

Comrades Indeed!

Two Northwest runners finish the most famous ultra of them all, South Africa's Comrades Marathon by *Gleb Velikanov*

Applying sunscreen at five o'clock on a cold morning, with the sun not expected for another couple of hours didn't feel right. Yet I found myself smearing on enough to last me the 55 miles separating Pietermaritzburg and Durban, in South Africa's coastal province of KwaZulu Natal. I was preparing to embark on a journey of a lifetime — the annual Comrades Marathon.

My friend Jack Branson and I decided to train for a 50-mile ultra marathon after running the 2006 Seattle Marathon. The original plan involved finding a 50-miler in the U.S. However, upon discovering an online ultra marathon training program that mentioned Comrades, Jack and I were certain that going to South Africa was something we could both commit to.

Comrades Marathon is like no other. Despite having "marathon" in its name, it is an ultra marathon started by South African veterans in 1921 to honor their comrades fallen in World War I. It has become amazingly popular over the years and is known world-wide. The race reverses direction every year. On even years, runners find themselves traveling west, from Durban to Pietermaritzburg, an "up" run. For the 2007 installment of the run, Jack and I were training to run the opposite way — "down".

A stern time limit is another feature unique to Comrades. While elite runners finish the race in about 5.5 hours, every participant must complete the run in 12 hours or less in order to officially finish. Five time cutoffs are situated throughout the course, disqualifying runners who fail to pass each one by a certain time. Promptly at 5:30 pm, when the race clock strikes 12 hours, officials block the finish line, preventing any remaining competitors from crossing.

The seemingly harsh rule has been an integral portion of the race since its in-

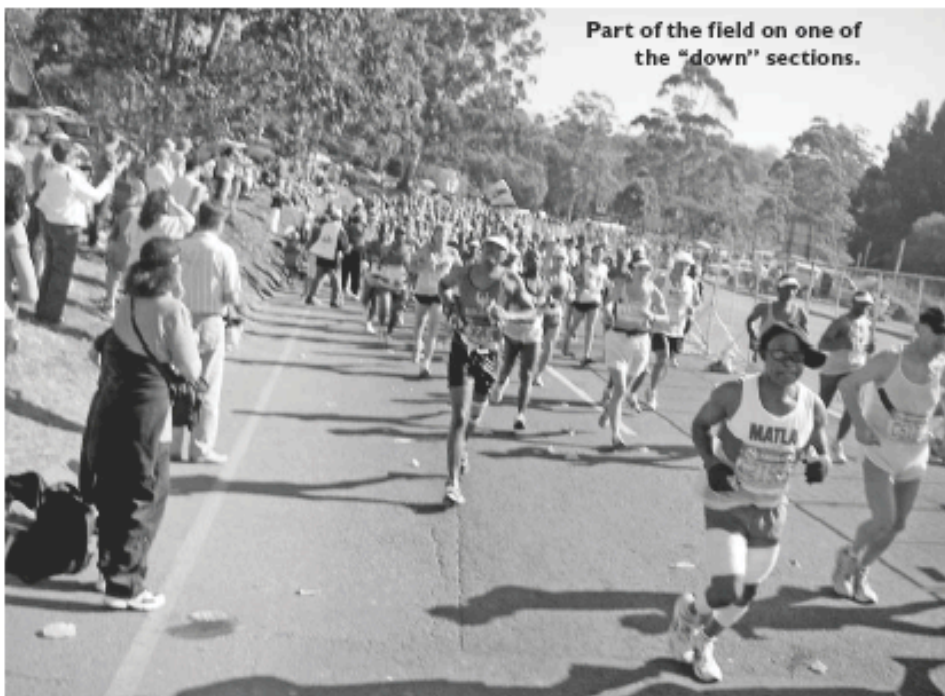
ception. Watching the final minutes of the race is quite moving: runners try their best to make the cutoff; many stumble and fall from exhaustion. Athletes that are still on their feet oftentimes carry fatigued runners towards the finish line, exemplifying the main theme of the race: camaraderie. Sometimes tragedy ensues — this year two runners died while running Comrades, one of them mere yards away from the finish line.

Training for Comrades

The time limit, along with the course made completing the race a hefty task. Despite being "downhill" this year, Comrades offers plenty of incline. Our training program was reflective of that: a six month high-mileage regimen, emphasizing back-to-back long weekend runs, and peaking with two 75-mile weeks, a month



Feeling good right before the start, the author (l) and training partner Jack Branson.



Part of the field on one of the "down" sections.



ABOVE—Halfway there, and feeling cocky.

BELOW—The infamous 12-hour finish clock—in just over 8 minutes they block the road.



and a half before the target event. While deciding to take on the program, Jack and I resolved to maintain some time flexibility, in order to accommodate various personal and professional commitments.

In addition, we made some adjustments to the program. First, I suggested we throw out one of the weekly runs in favor of an additional cross-training workout. The potential for injury prevention makes cross training an important part of training. Over the six months we took up indoor rock climbing, cycling and elliptical exercise machines for cross training. Endurance-specific weight training and Pilates were the final components.

Just as anticipated, we could not manage to follow the training program to a "T". Jack's demanding work schedule during the week rendered him unable to put in some of the shorter runs. My weekend commitments ruled out a couple of longer, consecutive-day weekend runs. In order to make up for the lost mileage, I beefed up my weekday runs, sometimes having to do ten-milers on two or three consecutive days. My hope was that the

total weekly mileage would suffice come race day.

Despite the busy lifestyle, my companion and I were committed to running a standard marathon as a part of training. We chose the inaugural Eugene Marathon, finishing a long training week with 26.2 miles of measured roads and aid stations. Somewhere along the course of that run, I realized that if I could set a marathon PR as part of a 50-mile week, I could finish Comrades.

Good nutrition played a significant role in my preparation. A dilettante in nutrition, I've devised an endurance-friendly diet. I made sure that the necessary 40-50% of my caloric intake came from whole-grain starches, like brown rice, quinoa, potatoes, cous-cous and sprouted-grain bread. These less-refined selections provided me with nutrients important not only for energy needs, but also general nourishment. A good example of such would be B-group vitamins and iron, which are plentiful in whole grains.

Lean protein sources such as chicken breast, eggs, tofu, milk and lean beef, along with fattier ones like salmon, cheese and tempeh provided building blocks for muscle.

Healthy fats, like olive oil, avocados and nuts, along with large amounts of fresh (organic when possible) fruits, vegetables and berries were the final portion of my diet.

Getting there is not half the fun — it's no fun

In addition to training and maintaining a healthy diet, I had to figure out how to get to South Africa and find accommodations. We planned our trip while training. Booking tickets was easy, while finding accommodation proved to be nearly impossible since Comrades runners had booked most of the hotels, motels and bed-and-breakfasts in or near Pietermaritzburg. Luckily for us a local wedding venue, 10 miles west of Pietermaritzburg, had a bungalow still available.

With our training complete and our plans set, we arrived at the airport ready to run. Instead we faced the long trek around the world. "Torture by Airplane" popped up in my head many times on the way there and back. As we flew into Durban a week before the race, Jack and I were mentally preparing for Comrades, while my girlfriend Breanne provided moral support. We stuck around Durban until we could pick up our race numbers at the convention center. Then we headed

towards Pietermaritzburg.

The day before Comrades I was wound as tightly as a spring. At the time we were staying in the bungalow in a beautiful rural area. I made an effort to relax, even lay on the cabin porch in a sleeping bag, staring at the horizon in order to find peace. But to no avail, as I found myself wide-awake way past my bedtime, clenched up with anxiety and unrest.

A fast start to 12 hours

The morning of the race was a whole different story—the anxiety was gone. I woke up thinking: “Ten 10k’s in a row—I can do it.” My confidence grew as we got closer to the starting area. Thousands of runners in space blankets, garbage bags and other disposable warming garments, were congregating behind the starting area fences. It turned out that my friend and I were seeded in different batches so I was to start on my own. We decided to both stay on the right side of the course so we could find each other. At the time I had no idea that it would not happen until the last four miles of the race.

After all the pre-start traditions (three songs and a rooster crow), the gun went off. Having ran Spokane’s Bloomsday I

was expecting a bit of traffic jam in the beginning, after all, almost 12,000 people were running that morning. To my surprise, the delay took only about three minutes, so my watch gave me an accurate time for the remainder of race.

My time was great for the first half of the race, so I anticipated a sub-11 hour finish. The much-heralded hills were not extraordinary—nothing I haven’t seen in trail ultras. In my head, I laughed at the advice to walk the hills from the beginning, advice I’ve heard numerous times before the race. I ran most of the way to Drummond, the official halfway point.

In retrospect, I should have listened to that advice, as I found myself in a strange place after about 40 miles. “Who am I fooling,” I thought, “I’m not a runner, I’m crawling at a snail’s pace.” And indeed, I was—my initial haste has caught up with me, nearly depleting me of energy. Various muscles of my body, mostly quads and, surprisingly, abs hurt badly. To my credit, I was able to make the best of it, maintaining fluid and food intake and structuring my walking breaks in an effective way, walking briskly up hills, while trying to run most flats and down hills. Nevertheless, a sub-11 finish was

out of the question.

At this point I hadn’t seen Jack for most of the race. I finally saw my friend after I passed the “6K remaining” marker—a distance marker was conveniently placed every kilometer throughout the race. It turned out he also started out too fast. Breanne, who took pictures and kept tabs on us via the Internet, later said that she saw Jack’s pace slow down dramatically in the final 13 miles of the run. At the time I was able to jog a mile in about 10.5 minutes. I asked Jack whether he could join me. He said he couldn’t. I told him that we both were going to finish, and that I would meet him at the finish.

I crossed the finish line having run for 11 hours, 29 minutes and 25 seconds. My training partner came in ten minutes later. Comrades was the longest either of us traveled on foot in one day. We were utterly exhausted, ready to be motionless for about a decade, dreading the feeling of lead in the lower extremities, which is inevitable the morning after.

“It will define you” is the race motto. It did—figuring out how to go on after hitting “the wall” around mile 40 gave me hope of completing a longer ultra. Or, just the bragging rights to say that I finished

Spokane Marathon, Marathon Relay Half Marathon and Five Mile Run



Presented by the Bloomsday Road Runners Club

October 14, 2007

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