



TARAWERA ULTRAMARATHON

[WHAKAREWAREWA FOREST, ROTORUA]

By Ingrid Tiriana



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THE TARAWERA ULTRAMARATHON

Options: 60km (to Tarawera Falls), 85km, 100km (both to Kawerau)

The course: Starting beneath the canopy of Rotorua's redwoods in Whakarewarewa forest, the course heads uphill then towards Tikitapu (Blue Lake) before circling the lake and heading to Lake Okareka, then into the Western Okataina Walkway, about 18km with some decent hills through bush trails and clearings to Lake Okataina. From there it's on to the most technical part of the course, the 24km Eastern Okataina Walkway, undulating with narrow tracks and roots and rocks to negotiate but offering spectacular views across Lake Tarawera. Just before you reach the 60km mark are the magnificent Tarawera Falls. From there it's on to a mix of forestry roads and forest tracks to the finish at Kawerau with an extra loop for the 100km entrants.

When you tell people you're training for an ultra marathon, their faces invariably screw up and their brow becomes furrowed. They don't get it. Surely only somebody completely mad would want to do something like that.

Maybe. But there's something quite unique about ultra running and a relatively new event on the New Zealand calendar, the Tarawera Ultramarathon which starts in Rotorua and finishes in Kawerau, really is something special.

It's been running for only two years but two-times men's winner, Hamiltonian Kerry Suter, reckons it's already an iconic event.

"There isn't a distance runner in the country who hasn't heard of it. It's such a special course with some of the most scenic trails in the North Island," he enthuses. "From the time you depart Rotorua beneath the great Redwoods until the moment you throw an exhausted body over the finish line in Kawerau, you are treated to such a spectacular montage of trees, lakes, dirt and rocks. If you could experience the 100km over any duration less than 10 hours you would probably have to stop and cry about the sheer beauty of it all."

"I will be surprised if this [doesn't become] one of those races you have to enter early for or run the risk of missing out entirely."

For Charteris it's "all about the athletes, the running, the adventure and sharing". He got into trail ultra-running about four years ago. "One winter I took up trail running to get in shape for the upcoming triathlon season. I enjoyed the trails a lot more than the biking and swimming and pretty soon gave up triathlons. There's something very calming and peaceful about running in the bush, dragging yourself over hills and peeing in scenic places."

Since then Charteris has tackled a huge variety of ultra events in the United States and Mexico including the Hunter S. Thompson Fear and Loathing 50k in San Francisco where competitors drank champagne at an aid station under the Golden Gate Bridge. "The most

unusual prize I ever got was 50kg of maize at the Copper Canyon Ultra in Mexico."

Last year Charteris ran the Western States 100-miler run. "I tore a hamstring tendon about 12 hours into the run but did not realise it at the time. Despite finishing about 30km short, it was one of the most emotional and satisfying days of my life."

The idea for the Tarawera Ultramarathon formed while Charteris was running in California. "I plotted out this [Tarawera] course in my head. I just had a gut feeling that this would be exactly the sort of run I would like to do myself and really hoped that others would share that excitement."

Charteris has certainly sparked plenty of interest with 160 in the 2010 event, double last year's field. He expects to hit his limit of 400 next year and that will be plenty big in his opinion. "I'd hate for it to become a big fancy corporate affair and lose its character."

"The event is really about sharing our love for running free. It might sound like a hippy concept - and it is - but I learned it from the Tarahumara, a people who have true freedom in health, family and love. It was my intention to try and reflect some of this in the Tarawera Ultra."

"That's why the event has virtually no rules and you can run further or shorter than your intended distance on the day. It is the runners' day to be free, to explore, to make some new friends, puke, fart and cry. I think the event will hit the capacity of 400 runners next year."

Suter is likely to be among them. The 2010 race favourite won the inaugural 86.5km race in 2009 and "didn't think any more of it" until Charteris said he was extending the race to include a full 100km for 2010. "Now I had more than just a title to defend, I had the unique challenge shared by all ultra distance runners; could I complete the distance?"

Suter did but admits it was "the toughest day of my life without question". The Ron Hill runner hadn't quite recovered from the 100km National Champs a month before and his friends bet he would pull out at 60km.



"I remember thinking if anyone passes me at any time I'll just stop and flag down the nearest car. Such incredible pain. Words just can't explain."

"In the words of Bill Bowerman (founder of Nike); 'the only thing that kept me going was the hope I would die'. Next year I'll be back without question but I have no plans to defend my 100km title. I'll be putting together an elite relay team."

Suter says Charteris has to be "one of the best spokesmen for the region, dragging people from around the world with great enthusiasm".

"[The event] certainly won't make him a rich man. He does it because he loves the sport, he loves the trails and he loves the people mad enough to show up each year. "It's no great stretch to call him an aspiring modern day Arthur Lydiard of ultra distance running. Having run the world over, he has more experience on the ultra scene than just about anyone in the country and he brings all that experience into the best day on the trail racing calendar," Suter says.

Aucklander Fleur Bromley, who won the women's 100km race, is just as enthusiastic about the event after her first crack at it. She changed her distance from 85km during the course of the event, having entered after deciding it was time for a change.

"I'd never done an ultra before but I'd done a few Ironman and had that base and the mental toughness, which is what the [ultra] event was all about in the end - that definitely got me through."

"I heard about the event a few weeks before. I was looking for a challenge and thought I'd enter the 85km option but knew if I didn't get injured I would do the 100km."

The experience has left Bromley wanting more. "I really loved it, it was great. Lining up at the start I had those nerves I hadn't had in years. It wasn't about where I would come but what lay ahead. I really didn't know what to expect."

"It was an exceptional course, so diverse, well

balanced. I loved the experience."

The 31-year-old had no idea what her time was when she reached the 60km mark at the magnificent Tarawera Falls near Kawerau. She'd decided not to wear a watch.

"The first time someone told me what the time was it was 4pm. At that stage I was coming up to about 20km to go so I got quite excited."

"It was really amazing and what I loved about the event is that it's not at all PC. We were out there, often by ourselves and were just allowed to do this thing. Usually there are all these requirements but not here, it was so liberating. You really have to just rely on yourself."

To Bromley it was "just like in the old days" when people just signed up for an event, there were no special gadgets or replacement drinks and gels. It was back to basics.

Bromley also loved the fact competitors could change the distance they did on the day. It meant those who were unable to continue after the 60km mark still had a great sense of achievement - and no DNF beside their name - while for Bromley and others feeling extra good on the day, it offered the option to continue.

"It was a real adventure and getting to Tarawera Falls, wow, that was the first time I'd stopped in a race to admire the scenery."

Bromley says Charteris is definitely on to a good thing. "I think he's really got a niche market. After Ironman this is like the next challenge for athletes like myself. It was more than achievable if you had the base. It just came down to nutrition and a head game."

Winning the women's race just topped it all off for Bromley who says she'll "definitely" be back, as much for the camaraderie of it all as anything else. Bromley reckons Suter pretty much summed it up at the pre-race briefing the night before. He told entrants there was no need to be nervous and to view it as no big deal. "We're not doing anything, we're just going to meet here tomorrow and go for a jog."

It sure was some jog.