

Vibram Hong Kong 100 Ultra Trail Race 2015

Janet is coming! Let's give her a high-five" people in front of me broke into an easy jog. Sure enough, a van was slowly approaching with an open door. Janet was greeting some by names and every one with a big smile and a cheer. That was less than 2 hours into the race and just before reaching the East Dam. It lifted my spirit and it felt like FUN first time rather than just another grueling race that somehow I got myself into.



My story began last year when I first heard about the little man. "I wanna go for the little man!" –my running buddy declared. Mediocre amateur runner, i.e. yours truly, rarely gets to bring home any prize other than a finisher medal. A-ha, but HK100 is different. Trophies are awarded based on finish time, gold for sub 16, silver for sub 20 and bronze for sub 24. Now I am interested. But how? I am new to the sports and I have only just finished my first 50k race. I have to double the distance within a year and not to mention the added time pressure. Well, if there is a goal, there is a plan.

Training plan was quickly drawn up. Gears were bought and tested. Getting expert advice really helped. And of course the home turf advantage was a big plus, stomping up and down numerous stairs, twisting ankles here and there, skidding on and off loosen stones and slate, skipping across sandy beaches and oh yes, battling against a few of the monkey kings at the monkeyland. So there, everything that could have been and should have been done were done. Could I or couldn't I?



The Start

It all happened too soon, the start, the bottleneck, the first trail and the long service road to East Dam. My heart was pumping. Was I too fast? Too slow? steps too heavy? There were so many thoughts in my mind. 30 minutes into the race and it felt like a life time already. That was until Janet, the race director, give me a high-five. Suddenly, my mind settled. OK, there are still 90km to go, please just let me get to the first water station!

Strangers become friends

Perhaps I did outpace myself. After the first 20km, I was getting in all sorts of "conditions", pain, cramps, and numbness, etc. While my body suffered, I tried to distract myself by observing others. Complete strangers began to look familiar. I could recognize certain people's outfit and gears. Or just by the running style. I overtook some and got overtaken by some others. But sooner or later, I would

run into the same people again and again. Funny enough, in the middle of a race, we began to strike up conversations. “Where are you from?” “What’s your target time?” “How far are we from the next check point?” “How many bananas you ate so far?” And we began to gossip about people we saw earlier in the race “did you see the girl in singlet?” or “the guy in flip flops?” Who says running is a lonely sport?

The Real Challenge

When I got to the halfway point at Kei Ling Ha (CP 5), the sun had set. The check point was packed with runners, volunteers and supporters. I quickly got my drop bag, replenished my energy food, fill the bladder, turned on my headlamp. I left the party behind knowing that for every step I took from then on, I would be breaking my own record. Nothing was going to stand between me and the little man! I felt surprisingly fresh and ready!

Oops... but that self-confidence is quite short lived. The next 13km almost broke my spirit.

The course of HK100 is heavily back loaded. Even at the race briefing, we were reminded again that we would be doing most of climbing in the last 50km and we should conserve our energy appropriately. Wow, wasn’t that true. Climbing up Ma On Shan had never been so difficult. My legs were heavy like lead and I felt like I was constantly on the brink of cramping. And the long way to Gilwell Camp (CP 6) seemed like never-ending. Everything seem longer and steeper and more rugged? Wait, let me consult my race plan. I was already over an hour behind schedule. I did some calculation in my head, I had 8 hours left to finish the race but I had yet to do the big 3 (i.e. Needle hill, grass hill and Tai Mo Shan). If I pushed it now, I might not have enough stamina to complete the race. But if I didn’t push it now, would I regret later for not even trying? Such was the dilemma.

Salvation

The city lights were sparkling like diamonds along the route. Many people stopped and took pictures. It was stunning. But I was not in the mood. I had given up on sub 24 by the time I arrived Beacon Hill (CP7). The volunteers were particularly cheerful at the checkpoint but I couldn’t say the same about all the arrivees. I took a look at the big camp fire, so warm and cozy, and the folded chairs. Scary thought, if I stayed, I could stay the whole night!

When my spirit was most deflated, I ran into a guy I met earlier in the race. He told me he was still going to go for sub 24. I said we didn’t have enough time. He laughed and replied “nonsense, of course we can still make it!” He wished me good luck and took off.

This little talk worked like magic. It was now or never. I stretched my legs, adjusted my headlamp and pick up my speed again. The Eagle Nest Trail was soon behind. There were lights in the distance and no monkeys around me. I was happy and feeling strong. Somehow, the next 20km came and gone in a flash. I didn’t even know how I conquered Needle Hills and Grass Hill and I certainly never looked back. I arrived at Lead Mine Pass (CP 9) in high spirit. I looked at my watch and I realised I might, I just very well might made it sub 24!

Grand Finale

And there I was, climbing Tai Mo Shan, the last hill. Reaching the highest point in Hong Kong! When I reached the pagoda at the top of Tai Mo Shan, I jumped up and down like a little kid. All the pain and cramps were forgotten. I knew I had only 4-5 km to go and even if I had to crawl to the finish, I would still make it sub 24. My eyes were filled with tears but it wasn't time to cry or celebrate yet. Let the final stretch of downhill begin.

The heavy fog at Tai Mo Shan was dispersing and I could see the moon just behind. I could hear in the distance the race's MC making an announcement. The closer I got, the clearer the words became. It was then I realised the MC was calling out the name and nationality of everyone crossing the finish line. Tears welled up again. It would soon be my turn.

"Don't forget to strike a pose and smile. There is a camera waiting for you at the finish" – some passer-by giving me an advice. That got me in a panic. I never knew how to pose at the finish! And before I could say cheese, I heard "and now we have Hong Kong Representative, Elana Chow!" applause! I didn't even know where to look! This was the moment I have been waiting for and all I could think of ... "please don't let me trip at the finish line"! d'oh.

Remarks

With my little man sitting proudly at home, I would like to thank Janet, Steve and everyone who worked and volunteered. Thank you for a most memorable experience. The organisation has been impeccable. The atmosphere you have created will stay with me always. You have made me feel proud to be a finisher of HK100.

Special tributes to all the wonderful photographers/ videographers who helped us to preserve the memory! The scenes you captured are breathtaking and it is still a bit hard to believe that I was part of this wonderful event.

Elana Chow

2015 Finisher/ 22h50m16s/ Bib 442

