

ASK THE TRAINER



INTERVIEW WITH ULTRARUNNER LISA TAMATI

A decorated runner over many distances, Lisa is arguably one of New Zealand's most well known and respected athletes. Some of her achievements include running the length of New Zealand, finishing the legendary 215km Badwater ultramarathon twice and numerous desert ultramarathons. I catch up with her to talk about The Gobi Desert, running for 24 hours and her newest project: The Northburn Station 100 mile Mountain Run.

FIRSTLY CONGRATULATIONS FOR YOUR NZ RUN, 2,200KM IN 43 DAYS IS PRETTY INCREDIBLE! WERE THERE ANY TIMES WHEN YOU THOUGHT YOU MIGHT HAVE BITTEN OFF MORE THAN YOU COULD CHEW?

To be honest I was petrified standing at the start line at 6am in Bluff thinking crickey girl, this time your big mouth has really got you in trouble! However, I believe in facing your fears and doing it anyway so I took it one step at a time. I ran into some very serious difficulties on the way with severe shin splints, a torn hamstring, the flu and just complete mental and physical exhaustion. The toughest thing was the length, it just went on forever. Most of the races I have done are over within a week so you can hold yourself together and think it will be over soon, but not with this one. The pressures on me from sponsors, charities, media, fundraising, organising etc were huge and it very nearly broke me a couple of times. Just north of Christchurch was my worst time when I could hardly take the next step sometimes. The pain was incredible but my crew were what saved me from sinking into the depths of despair, they did everything to keep me upright and moving and their

dedication moved me to give it everything. Then there were the CanTeen kids, two in particular. Wayne is a thirteen year old nephew of my friend Mad Macca (fellow ultrarunner) who has been fighting cancer for a couple of years. In Wellington he came to visit me and was brought into my room at night where I was crying and feeling sorry for myself and scared of failure. He held my hand and told me how much it meant to him and the other children what I was doing and that it made him feel he wasn't alone in his battle - I resolved to get over myself and deal with it. If these kids could face their battles so could I. Another girl Lana, a beautiful 19 year old with leukaemia had accompanied me over on the Ferry. I got off the ferry and remember moaning that I had to run another 25km that afternoon, then I asked her what she was doing and she told me she was off for another chemo session. That was a reality check.

I made it though, it took a little longer than I had hoped but flexibility is something else I learnt. I had speaking engagements and over 50 School visits en route, so the changes were a horror for the crew but we will never forget the experience together. I am still an ambassador for CanTeen and I really hope people will dig into their pockets and help support their great work.

WHAT KIND OF TRAINING DID YOU PUT YOURSELF THROUGH TO PREPARE FOR IT AND HOW LONG DID IT TAKE YOU TO RECOVER FROM THE WHOLE ORDEAL?

13 years of experience running ultras all around the world. It wasn't just about having the fitness, actually you can never train enough for your body to be able to really

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cope with such an undertaking or you will go into overtraining. But with top people, the best supplements and nutrition and mental toughness it was doable.

Training wise I never stop training so just upped the distance and did more cross training. I had just come back from Death Valley and then the Commonwealth 24hr champs in England so I was more worried about not getting sick or overtraining in the weeks leading up to it.

I would generally run between 130 and 200km a week and then cross training in the gym, stretching, weights to build core strength.

TALK US THROUGH WHAT KIND OF NUTRITION YOU GOT THROUGH EACH DAY...

Lots of natural foods. No electrolyte drinks or gels, great supplements from Thompsons and Red 8. Fish oil, magnesium, BCAA'S, vitamin C, protein drinks. During the day I ate dates, raisins, fruit, yoghurt, manuka boost bars and lollies when I got a bit low. Drip feeding is the key for long distance running. A bit every 10-15mins or so, same principal with water - a sip every few minutes. At night I could eat a horse and chase the rider. Maybe that's why I only lost 1 kg in 2,200km. How do you do that?

What do you think about when you are running continuously for 24 hours?

I have raced quite a few 24hr track races and won the 2008 Nationals and got to represent NZ at the Commonwealth Champs in England last September. 24hrs of non-stop running (and I mean non-stop) can be a diabolical experience, I always struggle with sleep deprivation and manage to “run sleep” and pass out for hours on end at times. There's a lady by the name of Val Muskett who is New Zealand's best 24hr track runner, she is in her fifties but she can still kick all our bottoms.

I enjoy the mental challenge of it but prefer to race off track or in deserts or from A to B, the tougher the weather the better for my racing. Something like Death Valley where this time I ran 38hrs non stop virtually with only a few minutes of breaks here and there will take you to places most people will never experience with hallucinations, emotional breakdowns, sleep walking, highs so high its incredible and lows so low and desperate you are fighting to make the next step. It's all learning though and these

experiences can be life changing, cathartic and freeing. Life's everyday problems disappear in the intensity of a race and that purity of vision is what I crave for sometimes in daily life and is what keeps me coming back for more.

OKAY, I HAVE TO ASK ABOUT BADWATER. MANY TALENTED, EXPERIENCED RUNNERS SIMPLY COME APART OUT THERE AND 20-40% OF ENTRANTS DON'T MAKE IT TO THE FINISH LINE. WHAT IS IT THAT YOU NEED TO SUCCEED OUT THERE?

An attitude and mindset that says, “I will get there no matter what comes at me and they will have to drag me away kicking and screaming or unconscious before I will give up.” That sounds dramatic but it's the attitude you need to have to get there.

You also need a crew that will do anything, and my crews both years have been as dedicated as anything and I thank them for their efforts. You go through so much together they are an integral part of the success of the race.

Luck of course - no injuries, mistakes or sicknesses that leave you weaker than 100% healthy.

Preparation - months of visualizing, planning to the last detail and pacing strategy.

You can do all that and still fail. I was one of the lucky ones these two times but have had my times of failures in the past too.

THIS YEAR YOU ARE SKIPPING BADWATER TO RUN THE GOBI DESERT 250KM RACE. HOW DO YOU THINK IT WILL COMPARE TO BADWATER SEEING AS THE DISTANCE IS FAIRLY SIMILAR?

The Gobi is a different kettle of fish as it's a self sufficiency race ie carry all your gear and food for a week on your back with no crew and all cross country (no being Miss Cleopatra this time). Carrying a backpack of about 12kgs make for hard going. However, this is a stage race with stages between 30 and 90km a day so sleep deprivation doesn't come into it. Sand and blisters, sandstorms, incredible heat with no access to ice does make it harder.

The time limits for this race are generous so a lot of the race competitors will be walking for part or all. I will be going hard out but am filming a documentary at the same time for the Sky sports channel; that

may slow me up a bit and make it a bit harder but I am looking forward to showing people what it's like to be inside a race like this in such an exotic place.

NEXT MARCH NEW ZEALAND WILL FINALLY GET ITS' OWN GENUINE 100 MILE TRAIL RACE. FROM THE DESCRIPTION ON THE WEBSITE IT LOOKS LIKE IT IS GOING TO BE A PRETTY BRUTAL AFFAIR! WHAT ARE YOUR HOPES FOR IT, WHAT CAN ENTRANTS LIKE MYSELF EXPECT AND WHAT HAS THE INITIAL RESPONSE BEEN LIKE?

This is going to be an iconic Kiwi race over one of the most spectacular parts of New Zealand, the Northburn station. We have a 100 mile (160km) a 100km and 2x50 km relay. Lots of mountains to climb up and down on and all off road, single tracks and right across the land with no tracks.

We want newbies and experienced runners to come and have a go at this ultra, grab a friend and dip your toes in the 2x50km relay or go for broke with the brutal 100miler (100 mile races count as qualifiers for Badwater in Death valley if anyone wants to race there). We are hoping to get a number of the world's best ultrarunners from around the world, so we are promoting our race in Europe and the USA. Fingers crossed. You can register your interest and sign right up now on www.northburn100.co.nz You won't regret it, the people of Cromwell and the Northburn station will be turning it on for you!

YOUR ADVICE TO SOMEONE THINKING OF RUNNING THEIR FIRST ULTRA

- Just sign up and work out how you will do it afterwards, nothing like a fixed goal to get you motivated.
- Drink water water water. Alkaline waters especially that help combat getting acidic. Start slow and taper off.
- Get a good base fitness level and then introduce the intensity in speed training.
- Do cross training like CrossFit, weights, yoga etc. Your core strength can be vital in ultra races especially if you are carrying weight.
- If you are limited in time the most important training sessions are the long slow runs back to back. That way your body learns to run when it is fatigued.
- Speed and pace training, interval training is very important but only after the base is established. You will increase your abilities with speed training - get faster, stronger and shock your body in new ways to keep it adapting but make sure you have a good strong base first.
- Immerse yourself in the world of ultra running, read magazines, books on the subject, find those who inspire you, motivate you. Get hooked.

Thanks so much for your time. Lisa's book Running Hot is out now and available in all good bookshops. **O**