

KEPLER CHALLENGE 2009

The mighty Kepler Challenge took place on the 5th of December just outside of the beautiful little town of Te Anau on the South Island of New Zealand. Being only a 2 hour drive south of Queenstown it made for amazing scenery and terrain that put simply wasn't very flat. The last 20km driving in to Te Anau on the Thursday before the race was daunting. Everywhere we looked there were snow capped mountains. Ouch, my quads were already shaking. What had I got myself in to.

On Saturday the 5th of December the race started at 0600 and the sky was clear and no wind. This made for very chilly conditions. The temp was 8 degrees when we started. The start line was at a control gate levy system connecting the two local lakes together which meant all 400 runners were crammed into a little service road no wider than 4m in hourly segments of where you'd think you'd finish. I started in the 8hr group, being safe and conservative. After the gun went off I'd learn that this didn't matter too much.

As the gun finally went off the nerves left and the task ahead of me was simple. 12 hours to compete a 60km loop with over 2000m of altitude gain. What could possibly go wrong? The first 5.6km was along the side of Lake Te Anau through very dense and humid beech forest. This section of the trail was relatively flat and a great way to warm the legs up before the climb to Luxmore Hut. I sat on 6:30min/km pace for this part so I conserved as much energy as possible and started my nutrition plan for the day. Nutrition plan consisted of 600/750ml electrolyte per hour with 1x uncle toby's muesli bar and 1x endura gel per hour as well. The electrolyte drink sponsoring the event was a brand called LEPPIN. This stuff is liquid gold. It's got a whopping 120mg of sodium per 250ml which meant I didn't have to take extra salt on the run which was great. This part of the run was awesome. Everyone was chatting away as the sunrise over the lake etched its way through the beech tree's in an amazing purple haze. What a great way to start a race.

The climb up from Broad Bay (5.6km) to Luxmore Hut (14.8km) had a total height gain of 1250m so I new the walking had to start. As it turned out a lot of the runners were walking too, which made me feel better. It was very tempting to run however the risk of blowing my legs out with still 45km to go just wasn't worth it. The climb went really well. Heart rate stayed under 150bpm and legs still felt good. As we broke through the beech forest into the alpine scrub the temperature dropped quite significantly. A slight wind was on our backs and all of a sudden I could see the trail zig zaging its way up the ridge leading to Luxmore Hut. Thought about stopping and putting a thermal top on, however decided not to due to the hut being only 4km away. Looked behind me and could see the township of Te Anau way below me and sweeping views of lakes, fjords and massive mountains everywhere. The scenery was just amazing.

On arrival at Luxmore Hut I was feeling really good and looking forward to running the next 11km along the exposed ridge line. I went through the compulsory safety gear check (all runners had to carry compulsory gear due to the cold and exposed conditions on the ridge) smoothly, filled up one drink bottle and started off with whistling and cheering from the hut crew. 500m up the trail from leaving the hut the temperature dropped again and was now 3 degrees. So on went the thermal top. Now feeling warmer I started my fast walking continuing up, up, up. 20 mins out from the hut I realised in the excitement of reaching Luxmore Hut I only filled up one drink bottle. Oops, and was suddenly out of electrolyte on a 60km trail run. Bad mistake. Luckily Forrest Burn emergency shelter was only 4km away.

Once at Forrest Burn shelter I quickly filled up both drink bottles and moved on as quickly as I could. I was now able to run on large parts of the ridge line which was great and kept me warmer as well. The wind and the cold was starting to work its way through me and my motivation to run quicker and get off the ridge into the warm valley below pushed me along. The scenery was now even more spectacular than before. Massive 1000m drops either side and 360 degrees all around of mountains and snow. "Don't get this in Perth", I kept thinking. The annoying part was that the trail went through 9 avalanche paths which made the trail very rough and uneven. So looking at this amazing scenery was very hard, due to being too focused on where my feet were landing. However I was privileged to see a massive alpine bird called a Kea. This bird is a dark green colour and when it flies it has a bright red patch under its wings which is almost blinding. So watching this bird fly in the thermals blowing up and over the ridge with snowcapped mountains around was a very special moment.

Finally the 5km decent started down to the valley floor to the next major checkpoint at Iris Burn Shelter which is at the 28km mark. The decent was long and repetitive. We left the alpine scrub and entered the beech forest again. This was great because it was warmer, yessss. However, the switch backs on the run down were ruthless. I counted 100 and then gave up. The waterfalls and raging rivers flowing off Mt Luxmore made me feel like I was in a Lord of the Rings film. Amazing. I could now start to hear the music from Iris Burn Hut and it meant that when I arrived there that a) there would be food and water and b) I'd be off that bloody ridge and mountain and in the valley which meant less hills. I couldn't of been anymore wrong. I spent a couple of minutes filling up my drink bottles and was on my way. 32km to go, haha.....shit.

I felt awesome leaving Iris Burn so decided to give it a nudge and pick up the pace. In the next 22km I managed to overtake 54 runners and push myself up into 170th place. But that 22km wasn't without problems. The Iris Burn valley was not as flat as I thought. The trail was in great condition but there were what I called, PINCHERS. These hills were never any longer than 200m but were so steep. They got so annoying because you'd get into a rhythm and then would have to go into walk mode and scramble up these things. I started to get angry

and at one point found myself yelling at these short climbs. Which just made me even more angry again. Looking back at it, I don't know what brought on these moments of rage but in hindsight it was probably due to low blood sugar levels. So a gel normally brought me back into normal mode. Around the 40 km mark I started to finally feel the weight building up in my legs and the fatigue gradually creeping up on me. But the pull of the aid stations kept me running. It's funny the pull of them is amazing and once you finally get to one and leave out in to the wild again your on your own and that's when you really have to keep motivated and try not to walk. This was a continuing battle. It gets quite daunting being so fatigued out in the middle of now where. Knowing that the only way they could get you out was by helicopter was enough incentive to keep it together and keep putting one foot in front of the other though.

Before I knew it, I was at Rainbow Reach and running through people that had walked in to this point to cheer us crazy people on. It was great to finally see some people again and I only had 10km to go from this point. But after already running 50km, leaving here was very hard. 10km felt like 100km to go at that point. The electrolyte drink was now wearing very thin and was losing its nice refreshing taste it had earlier on in the day. So I changed my plan for the last 10km to water and jelly beans. Due to the legs not operating as well as I wanted, tree roots were not as easy to negotiate as they were earlier on in the day and I tripped over a couple of times. These spastic moments made me laugh thinking that I couldn't finish 60km's in the New Zealand wilderness without a bit of mud on me. I knew I was running on fumes when a couple of times I could of sworn there was someone running behind me, but each time I turned around there was no one there. The last 45mins was mentally the toughest. Tree roots popping up out of no where, and the commentary from the finishing line was wafting up the valley with the wind. This resulted in me thinking the finish line was a lot closer than it really was.

Finally turned right out of the forest and on to the finishing chute at the control gates and couldn't of been happier. I crossed the line in 8hrs 14mins 50secs and realised 60km of running through mountains is possible and is a very rewarding experience. The satisfaction of finishing the Kepler was like nothing I'd ever felt and can't wait to do it again. The scenery on the whole run was just amazing. I saw eagles, birds, mice, streams, rivers, waterfalls, mountains, snow, 3 degree temperatures on the ridge to 24 degree temps on the valley floor, thick lush green forest and alpine conditions all in one day.

So thank you to everyone who helped me in the lead up to the Kepler and especially to Budgie my coach who has the uncanny ability to scare the hell out of you with his daunting programs. Yet in saying that, they always set you up for success. Also Laura my wonderful girlfriend, who puts up with so much while I do these crazy things.