> *"I'm very much in the barefoot camp ... such a vital part of being a successful trail runner."*

poles to boost myself up. Essentially, I'm tricking my brain to believe I'm being assisted."

While by no means exclusive to the ultra- and trail-running scenes, the barefoot/minimalist phenomenon is yet another movement commonly linked to both, and Davies is happy to admit he is well on board.

"I'm very much in the barefoot camp, [which is] one of main reasons I only wear the minimalist Inov-8 range of trail shoes," he explains. "One of the reasons why this trend is particularly strong in trail running is because proprioception – the ability of your body to orient itself in space without visual clues – is such a vital part of being a successful trail runner. I find the more feedback I get back from the ground, the more my balance and stability is enhanced. I do all my track sessions on grass in barefoot for this reason, too."

It seems to be working. The North Face 100 victory in record time, and over an accomplished field, is the jewel in Davies' crown. Given his move to the Blue Mountains a few years ago to focus on his running by taking advantage of the world-class trails and an active and supportive running community, the TNF100 is, in many ways, his "home race". It is not surprising, then, that his victory was an emotional one.

"All day my focus was razor sharp, and every foot strike and metre, every surge and release, was considered," he says. "When I entered the resort in the last 200m, I was able to release all this. Pure and present human emotion took over, and I could not help shedding a tear. It was so special running in that race with so many friends either running or supporting me, and the fact that it was in my backyard made it all that little bit more significant. I love the Blue Mountains."

After TNF100 win, Davies was quoted as saying that he'd been training for six years for this race. Even for an athlete with such obvious focus, it showed incredible patience and determination, though reflection on his comment does force him to clarify somewhat.

"I only started running competitively around six years ago," he explains, "and it's been a long journey to get to this point. But I believe every training run, every track session, every race and recovery session, contributed to the performance in TNF100. It's been a journey that I've enjoyed every step of the way. It's taken me to some special places, and I feel very privileged being part of such a great supportive community that has kept me motivated and striving to improve."

This desire for continual improvement is a trait shared by many elite athletes. It saw Davies line up for the Ultra-Trail Mt Fuji as a "warm-up" for TNF100. It was a decision that some in the ultra-running community saw as unconventional, and even harmful, to his chances in the Blue Mountains, but Davies credits the race in Japan with instilling the mental strength he needed to attack TNF with confidence.

"Ultra-Trail Mt Fuji is one tough race," he says. "It's 100 miles with over 9000m of elevation gain. The race is a mix of trail and road but had the most incredibly difficult and torturous climbs and descents that I've ever experienced. It redefined trail running for me. It was an event that only strengthened me both physically and mentally. After completing that so well, I knew that I no longer had any grounds to be afraid of TNF100 course. It toughened me right up."

At the pointy end of the sport, Davies has seen a growing popularity with athletes stepping up from shorter disciplines, citing Marty Dent's running of a 50km race recently as a prime example. This growth is matched at the grass-roots participation level across both ultra and trail running, something that excites Davies greatly.

"Participation levels at all running distances are increasing, and as such, people are always seeking new challenges to test themselves against," he says. "More and more people are seeing ultras as the ultimate endurance challenge and setting bigger goals. Trail running is becoming very popular, as it offers people the opportunity to connect with nature and get away from the bustle of busy lives. There is an earthiness about trail running that is unique to the sport. You definitely engage with nature – the terrain, the weather and the wildlife – much more, and that reconnects us and builds a deep respect for our innate link to the earth."

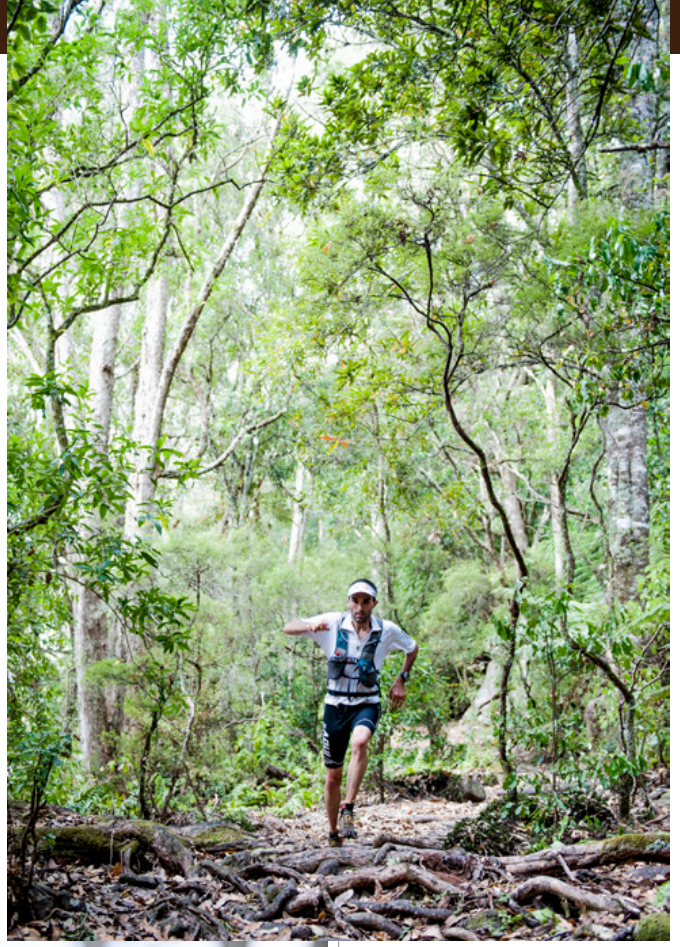
So what, then, is Davies' advice for those interested in joining the swelling ranks running through eucalyptus-flanked trails, listening to birds sing instead of Daft Punk? "Take the small steps up to the different race distances and be comfortable with each distance before you up the ante," he says. "I ran about eight 100km before I jumped into doing the 100-mile events, and before the 100km I ran many marathons. Of course, remember to look around and enjoy where you are. Sometimes it's another world."

While obviously excited about new participants and keen to preserve the community feel of amateur trail-/ultra-running, Davies is also excited about the elite level of the sport and his part in it. He notes the similarities between elite-level half-marathon and marathon runners transitioning to ultras and ITU triathletes stepping up to half- and full-Ironman distances, and without relying on external motivation, he appears genuinely enthused about competing against top athletes like Dent and testing himself against them. He mentions a number of ultra/trail "Everests" he is working towards, naming the 89km Comrades Marathon in South Africa, the 100-mile Ultra-Trail Mt Blanc in Europe and the 100-mile Western States in the US as his three standouts.

"I would love to give Comrades a crack," he says. "Having crowds line the street from go to woe would be incredibly uplifting. As much as I have improved in trail running over the years, I believe I perform equally as well on the road. The only other race more significant would be Western States, the oldest and grandest of all trail-ultras. It's just so hard to get into!"

Yet it seems that getting things done that are "hard" is something Davies is eminently capable of. That being said, support is vital for any athlete, least of all one who runs hour after hour through some of the most unforgiving of terrain. Davies agrees, and is quick to praise the people behind him.

"My team on the ground is mainly in the form of my awesome wife Nadine, who has crewed for me in all my major ultra races," he says. "She is a psychologist and has helped me considerably over the years to keep my life grounded as well as plan all my logistics for overseas races."



Returning to the earlier theme of the trail-/ultra-running community, Davies says, "I get a lot of support from my fellow runners, many of whom I call my closest friends. There is never a shortage of people to go running with, either. There is also a lot of support online these days, too! It's fair to say that I don't have a traditional 'social life', as running is my social life."

With that, there seems only one question to ask: what's next for Brendan Davies and his crew? His thoughtful, quietly confident reply is, by now, no real surprise.

"This year, I have a series of races in Europe as part of the Skyrunning Series, including the Mt Blanc Marathon. From there I will concentrate on some Australian ultras, such as the Surf Coast Century, with another trip to Japan likely, too. Towards the end of the year, I will focus a lot more on the road in my build-up to the World 100km Champs in South Africa, where I hope to break into the 6.30s. This will include targeting a 2.25 marathon somewhere in Australia – possibly at Melbourne, where I ran my previous PB in 2010."

There's no doubt Davies' achievements to date are impressive, and it would be folly to assume the list will not grow. But it seems just as important as the race wins and records are the friends in the running community and the home in the Blue Mountains he has made along the way – not bad for someone who looked at a photograph of himself a few years ago, wasn't happy with what he saw, and decided to start running.

FAST FACTS

Typical Training Week

SUNDAY: Long hilly trail run (40-50km)

MONDAY: AM – 6km tempo run on treadmill in altitude chamber; PM – 12km easy run.

TUESDAY: AM – 5km elliptical trainer in altitude chamber; PM – Long interval training session on grass track (e.g. 15 x 3min or fartlek)

WEDNESDAY: 25km steady-state run

THURSDAY: AM – 5km tempo run on treadmill in altitude chamber; PM – short interval training session on grass track (e.g. 14 x 300m)

FRIDAY: 16km easy run

SATURDAY: 12km hilly tempo run or hill repeats

WEEKLY MILEAGE: Between 140-160km

Top-Three Performances

1: 2013 North Face 100 – "the biggest victory of my career, and my most well-run race."

2: 2013 Ultra-Trail Fuji Marathon – fifth place, "such a tough race to complete."

3: 2012 World 100km Championships – 6.55, 11th place, fifth-fastest all time Australian.