

# THAT 50KM Hook

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TRAIL RUNNING HAS BEEN A SAVIOUR FOR A VAST ARRAY OF PEOPLE. FROM ESCAPING THE EVERYDAY GRIND TO FINDING THEMSELVES AGAIN AND REDISCOVERING THEIR TRUTH. VICTORIAN **ANIKA WARREN-SMITH** WENT FROM ROAD TO TRAIL RUNNING IN 2013, REVELLING IN EVERYTHING THAT SURROUNDED HER – FROM THE TERRAIN AND NATURE-SCAPES, TO THE COMMUNITY WHO SUPPORTED HER. IT WASN'T UNTIL 2022 THAT SHE BIT THE BULLET, THOUGH, AND TRAINED FOR HER VERY FIRST 50KM. TODAY, SHE SHARES WITH **TRAIL RUN MAG** READERS THE KNOWLEDGE SHE GAINED, EXPLAINING HOW SHE DID IT AND WHAT WORKED BEST FOR HER.

**When I started writing about preparing for my first ultramarathon, the practical stuff first came to mind. Training plans, gear, nutrition, etc. Whilst all of those are important, and I will get to them later, I realised they were not the most important for me. The key element I needed before anything else was the belief that I could do this because for quite some time, I had diminished my trail running efforts.**

*I'm just a short-course runner...I'm very slow...I could never run a half-marathon.*

That kind of talk. On reflection, I can see this had certainly been holding me back from challenging myself to extend beyond my comfort zone.

To give you some background on my running history, I began in 2012 by downloading the C25K app. I'm sure I nearly died attempting the first run of 8x1-minute intervals. On the second attempt, I took my toddler son in the pram and remember him looking around at me somewhat concerned by his puffing red-faced mother! Who knew your arms were so important when running? But the hook with running is how quickly you can see improvements. By the end of the 3-month program, I was rather chuffed when I managed 20 minutes of non-stop running.

The following year, I discovered trail running and didn't look back. Even though I was not great at going up hills, I loved the challenging terrain and the









## CONTRIBUTION THAT 50KM HOOK



beautiful places I was running through as well as the camaraderie of the trail running community. My results improved consistently every year, yet I still didn't see myself as being good enough to extend much beyond 10km and certainly did not consider myself an athlete.

Slowly but surely though, my runs began to get longer and in 2019 the unthinkable happened. I did something I said I'd never do – I entered a half-marathon. I picked the prettiest (though not necessarily easiest) course I could find to try and make it a bit more bearable, the 23km Great Ocean Road Running Festival half. This was purely to qualify for a 20km trail event I wanted to have a crack at in Gariwerd/the Grampians. Qualifier achieved, I ran that race. The Wonderland 20km was my longest and toughest trail run ever. It was awesome and I was starting to think bigger, but still only slightly bigger. I was in awe of ultrarunners, but I could never do that. Perhaps though, I'd be able to manage a leg of the Surf Coast Century with a team. Surely 25km would be achievable?

Then came 2020. On the other side of COVID restrictions, I returned to running at a level that my body wasn't ready for. My fitness had taken a hit after too much homemade sourdough and more walking than running. One of the (few) lockdown silver linings was time for introspection and working on myself, and by the end of 2021 there had been a significant mindset shift. I finished a Masters I'd been doing for more than five years and had the confidence I



needed to apply for a job after 14 years out of the workforce. I was honestly stunned when offered a position! Here I was starting a brand new career, as a grad mind you, at age 46.

Somehow managing to maintain a base running level, I had just finished the GOR half again with a Wonderland 20 qualifying time, when an ultra running friend suggested I do the SCC50km. I think I scoffed at the idea, but a seed had been planted. If he thought I could do it, then maybe it was possible.

For two weeks I thought about it. Then I started verbalising those thoughts. The idea became more appealing; I was finding my return to the workforce quite an adjustment. The learning curve was huge and often left me feeling exhausted. I knew if I didn't have a goal, exercise could easily fall by the wayside.

There was also another, deeper reason why I was drawn to the challenge. It was inevitable that things were soon going to become very hard at a much more personal level. My mum was living on borrowed time, having run out of options to treat her lung cancer. Amidst all this I needed something that was just for me, something to ground me, and time to think of everything or nothing at all. I needed running-in-nature therapy. The fact that the race starts and finishes in Anglesea on the GOR, a place that my mum and I have deep connections to, sealed the deal.

With a strong purpose underpinning why I was doing this, I signed up at the end of April and had 16 weeks to prepare.

### Training – Obviously!

The first thing I did was source a couple of training guides – the Hanny Alston's trail marathon planner which was provided with event registration, and the 50km program created by runner Sam Gash and the Her Trails team. I printed a calendar and planned out a training schedule that would fit around work and family commitments.

My existing weekly training load was three runs, two yoga classes, one pilates/barre class, and one to two walks. Not much changed with my new plan except that I increased it to four runs per week and focused on gradually building my time-on-feet (TOF). To avoid over-training and potential injury, I would factor in a lighter TOF week every month or so.

I tried to get as much trail time as I could and on weekend long runs, explored new areas to add some trail variety and keep it interesting. They all included similar terrain to what I'd be experiencing on race day, though nothing quite prepared me for the clay!

### Recovery & Maintenance

Daily use of the foam roller and/or massage gun helped relax tight muscles, and I also had regular remedial massages. I'm not sure how much the latter helped my muscles,



but the whole experience was deeply relaxing, so I figure it's of some benefit. Active recovery on non-run days was generally a walk (which also count in TOF totals), and always at least one complete rest day per week. Finally, I attempted to get to bed at a decent time on a more regular basis.

### Gaining Information

I tried to absorb as much about ultra running as I could from multiple sources – books, blogs, social media, podcasts and ultra running friends. The topic with the most impact was nutrition and hydration. I think these are often overlooked, yet it's so important to consider how we are supporting our body day-to-day through the entire journey. There's no cookie-cutter approach and our dietary needs change as we age. I've certainly found what worked for me five years ago sadly doesn't really fly now as a peri-menopausal woman, and this is where a nutritionist consultation was super helpful.

### All The Right Gear

The one piece of kit I had the most trouble with was shoes, namely road shoes for training around home off trail. I'd been properly fitted at reputable running stores but kept getting numb toes on my longer foot after 5kms. A visit to the podiatrist (also a kick-arse ultra runner herself) revealed I'd been sold shoes that were too small. My trail shoes were not quite as bad, but the upshot was I needed to buy a new pair of each type.

For everything else, I made sure that I was across the mandatory gear requirements and researched what would help keep me most comfortable on a long day out. Think things like thermal layers, toe socks and the best anti-chaffing cream you can find. I tried everything out many times before race day – clothes, shoes and socks, gels and electrolytes – and on long run days would have my full race day pack.

When race day arrived, I was nervous but felt ready. My main goal was just to finish and try to enjoy the experience as much as possible. Despite the last 6kms looking rather dodgy (I could no longer run downhill), I crossed the line a smidge over my estimated time of 8hrs 30mins.

Whilst that sounds like a very long day, I really had the best time and lots of chats with fellow runners which helped pass the time. My support crew (husband and kids) later said that I looked like I was having fun whenever they saw me.

Maybe I was just very happy to see their smiling faces!

They were a huge part my success, as their support during the months of training and on the day was invaluable.

### And Thus The Lesson Is Learned

Was there anything I would I have done differently? Most definitely!

- More strength: I find it very hard to get excited about strength work outside of

pilates class. It's often challenging to fit it all in, so I'm going to try breaking home sessions down into mini workouts.

- More hills and speed work: as above, these are not some of my favourite things.
- More time: 5-6 months of training would have been better to get my knees ready. My longest run was 30km over 5 hours, when ideally, I should have done at least 36km. Adding another half marathon to my longest ever run was probably asking a bit much of my body.

Nevertheless, I appeared to pull up quite well with zero blisters or chaffing. One big toenail was very bruised but never fell off, much to my amazement. The muscles were sore for a few days but nothing too concerning, until I ventured out on my first gentle jog and had to call my husband to come pick me up after a few kilometres. My cranky knees took a good four months to recover from the inflammation but seemed to have forgiven me now.

I am returning to the SCC50 this September with a friend who wants to attempt her first ultra. With a full six months to prepare, my goal is to finish without knee pain. Once again, the journey is providing me with much needed nature therapy since my mum passed away in February. It's been a slow start as the motivation levels fluctuate, but I'm sure that once again, the physical challenge will help me through the emotional one.

Running an ultra obviously requires both physical and mental endurance, and commitment to the process which is ultimately a commitment to yourself. Whatever the training journey and race day throws at me this time, I now know that I am more than capable of rising to the challenge.

Even though I may not always feel like it, I am an ultrarunner! **RUN**

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**INSIDER KNOWLEDGE:** Anika is a Melbourne-based trail runner who is much better at running down hills than up them. With a background in science and long-time love of photography, she stops often for photos or a spot of plant ID.

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