

The following article was written by freelance journalist Paul Connolly and was published in the June 2016 edition of “The Monthly).

JUNE 2016 THE NATION REVIEWED

Foot soldiers

By Paul Connolly



Trackside at a 24-hour ultramarathon

“Are we there yet?” quips first-time ultramarathon runner Angelo Portelli, 46, at 10.01 am. He is one minute into the Coburg 24 Hour Track Championships being held at the Harold Stevens Athletics Track in suburban Melbourne. But for rope-thin Portelli and the 47 other competitors running or walking their first lap on this mild Saturday morning in April, “there” is not so much a destination as a time. In this case, 10 am Sunday.

The Coburg 24 Hour acts as both the Victorian and Australian 24-hour track championships. The vast majority of competitors, however, are not chasing a medal or Yiannis Kouros’ world record of 303.5 kilometres. This is more an excoriating examination of self than a race, and they are taking part for their own reasons. Reasons they’ll frequently have cause to question.

Take Peter Gray, 51, shuffling along in tracksuit pants and battered trainers. In his heyday he had the physique, and flowing locks, of Thor. Now only strands of his hair remain, and the “V” of his once mighty frame has been inverted by both age and his fondness for roast chicken and Coke. This is Gray’s 29th consecutive Coburg 24 Hour. “I want to do 30 in a row, to make history,” he says.

Those in the know remember wistfully that in 1990 Gray became the youngest person, at 25, to complete the 1006-kilometre Sydney to Melbourne ultramarathon. He finished in seven days, 18 hours and two minutes. A year later, he covered 230.7 kilometres in finishing fourth at the Coburg 24 Hour. Gray, who lives with his 91-year-old mother near Geelong, has completed more than 300 ultramarathons (any footrace longer than a marathon). Why? He struggles to explain, but says ultramarathons bring some meaning to his life. “We’re like soldiers going to war.”

By early afternoon the competitors are spread around the 400-metre ochre-red track, which sits between the slow meander of Merri Creek and the whistle-and-squeak of Coburg Basketball Stadium. A board, updated hourly, displays each competitor’s lap count. The early pace-setters include the whippet-like Francesco Ciancio (a 100-kilometre specialist), Sydneysider Philip Balnave and Brisbane-based soldier Kevin Muller.

Balnave, 49, is the centre of much attention early on. It’s not just his remarkable pace that sets him apart but also his attire: floppy hat, short-sleeved blue shirt, baggy shorts and, on his feet, the kind of rubber sandals you’d wear to the shower block at a caravan park. Balnave’s partner, Mook Kooi Loo, tells me Balnave takes pride in demonstrating the inessentiality of \$200 sneakers. She adds that he doesn’t own a car, and has been known to slip out of the house at 11.30 pm and run until dawn.

The beauty of a 24-hour track race is that competitors are in constant contact with one another, creating a collegiate atmosphere where black humour thrives. “Toenails are overrated,” reads a trackside whiteboard. As a spectator, too, you see the same faces so often you begin to feel you know them. There’s Rob Robertson, the chirpy 53-year-old American with high elbows and Forrest Gump’s accent. And Sandra de Graaff, 48, and Albertus van Ginkel, 54, the towering Dutch couple who, like Robertson, are determined to complete 100 miles (160.9 kilometres) in order to earn their Australian “centurion” badge. All three will succeed with about half an hour to spare.

The majority of competitors are in their mid 40s or older. Around 10 pm – as a sudden cold wind pushes rain across the floodlights – race organiser Tim Erickson explains that older athletes are not obsessed with speed and have the experience “to know they’ll get through a bad patch and come good again”.

As Erickson talks, 74-year-old Val Chesterton strolls by in a parka. At 8 am the next day, on her way to a total distance of 118.6 kilometres, I'll momentarily walk alongside her and ask her why she does it, and whether ultra-events are about a desire to satisfy existential pangs. Or something like that. "I'm wondering about that right now, myself," she says. "I don't know, but it's something to aim for, isn't it?"

They're certainly a motley bunch. By the 18-hour mark, one of many grizzled, no-nonsense blokes, Louis Commins, 67, will be bent sideways from the waist like a vandalised car aerial. But he'll finish (with 134 kilometres). As will Brunswick's Bill Beauchamp, a 68-year-old beanpole in a blue truckie's singlet and Aldi sneakers, returning to the sport after a long absence. With a running style evoking someone scooting to answer a phone in another room, he'll end up with a stubbornly compiled 152.4 kilometres.

Then there's 55-year-old Tony Wilms (130.3 kilometres). Even on the opening laps he looked in trouble, perhaps on account of his track-scraping gait. For many hours he wears a rictus on his face and headphones in his ears. "My son made me a playlist," he says. "It covers up the sound my feet make."

With three hours to go, an end in sight brings a new wave of energy. Peter Gray, who'd taken a nap in the reclined driver's seat of his old Ford Laser, is back, plodding along (final distance, 68 kilometres). Balnave, meanwhile, has withdrawn (171.2 kilometres), as has the compact Nadine Barnes (141.6 kilometres), 32, who for so long looked like a perpetual-motion machine.

At 8 am on Sunday, from the utilitarian clubhouse where Herb Elliott's name is on the honour board, someone whispers apologetically into the PA system, conscious of how it might sound to competitors who started 22 hours earlier, "Bacon and egg rolls now available."

Finally, at precisely 10 am, it's over. The competitors are too exhausted to celebrate – even the winners, Wangaratta's Sharon Scholz (192.2 kilometres) and Kevin Muller, who racked up 242.2 kilometres, stopping only a few times during his 605 laps to use a portaloo. Instead, they simply hug each other, their family and friends, and make their way ever so gingerly to the clubhouse for the presentations. I ask walker Dawn Parris, 63, how she feels after clocking up 133.2 kilometres. "If I wasn't better mannered, I'd say I'm rooted."

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