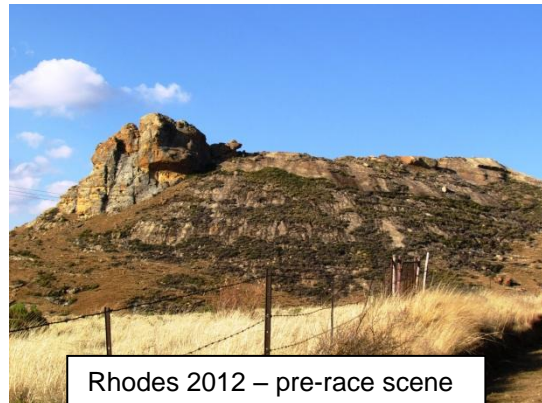


The 2012 UTi Rhodes (Breathtaking) Trail Run by Arthur Spickett

On Saturday the 14th of July 2012, some 10 km on the Carlisle road, into the first leg of this truly existential experience, while in a befuddled state, sloshing through what seemed like extra gooey toffee threatening to suck off my tackies and being battered head on by waves of sleet, my main thought was one of amazement: everyone (co-runners and the kind and sympathetic folk – on previous runs they were admiring! - at the feeding stations, alike) seemed to know me, addressing me by name. This, I regarded as a remarkable phenomenon, something my brain seemed to cling to in a desperate effort to dispel all physical discomfort, given that my outfit (and that of everyone else) was designed to stave off extreme elements, belying any form of personal recognition, even by my closest relatives.



Rhodes 2012 Road - pre-race



Rhodes 2012 – pre-race scene

Since the previous Wednesday, I had been following- with some trepidation - the Norwegian/Danish (admittedly strange, but they seem to get things right!) weather forecast for Rhodes, South Africa, taking note (with mixed feelings of ominous glee) of predictions of precipitation in the form of rain and snow, commencing Friday evening, gaining momentum through Saturday (race day) and Sunday. Well - this is what you want from the UTi Rhodes Trail Run – and that is what we got! Sure as death, I lay awake most of Friday night listening to the pouring rain while physically (but not in spirit) secure and wonderfully comfortable in our abode some 20 km from the START, tossing between what to wear (cold, wet and windy or cold, ice and windy??), route conditions (would there be a route change??), will I even get to the START in our 1.4i??, SHOULD I EVEN GO?? – this latter accentuated early the next morning with what looked like an exodus of oncoming cars leaving the (quaint Victorian) hamlet before 06:00. Before leaving for the START, the added angst of the unknown took hold when our host (who manned a feeding station) confirmed a route change. Angst changed to misguided jubilation at the drizzling damp pre-race briefing – we are not going up Mavis and over the Hooggenoeg ridge (enormous relief to those who know the Mavis route and a vast reprieve that could even convert borderline atheists) – we would go out-and-back on the Carlisle track and then out-and-back on the Kloppershoek road.



Uti Rhodes Trail Run
14 July 2012 – 07:03 START



Rhodes 2012-Feeding station warming up!

Then again, I had trained for a classic Rhodes (if there is such a thing) – run like hell the first 15km, trail shuffle and mountain goat through the Kloof, months of stair climbing in order to labour up the indomitable Mavis, trail shuffle over Hooggenoeg and then hit the downhill (I'm a downhill junkie) – the route change meant all roadwork, hard continuous running for 50 km. My relief turned once again to trepidation. Then again, the mind digresses, we probably won't be ascending much beyond 2 000m, a far cry from the 2 600+m demanded by Mavis, Lesotho view and the Hooggenoeg ridge ilk where exhaustion is logarithmically exacerbated by the oxygen depleted air available to gasping lungs on the ascents, compounded by altitude induced comatose delirium. Courage returns before the start whistle – little did I know of the effects of wind driven sleet!

Undulating is not the term to describe a route in these resplendent mountains – on the out legs, lengthy steep inclines punctuated by rare short stretches of gentle downhill in an ever escalating gradient, approaches reality, but does not convey the essence of desolate beauty of the surroundings, exquisitely surmounted by the grim, austere but glorious snow covered mountains. Plodding through the muddied track, churned up by some 400 feet before you, saps whatever carbo-loaded energy they had before, whilst any available brain sugar left after combatting the effect of the elements in bodily function management is burnt up in concentrating on foot placement to prevent slipping. Fortunately, the route description on the back legs is *vice-versa* the above, providing some respite (a disillusion to a tired and tested body and mind), but track conditions worsened by being battered by now (on the home leg) in excess of 600 running feet. Wading through the strong-running icy streams (while irrationally and facetiously thinking that at least it cleans my tackies) deadens your feet – you can actually feel the ice crystals forming under your soles in your socks - and stomping out the accumulated water after fording such streams to gain some feeling again, becomes a priority – all the while clinging to the conundrum of - how do they know me?? At the Carlisle road turnaround realization sets in - fleece gloves and snow do not work - snow melts leaving wet gloves, freezing hands and, by then, to my bemused mind, frost-bitten fingers, leading to a left foot - right foot - clap hands together, slippety - clop-clap, kind of run. One cannot retie a shoelace with frozen fingers, a testimony that progressed through stages from mere assumption at first, leading to high probability to reach factual status after repetitive attempts under actual experimental trail/trial conditions - and - after some 25 km, this leads to a mind twisting panic – if I don't get dry gloves, I'm not going to make it! Also, 'water-resistant' with reference to my outer shell jacket, definitely does not denote 'water-proof' leading to a pay-off between breathability and getting soaked with perspiration from within and cold, very cold, melted snow from without.

Great is my admiration for (and infinite envy of) the lead runners approaching from my front, already on their home run, ever willing to throw a kind word of encouragement my way while staying ever focussed on footing and end goal – this, to me, still so very far away! At Kloppershoek, two realizations struck me simultaneously. My prominently displayed number has my name printed on it! – and - for the first time during any run, I felt a deep empathy towards those manning the feeding stations in the, by now, heavy wind driven snowy-sleet extreme cold – some really did not look as if they were enjoying themselves - the weather was really closing in, almost obliterating the Kloppershoek signpost - not that I was into the scenic tour thing at that stage! Nevertheless, they were there, they were supremely warm-hearted and encouraging and their sacrifice prompted a huge feeling of gratitude (one does tend to get emotional on such runs). My sincere appreciation to them all, especially to those who prepared that laced hot chocolate (this needs to be taken *ad libitum*, interspersed by the judicious but ample intake of OBS straight from the full jack bottle which, in my case, does not impair (plodding) performance after 35 km in any way and instils a much needed boost of false bravado. Eventually, conditions lull somewhat only towards the second to last feeding station and somehow, the spirit (mine, not the OBS or that of the hot chocolate) lifts.



Rhodes 2012 – Snow angel

Meanwhile, my daughter in gumboots, on a bit of a free reign while mother frets and worries about my haphazard time management, totally unburdened by that sense of responsibility and consequence that weighs down adult enjoyment, is having the time of her life – real snow, photos with Guy the Polar Bear, instantly made friends and toffee apples.

The atmosphere at the Farmers' Hall is electrifyingly jubilant. Nothing can really describe that feeling when turning the final corner – body and mind want to, but cannot relax. Many cracked open their goody-bag OBS, others found solace and nourishment in the best soup this side of the Orange River and other sustenance, once again made available by this wonderful community – kudos to all involved! Once finished, endorphins, adrenaline and nor-adrenaline compete; elation and disorientation slowly subside and then - you really get cold, despite immediately donning the high quality First Ascent switchblade and (at last) a dry BUFF – thank you to these sponsors that really make this race 'value for money' and, along with Darrel and Evie Raubenheimer and the whole organizing gang - profound obeisance - such a memorable event!!

Worsening weather conditions evinced by increasing snowfalls and concerned co-residents (despite 4X4 ability) forced departure before the prize-giving – at that stage I was frozen stiff with no will of my own, in no condition and with no wish to argue.



The morning after, we woke to a veritable 'winter wonderland', wonderland indeed, if you are ensconced in a secure cocooned abode, but not when confronted with a hair raising, buttock clinching 40km of slush covered dirt road before you get to, even worse, 2-track, ice covered tar from Barkley almost all the way to Lady Grey. While traversing this awesome spectacle, I repeatedly vowed that this would definitely be 'the road less travelled' in future.



In retrospect – a totally awesome experience well worth the annual pilgrimage!