being told off each week for not doing them.

It took six months to May 2013 of religiously going 4 times a week to the gym doing certain exercises and stretches. Most of it spent getting bemused stares as I either stood in various contorted positions whilst raising a leg trying not to fall over or with my hands on backside desperately seeing if I could activate the glutes. I'm still convinced the latter would have been easier and faster just wiring them up to the mains.

At the end of May I hit the trails with fellow trail runner Vic So for what was supposed to be a 17km hike in Tai Lam Country Park, but the inevitable jogging started. Apart from the 2 days of recovery from not doing anything in a long time, no major recurring issues popped up. This was the start of a gradual build up over the summer to getting back on the trails.

In August the entry for HK 100 opened, I had just flown abroad with work and almost missed it getting confused with the time differences. Realising my mistake just in time I ran back to the hotel like a madman, took the lift up to my room using the Hong Kong elevator button pressing technique as the lift always come quicker when one does that. Before I had known it I was logged on and the enter button was pressed. Entry secured, I was in. I then sat back, what had I done? I wasn't 100% sure but it was 5 months away and it was going to be a fun journey.

The rest of 2013 saw me ramping up the training including a weeks running in Spain which got my fitness up and various friends doing a lot of persuasion to enter the Beijing Sowers Great Wall Marathon, HK MSIG 50km and Oxfam Trailwalker which all hurt in their special ways but in an enjoyable sadistic way. The biggest difference to my running prior to being injured is the sheer enjoyment and positivity that I get on being out on the trails. Even on the hottest summer days with a bad head from excess the night before the positivity I have found gets me through the low points and bring enjoyment to each moment whilst out. Previously it had always been easier to take the early exit.

Roll on Jan 2014 and a couple of weeks prior to race day a niggle with a pulled adductor popped up. I don't think once I thought this might put me out. Ten days of doing nothing but massaging, prodding, stretching, taping and positively thinking it will be better in time proved good with a couple of test runs in the week before with little issue.

The week up to race day I was full of adrenaline busting to get out, flowing through the route and timings in my mind, what would happen if I went faster, what should I eat and drink, and where would I find that mandatory space blanket having toured several shops around Causeway Bay and Mong Kok.

Race morning saw my arriving at Pak Tam Chung with OTW teammates Rachel & Tilly and Nic who was on reporting duty for the race. Usual pre-race drill took over on arrival which I'll spare the details. I've always been amazed at how many toilet trips one can fit in before a race. A quick catchup with a few people and I made my way to the start for that obligatory time of not really knowing whether it's

nervousness or pure adrenalin that is trying to escape. I don't know where the time went, but before I knew it, it was the countdown and 1600 runners were on their way to Route Twisk and the finish line 100km away.

From Start to East Dam

It was good to finally get moving. I spent the first 400m run on the road catching up with a few other runners before the right hand turn onto the trail where I tried to calm down and get into my stride. Things felt good along the first 5km of trail, breaking all my no running uphill rules in the first 50km of the race. After all, rules are there to be broken. I arrived at the East Dam 10 minutes ahead of schedule feeling great. It was great to see Nic and Martijn there who cheered me on. The atmosphere on the first 12km had been fun, but now it was time to focus, find the rhythm and start refuelling. The voices from Trailwalker in my mind from November reminded me to eat on the first uphill from East Dam.

East Dam to Wong Shek Pier

I followed Claire Price up and over to the base of Sai Wan Shan. She glided effortlessly down the stairs to Long Ke beach. I tried my hardest to imitate her downhill running skills and was lucky not to be using my chin as a broom to sweep the steps. Going up Sai Wan Shan, I was in two minds on whether I should slow down as should not be in this position, but I felt comfortable so told myself not to worry about it. Before I knew it we were jogging past the pavilion at the top and heading down to Sai Wan beach.

3 years ago this used to be my most hated hill in Hong Kong and after one occasion being dehydrated in the summer heat I had to crawl on my hands and knees to get to the top. During the last summer I knew I had to get rid of this lasting memory and had picked one of the hottest days of the year to blast up Sai Wan Shan to purge the memory of crawling up 3 year before. Now my only disappointment is not having the time or the camera to stop and take a photo of the view over to the beaches and Sharp Peak.

A cheer from Romain who was filming with Lloyd on Ham Tin beach spurred me on to what felt like the best egg sandwich I had had in a while at CP1 after running 19km.

From Ham Tin I found my place behind Peter Lee and was feeling really good with the pace. On the hill out of Chek Keng Rupert was there with his camera and cheered us along. The final run into CP2 at Wong Shek Pier appeared effortless. The small uphill bits that were there on my last training run didn't seem to exist today and before I knew it I was running down the final steps over the timing map at CP2 to the water and food tent to refuel 15 minutes ahead of schedule. Things were going well, but I still had so much adrenalin and excitement in me I wasn't really aware of who was there cheering us on. Leaving the checkpoint I knew I had to calm myself down somehow.

Wong Shek to Hoi Ha

This has to be the most technical part of the race and one that I had always worried about going over and twisting an ankle. I had given myself enough timing to take it easy on the leg to Hoi Ha. However the thoughts of twists and slips never surfaced as I followed Peter Lee making his way through the rock obstacles in the path around the coastline even having the pleasure of looking out at the view on occasions. Turning left at the bend near Wan Tsai I was reminded to eat again on the short set of steps uphill. A short run with a couple of local Hong Kong runners who were chatting away took us into CP3 at Hoi Ha to be greeted by very friendly and happy supporters at the CP who helped to fill my bottles. Still obsessed with my timing sheet I was now 17 minutes ahead of my ambitious target schedule and still feeling good. However just as I was leaving the CP, I was stopped dead in my tracks. My eyes caught sight of the biggest box of toblerone chocolate I have ever seen. I couldn't resist, 36km down and stuffing my face with oranges and chocolate felt great.

Hoi Ha to Yung Shue O

A short way up the road from Hoi Ha I was back on the Peter Lee express and bumped into Rupert with his camera who commented if I was ever going to be anywhere other than 10m behind Peter. Not

if I can help it, but I'm not expecting it to last was my response. It was starting to get warm and so I put myself on the pavement in the shade of the trees. A drop down to the right took us on to a concrete trail through the small village of Pak Sha O where a group were cheering us along sitting at a table with a bottle of wine or two. The temptation for a stop was high. The sight of a picnic and glass of wine was pure cruelty to the mind.

During this stretch the concrete trail winds its way up through the woods, the gradient not too steep so I slowly jogged to the top passing a couple of runners on the way. Taking the left hand turn on to trail the first glimpse of Ma On Shan comes into view and brings a smile to my face. Little did I know what state I'd be in 90 minutes later climbing up it. Running past Sham Chung and on the coastal trail was the first point where I could feel myself getting tired. I pushed those thoughts to the side as I ran past the Chinese pineapple trees just outside Yung Shue O and shortly after met Vince just outside the checkpoint at the 45km mark. A quick joke about wanting to steal his motorbike to get to Sai Sha Rd while Hannes, Vince and Alice helped to fill water bottles and stuff oranges down my throat and before I knew I was off for the final half and all the hills. I was 20 minutes up on my ambitious target and couldn't believe how strong I had been going.

Yung Shue O to Kei Ling Ha

On the left hand turn just after the village, the race marshal told me I was in 34th position. I thanked him for putting a smile on my face. I had lost the Peter express and decided that I should calm down and take stock of what was still left to do. This gave me the chance to eat a sandwich whilst walking a flat bit, a real luxury.

At the bottom of Rooster Hill, a fierce climb of around 250m I was feeling tired. It was at this point where I ditched my ever trusty timing schedule and didn't look at it again for the remainder of the race. The sun was out and it was warm but I went up a steady pace. Near the top some shirtless guy came racing up over and was gone in a flash. The speed of him amazed me. Seeing Martijn filming on the downhill to the road gave me a boost and all the clapping and cheering coming into checkpoint 5 put the smile on my face, but the reality when I now look back at some of the photos taken was clearly a different story.

If I'm brutally honest, I am not that clear at what was going around me at checkpoint 5 or how long I was there for, but don't think it was too long. I recall Vince and Hannes taking me to a bench and sitting me down and Vince trying to calm me down and telling me to rest for a couple of minutes. I've no idea what he said, I was in a trance in my own space. Alice helped with my water bottles, Hannes & Nic gave me food and Rupert took some photos so I could savour the moment at some later point. Having them there no doubt gave me the uplift I needed to push on into the hills of second half. Nic helped me through the traffic across the road, not sure if it was his gangster look with the yellow sunglasses or the look as though I was going to stumble in front of the next moving car, but one eventually stopped and the journey into the big hills was about to start.

Kei Ling Ha to Gilwell Camp

The last I recall as I headed up the trail from CP5 was Vince's shout, 'slow down and take it easy'. There was no fear of that not happening in the state I was in. All plans to run up the road section were thrown away as I got my poles out and got into a good fast walking rhythm. I climbed up Ma On Shan at a slow steady pace, but soon realised how dehydrated I was. By the time I got to the top I had gone through half my water and wishing I had filled the spare bottle in my bag. My next thought was 'oh well, nothing I can do about it now, it's ration time to Gilwell Camp'. Over the top I ran past all the people with cameras on the ridge and then bumped into Tommy and Speeto who were hiking the other way. From there my troubles really kicked in as I jogged and walked bits to Mau Ping. I was feeling light headed and was struggling to stay awake.

The first steps up to Buffalo Pass and the sharp pain of cramps in both adductors came in. Not really knowing what to do I resorted to putting more electrolytes in my remaining water, stretching and deep breathing to take my mind off the pain. Another runner came past and offered me more electrolytes which was very kind, but I was nervous about going the other way and having too much salt in one go.

I tried to stay pretty positive through this section focussing on just moving slowly and stretching and hopefully the cramps would vanish. The one thought I remember the best that came into my head was 'I want that finisher's hoodie and I'm going to get it!'. Why this came up into my mind on the steps up to Buffalo Pass I have no idea, but I've been jealous of everyone's warm HK100 hoodies the previous couple years during the Hong Kong winter months and I wanted one, and at that point I was prepared to crawl to the end to get it. It's always amazed me how the smallest of things can have the biggest of impacts.

Coming into Gilwell camp it was great to see the supporters at the checkpoint. I hate to think how bad the photo is that was taken by the nice lady there of me cramming as many orange slices in my mouth at the same time as drinking a litre of Pocari Sweat. I was still in my trance and despite the excruciating pain of cramps on each set of steps the past hour I left the checkpoint 6 with a big grin on my face from the positivity and laughs from all the helpers.

Gilwell Camp to Shing Mun

It must have around 4.20pm and the heat of the day was dissipating. I knew in an hour's time when evening came my low point would come to an end. I always gain strength on the trail once darkness falls.

I ran down the hill from the checkpoint with Chor Kin and he flew off in front when we turned left on the trail. My cramping issues had not gone away and I struggled up Tate's Cairn, this was the point where I did start to doubt, but I stuck with the view of once night fell in an hour or two it would get better. Running down the road to Shatin Pass it was great to see Vince, Hannes and Alice there to cheer me on and give me some words of encouragement as I stumbled past. On the climb to Beacon Hill things did get better as I was having to stop less frequently to deal with the cramps and on reaching the checkpoint at the top I knew there and then I would make it to the finish line 20kms and 3 of the toughest hills away.

The kids at the checkpoint, like all the volunteers at each checkpoint, were awesome. Lots of fun, laughs and chocolate lycee packets. I left there feeling good with the thought of I can still get to Shing Mun in daylight if I push a bit. I ran pretty quick down the stairs and a good pace on the 2km flat section through the woods to Tai Po Rd, and for once the monkeys seemed more scared of me than the other way round. Ying Ying who I bumped into at checkpoint was right on my tail and we walked and jogged up the hill through the monkey zone together. Having seen his performance on races throughout the season it was a privilege to be able to run with one of the best in Hong Kong. Coming down into Shing Mun we flew along the trail and down the steps in the dark without bothering to get the head torches out, and I was greeted by Hannes and Vince at checkpoint 8. I had a smile and more importantly I had my form back. I was looking forward to Needle Hill and the climb to Hong Kong highest peak, Tai Mo Shan.

Shing Mun to the finish line

I've always had a view of Needle Hill. During the daytime it's a killer, at night it's absolutely fine as you can't see where you have to go, and what you can't see can't harm you. I was by myself on the climb up but managed a fast and steady pace and was really enjoying it. Just before the summit I caught up with the runner in front and we ran down the other side together and hiked/jogged up to Grassy Hill together. I had never met KK Chan before, but he is one of the legends on the trail scene and again it was a privilege to be on Needle Hill, Grassy Hill and Tai Mo Shan with another inspirational runner from Hong Kong. The strength was coming back and we ran down into the checkpoint at Leadmine Pass. It had been 1 hours and 10 minutes from Shing Mun, the cramps pretty much gone and I was back on all cylinders.

I took half a jam sandwich at the checkpoint for the start of the climb up Tai Mo Shan. I've always enjoyed this climb, probably in the knowledge that the end is in sight. I jogged bits on the plateaux at the top and was catching up other runners. The full moon and the stars were out and the views of the lit up city of Shenzhen, Hong Kong Island and the bridges to Lantau were stunning. One runner near the top going at quite a pace stunned me as he appeared to have no light, but all I could see here was this

whizzing sound every few seconds and as I got closer I think it was one of the wind up lights. Once on the final 150m of ascent road climb to the summit he was off like a bullet.

The start of the run down with KK Chan we took it easy admiring the views and the clear sky. About half way down I suddenly heard the shouts of Vince, Nic and Martijn who had come up to cheer and follow on the last section to the finish line and tell me to hurry up. I feel very honoured to have run the last stretch to the line with KK Chan and Ying Ying, two great runners in Hong Kong.

I crossed the line in 13 hours and 5 minutes, my 13 month dream had concluded. My first solo 100km ultra ticked.

My target time that I had set myself several months ago had been sub 15 hours and I had smashed it. Some know that I had more recently set myself a very ambitious 12 hour 30 minutes target time. Could I have achieved this? Possibly, had I been more disciplined about water and electrolyte intake. Am I disappointed, not one bit! I exceeded my expectations and even through the difficulties of the 3rd 25kms of the race I had fun. I met some great people on the trails, both runners and volunteer supporters at the checkpoints and it was fantastic to get cheered on by so many friendly faces along the race route.

I feel exceptionally lucky to have had the support of Vince, Hannes and Alice at various checkpoints along the way and am extremely grateful to them. I got a lot of encouragement from them and from a lot of other friends along the route and am grateful in belief that several people have had in me over the past few month of being able to get out and complete this race. I feel lucky to be in Hong Kong. It's a great place for getting out on the trails and I feel honoured to be part of the trail running community here.

So why do I run?

Before someone asks, wrapping up to my original question, why do I run? I've had a lot of time to think about this over the past 6 months on the trails whilst training for this event and my answer has been a return question, what do you miss?

I only really found this out this summer, when I returned to the trails after a long time away with injury.

3 years ago before I got injured when my running was in its early days. Training in the summer heat was a struggle, I wasn't sure what I was doing and always looking for an excuse for an early exit. The past 6 months since I restarted, my attitude has changed, It doesn't matter whether I'm in the hills with friends or on a 40km run by myself. I now savour the moments I have out on the trails with my mind in a world of its own. I enjoy the views, the wild sounds in the trees, and the sound of my feet hitting the trail km after km and the ice cold Lai Cha or cold beer at the end of a run tastes even more refreshing than it ever used to.

Even during the last summer on the occasions when the heat got the better of me or I tired myself out and had a way to go to the end of a run, I'd have a smile in the back of my mind as it was not that long ago that being out on the trail was not even a choice.

Dominic Rigby