

## A “Near-Death Experience” or Why Exercise Is Not Always Good For You by Alison Frith

Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> November 2008 is a date that will stick in my memory for years to come. Why? This was the day that I had my first ever (and hopefully only!) ‘near-death’ experience – whilst running the Kerikeri half marathon.

While not an elite athlete by any means, I was not a complete novice half-marathoner when I took on this challenge. I completed my first half marathon four years ago when I was on my OE living in London. I’m quite lazy and non-athletic by nature, and the excesses of the London lifestyle (commonly known as the ‘Heathrow injection’) were not doing good things for my waistline, so I decided that setting myself a goal to run 21.1k in front of a crowd was a sure fire way to scare myself into exercising. And sure enough, it worked – I trained diligently around Hyde Park in the evenings and weekends and pounded the pavements of Embankment and Southbank during my lunch breaks, and completed my first race around Windsor Castle, in 1 hour 56 minutes. The running became strangely addictive, so I went ahead and completed my second half the following year in Stratford upon Avon, in 1 hour 56, and then my third in Christchurch the following June...again in 1 hour 56! So when some friends were keen to do the Kerikeri race I agreed to join them and I thought to myself, OK, now is the time to smash through this 1 hour 56 barrier. I had a four month build-up and trained pretty well – even more than I usually do in fact, so when race day arrived I lined up at the starting line feeling quietly confident.

For the first ten K, I was going quite well – I felt pretty good and I was right on track to cut at least 3 minutes off my time. From the 10K mark to the 16K mark it was getting a bit harder but I was still managing to maintain my speed. In every race I’ve done, I’ve always found the last few kilometres pretty hard going, so as per usual I reached the 18km mark feeling pretty knackered, but I was telling myself “You’re still on track, just 3ks to go, you can do it, just keep moving your legs...”

Unfortunately, that is the last memory I have of the race. The next thing I remember is waking up on a stretcher in an ambulance and having absolutely no idea how I got there. It wasn’t until much later

on I learned that according to bystanders, I made it as far as a roundabout, a mere 400 m from the finish line, where I apparently sat down on the road, vomited a couple of times and then fainted.

But what happened next is the scary bit – I was feeling woozy and totally drained of all energy, and as I was carried inside to a first aid room I slipped into a very strange, delirious state. Suddenly I could see bright white lights shining down all around me, like I was in a surreal movie scene, and I thought this is it, my time is up, I'm dying! Luckily by this stage my husband, who had been anxiously waiting at the finish line and realised something must be up, had found me. He walked in to the first aid room see me lying on a bed shaking, hyperventilating, sweating copiously, with very dilated pupils, flickering eyelids and almost incomprehensible speech...I started uttering my last goodbyes to him, and I was trying really hard to be brave and face death without making too much of a fuss (!), but I was terrified and whimpered quite a few times that I didn't want to die! Everyone seemed to be ignoring me and my pleas for help (my husband later said this was because no one thought I knew what I was saying) as they wiped me down with cool cloths and kept checking my blood pressure, but they did close the door and herd most people out of the room. At this point I got really worried about my chances of survival, and I remember thinking great, they don't want random members of the public see me kark it right here in the first aid room. My husband was keeping amazingly calm, telling me to relax and breath, but the calmer he became, the more panicked I got as I thought he was trying to be brave, telling me just to let go and follow the lights! My mind was buzzing, all sorts of thoughts were racing through my head – I can't die after 21 k, that's far too embarrassing, it should have been at least a full marathon, my poor husband being a widower, I haven't planned my funeral, will I be on the news?

After what felt like forever, I seemed to come to and I was helped up to sit on the side of the bed – I still didn't feel quite with it and as the St Johns staff started talking to me, I quickly started feeling strange again and I couldn't speak properly or understand what they were saying, and before I knew it I was relapsing straight back into my delirious state. This happened three times altogether and I had become completely freaked out as I was sure that I must have had a stroke or some kind of permanent brain damage. Eventually I was packed back into the ambulance to go to the medical centre for a check-up. By the time I arrived, I was actually starting to feel a bit more like myself, and after a once-over from the local doctor and a bit of a rest I was allowed to go home, promising to consume four litres of

sports water and flat Coke over the rest of the day to replenish my fluids (I only managed to get through about two litres, four litres is a heck of a lot of liquid!)

As reality sank in, I was pretty frustrated to find out that I had got so close to the finish line, especially as I was on track to break the 1:56 barrier, but this paled in comparison to how over the moon I was just to be alive and not brain damaged! I was so joyful in fact, that when we got back to our friends place they were a little concerned that I was still delirious, as I was going on about being 'high on life' – obviously they hadn't realised how close to my death bed I was – or at least thought I was!

So what actually happened? In short, I'm not sure and the doctor wasn't either, but after talking to the doctor and consulting Google, I think it was probably a reasonably severe episode of 'hitting the wall'. According to Wikipedia, hitting the wall "describes the condition when an athlete suddenly loses energy and becomes fatigued, the result of glycogen stores in the liver and muscles becoming depleted." You can then faint because you are losing energy and cannot continue. So, in basic terms, my body ran out of energy and shut down, most likely because it was severely dehydrated (as I probably didn't drink enough), perhaps because I was pushing it quite hard or maybe both – which meant there was loss of blood to the brain which caused me to faint, and then the delirious state was also a symptom of dehydration, especially as I'd been sick.

So, all in all, a rather dramatic experience and definitely not one that I want to repeat. Will I do a half marathon again? Honestly, I'm not sure as it was all a bit scary but I'm looking on the bright side – although I didn't cross the finish line, I did escape death and I'm here today to tell the tale!