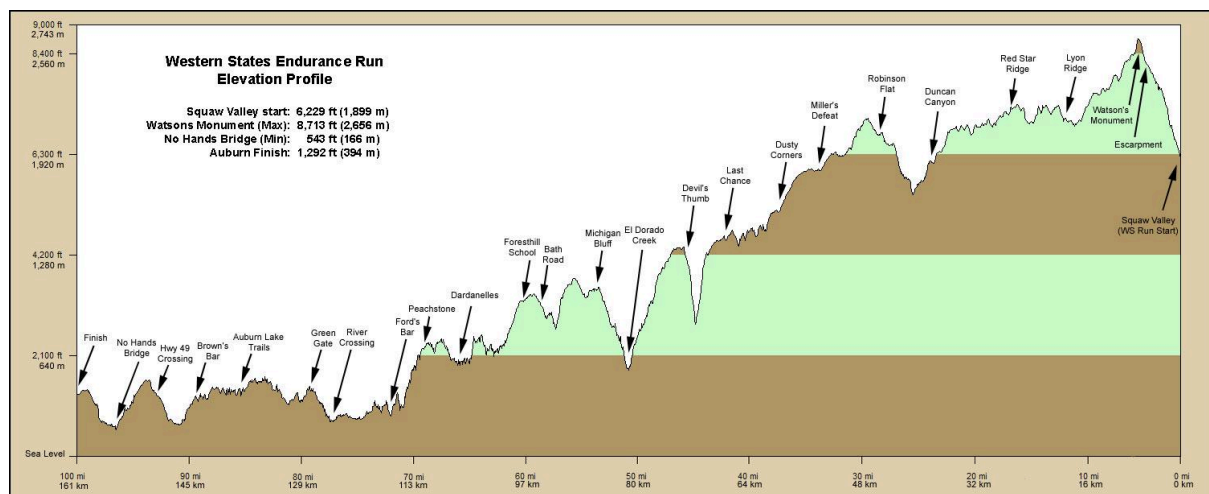


THE REAL DEAL: The 44th Annual Western States 100-Mile Endurance Run, 24-25 June 2017

Established in 1974, The Western States Endurance Run (WSER) is the world's oldest 100-mile / 160-kilometer trail race. Arguably, it's the most prestigious and competitive of its kind. The 2017 event was no exception; in fact the pointy end of both the male and female fields was touted as the deepest to date. Starting at 1890m in Squaw Valley, California near the site of the 1960 Winter Olympics, the WSER ascends a total 5500m and descends 7000m, before finally ending 100.2 miles later at 374m in Auburn, California. Steeped in over 44 years of history and tradition, the WSER is the 'real deal'.



You'd be hard pressed to find an ultra runner that doesn't have WSER on their bucket-list. It's been on mine ever since I discovered ultras (June 2010). My desire to someday take on the 'grand daddy' of 100-Milers' was quickly cemented whilst reading autobiographies by ultra legends such as Dean Karnazes and Scott Jurek. Hence, a couple of years ago I started the ball rolling by registering my name in the annual WSER lottery. Attracting some 4000 applicants, vying for just 270 spots (out of a total 369 starters), I expected it would take a few years before my name would be drawn (some people wait 20+ years for their 'day'). Then in December 2016, the unthinkable happened; I was offered a 2017 bib number via the Ultra-Trail World Tour (UTWT) – one of six self-funded spots, reserved for elite athletes from outside North America. In a blink, I gleefully signed on the dotted line. I was going to run my first 100-miles at none other than the holy grail of 100-Milers'!

The 44th WSER would commence at 5am Saturday 24 June 2017 (Pacific Daylight Time). As the days crept closer my anxiety levels heightened. Understandable, given the fact I was about to step into uncharted waters. Prior to WSER the furthest I'd run in one hit was 101km / 6700m ascent + descent / 16hrs. Somehow, I managed to remain reasonably calm. My preparation played a big part - on top of training, I'd spent a considerable number of hours fine tuning my race plan, and I'd arrived in WSER territory with plenty of time to wave goodbye to 'jet-lag' and acclimatise to summer (it was winter back home in New Zealand (NZ)).

For the two weeks leading into the WSER, I'd had the unbelievable good-fortune of being hosted by local running royalty, The Queen aka Meghan (Arbogast) Laws. Meghan has placed Top 10 in all of her 12 finishes at the WSER. She knows the course like the back of her hand, and to my utmost gratification I found she was more than happy to bestow her wealth of knowledge. I shadowed Meghan along as much trail as we could possibly squeeze in – before race day I'd run the second half of the course. We chatted nutrition and gear, practised heat-management strategies, Meghan reminisced previous races and I asked a lot of questions – hopefully not too many! On top of opening their home and showing me the ropes, for which I'm eternally indebted, Meghan (and husband Mark) introduced me to their local trail running community. I discovered an inclusive, fun-loving, strong network of like-minded souls. A new 'family' I'd never expected to gain on this adventure.

On race morning, instead of hovering on the start-line, chatting to fellow competitors as I typically would, I felt like laying-low. So, I did. I tucked myself into a corner of the 'breakfast' room and internalised, focusing 'almost' solely on the task ahead. I hadn't quite relinquished my motherly duties for the day – someone needed to make sure Spike (5yr old son) left a few muffins for the runners!

One quick start-line photo, two firm 'go-well' hugs (from Spike and husband, Todd – they'd flown in from NZ a couple of days earlier) and I stepped up to the mark without hesitation. There's no denying I was anxious (and excited!), yet I didn't doubt, even for a second, that I wouldn't cover the 100-miles. The question that did hang over me was, how would my day unfold? I believed in myself. I believed in my crew (more on all of these selfless individuals later). So, all I needed to do now was RUN ... and of course walk the steeper sections, follow my nutrition and heat management plans, and remember to ENJOY the journey.



Let's get the party started! See you in Auburn. Photo : Todd Hayvice

As dawn broke the starting gun was fired with very little pomp and ceremony and the merriment commenced. Typically, I bolt out of starting chutes (even at ultras), WSER was different. I moved with purpose out of Squaw Valley, up the sun-kissed summer ski-slopes. Yet, I took time to spot and acknowledge familiar faces lining the route, breath in the fresh mountain air, and cast an eye over the valley, shroud in early morning mist far below. I wanted to soak-up every little bit, as for all I knew (given the fact that entry is as scarce as hen's teeth) this could be the one and only time I'd experience this race.

I tackled the first climb (800m in the first 7km) in the same vein as my departure from the start-line; with ease and appreciation. I even shed a couple of tears (typically unheard of this early in the piece) in gratitude. I'd worked hard to bring this dream to fruition. Equally my boys had made many sacrifices, my sponsors (noted at the end) and UTWT had believed in me, and thanks to the power of social media my family and friends had regularly sent messages of support. Finally, here I was embarking on my first 100-mile race. I relished the moment.

By the time I crested the Escarpment (the highest point on the course at 2700m), I had snow underfoot (the last of the hard-packed winter base). Sarah Keyes (a La Sportiva athlete I'd met at a WSER Tapper Party) gave a friendly good-morning and commented on my 'sweet' (bright green, CEP Compression) socks as she passed. The camaraderie between competitors was one of the first things that drew me into ultras – a trait that flows through even the most prestigious events. I chatted to a few other females around me. Unlike previous races, I managed to remain exceedingly calm, and oblivious to my placing. I felt it was far too early in this game to be concerned with position.

The day prior at race briefing, Craig Thornley (Race Director) had warned that we'd encounter a considerable amount of snow and then mud (a direct result of snow melt) traversing the high country. He wasn't wrong! Ironically, it was along this section that I caught up with Craig and somewhat reluctantly slipped passed him; I called out jokingly "I hope it's not bad karma to overtake the RD!".

The snow was firm to slushy and some patches were pretty slippery (as opposed to soft, powdery and sinky). I reverted to bottom-slides down a few of the steeper sections, to avoid the inevitable! Then came the mud – it was super wet and super boggy! Trudging along what felt like an endless muddy canal, I was sure I'd leave a shoe behind. Thankfully I didn't, instead I gained two shoe-fulls of sludge and grit (I've since learned that a lot of runners used a subsequent aid station to empty, clean, even swap out their socks, and even shoes. I didn't, which was detrimental around the 80-90 mile mark - more on that later).

Suddenly, up ahead I spotted a female struggling in the slippery conditions more than I was. Instantly, I recognised speedster Camille Herron (she'd crossed the finish-line an hour ahead of me at NZ's Tarawera Ultra in February and just 3 weeks prior to WSER she'd won the prestigious Comrades ultra-marathon in South Africa). She had hefty goals heading into WSER, hence I really hadn't expected we'd cross paths. We conferred briefly and entered the first Aid Station (Lyon Ridge, 10.3mi. / 16.5km) around the same time (18th female / 91 overall, 2hrs 25min elapse). I was quick to fill my soft flask with water (pre-loaded with

Tailwind Nutrition) and move on. Turns out Camille wasn't (I heard later that she dropped here or soon after).

Pulling out of Lyon Ridge I turned and spotted another familiar face – fellow ANZAC Nic Errol. He was quick to shout out some encouraging words, spurring me up the departure 'ramp' – thanks Nic!

Happily, I found myself tackling this next ascent with new friend, Paulo Medina (Race Director for a number of other local trail running events). Integral to the Auburn trail running community, I first met Paulo at his WSER Tapper Party (the same night I'd met Sarah Keyes). Subsequently, he'd joined Meghan and I on a few training runs. I thought to myself, and from memory also commented to Paulo – “perfect! I'll just envisage we're out on a training run, enjoy the company, admire the surroundings and relax” – which I did. We didn't talk as much as we had on training runs. We didn't need to. Just being in familiar company was enough to soothe my mind.

A little further down the trail, confronted with a steeper incline I found myself reverting to a hike. I turned my head and who should pull-up alongside but Meghan. She graciously invited me to run with her. This was exactly what I needed. Tucking in behind Meghan, just as I had over the past two weeks, kick-started my triumph of the high country.

Another couple of factors I believe aided my journey through the high country, were;
a) my use of an Environmental Simulation Suite before I left NZ. A couple of times a week, I'd trained on a treadmill, in a chamber with heat and altitude set as close as possible to expected race conditions. Through the high country, others noted feeling the affects of altitude, I didn't notice anything – a clear indication that the hypoxic training had been worthwhile.

b) some sound words of advice Paulo had received and kindly shared with me; “don't fight the course”. I tweaked this phrase slightly to “be at one with the course” and added it to my repertoire of mantras.

By the time I reached Aid Station #2 (Red Star, 15.8mi. / 25.4km) 3hrs 35min had elapsed. The sun was well and truly up, the temperature was rising, it was time to commence heat-management. I doused myself with a couple of cups of water (refilled my water flask) and moved on. From here the trail opened up, became drier and rockier and finally I found a running rhythm – joy! I travelled closely behind fellow UTWT supported athlete Ildiko Vermescher (Hungry). An accomplished European runner, she crept away from me on the climbs, although I was quick to catch up on the more runnable sections.

After what felt like a decent amount of time, travelling at a decent clip, we were joined by a videographer. A sure sign we weren't far from the next aid station. Knowing that I was about to see my crew for the first time heightened my energy levels. Taking care not to tumble on camera, I descend the loose gravel switchbacks at a fairly rapid rate.

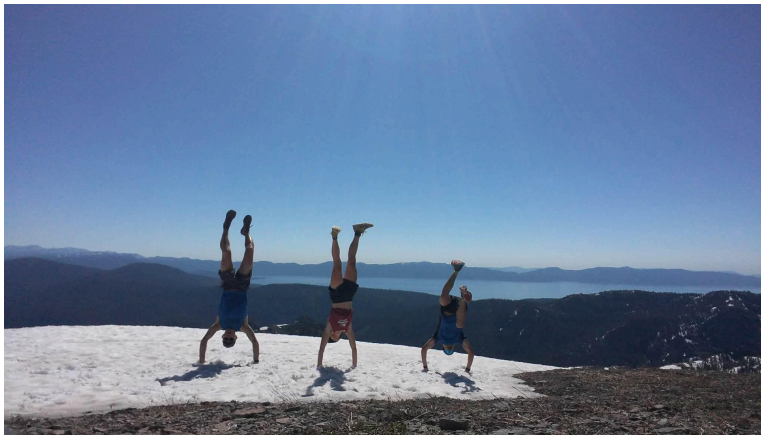
Careering down the hill into Aid Station #3 (Duncan Canyon, 24.4mi. / 39.2km, 5hrs 6min elapsed), I immediately spotted my crew. All experienced ultra runners, they'd wisely

positioned themselves in prime real estate. For my debut 100-Miler, I'd had the good fortune of securing two support crews, and a pacer crew.

Crew A : *Tarawera Ultra-marathon* represent; Kiwi Paul Charteris (Race Director) and his partner Sarah Rosenbaum

Crew B : *Family and Friend* represent; husband Todd, 5 year old son Spike, and friend July (in California for a month, he deviated from his original itinerary just so he could follow me around for ONE DAY. We'd met back in 2010 at my first ultra, The 4 Deserts - Gobi March)

Pacer Crew : *Idaho* represent; Rick Valentine, Jose Cervantes and 'manager' Joelle Vaught (5 time WSER finisher).



Pacer Crew taking their role seriously 😊 Reporting back on the Escarpment conditions pre race. Photo : Joelle Vaught

As an ultra-runner I spend a considerable amount of time alone; self-reliant and self-motivating. However, when events roll around, support and encouragement from others is crucial.

At registration the day before, Sarah (Crew A) stood in the queue with me (in the baking sun, I must add) for a considerable length of time. She quizzed me on all the finer details of my crew expectations. With her alongside Paul (who's crewed at WSER a number of times) I sensed that I'd be in and out of aid stations with the precision of a formula one racing car. And I was right!

My nutrition was replenished, my vest, neck scarf and arm sleeves were filled with ice, my head and shoulders were doused in water, and I was on my way again. What made my brief pit-stop even sweeter was the fact my Pacer Crew had made the long drive out to see me. As I pulled out of Duncan Canyon, Joelle wisely reminded me to "keep sipping on your Tailwind". And I heard Paul comment that Meghan was just pulling-in (at this stage the pointy end of the women's field was still fairly bunched up).



Cooling off at Duncan Canyon - under the watchful eye of crew extraordinaire Kiwi Paul. Photo : Joelle Vaught

Feeling invigorated, I shot off down the trail. It wasn't long before I came across Amy Sproston (2016 2nd place) walking. I passed by, offering up some encouragement. The next time I saw Amy, she was on the side-line – sadly, she hadn't had a repeat of last year. She'd dropped within the first half of the course. No two days are ever the same.

For a while I ran on my own, descending tree covered single trail to the roped and marshalled Duncan Creek. This crossing presented the first opportunity of the day to almost fully submerge. I can honestly say that the heat (at times soaring above 40 degrees), didn't really bother me all day. I put this down to employing diligent heat management early and often. At every aid station, from mile 24 – 70, I took a sponge bath, and had ice loaded in my head and neck buffs, down my arm sleeves and in the back pocket of my hydration vest. On top of this I submerged or at least splashed my head in most trail-side creeks and waterfalls along the way.

Heading up the other side of the canyon towards Aid Station #4 (Robinson Flat, 30.3mi. / 48.7km) Ildiko and another eventual Top 10 runner, Kaytlyn Gerbin caught me up. For the next 10 or so miles we 'pushed' each other along. Kaytlyn and I chatted occasionally; no doubt Ildiko would have chipped in too had we been able to switch to Hungarian.

Arriving into Robinson Flat (6hrs 29min elapsed) was quite overwhelming. Located almost a third of the way into the race, it was the first of the more accessible 'crew-allowed' aid stations. As such, it attracted a large crowd. Even before I reached the official cordoned-off area, the trail was swarming with spectators eager to see how the field was playing out.

Seems fitting to add here, that all along the course both side-liners and fellow competitors offered up enthusiastic, encouraging cheers.

Once inside the aid station I made a beeline for the ice and sponge-bath depot. Just as I had at Duncan Canyon, I requested ice in the back pocket of my vest. Sadly, as I moved away I felt all but a few pieces slip down my back and out onto the dusty ground. Not one to back-track and eager to touch-base for the first time with Crew B, I kept moving forward. Eventually, I spotted Todd waving profusely over on the right hand side. He seemed particularly happy and relieved to see me. Likely, due to the fact I arrived an hour later than my ETA. They'd been waiting patiently in the beating sun with minimal canopy.



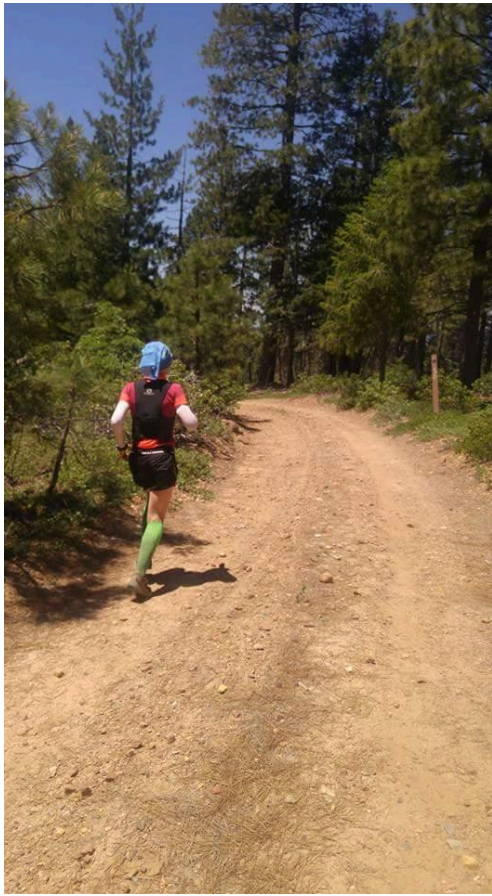
Restock and reassuring words from Todd at Robinson Flat. Photo : July

Todd conferred with me over the ice debacle. I assured him I was comfortable continuing with negligible ice. At the next aid station, I'd make sure my instruction was clearer and that I took more notice of the execution. Noticing that I was frustrated by my splits, he quickly pointed out "everyone's behind their estimated times". This little snippet of information boosted my morale (even though it was still too early to be concerned with what others were doing).

The incline out of Robinson Flat was just enough for my mind to start testing my mantra; "Mind Over Matter". Ashamedly (now that I look back), my mind won out a couple of times, and I found myself walking when I shouldn't have been. Ildiko was just ahead, so I used her to 'pull' me over the crest, and then I chased her down the other side into Aid Station #5 (Miller's Defeat, 34.4mi. / 55.3km, 7hrs 11min elapsed).

Running in the company of Ildiko and Kaytlyn continued through to somewhere between Aid Station #6 (Dusty Corners, 38mi. / 61.1km) and #7 (Last Chance, 43.3mi. / 69.6km). I arrived

into Last Chance a few minutes ahead of both of them. I didn't see Ildiko again until we'd both crossed the finish-line. Kaytlyn on the other-hand was a different story – more on that later.



Coasting into Dusty Corners. Photo : Joelle Vaught

Approaching Dusty Corners (7hr 45min elapsed) I received a couple of high fives from my Pacer Crew, before being greeted into the aid station by another new friend, Lee McKinley. Like so many of the local trail-runners, Lee is heavily involved in the WSER; training with many of this year's entrants (including myself), track maintenance, and on race day volunteering at aid stations and pacing (around 9pm he'd pace Meghan from Rucky Chucky (78mi. / 125.5km) to the finish). Lee embodies the local WSER community.

Whilst Lee attended to my heat management requests, Paul and Sarah were quick to hand over my next ration of nutrition and gather up my empties. Departing I'm pretty sure they threw "Top 10" my way. A post race review shows I was inching my way up the field, but I wasn't quite there at Dusty Corners. Either way, I parked this information - it was still too soon to be pondering placing.

Approaching Aid Station #7 (8hrs 32min elapsed) I recalled Meghan's advise that this outpost, now a mining ghost town, quite literally is the 'Last Chance' to gather your thoughts before entering the formidable 'canyons' section. I took a few extra seconds here to ensure I was well and truly watered and iced.

The first of the canyons is Deadwood; dropping 600m, then ascending an extremely steep 450m to Devil's Thumb. Once I reached the bottom of this canyon I'd be on familiar terrain. Excited by this prospect, I scooted off down the hill. Perhaps a little too fast, as suddenly I found myself toppled over, on the upper berm of the trail. Somehow, I'd misjudging the steep descending switchbacks. A little shaken, yet not too stirred, I continued down towards the bottom of Deadwood - marked by the crossing of Swinging Bridge.

Part of my preparation for WSER involved evenings on the sofa (not somewhere you'd typically find me!) watching historic race footage. As WSER novices, Todd and I watched attentively, eager to catch glimpses of the trail, observe aid station layouts, critique support crew and analyse runner composure – mostly we made mental notes of what not to do. It was whilst watching one of these many clips that I first learnt of runners stopping at Swinging Bridge to duck down a 100m or so sidetrack for a full submersion in the North Fork of the Middle Fork of the American River (what a mouth full! Even the abbreviation is long - NFMFAR).

A week and a half earlier, Meghan and I had scoped out the area on a training run. We'd found an alternative flowing creek that was right on the trail (no sidetracking needed!). It was only a few hundred meters up from Swinging Bridge. The water was deep enough for a step-in and dunk, so I paused here to do just that.



Course recce with The Queen aka Meghan Laws, Swinging Bridge, 13 June 2017.

The 450m climb up to Devils Thumb (Aid Station #8, 47.8mi. / 76.9km) was the steepest, most brutal of the day, exasperated by the 40+ degree temperatures. Feeling refreshed from my creek submersion, I glanced at my watch so I could keep an eye on my progress (ETA at Devils Thumb was 40mins), and started to climb. I encountered a handful of men along the way – I'd passed one of them on the descent into Swinging Bridge, he was clearly more in his element going up. Another was bottomed-out on the side of the trail, looking very much worse for wear. A couple of guys had just left him to send help.

Nearing the top I spotted elite ultra-runner and journalist, Andy Jones-Wilkins (AJW) and another guy careering towards me - they were obviously headed down to aid the dilapidated runner. I'd seen AJW earlier in the day through the high country. He'd been quick to call out "here comes 'The Queen' - these must be all the smart girls". I hadn't seen Meghan since Duncan Canyon, so it concerned me that perhaps I'd been moving too quickly. However, I felt as if I hadn't been fighting the course, so I carried on in a similar vain.

I can't deny that it was a relief to pop-up into Aid Station #8 (9hrs 48min elapsed). Nearing the top of the climb, wildfires (from a few years ago) had stripped the hillside, leaving the trail completely exposed to the beating sun. For a split second, a volunteer's popsicle offer appealed. However, I was quick to graciously decline, envisaging the inevitable sticky melt-mess a few kilometres down the trail. Sticking to my nutrition and heat management plan, I moved on.

I am now on familiar, runnable terrain. I moved with a sense of ease and rhythm; firstly weaving through pine-trees, soft pine-needles underfoot, and then darting over rocks, descending single trail. I made my way into the courses second, more gradual but deeper canyon (795m drop, followed by a 550m climb) - El Dorado. Aid Station #9 (El Dorado Creek, 52.9mi. / 85.1km) was positioned at the bottom. Pulling in (10hrs 45min elapsed), I was greeted by yet another new friend, Scott Vosburg. It really is so warming and motivating to see familiar faces.

Approaching El Dorado Creek, I'd felt the presence of a female hot on my heels. Turning to see who it was, I was dumbfounded to find 2014 Female Champion, Stephanie Howe Violett. One of three favourites to take this year's title, Steph was someone I hadn't expected to come from behind, or to even see for that matter. Turns out I'd passed her back at Devils Thumb, where she'd spent an hour or so trying to settle her stomach.

Clasping onto some praise from Scott, I collected my composure and set-off up the hill towards Aid Station #10 (Michigan Bluff, 55.7mi. / 89.6km). It wasn't long before I stumbled upon Sarah Keyes again. She'd passed me nearing the top of the very first climb, now it seemed it was my turn.

Arriving into Michigan Bluff (11hrs 35min elapsed), I felt upbeat and in control. Even though I'd just been overtaken by Steph (she was "trying to make-up for lost time"), I still wasn't concerning myself with placing. In fact, I still had no official indication of where I was in the field. A quick heat management pit-stop, followed by a nutrition replenish and brief 'how's everyone going?' with Todd, Spike and July (camped out on the side of the tarmac) and I was on my way again.

Spectators lined the street – their enthusiastic cheers washed over me, as I embarked on what would be the last leg on my own. At Aid Station #11 (Foresthill, 62mi. / 100km) I'd be joined by my first Pacer – Jose Cervantes – hooray! I was looking forward to having company. But first I had to conquer the third and final canyon - not as deep as the other two, but equally as steep and hot, I was pleased to see the back of Volcano.

Reaching Bath Road (1.7 Miles short of Forest Hill), I'd selfishly hoped to see my Pacer Crew (the rules allow runners to be crewed 'up' this stretch). Alas, there was no sign of them. Alone and faced with a reasonable incline, my mind took over again, and I walked. Looking back, this wasn't necessary, particularly given the fact I'd run up here in training – another area to work on for next year! Glancing over my shoulder I spotted what I thought was another female. I didn't need a second look. Instantly, I was jolted out of my self-pity 'waddle'. I resumed a slow but definitely faster than walking, run.

Rounding the intersection of Bath Road and Foresthill Road, I heard loud cheers and my name cried out from a passing vehicle. Turns out it was a Peter Defty of Vespa (a naturally occurring 'wasp extract' that Optimises Fat Metabolism (OFM)). In training, I'd trialled Vespa alongside my baseline nutrition (Tailwind). I was thrilled with my findings. On long runs, I felt a lot more balanced and upbeat, so I integrated it into my WSER nutrition plan. Peter was clearly thrilled to see me sitting in (what I was about to hear) the 'Top 10'.

The other product I added to the mix for the WSER was Spring Energy. Leading up to the event I'd been warned by 100-mile veterans that I shouldn't rely on just one type of nutrition (prior to WSER I'd consumed Tailwind Nutrition exclusively at races with great success). Hence, I'd been looking out for something to have on-hand, and that could provide a few more calories, in a non-liquid format. Spotting the likes of Sally McRae and Sage Canaday promoting Spring Energy 100% natural gels, I decided to give them a go. I liked the taste, it felt good knowing I was consuming real food (the same as I do day-to-day) and most importantly it complemented Tailwind. Spring Energy came on-board for my debut 100-miler and I'm happy to report that it will feature on my future nutrition plans.



Upbeat approaching Foresthill Aid Station - Rick had just shared news of my 9th position. Photo : IRunFar.com

Running down Foresthill Road, now less than a mile from Aid Station #11 and escorted by my Pacer Crew, I was informed of my 9th position. Wahoo! I also learned that at least a couple of the woman ahead of me were looking a bit rough. Entering what's known as the

'racing section' of the course (numerous people had cautioned me to arrive at Foresthill with running legs – ready for the last 38 miles / 61 kilometers of runnable terrain), I felt strong and ready to run. So, it was game on!

Pulling into the aid station (12hrs 48min elapsed) I reminded myself to stay focused. So far, I'd made a good job of executing my race plan. If I continued to be diligent, I'd stay on track and ultimately arrive at Placer High Track (finish line) in one piece. Here in lies what I've decided to label as my first 'rookie WSER mistake'. In the newly acquired knowledge of my 'Top 10' position, I shot off down the California Trail (Cal-St) like it was the last 10mi/16km of the race. In reality, I still had 38mi. / 61km to go!



Come on Jose - let's do this! Leaving Foresthill, headed for Cal-St. Photo : Joelle Vaught

Utilizing the gradual descent, I called out to Jose to speed things up a bit. We flew down the trail, hunting for position #8. It wasn't long, probably 1-2 miles, before we caught up to Kaci Lickteig (2016 Female Champion) and her pacer. It was obvious Kaci was struggling. We're yet to meet formally, but that certainly didn't stop us throwing each other a few words of encouragement.

I continued to tear down Cal-St, as if the bottom – the Rucky Chucky, American River crossing at Mile 78 – marked the finish-line. Entering the first of the three Cal-St aid stations I spotted another female (this time it was someone I didn't recognise - Sabrina Stanley, eventual 3rd place female) and she spotted me. She turned immediately and shot off down the trail with her pacer. After a quick sponge bath and ice restock, my pacer and I followed in hot pursuit. A rush of adrenaline meant we were on their tails within seconds, and on the lookout for a trail widening, so we could 'swingby'.

Maneuver complete, we continued on at a reasonable pace, heads held high, hoping to create a decent gap. Unfortunately, it didn't quite pan out that way - Sabrina wasn't having a

bar of being passed. Almost instantly, she upped her pace, dropped her pacer and overtook me! I considered tucking in behind her. However, I was now beginning to feel the repercussions of my earlier out burst, and the realisation that I still had over 30 miles / 48 kilometers to go, flicked on my sensibility switch.

If the California Trail was to be bestowed another nickname, my suggestion would be 'Carnage Street'. As it was along this 16mi. / 26km stretch that I encountered a number of runners who were clearly hurting. After Kaci I came upon two more, equally as accomplished female runners. Speedy, YiOu Wang (winner of the 2016 and 2017 Lake Sonoma 50 Miles, and a number of recent 50k events) had lead the females from Dusty Corners (Mile 38) - I couldn't believe my eyes when I rounded a corner (now at approx. Mile 70) and saw her splayed out on the side of the trail, aid at her side. I'd not long moved on and resumed my running rhythm, when there in front of me on a flat stretch of trail was Switzerland's Andrea Huser, walking. Andrea has a string of European Ultra titles to her bow, and she ranked second on the 2016 Ultra-Trail World Tour (I was 5th). Like YiOu, Andrea lead the females for a significant portion of the race - from the start to Miller's Defeat (Mile 34.4).

It wasn't only females struggling in the last of the day's rays. I passed seven males along Cal-St, including US Michael Wardian (holder of countless marathon and ultra-marathon records) and another fellow ANZAC and UTWT support elite, David Bryne. I tried to persuade David to 'tag-on'. Sadly, he declined (and I later learned that he dropped at the next Aid Station #15, Rucky Chucky, 78mi. / 125km).

Continuing on, the inclines became more and more of a grind and I felt like I was travelling a lot slower than I wanted to be. Turns out, I must have been keeping up a reasonable momentum, as I pulled into Rucky Chucky (15hrs 46min elapsed) right behind Sabrina. I'd moved up three female positions to 6th, and 10 positions overall. Out of 369 starters, I was the 29th to reach the most renowned river crossing on the course. Fortuitously, I arrived right on dusk, just in time to pick-up my headlamp from my crew.

Most years, dam retention reduces the water flow at Rucky Chucky - allowing runners to wade across with the aid of a cable and numerous volunteers. However, this year high-water flow dictated the use of boats - the spin-off being no refreshing dip. Thankfully, the organisers had thought this through, and kindly cordoned off a 'swimming pool' to one side, for those that wanted to take a dip before jumping in a boat (adding max. 1min to your time). I hesitated for a second and then followed through with my plan to 'wash-off' the 15 or so hours of running. The full submersion acted as a reset - 1min well spent!

On the opposite riverbank, I shed the allocated lifejacket and glowstick necklace and disembarked the small paddle boat. I heard Todd shouting "Go Fi!" - a timely reminder to dig deep and make him (and everyone else that supports me) proud! I dialled in a purposeful hike and made my way up the dirt 4WD track towards Aid Station #16 (Green Gate, 79.8mi / 128.4km). It wasn't long before Rick and Joelle came down the hill to join the mix (the second of the three stretches where runners can be crewed). The four of us marched on in the dark; Jose and I shared tales of Cal-St and the other two updated us on the status of females up ahead. I walked most of the incline (looking back I could have run a bit more of it

- as I'd run the full length and more in training - another area for improvement!). As we approached Green Gate (16hrs 20mins elapsed, holding 6th position and up 5 places to 24th overall) I felt recovered and ready to roll. I informed Rick that I didn't need anything and 'we' wouldn't be stopping, promptly hurdled the metal gate, crested the top of the rise and waved goodbye to the others - shouting out "see you at Pointed Rocks (14.5mi. / 23km away).

I'd run this next section (20mi. / 32km through to the finish-line) with Meghan, two weeks earlier to the day, just two days after I'd arrived from NZ. In the daylight, we'd purred along, chewing up the miles and chewing each other's ears off! Now, in the dark, with 80mi. / 129km in my legs, the undulating, single-trail was perpetual.

Rick and I took turns at leading. From memory I grumbled and swore a bit (I tend to get a little vocal as I tire - nothing more than a mechanism for pushing through). Conversation was minimal, yet not required. Just having company along the now pitch black trail was enough. And something I was exceedingly grateful for when we were stopped in our tracks by a loud rustling in the trail-side foliage! Thankfully no cougar encounter (although I heard after the race that others hadn't been spared, spotting a cougar in this exact vicinity).

Finally after feeling like I'd never get there, Aid Station # 17 (Auburn Lake Trails, 85.2mi. / 137km, 17hrs 29min elapsed) twinkled up at us from the gully below. We'd only travelled 5.4mi. / 8.7km from Green Gate, yet it had felt so much further. I knew I'd slowed up a bit on the trail (being passed by a couple of guys a clear indication), so in order not to waste any more precious time, I paused only momentarily - just enough time to have a flask (pre-loaded with Tailwind) filled with water. Gaining momentum again, we called out thanks to the volunteers. One of them was quick to reply, noting that another female had departed just 2mins before of us (I'd held onto 6th position, but dropped back to 27th overall).

My mind was on the hunt. Sadly, my feet weren't playing ball. I could feel that large, multiple blisters had formed both underneath and around my toes. For a while there the toenails on my little toes felt like they were being ripped off - it was excruciatingly painful and frustratingly it was slowing me down. Perhaps my second 'rookie WSER mistake' was not changing my socks (or shoes) during the course of the day. My feet had been wet all day. Unavoidable, given the snow melt, a number of river/creek crossings, and about 15 aid station sponge baths. If I'd switched out my socks a couple of times then perhaps they wouldn't have been so messed up. Definitely something to consider next year.

I was surprised to find that even though my feet were reducing me to a shuffle at times, I maintained both my 6th and 27th positioning for the next 5.5mi. / 8.8km, right through to Aid Station #18 (Quarry Road, 90.7mi. / 146km). We heard Quarry Road well before we saw it. Loud rock music booming up the steep approach made for a fairly intense arrival (18hrs 43min elapsed). Not needing any supplies and hearing that the next female was now 10-15min ahead, I motioned to Rick that I wanted to keep trucking.

Hearing I'd dropped back at least 8mins, threw me a bit. A touch of self pity crept in. Turns out I needn't have worried, as a mile or two down the line we spotted a female up ahead, walking. As we neared, I recognised it was Clare Gallagher (having won her debut 100-mile -

Leadville Trail in 19hrs flat, she was yet another strong competitor that had clearly seen better days). I hardly registered that I'd moved into 5th position.

The slightly easier trail through this section (Green Gate to No Hand Bridge - which marks the base of the final climb) continued to be offset by my mangled feet, overall weariness and the fact I was traversing it by headtorch. It really was a relief to hear traffic noise and see the flicker of police car lights, signally the Highway 49 crossing. I was now less than 7mi. / 11.2km from the finish-line, and only a mile away from seeing my crew one last time.

As I pulled into Aid Station #19 (Pointed Rocks, 94.3mi. / 151km, 19hrs 41min elapsed) Todd asked me how I was feeling. I abruptly answered "crap!". Looking up to discover I was being filmed I quickly followed-up with "I'm ok, I just want to be finished". I lapped up a few reassuring words from Todd, stuffed my final quota of nutrition in my vest, and left within the space of a minute. I just wanted to get the job done and of course I was keen to hold onto 5th place (25th overall).



Final restock and 'firm' words from Todd at Pointed Rocks. Photo : iRunFar.com

Heading off through the rolling grassland, I could hear cheers from the aid station - another runner had obviously arrived. In my weary, slightly delirious state, I thought I heard a female's voice, enquiring as to who had just left. Could it be Meghan? She's renowned for picking off placing in the last miles - ultimately securing herself a 'Top 10' position. Almost instantly, I felt like I was being hunted. My 5th place was under threat.

Feeling vulnerable, I pushed on down the last dusty, uneven descent towards historic No Hands Bridge. Unfortunately, my ears hadn't been playing tricks leaving Pointed Rocks. Before long, an impressively strong Kaytlyn (last seen at Mile 38, 12hrs earlier) came hurtling past, kicking up a cloud of dust in her path. In her haste to overtake me and then Nicole Kalogeropoulos only a few 100m ahead, she tripped and was down. But, not for long. She was definitely having a second wind! Not having the energy to set chase, I too passed Nicole and her pacer (retaining my 5th position), and then settled back into a steady pace.

Following behind Rick the dust hindered my navigation, so I called out for him to take a back seat.

Crossing the American River, one last time, using historic No Hands Bridge (Aid Station #20, 96.8mi. / 155km) was like running down London's Oxford Street in December (except for the temperature!). No Hands was lit up like a Christmas Tree. I glanced around trying to take it all in. However, my ability to comprehend was blurred, and my sights were now firmly fixed on the finish-line. Having no need to stop, we ran straight past the aid station, over the bridge and out the other side - marking the beginning of the final 200m or so climb.

I mustered any energy I had left and focused on maintaining my running (in all reality it was more like 'jogging') momentum. I knew if I reverted to a walk it would be hard to get going again. More importantly, I had no idea how much of a gap, if any, I had on the next female. I really didn't want to be battling for 5th place (or heaven forbid lose grip of 5th place) in the last 5 miles of the race. I jogged as far as I possibly could. Then power-hiked, with the last Aid Station #21 (Robie Point, 98.9mi. / 159km) locked in my peripheral.

Apart from a couple of hardy volunteers, Robie Point aid station was pretty deserted when we passed by at 1.37am (20hrs 37min elapsed). We barely paused as we topped up a soft flask with water - just encase I needed a mouthful in the final 1.3mi. / 2km (which I didn't). Even in the small hours the temperature was high - it never dropped below 75 fahrenheit / 24 degrees. As we made our way up the tarmac into the outskirts of Auburn, locals started to litter the street. They clapped loudly and shouted words of praise. Many had decorated their front yards specially for the annual occasion. It was clear that most Robie Point residents are proudly affiliated with the WSER.

I spotted the permanent WSER Mile 99 sign jutting out from a corner berm. Instantly, I was awash with the overwhelming realisation that unless I was knocked down, I was going to complete my first 100-Mile race! I'd covered this final mile a couple of times in training. However, I discovered 100-Miles impairs your judgement! So, I was very thankful to be chaperoned. A pacer either side, adrenaline kicked-in.

As we ran down the last descent, the Placer Track floodlights illuminating the night sky up ahead, I registering the enormity of what I was about to 'sign-off'. I launched into enthusiastic vocal (I'm not sure if any of it made much sense!), fist pumped and thanked Rick and Jose profusely (as a tag-team they'd been at my 'beck and call' for the last 38mi. / 61km / 8hrs).

There's no denying that stepping onto Placer Track and hearing my name announced over the loudspeaker, was surreal. Since discovering ultras in 2010, I'd read many recollections of this moment and watched a lot of finish-line footage - now here I was with 100-miles in my legs, it was my DAY!

I rounded the track at what felt like my fastest pace of the day (it wasn't quite, but it was up there). I had a new lease of life, and within one-eighth of a mile / 200m, I had a new string to my bow.

At 1.51am Sunday 25 June 2017 (20hrs 51min 27sec elapsed) I completed my first 100-Miler. To top it off, I'd held onto 5th place (24th overall). I'd proved I am the 'real deal'. I couldn't have been prouder of my debut performance, and neither could all my crew (well almost all, Spike was asleep - I'll let him away with it this time, something to work on for next year!). Their beaming smiles, and the tears of joy streaming down their faces, said it all. The icing on the cake, my 'Top 10' placing guarantees me a spot to do all it again in 2018 (as bib number F5).



#Joy. Photo : iRunFar.com

I've toyed with whether or not to put this next comment out there. Since, it's truly how I felt, then here goes – if for some reason I hadn't been able to step-up to the start-line on 24 June, I would have returned home content. Why? Because, in the two weeks leading up to race day, I'd had the most incredible insight into the depth and breadth of what is most certainly, so much more than an annual ONE DAY event. Thankfully, I didn't depart early. What I did do, with the knowledge and connections I'd made, was approach the WSER with utmost respect, and I was rewarded.

Race Day Outfit

Shoes - Salomon Sense Ride (blue bird)

Socks - CEP Run Ultralight (viper)

Shorts - Salomon Agile (soft, lightweight internal short (no briefs needed) and superlight outer shell)

Tee - Trail Runner (superlight and breathable, natural bamboo charcoal fabric (almost feels as if you're running naked))

Bra - Medium Impact

Visor - XA

Race Vest - Salomon, S-Lab Sense Ultra Set

Nutrition

Apart from taking water and ice at aid stations, I was self-sufficient - I didn't once, not even for a second, look at the nutrition offerings. The following saw me right;

[Tailwind Nutrition](#) (3,000 calories) - all day, alternating between two flavours - Green Tea and Naked. WSER was the longest in both distance and time that I've consumed Tailwind. I'm thrilled to report that as with all prior outings, I had no GI issues and I didn't get tired of the product at all.

[Spring Energy](#) (1,000 calories) - 100% natural, real food gels that worked a treat with Tailwind
[Vespa](#) (6) - helped stabilise my energy levels by tapping into my limitless reserves of "fat as fuel".
Water (approx. 12L)

On-going Support

[Salomon NZ](#)

[CEP Sports NZ](#)

[Tailwind Nutrition NZ](#)

[Spring Energy](#)

[The Healthy Runner](#) (NZ distributor of [Vespa](#))

[ENDUROBeet](#)

[Back To It](#) (Fascial Stretch Therapy)

Coach Scotty Hawker of [Mile27](#)

My two boys; husband Todd and son Spike - who are always behind me; sometimes physically, more often in spirit. I couldn't achieve my goals without their boundless support.



2017 Top 10 Females, from left to right (F1-F10); Cat Bradley, Magdalena Boulet, Sabrina Stanley, Kaytlyn Gerbin, Me, Nicole Kalogeropoulos, Jacqueline Merritt, Ildiko Wermescher, Meghan Laws, Andrea Huser.
Photo : iRunFar.com