

TRAIL RUNNING SEVEN OF NEW
ZEALAND'S BEST WALKING
TRAILS IN SEVEN DAYS WAS AN
AUDACIOUS FEAT. SO WHAT
HAPPENS WHEN MAL LAW,
TRAIL RUN'S NZ EDITOR
BACKED UP TO RUN
A NEW SET OF SEVEN,
IN SEVEN DAYS, THE
FOLLOWING YEAR?

7 IN 7





In November 2008 veteran endurance athlete and Trail Run magazine’s NZ editor, Mal Law, was wandering through the rugged Kaimanawa Ranges in central North Island, NZ on a long solo hike.

With nobody to talk to he got to thinking about adventures old and new. For a long time he’d harboured the dream of doing something big, audacious and never-before-attempted but the precise details of this Big Idea had eluded him. Then, from nowhere, as if carried to him on the wind that was threatening to dislodge his precarious foothold on the scree-covered ridge he was traversing, the epiphany happened.

But to properly understand the genesis of the plan that was starting to seed itself, we have to step back in time almost 40 years to the morning when Mal, then aged 9, was awoken by his dad with the news that “Alan won’t be coming home from hospital this time, he died last night.” Alan was Mal’s only brother, four years his senior. The news was of course devastating and as Mal now readily admits: “In that instant my life was irretrievably changed and the kind of person I would grow up to be was most likely reshaped”.

What it definitely did do was create a desire to help other people that were battling leukaemia, the cruel form of blood cancer that had robbed Mal of his brother. Twelve years later this is what drove Mal to jump on his Raleigh 10-speed and pedal his chunky, unfit body all the way from London to Lisbon in his first

fundraising adventure for the UK’s Leukaemia Research Fund.

Fast forward almost 30 years to that wind-swept ridge and the birth of a crazy idea that would ultimately make up for decades of unfulfilled promises to make a further difference to people whose lives were being shattered by the spectre of leukaemia. He can’t now recall how the idea came to him “it just did! Out of nowhere”

That idea was to become the first person ever to run New Zealand’s 7 mainland Great Walks in just 7 days. That’s 360kms of iconic trails spread across both islands with almost a thousand kilometres separating the first (Waikaremoana) and the last (the Kepler, which Mal would run as part of the annual Kepler Challenge.)

To hike these 7 Great Walks would take most people four weeks plus a few days to travel between them, so it was indeed an audacious plan. Audacious but successful – on 5th December 2009 Mal took the last strides on this epic journey that ultimately raised over \$85,000 for the Leukaemia & Blood Foundation.

Not content with having run himself ragged – over the course of the 7 Great Walks and the months of lead-up training he clocked some 3,500 kms of trail runs – Mal conceived a new 7in7 Challenge for late 2010. This time he chose six new trails for the first six days but still opted to finish with the Kepler Challenge. This time it would involve 370 kms of running and some seriously rugged terrain as the new Challenge set its sights on back-country trails. What follows is Mal’s own account of this epic week.



It's 7a.m. and I'm just an hour into what's expected to be an 11-hour run over the Young-Wilkin Circuit in the Aspiring National Park. I feel weak, on the verge of throwing up. This shouldn't happen until much later in the day, if at all.

Never mind, I take on what food and fluid I can and keep running. Two hours later and things are no better, and now the climbing has started in earnest. I shed my pack and hand it to legednary endurance athlete and current world champion multisporter, Richard Ussher, one of my 11 support runners for the day.

Another hour or so and we hit the high basin of the Upper Young Valley – things only seem to be getting worse. Dark, negative thoughts are hard to keep at bay and the steep climb to Gillespie's Pass looks like the north face of the Eiger to me right now. But the spirit amongst the support runners is strong and collectively they help me knock it off step by slow step. The best part of another hour passes, I try a caffeine-laden gel and amazingly, 10-minutes later, I'm starting to feel a little better. Then we hit the Pass at 1660m and ahead lies a beautiful stretch of soft snow. Suddenly my batteries are fully charged and I join the others in a sensational, if somewhat out-of-control, descent towards the Siberia Valley.

Thus began Day Two of this year's 7in7 Challenge – my personal quest to run 370 kms of stunning trails in the Southern Lakes area in just a week – and with the help of 120 or so support runners, who would join me for one, two or three days each, raise at least \$150,000 for the Leukaemia & Blood Foundation. It turned out to be the toughest few hours in a gruelling but massively enjoyable 7-day adventure.

My problem it turned out was severe dehydration from the day before when I, and 60 other people, had run the inaugural Twin Lakes Marathon from the shores of Lake Hawea to Glendhu Bay, Lake Wanaka. It's a stunning run but unfortunately coincided with the hottest November day on record in Wanaka! It was over 30°C in the shade, and as there was very little of that to be had it made for brutal conditions.

My health was restored at the end of Day Two (which turned out to be an almost 12-hour epic) thanks to 2.5L of IV fluids via a drip at the local medical centre. And just as well, because



very early the next day a group of 10 of us set off to tackle the legendary new Motatatpu Track from Glendhu Bay to Arrowtown (via Big Hill). This has to be one of the toughest 50 km runs on the planet, particularly on a day when the heat was again unrelenting. It has a staggering 3,400m of ascent and is largely pole-following goat tracks rather than well-made trails. With one of the support runners struggling from early on the pace was necessarily slow but it was a thoroughly enjoyable 14-hour expedition into a special part of the country.

Day Four took me and a fresh group of support runners along the shores of Lake Wakatipu and over Lomond Saddle, down a memorable stretch of trail heaven into the baking hot Moonlight Valley and along the 4WD road to Moke Lake where the ever-wonderful support crew awaited us with a few treats. This was one of the days that I'd opened up to less experienced runners as a way of encouraging participation from those new to the sport. And for Sarah, Lou and Nicole it was an experience that went way beyond anything they had tackled before. The day finished with a further 12 kms of beautiful trails alongside Moke and Dispute lakes, before dropping down to meet the Glenorchy Road. At frequent intervals along this stretch my ears were burning as the girls silently cursed my name, but their pain turned to joy when, with a glance at our Garmins, we announced they had just run their first ever marathons.

By now I had spent much longer on my feet than I'd been expecting to – the 190 kms covered had taken some 40 hours – and I was feeling sore and tired. But the support crew were doing a great job of refuelling and massaging me each night, so I was confident of the Challenge's ultimate success.

Day Five was the much anticipated run around the Rees-Dart circuit, venturing into the heartland of the Aspiring National Park. For this I had assembled a strong group of 12 mountain goats who I knew would be able to cope with the frequently rough terrain and had the endurance required for a massive day out. And it was quite simply a stunner! From the early morning start running through low mist, gorging on views of the high snow-clad peaks above, to the thrill of the Rees Saddle, the technical

descent of Snowy Creek and the long hot traverses of the Dart Valley tussock flats, it was an absolute classic that I know many of us described as “the best trail run ever”. But at the end of a 67 km, 13-hour day I was completely shattered and close to tears when greeted by wife Sally and the ever-growing band of support crew and well-wishers at Chinaman’s Bluff.

Another day, another early start. For Day 6 there was just a small group of five of us taking on the 54 km Greenstone-Mavora track. After a short but glorious trip by launch across Lake Wakatipu from Glenorchy we set off on the relatively well made trail through pristine beech forest, making good time to Greenstone Hut. From here on was all new to me, and what lay ahead came as quite a surprise. The route was far rougher and more technical than expected. And once in the Mavora Valley the heat again became a factor. By the time we hit the final 10 kms of dusty track down the side of North Mavora Lake the distant glimpse of the finish line took on a mirage-like attraction, drawing our tired and thirsty bodies slowly towards it. Taking a ‘run a bit, walk a bit’ approach we finally made it – some 10 hours after setting off – and enjoyed a long soak in the cold waters of this jewel of a lake.

So now all that was left was one more obscenely early alarm call and the 60 km Kepler Challenge race to run. This year no fewer than 28 Kepler competitors were running to raise funds for the 7in7 cause and we made sure they were all visible in their white All Good Bananas running hats. I set off at the back of the field with a dozen close friends many of whom were running their second or third day of this year’s 7in7. We were in no big rush and spent as long as possible drinking in the almost impossible views from the main ridge before dropping down to Iris Burn and the half-way point. This is where I knew the wheels could fall off big time but thankfully I felt pretty strong (in a slow kind of way!) and arrived at Rainbow Reach in good heart.



Now just 10 kms to go and to make it extra special my 13-year old son Beinn joined the pack and ran with us the rest of the way. Two major tumbles in five minutes almost made for a premature end to the day but I bounced well enough and next thing we could hear the MC at the finish line. One more bend rounded and there it was – the finish to a 370 km, 72 hour week of running in very special places with very special people.

EPILOGUE >

The 7in7 Challenge 2010 raised over \$170,000 for the Leukaemia & Blood Foundation (LBF) and together with the inaugural run Mal and his supporters generated over \$250,000 for this very deserving cause. “It has been massively rewarding for me personally,” says Mal “And has been the catalyst for many wonderful new friendships. But it has only been possible because of the incredible support offered by my family, friends, commercial sponsors and the thousands of people who have given so generously to the cause. To all these people I give massive heartfelt thanks.”

For reports and photos from the 7in7 Challenge see >

www.7in7.org.nz/followthechallenge

To take part in a future 7in7 Challenge email >

mal@7in7.org.nz

Mal Law also operates Running Wild, an organisation and website conceived to highlight NZ as a trail running Mecca while doing some good for the world:

www.runningwildnz.com

FACTS

Over \$176,000 raised

370 kms run

72 hours on the trails

14,000m true ascent

30,000+ calories burnt

Favourite equipment:

Asics Trabuco trail shoes

Icebreaker socks

GT150 run tops

2XU tri-shorts

Innov-8 hydration pack

All Good Bananas run cap

SPOT satellite messenger

Spaceships camper

vans for support crew.

7 IN 7 MAP >

Day 1. Twin Lakes Marathon

42km race > 60 competitors >
All running for 7in7.

Day 2. Young-Wilkin Circuit

55km > 11 support runners.

Day 3. Motatapu Gold

50km > 10 support runners.

Day 4. Wakatipu Wonderland

42km > 10 support runners.

Day 5. Rees-Dart Circuit

67km > 11 support runners.

Day 6. Greenstone-Mavora

54km > 4 support runners.

Day 7. Kepler Challenge

60km > 400 competitors >
28 running for 7in7.



Mal's interview 1

on Breakfast TV PRIOR to
the inaugural 7in7 Challenge



Mal's interview 2

on Breakfast TV AFTER
the inaugural 7in7 Challenge



Trailer to 'For Alan' —

the short movie documenting
the first 7in7 Challenge