

IN TWO MINDS

A MANASLU MENTALITY



TWO LIVES ENTWINE ON ONE TRAIL THROUGH THE HIMALAYAS AS TWO VERY DIFFERENT PEOPLE WITH TWO VERY DIFFERENT HISTORIES FIND THAT LOOKING AT THE FAR AWAY MOUNTAINS CAN BE THE SAME AS LOOKING INSIDE YOURSELF.

MAJ

I'm an asshole. And it took me only three hours and 26 minutes to realise it.

I was in Nepal for the Manaslu Trail Race, but I wasn't thinking about it as a race. Due to a combination of a prolonged period of injury, ill planning and the talented local Nepali runners in the field, I thought I wouldn't be in with a shot at challenging for top spot. The release that accompanied this thought left me free of expectation and pressure.

When, in the three days immediately before the event, I was spending five hours a day on the toilet due to the Kiss of Kathmandu, I wasn't fazed about the effect it would have on my ability to compete. It wasn't a competition.

Even still it was great to kick into Stage One with the experience of pissing waterfalls out of my arse now, thankfully, a distant memory. We cruised through lush green forests of old growth trees and I was full of optimism at having just begun a journey that was sure to be high on the list of 'epics'.

Then at the three-hour 26-minute mark something happened.

I turned into a hungry competitor, ready to take candy from a baby if I thought it would give me extra calories to fuel what was now a race.

Physically, I felt good. A nine-day tour with Take On Nepal prior to the event must have prepared my legs for the terrain. Mentally, however, I was split into two minds.

Part of me held on to my intention to spend time talking to strangers,

connecting with like-minded people, telling bad jokes and making new friends. The other part had turned this into a running battle in the Himalayas.

When I crossed the finish line for Stage One, a race-minded devil sat on my shoulder and whispered, "Go. Go find a quiet place, put your feet up and recover. Stage Two is tomorrow and you have to race."

The devil's sweet voice is convincing, so I grabbed two serves of noodle soup, found a bench to lie down on and shut my eyes like a good anti-social runner.

JILL

Altitude played havoc with my head, generating unwelcome feelings that transported me back to Station 44 in Murnau Trauma hospital in Southern Germany, the place I had spent the initial months after my accident. I was trail racing in the Himalayas, the most sublime, picturesque, mountains in the world – yet my skull was fractured, my brain bleeding and swelling. The trail, the rocks, the glacial lake, the sky, all felt surreal, all took me back. I was flooded with memories of the pain and fear I had felt each time I had had an MRI. I was mid-Post Traumatic Stress heightened by Acute Mountain Sickness.

The first Wednesday of September 2014 was cool and wet in Bavaria. My 10th grade PE class had just taken to the field, it would be our first baseball lesson using actual bats. A student connected bat and ball with the power of a gifted athlete and my life changed in an instant. I remember the impact of the ball, trying to be strong

and mask the pain, ensuring my students were safe though needing them to run for help quickly.

I was brought to the local hospital then sent home after only minutes, diagnosed with a black eye – swollen shut at the moment of the accident. I struggled to digest that there was nothing more to the injury, who was I to doubt the doctor?

After two days alone at home, drifting in and out of consciousness, a friend found me and took me to Emergency. The medical professionals immediately put me in an ambulance to transfer me to a trauma hospital. Imaging showed a bleeding and swelling brain along with skull fractures. Now after more than two years and seven hospitals in three countries, I have a black eye that never opened again, cognitive and psychological problems, an appetite that has never returned and a wanderlust that is taking me around the world.

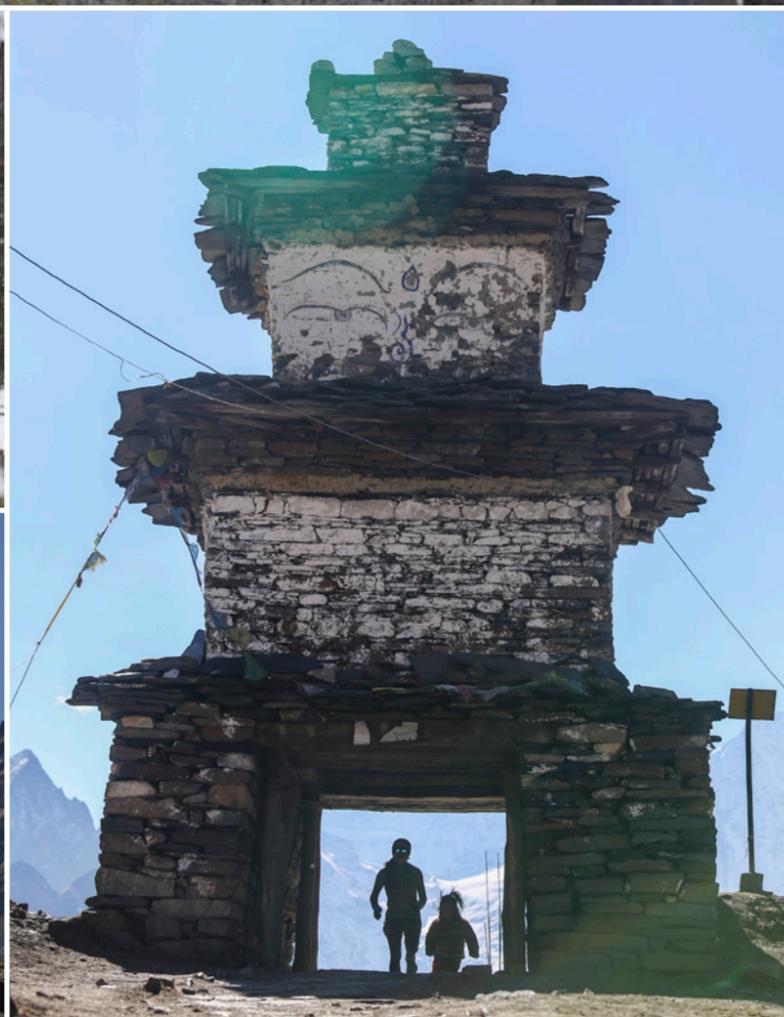
The week leading up to the 2017 Manaslu Trail Race I found myself enjoying early morning runs with a local runner providing fascinating insight into Nepali culture while getting enough elevation in the Kathmandu Valley to see the mountains otherwise not visible from the clogged city.

Then the race started, a slew of unfamiliar, impatient runners and technical terrain leading into a dark abyss as far as my good eye could see and positive self-talk needed to speak loudly over the screaming devils of doubt.

Lending itself to a pace that compliments my compromised vision,

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<< the extended climb of Stage One suited me. As the altitude increased I felt strong so my expectations increased. What goes up though, must come down and on the technical downhill the footing toyed with my limited depth perception, the only rhythm I seemed to generate was that of frustration and doubt.

Finishing Stage One, it was obvious that the wild oscillations of this mountain trail race would be felt more than merely in altitude.

MAJ

Stage Two was time to throw down! After a little warm up in the lead group, getting held up by mule trains and moving up the gorge towards snowy mountain peaks my legs felt good and my mind said "Get moving, run hard and push". Just over three hours later I crossed under the finish line banner and reached straight for my watch like a 10km road runner, stopped the time and started a counter to see how long I had been able to put between me and my competitors.

My plan of making new friends had turned to crushing fellow competitors. I grabbed three bowls of noodle soup and found my bed for a couple hour's kip.

As our group of 54 runners, staff and mules moved towards Manaslu we entered another world. I see a stage race like school camp for adults. The Internet is non-existent and life's focus turns to the one single day ahead of you with time to be free, take off, run. With no to do list, deadlines or emails, days are full of more 'living in the moment' moments. And moments of boredom. It was strange to feel bored again. Life in this other world would span the 12 days of the race, a time when personal histories were only what you were willing to share and this freedom allows people to drop their layers. With a competitive mindset, however, I felt I was starting to put on new layers of personality, layers I didn't like.

I started to feel the need to be intimidating on the trail and have my actions demonstrate I was here to race, not make the kind of small talk that cuts into recovery time. It's healthy to challenge yourself to achieve what you didn't think possible but there are many ways to rise above your own expectations. I have learnt a lot in the past couple of years and the old adage of 'the nice guy never wins' is complete bullshit. We can only ever win in the long run with love and compassion. We are our thoughts and our actions are driven by what we think. The feeling of winning is momentary.

When I am old and can't run anymore, I'd rather be sitting in a room full of friends than a room full of trophies. I needed to remind myself of that.

Here in the big mountains, I needed to change my attitude because I could feel myself turning into a thorn amongst a group of roses.

Everything we do starts from our mind. We have control over so little, at any moment something can happen that changes your future in an instant. So we only have now to act in a way we will be proud to be remembered by.

Running at 3800m with the sensation of breathing through a straw can lead to doubt and negativity, especially when racing. But it doesn't have to. We can frame a situation how we want. I could curse, be discontent or get caught up in minutes and seconds, but I knew that in order to run my best, I needed to run relaxed, be encouraging, run happy and enjoy the incredible Himalayas. I knew that most importantly I needed to help the other competitors around me to achieve their goals and conquer this brutal race.

As we ran it hurt and in our group of four there were three grown men and Sunmaya, a teenage Nepali girl. She did not leave our side for 7km of the 8km stage. Pushing us to the limit, it >>

« was impressive. As we hit a slight slope forcing us all into a walk, Sunmaya started to drop back and it was then that Brice, a true 6-foot Swiss machine, placed a hand on her back and helped her towards the crest of the hill. An example to follow and that is what I did.

JILL

Despite the losses that have changed my path, my recovery and rehabilitation are taking on a new form, one aimed at moving energy away from thoughts of how life used to be and towards self-acceptance. Circumnavigating the globe, I decided to embrace my differently-abled body and run one mountain at a time.

Finding the appropriate challenge that lends itself to confidence building rather than frustration and doubt is an equation I am committed to solving. Since embarking on this adventure, I have run in the Pyrenees, French Alps, Italian Dolomites, Slovenian Alps, India and now Nepal.

Normally a large group of strangers, unpredictable situations, lack of routine, unfamiliar food – each of these alone throws me outside of my comfort zone, however, in Nepal the concoction

blended smoothly to make for a most memorable experience. The Himalayas found a way to shelve the bureaucracy and anxiety that all things became in the wake of my accident. The wide-open space has the power of perspective.

My accident put so much into perspective. Allowing numbers such as speed, distance or counting wrong turns to dictate the outcome is wrong. Yet on too many days it is such a struggle to move away from this mindset. Debriefing the day's challenges over a bowl of noodles with an already well-rested Aussie – Maj – came at me with the surprise of a hard ball to the head, yet the impact so drastically different. Perspective shifting.

MAJ

Competition is not evil. Competition can bring out the best in us and this is what Manaslu did for me. As soon as I changed my mind about the way to win, about what winning was, my enjoyment increased and my experience enriched.

I managed to keep a gap on second place, but the way I went about it was completely different from Stage Three onwards. I listened to the joyous fat Buddha on my shoulder whispering: "This is such an amazing crew of

people, encourage, support, make a real connection and enjoy this moment, because the important things in life are not things."

In my mind, I yelled motivation to the people I ran with and when the Himalayas forced us to suffer my thoughts came out in the words of a crazed yeti. This was the only way I wanted to be a competitor. I got real with who I was deep down and emanated as many positive vibes as I could onto the trail.

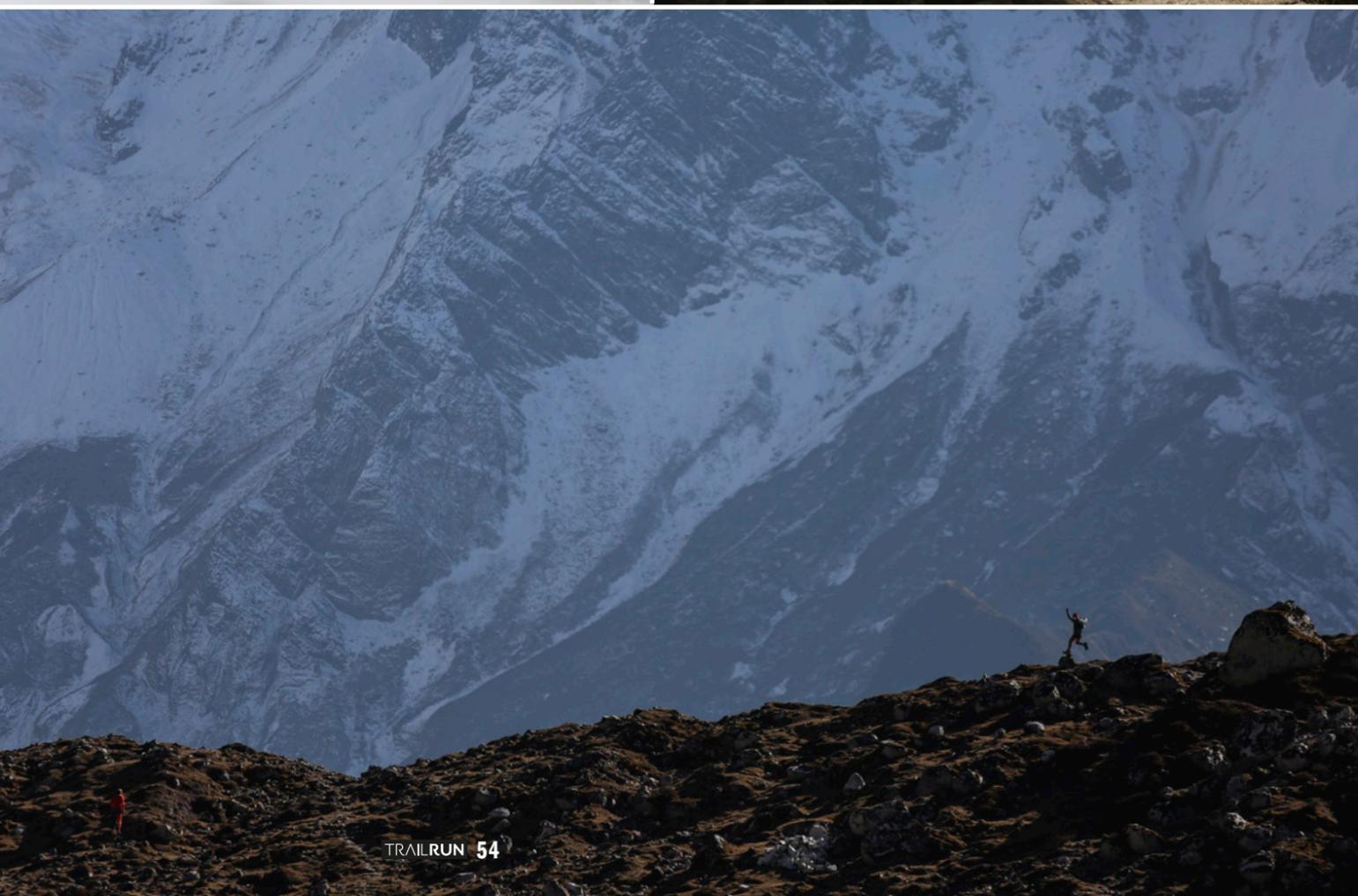
The people surrounding me were crazy and totally bad-arse and seeing them coming from all walks of life reinforced the value of our one, short life. Bill celebrated his 63rd birthday during the race. 63! And going 190km over nine days with 11,000m of vertical ascent, not to mention a few 4WD journeys that could break a hip, was insanely impressive. I tried to find a comparable challenge so big and different that I would be as equally far out of my depth. I'm still planning that trip.

And then there was my new friend, Jill.

JILL

Listening to my body has never been a strength yet the fear that accompanied »





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the throb in my head with each metre of altitude gained during Stage Four was screaming. Demons laughed while I fought to digest the Acute Mountain Sickness that would mean I would not get the fairytale ending I was longing for. Yet I found it in me to remember that I had not simply come the few thousand vertical meters of trail below. I'd been given three days to live and survived hundreds of days in intensive care. That was part of the journey. Now, months later, I found myself racing fiercely up the Himalayan slopes with the same will I mustered to pull out tubes from my body and disconnect monitors. The trail encompasses the mountains of my mind. I appreciate that which I have overcome while continuing to foster acceptance and personal growth one step at a time; in the mountains that step needed to be a 180 degree turn.

Though turning back on the trail of Stage Four was not what I wanted, I tried to see that making the decision was in fact growth, a step towards acceptance and being mindful of what is important.

Losing a sense changes you in ways you can't imagine. In losing 70% of my eyesight, my vision for that which I feel is important has actually been enhanced. I completed six of the seven stages and though my Manaslu race numbers did not measure up as I had hoped they would, time with inspiring new people made for unforeseeable highlights. They were short anecdotes, an extended wink,

polite curiosity, a random hug, insight and reality checks, numerous seemingly insignificant actions coming from a handful of manic mountain runners who, I feel, have no idea of the meaningful impact they have had in helping me embrace this, my differently-abled, life.

MAJ

Crossing under the finishing banner for the last time with a Number One next to my name was nice because the race was tough and I fought hard, but it is an insignificant footnote to the experience that all those competitors shared as a group, the connections that we made and our heartfelt laughter that still bounces off the mountain walls of the Himalayas.

Now, back in Australia, reliving the dream of my time in the Himalayas with *Trail Run Mag's* editor, Chris Ord, who eight years prior had himself run Manaslu in its first edition, I am struck by how incredibly similar our stories are. New friendships were made and still endure, we both hold on to anguish over reconciling the urge to compete with the need to be compassionate to fellow runners. We remember the simple life and dramatic beauty of being face to face with Nepal, its mountains, people, culture and its ability to strip you back, peel away the layers and change you as a person. We both remember moments of tears shared between grown adults standing in an alpine meadow in the shadow of giants. **RUN**

MORE INFORMATION

www.manaslutrailrace.com – 2018 provisional dates: from 10th November

www.mustangtrailrace.com – sister event to Manaslu and just as adventurous

www.trailrunningnepal.org – the organisation behind both events and many more, and responsible for much of the growth of trail running in Nepal.

www.takeonnepal.com.au/trail-running-tour.html – trail running tour to Nepal, hosted by Majell Backhausen with a charitable aim

www.majellbackhausen.com - follow Maj's trail running adventures

www.mountainsofmymind.com – follow Jill's adventures