

Personal stories from 2009

1. Pip Miner, Poipet development worker and runner

I like surfing and I'm crazy about snowboarding. Unfortunately, neither of these sports is booming in Cambodia... so it's a good thing we've got the annual Pursat River Run! This year was my second year to run Pursat and I learned a few lessons.

Lesson # 1: It's not about time. It's about having a good time.

The pre-race information noted that the routes were not exactly 5km or 10km. Pursat might not be the place to record a new personal best time, but it's a great race to enjoy running with local Cambodians. Runners turned out from thirteen high schools across the province, the police and military police, non-government organizations as well as members of the public. Of the 495 runners, there was a sprinkling of expatriates, but most runners were locals. Running with a bunch of locals is what makes this race great!

Lesson #2: It's not about fashion. It's about finishing in style.

Just before the start of the 10K, there was a huge downpour, cooling the air and giving runners an excuse to look a little messy after only a few kilometers. (Me? Sweaty? Nah.. it's the rain!) I was quite comfortable but I wondered about the teenagers who ran the full 10 in soaked jeans and a cotton T-shirt? They were still smiling at the end so I guess they were ok! I noticed a range of footwear too. Many ran barefoot. Some ran in socks. One young guy clicked down the street in his football boots. Ultimately, it wasn't as much about fashion as finishing in style. Srey Mao, a 15-year-old student from Battambang, embodied this. She ran a well-paced 5K, striding out 300m before the finish line and taking first place in the women's event. All this in shorts, a T-shirt and a pair of socks! It wasn't about fashion, but Srey Mao was all style.

Lesson #3: It's not about placing. It's about racing.

At the starting line, I couldn't help but notice there were kids preparing to run who were about half my height and a third of my age! I wasn't sure whether to feel pity or fear (or both). After some jostling at the start, runners settled down and began to run their own race. At the finish line, Mok Bonthoeun finished the 10K a comfortable 2 minutes ahead of his nearest rival, Kieng Samon, and Emily Woodfield defended her women's 10K title. Cheng Chandara claimed the men's 5K and Yeut Srey Mao won the women's 5K. For the kids who pinned a race bib to their chest for the first time, I hope they will race again and discover that placing isn't everything. Rather, it's about setting a goal, running at it and celebrating finishing the race.



Pip gets her 'silver medal' for coming 2nd in the 5k

Afterwards, I spoke with some of the other runners and race officials. Some high school students were thrilled with the prize money they received and said they would use it for their studies. One runner said she was motivated to enter the race because she is training to be a school sports teacher and doesn't simply want to teach the theory but wants to be a role model for young people. The race officials I spoke with loved being a part of it too. They said they have no plans to run next year but would consider participating if there was a Pursat River Ping Pong Competition?!

I can't say that in Pursat 2010 there will be surf, snow or ping pong.... but I do hope there will be running!

2. Laura Watson, Phnom Penh doctor and runner

As we assembled by the dusty white line across the road marking the start of the 10k race, a clap of thunder accompanied the onset of one of Cambodia's incredibly powerful monsoon downpours. Attempting to stay just a little dry, I squeezed below an overhanging roof along with a couple of local khmer women who had come along to see what was going on and join in the fun. I asked them if they were going to run. "Oh no, I am too old!" she said, looking about 35 to my eyes. "How old are you, Ming?" I asked, using the polite work for younger Aunty. "I am grandmother and 55 years already!" she replied. As the rain eased, I jogged out through the marshy field to get back to the start. I joined the group of bedraggled runners on the start line and groaned as we found out that we were still waiting for the man with the watch, the official time-keeper, to arrive from where he had been timing the 5k race. The Khmer elite runners jogged up and down to warm up – super light and bouncing as if they had springs on their feet.

Finally we were off – relieved at the cooling effect of the rain but nervous about the race to come and worried that the road could be pretty muddy and slippery, I tried to settle into my pace and not shoot off too fast. The smallest kids ran beside and in front of me, many in bare feet or flip flops. One young man had shoes several sizes too big that slapped loudly with each footfall. It was distracting so I speeded up to get away from him. His smaller barefoot colleague kept up with me and we ran along side each other for a while in companionable silence.



The run took us along the Pursat river, swollen and brown with monsoon rain. Small houses and local café's lined much of the route. Small children shouted out greetings "Hello! What is your name?" and held out their hands for a good luck slap.

Reaching the outskirts of Pursat brought dry weather and a smoother surface, but more obstacles. Well into the morning now many people passed by on motorbikes carrying goods for sale, or babies in woolly hats, or entire extended families. All turned to stare at the unusual spectacle of hundreds of runners along their main road. We passed the biggest landmark of Pursat, an island in the middle of the river that has been modelled to look like a boat. The wheelchair race had started from here a little earlier in the morning, with most of these athletes disabled through landmine injuries.

The last part of a race is always the hardest and the stretch past the market and the small hotel was no exception – a sharp turn to the right and the stadium was just about in sight. This consisted of a rather muddy green field with an indistinct finish line and a small crowd to cheer us home. Crossing the line in second place I bent down to receive a pink plastic garland. The race was over, and once I had tracked down a bottle of water I got back onto the road to cheer on those coming in behind me.

All our elite Cambodian friends had done well, picking up the first 3 places in the men's race and a young 15 year old girl from further north had romped home to first place in the women's 5k. Athletics is poorly funded in Cambodia and runners have to train and live on miniscule amounts of money – even a national team athlete must try to feed himself on about \$30 a month, and the one pair of cheap trainers they receive a year are barely adequate for the job. But their love for the sport is obvious and you get the feeling that they would all run anyway, even if they had nothing.

3. Brian Stenson, Irish vet and a 'friend of Cambodia'

It was a great pleasure to attend the Pursat River Run in October 2009 and see the great mix of competitors – Khmer and foreigners, men and women, boys and girls, disabled and able bodied. The organisation and coordination of the races and the ceremony afterwards was fantastic. Many people had travelled a long distance to take part – by plane, bus, car, walking or by wheelchair and it was lovely to see the enthusiasm shown by everyone especially the schoolchildren. Well done to Kosal and his team.



Brian supports DDSP and sponsored the Pursat River Run because of the opportunity to champion disabled people's inclusion

Because I am an old man 😊 I was unable to take part in the race and so I followed the athletes on a motorbike, camera in hand. Like everybody else I got quite wet when the rain came but this only cooled us all down a bit. I missed the wheelchair race because I was following the amputee's race but I met up with them all afterwards in the tent – which proved very useful due to the weather. I spoke with many of the disabled athletes and they were all so pleased to be involved in a big inclusive communal event. We could all be disabled tomorrow if we are unlucky and have an accident.

I was nervous when I was asked to make a speech and wrote it during the night before the race, with a good dictionary to hand. I am not sure how much of

what I said was understood but at least it got a laugh or two. So, maybe I contributed a little to the fun on such an enjoyable day. It was also very pleasing to see all the dignitaries attending and supporting the event and I was delighted to be presented with a lovely krama scarf by the Deputy Governor.

I look forward to attending the race again next year and meeting my friends in Pursat and Cambodia. Thanks to everyone who made me so welcome in this beautiful province.