BRENDAN DAVIES /

NOUGHT TO 100 IN FIVE YEARS

Many of us have looked in the mirror and not been entirely happy with what we've seen. It could be the result of simply over-indulging a little during the Christmas break, a busy life trumping that additional weekly long run, or even years of poor diet and lifestyle choices. Our response to what confronts us often varies, ranging from defeat to denial, indifference to zealous activity and quiet determination to public proclamation.

WRITTEN BY **NATHAN BILTON**

IMAGES COURTESY OF **MARK WATSON, ANDY GREEN, AURORA IMAGES, JP PHOTOGRAPHY, MARCEAU PHOTOGRAPHY** & **WWW.SUPERSPORTIMAGES.COM**

Davies in full flight during his record-breaking run at The North Face 100.

Knowing this, it is still something of a shock to hear Brendan Davies, 2012 Australian Male Ultra Runner of the Year and winner of The North Face 2013 in record-breaking time, had confronted himself in a similar way and asked some hard questions.

"I'd been on holiday in Southeast Asia and saw a photo of myself from the trip," Davies recalls. "Like lots of people around that age, I decided to make a few changes." Following his 30th birthday, Davies began training and running suburban fun runs with Woodstock Runners in Sydney. In 2007, he entered his first big race – the SMH Half Marathon – followed by the Sydney Marathon later that year. "I finished in 3.14 and knew I'd caught the bug," he says. Running would, from now on, be a major part of my life."

It becomes apparent that this understated and modest way of talking about his achievements is typical of Davies. When you let it sink in that he has been racing seriously for less than five years, you begin to wonder about his pedigree. A junior track star, perhaps? Maybe even an age-group national champion?

"Growing up, I had a very active upbringing," he reveals. "I was always down at the local park, playing something or riding my bike. I played many team sports like soccer and football, and was part of Scouts and Little Athletics; I just enjoyed being outdoors and being active. I used to run quite a bit, but just for enjoyment rather than competition."

So there was no returning of the prodigal son, then. Yet it still didn't take Davies long to discover he could be more than a very good social runner. "I realised I had some natural ability early on, and I had a strong desire to see how far I could keep pushing myself and what I was capable of," he says. From 2008, he averaged around 40 races a year – everything from track, fun runs to short ultras – in his constant desire to improve. "I was always wary of trail ultras," he admits, "as they are, in my opinion, the toughest discipline of all the running sports. But once I took the plunge in 2011 at TNF100, I haven't looked back. I've represented Australia four times; twice in 100km on the road, once in mountain running and once in ultra-trail, and NSW a couple of times at the Australian Marathon Champs. Of course, throughout this journey, my training and racing program has changed."

As someone with experience across different distances and terrain, Davies is well-placed to expand on the demands of the disciplines and how they differ. "Road runners tend to run to a set pace and rhythm, while with trail running, the pace is dictated by the terrain, so being in song with your body and monitoring exertion levels is vital," he says. "From my experience, trail running demands a much larger skills set; agility over mixed terrain, reading the terrain and being able to run quickly over elevation change. The step-up to ultra-distance trail events brings about new challenges. Nutrition and hydration, nursing yourself when things go awry and sustaining yourself over large distances are vital."

With so much that can go so wrong over long distances, the adaptability of ultra-distance runners is both fascinating and impressive. When one throws in the added uncertainty of the trail, it therefore begs the question: does the mental component become the most important factor in success? For Davies, the answer touches on the need for body and mind to be working together.

"Like a road marathon, the last quarter of any ultra is the business end of the race, and where you will significantly gain or lose a lot of time," he explains. "If you have trained the body and mind well enough, and taken the small-steps approach in the lead-up to an ultra, the risk of hitting the wall is greatly reduced. A lot of runners still do, however, and this is usually due to lack of proper nutrition during the run and going out a little too hard early on or not training specifically for the terrain and distance. I've seen many good road marathon runners hit the wall in a trail marathon. This is because they have underestimated the demands of trail running, even though they are quite conditioned to run the distance."

This idea of "training the mind" is, of course, a factor in preparing for any race, but it is of particular importance to ultra-runners – so much so that is it not uncommon for them to use mantras to stave off the pain and doubt that is part of running long distances. Davies admits it is a technique he also utilises.

"My mantra is 'This is tough, but I am tougher' – simple but effective!" he explains. "I also use mindfulness techniques, keeping focused on the positive energy around me rather than on my own struggles. I use lots of other strategies, too; counting strategies and lots of visualisation techniques. For example, when running up a steep ascent, I visualise myself using ski