

Sanity's Edge

BY JARED BEASLEY

Patrick Macke was slowly slipping into an altered state known only to the highly drugged or the deliriously over-exerted. The last communique from his crew was that there was a motel 30k from Melbourne and the finish line. This became the only goal that made sense: cool soothing water meant relief. The problem was, he couldn't trust the distance. How long would it take to reach this place and those magical, jetting, liquid streams? He'd been misled before. And Melbourne? What the hell was that all about? He'd never been to Australia in his life.

Ultrarunning is a particularly non-funny activity. It's hard, it hurts, and it can be dangerous and on occasion, even deadly. It depletes the body then cleaves open the mind, leaving only scraps of willpower and shattered ideation. But as anyone who's endured an ultra knows, distance and perspective change everything. We leave behind the left-brained business of times, improvement, metrics and analysis; we unscrew the macro lens and let the insanity come into focus. Then, the movie begins: a runner out there in their own *Twilight Zone*, searching for something they can't name – a rainbow in the dark.

Macke had stepped off into the weird. The 30-year-old, long-haired, thick-mustached Brit was now in a cheap motel shower and on a strange trip – his body leaking out stress and his mind playing funny. He had not only found the edge of himself—he'd slipped past. A professional artist by trade living in a patch of woods near Vienna, he was now eight days into the 1986 Sydney to Melbourne multi-day. And he was remarkably close to the finish, but he

couldn't remember any of that. Confusion was replicating in his psyche and spreading, and his sense of reality was growing shakier by the moment. He hadn't slept, his crew reminded him, in nearly 30 hours. But why? A calculation gone awry?

Things had gone sideways for Macke early in the race. He'd been running through Canberra, the capital of Australia, when he had an overwhelming need to relieve his bladder. The crew, who had been blasting Beethoven for Macke over their loudspeakers, spotted a Chinese restaurant up the road. Behind the counter, the crew focused in on

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what looked like the manager, but he couldn't understand a word of English. The man was not only snooty; he was downright rude. Turns out they were actually in the Chinese Embassy. As for Macke's needs, it is well documented that race official Chris Stephenson found and gave Macke a cooking pot to pee in before covering it and running down the road to look for a trash bin. At another point in the run, Macke urinated on a race vehicle. During another juncture, he tried to drop a deuce



on top of a beehive. (70% of bees in Australia build their hives in the ground.) Macke was saved at the last minute by a Johnny-on-the-spot crew member.

And it wasn't just Macke. On the second day, one runner ran away and hid from his

crew for three hours. When he was found, he peeked through his bush hideaway and refused to come out. He had entered the race on his own accord, paid good money and taken time off work. What was going on?

Submerged in this alien land of mega-distance, an ultrarunner can wake up in a warped world of “How did I get here?” and “Why am I here?” and “Just what the hell am I doing?” At some point in the not-so-distant past, he or she was an average Joe or Nancy – to some extent having no idea they’d wind up on the fringe of mainstream runnerdom.

In Australia, there was big money on the line: \$60,000 in cash prizes, all put up by the organizers – the Westfield Group. Their Sydney to Melbourne runs were the most lucrative and demanding races of the ‘80s multi-day scene. Begun in 1983, it was a signpost to the kind of individual a multi-day niched for. The inaugural race was won by 61-year-old potato farmer, Cliff Young, who was running in overalls, gummy boots and without his dentures. (They rattled.) His winning mindset? Chasing his sheep in a storm.

It was night when Macke finally got back on the course only to fall apart. At a traffic light, he began to wobble and then went to the ground. He awoke in a café, a cup of coffee in his hands. Unaware that it was still piping hot, he guzzled it. With a scalded tongue and throat, he was suddenly in another hotel room and there was a doctor, someone cutting open his left shoe and an escort who led him back to the course. At one point, there was a walking stick; but he doesn’t remember that either. He was in Melbourne proper now, but not at the Doncaster-Mall finish. That was still rok away, he was told. Two hours later, he saw a sign that read, “Doncaster 9km.” *Somebody was lying.*

The 2:25 marathoner knew about pain and endurance. The year before, he had won the Spartathlon in spectacular fashion. The 674-mile multi-day across southeastern Australia, however, had him on the ropes of a seemingly endless fight. Instead of

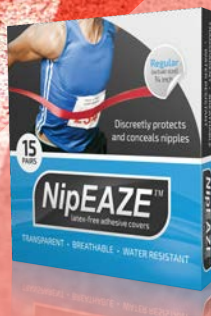
pushing on, Macke opted for a break at an Indian restaurant. They would surely have a nice cup of tea. Race officials and crew members stood by in complete befuddlement as Macke enjoyed a plump serving of rice pudding. They informed him that he’d lost second place to Brian Bloomer, and Eleanor Adams in fourth place was closing fast. He was unmoved. “Oh, good,” he responded. “I’ll wait for her.”

Then, he was in a bathtub. Whose? He didn’t know. The lady had welcomed Macke in after seeing him in the race on TV. (The Westfield Sydney to Melbourne was a nationally televised event.) He had been driven to the lady’s house by a friend of one of the organizers. When he came back to the course yet again, he was informed he was a mere 2k from the finish. He had good reason not to trust that, but greeted by a man with bagpipes, his wits suddenly came back to him and he finally crossed the finish line.

What gets us into the weird is often more predictable than the elusive, enigmatic nature of what gets us out. There are no smelling salts for the psyche. Macke would later detail his epic finish in the book, *I’ve Finally Found My Hero* by Phil Essam. What got him to the finish line? He really hated those bagpipes. ▀

JARED BEASLEY is a New York-based author and journalist. His 2019 book *In Search of Al Howie* was chosen by Kirkus Reviews as one of the best indie books of the year.

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