

SANI STAGGER

The Sani Stagger (25 November 2006) consist of three races, the marathon, which runs up and down the Sani Pass and two half marathons, one up and one down the Pass. These races takes place in the Southern Drakensberg and are hosted by a small athletic club in Underberg, Sani Athletic Club.

This is not your normal marathon. It is tough, extreme and then there is altitude! The race starts at an altitude of 1566m and Sani Top is 2874m so the climb is quite significant. They claim to have the highest pub in Africa at the top! The first 10-14 kilometres may be described as undulating, however, the seven kilometres to the top are very steep and have hairpin bends like you have never seen on such terrain! Awesome! Only 4X4 vehicles may use the road and we had traffic all the way.

The weather conditions on the day were extreme with light rain most of the way, but it had rained all night, the night before the race and the road was mud — thick “porridgey” mud! The traffic on the day including 4X4s, taxis, yes, even on Sani Pass and quad bikes, the riders looking like men from outer space with the suits and masks etc they were wearing for protection from the elements, further churned up the mud.

The “down” runners are transported to the top in 4×4 vehicles and the “up finishers” are transported back to the start. The route is simply the Sani Pass! The start for the “up” half and full marathon is on the golf course at the Sani Pass Hotel. The route takes you out of the grounds onto Sani Pass and up, up and up to the top, called Sani top! At the turn



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around a band is placed around the wrist of the marathon runners, which indicates to the officials at the finish that they went through the halfway point. Without this band you are a non finisher. On the way up you run through the South African border which is opened especially for the runners to pass through early in the morning. The border is usually only open between 08h00 and 16h00.

The day before the race was hot 30°C and I wondered how I was going to deal with the heat. Race day dawned with mist and light rain! Complete turnaround in temperature, about 15°C. And then I had the thought of how to run this race in the rain! What to wear? I do not like extra clothing so decided to run in my Cape Storm body warmer and at the last minute the windbreaker which ended up around my waist within three kilometres!

The misty conditions blotted out the magnificent views we were intended to enjoy. At times I couldn't see runners ahead of me as they disappeared into the mist. The beautiful mountain scenery on either side of the road — not there! (I joined a tour up the pass the following week on a clear day and saw what we had missed!) Mud was unbelievable, slippery and unavoidable! I had to adapt my running style so that I did not slip. Had to run flat-footed through the really muddy parts and think that is why my upper quads were so sore afterwards. We had intermittent rain the whole way and the rough road conditions made it dangerous in some places. Near the top we picked our way as the road condition was extremely rocky and uneven and very steep. I walked most of the last five kilometres to the top. I read on an ultra running website that for approximately every 311m increase in altitude above about 1524m your ability to run will diminish by about 3%. This translates to an approximate 12% loss in performance to the top and turning point for the marathon. The altitude took its toll and at one point I felt light-headed and that I was going to faint. I decided

that was not going to happen and focused on moving forward and staying upright. Fortunately that feeling passed and I was OK again. Now I know why they call this race Sani Stagger!

It was freezing at the top, -3°C we were told. The wind was icy and my hands ached and burned from the cold. My legs were also cold and stiff and I didn't trust myself to run!

Running down was tricky especially the first bit from the top where it was not possible to run, but also not too comfortable to walk! After negotiating the first five kilometres of the descent it was easier to run again and in places there were some good runnable sections where you could get into a rhythm for a while. Going down, of course, got a bit warmer and the wind became less, so it was more pleasant, however, we still had some light rain. The cooler weather conditions were favourable, as a hot day would have probably brought with it some casualties from dehydration, heat exhaustion and runners dropping out. A few runners did fall though, and I was told before the race that a lot of folk fall and when you see the terrain you can understand this. I am proud to say I did not fall!

I had this thing about finishing the race in less than six hours so I tried to keep going as consistently as possible. At two kilometres to go it was going to be a tight finish! I made it in 5:59:21 in the end, just scraping in! This target was self-imposed as the race has an official six - and - a half hour cut-off.

Training

I felt that my training had been adequate. I have done a lot of trail running during the year and this helped with getting stronger over a period of about five months. Thanks to **Michele Priestman** for her enthusiasm and drive and for re-introducing me to trail running and for the wonderful training runs we shared. In addition I used races like the *Voet*, the *Grape Run* and training runs over Boyes Drive, Ou

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Kaapse Weg, Silvermine, and Table Mountain. I used club runs during the week, running with the 5:45 min/km group, which took us up through greenbelts and vineyards, what a privilege, all hills and off road running to keep reminding the body of what to expect on race day. I feel that this all paid off as I felt strong on the day and was able to keep going towards the end of the race and meet my target. It was a happy run mentally as I think I had prepared well. I could not prepare for the altitude though. One should either arrive a few weeks before to acclimatize or the day before the race. We arrived on the Thursday afternoon before the race which took place on Saturday morning. However, I did not feel too bad on the run and I coped well and only suffered minimally and fairly briefly about 4-km from the top.

Lindsay Weight had given me some tips about altitude running and one was to hydrate well days before the race and also during the race. I did that. I only wish that she was still alive so that I could feed back to her on my race as we had planned.

Race splits

As a matter of interest I include my splits. Note the 15-21-km split! This was the extremely tough section where I walked for about 5-km.

Distance in km	Split	Total time
0-7	50:05	
8-14	56:04	1:46:09
15-21	1:37:49	3:23:58
22-28	56:55	4:20:53
29-36 (8-km)	57:35	5:18:28
37-42.2 (6-km)	40:44	5:59:12

The first half- 3:23:58 and the 2nd half 2:35:23. My watch time was a little out with the official time of 5:59:21.

I was very sore and stiff for about three days after the race, felt like I had run Comrades!

All in all this was a huge experience, rather a test of endurance than a marathon.

It is a very popular race and the entries are restricted to 200 for the marathon and 100 each for the half marathons. Entries open in July. Website: www.sanistagger.com all works out!

Gail McLellan



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