

CITY 2 SURF

Australian spirit in the largest fun run of the world.

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They came down Williams Street like an avalanche, thousands of runners, occupying the entire width of one of the arteries of Sydney. While on normal days it is coloured by cars, brake and traffic lights, today a colourful mix of women and men poured into the street.

City to Surf, this is a 14-kilometre track from Hyde Park to Bondi Beach, and just like a first wave the runners float up the hill of Kings Cross before the tunnel swallows them. Photographers of the main newspapers and agencies have been waiting for this moment for over an hour.

At the curb the first clothes have been thrown to the side, abandoned by their heated up wearers. Later during the day diligent volunteers will pick them up to collect them for charity.

After the tunnel the runners can enjoy the first of many small music groups, squeezed into the small turf of green in-between the two crowded multi-lane streets.

You can hear not a single car; instead, you hear the sounds of hundreds of thousand running shoes, muted voices. Concentration dominates this first part of the race where most of the participants might still have a particular time in mind.

On the ascent to Edgecliff train station some runners turn into walkers. A superman flies by, energetic, keen to be photographed. Some wish they'd stocked more water, yet the first water supply station is still a long way away.

Entertainment continues right after the hill. In Double Bay apparently every loudspeaker of a home has been moved onto a porch and the sound system works at overload. A cheery group minds the music, drinks beer and encourages the passing runners.

A few metres further the Golden Sheaf Hotel, too, has elevated a professional band on its porch. For a brief moment a group of pink pant wearing young men interrupts their running, forms a swirl in the stream of runners and dances to the music.

Suddenly an intensifying noise – is it someone clapping? As the noise grows stronger it seems as if all runners have empty cans tied to their legs. The mystery resolves behind the next bend: The first water station, and thousands of empty plastic cups litter the street. As the runners tread on and crush them they produce this noise which is intense just after the station, then fades to an occasional crush a few hundred metres further.

One hill ahead the panorama of Rose Bay's long promenade with old shady trees, chained dinghies, elegant sailing boats and a grand outlook onto Sydney's eastern harbour competes with the road for the focus of the runner's mind. This focus is required since a steep ascent lingers right after Rose Bay which has been nicknamed "Heartbreak Hill".

To add insult to injury an open bakery tries to seduce the athletes to their premises instead with mouth-watering scents of fresh products. Here, at the latest, the main field starts to walk. Rich houses tower to both sides and a smart real estate company put up "You can make it!" signs of encouragement.

First aid stations abound, frequented by the bruised, blistered and burned. Some let you stick your finger into a pot of sunscreen, a necessity given the cloudless blue winter sky.

Finally, at Vaucluse, the high hill flattens into a long stretch of even terrain. "Go Shelly," says a sign pinned to a bus stop. It's not the only one – they're on garage doors, "For sale" signs or held up by loved ones, desperately trying to spot their star in the mass of people.

One house owner put out his hose and sprays the sweating runners with water, despite level three water restrictions. Other men find their fun in aiming huge water guns at (mainly female) runners.

"You're all winners!" calls a young woman from the side of the road, "and you're all beautiful!" Encouragement is rife in the streets and the Sydneysiders give it wholeheartedly. You hear clapping, shouting, "go, go" calls and see an old lady waving a ribbon. This is Australia's true spirit – united in the event, no matter if you're a participant, if you watch from the side, if you're the hero to rip the finish ribbon or the senior to arrive last. Nothing's more true on this day: everyone's a winner.

The crowd makes its way down Military Road. The steepest ascents are beaten and so are many runners who resorted to a fast walk. There's more talking now than at Kings Cross, and the crowd looks more like a big family rush to the latest limited offers.

Michael looks fragile from behind. He's wearing a T-Shirt which says "Push me to start me!" and bears many a date since the City to Surf run began in 1971. He's 67 years old and doing well as compared to some others which are cared for and picked up by the ambulances which are particularly busy between kilometres 9 and 10.

On the roof of a car sits a little girl, shyly extending her small arm, hoping for passing runners to give her five. And if someone bothers to look up and clap her hand, for an instant the two form a bridge between generations. In five years, maybe, she's wearing a number on her shirt.

After kilometre eleven Bondi comes into view. The sea of houses gives way to the occasional glimpse of the sea of water, and, as the runners approach the beach, the sea of people. And what a mass!

66,000 people were officially registered, many more joined just for fun, and many of these complete their run or walk at Bondi. But before they see the finish they run along Campbell Parade, watched by their fellow athletes who already finished their race.

Then, a last turn, and the finishing gates come into view. Big watches unmistakably tell you the time, and when it approaches a full hour a moderator shoos the runners towards the gates.

Then, suddenly, it's all over. You pass three gates, the gate of time, the gate of cards and the gate of medals. Then you walk, walk, slower, much slower, until you drop into the sand of Bondi Beach. The sea breeze cools you down, your bare feet welcome the sand and you can rest your eyes on the surf. Ahhhh. Miles away from the city. From the city to the surf.