

# COMRADES MARATHON

## Durban to Pietermaritzburg

16<sup>th</sup> June 2006-06 Youth Day

UP RUN - 87.5 Km



## History

The 'Comrades' is known as "The Ultimate human race" and was first run in 1921. It is recognised as one of the crown jewels of ultra-distance road running in the world. The race is run annually over a distance of approximately 88km between the cities of Durban (at sea level) and Pietermaritzburg (650m above sea level). Each year it is run in a different direction, but always incorporates "The Big Five", five really long and steep hills (there are innumerable 'smaller' up and down hills too). It is well known for its tales of camaraderie, endurance and the pain of either making or missing the sound of the gun that marks the cut off time of twelve hours.

The 'Comrades' is an Odyssey, both in terms of mileage (54 miles) and Courage, Commitment, Character, Camaraderie and Coincidences. Unbeknown to me, my 'Comrades' Odyssey actually began in Toronto Canada in September 1971 when my

cousin 'introduced' me to Ralph Waldo Emerson (a 19<sup>th</sup> century American poet and philosopher, of whom I have spoken about before). In the copy of his book that she gave to me upon my departure, was marked the quotation "What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us" a statement that has popped in and out of my memory cells over the years since then.

When I returned to running in 1980, it coincided with the start of an era in which a man named Bruce Fordyce was to win nine 'Comrades' in as many years and hold both the 'Up' and 'Down' records at one time or another. His exploits gave the 'Comrades' world status, but he himself never gained true international recognition for the great runner he was due to political, financial and sporting sanctions being imposed on the SA government at that period in time for their stance on apartheid. (Fordyce ran his 24<sup>th</sup> 'Comrades' this year in a time of 9:41:11 placing 3593 "for fun").

Because of these sanctions and travel difficulties, my intention of 'having a go' at the 'Comrades' was put away into the memory cells as 'something to do later'.

## August 2005

Whilst looking through travel brochures, I found a Safari tour in SA, that would last 6 days, taking in Lake St Lucia, Swaziland and Kruger Park, which if taken, would allow me to keep a promise made many years earlier to Sue, my wife, to see the animals in the 'Real SA'. (It also kept me happy, because I would not have to sleep under canvas for 10 nights on a 'real' safari). When checking out airfares on the web, information came

up about the Comrades Marathon taking place on Friday 16.06.06 from DB to PM. The tour started from DB on SUNDAYS. Coincidence?

On looking at the 'Comrades' website for information, imagine my surprise to see the theme quote for 'Comrades' 2006 to be: "What lies before us" etc, the very quote from my friend RWE himself. Coincidence? The qualifying time for a 'Comrades' entry, is a standard marathon in under 5 hours. Easy peasy for me, I am in London 2006 already and can run 3:10 no probs! Coincidence? And so the seeds were sown.

### **October 2005**

I had managed to find information from the 'Comrades' website, and other sources about ultra marathons, about the training required, about the L O N G runs, no that's L O N G runs.

So, based on previous successful (for me) London Marathon training schedules, for 'Comrades' I added a bit here and there and really added the mileage for AFTER London. My aim was to run London fast and slow down for the 'Comrades'.

### **January 7th 2006**

LM training began for me today, on my 56<sup>th</sup> birthday, in the snow at Aldridge XC. It is 15 weeks to London and 23 weeks to Durban. (It rarely snows at the seaside?). The next day, on my very first 'real/proper' LM long run, I turn an ankle.

Things do not get much better in the weeks that follow. I run the Gloucester 20 on 5/3/06, 5 days after getting out of bed with the flu and worse still, near the end of the race, I really hurt a

hamstring. Around now, I enter the White Peak Marathon in May, something I have had in my memory cells for a number of years. The Bedford 20 on 2/4/06 was not much better than Gloucester, bonus here was no real injury problems.

### **FLM and After**

And so to London, where all went fairly ok until mile 20, and then the last 10km taking 58 minutes, desperate on the day, as well documented on this website previously. By Coincidence, an awakening on distance and pace that was to put me in good stead for later.

In the days after London, various blood tests and talks with my GP reveal no problems and so on the Saturday after London, I run 18 miles in 3 hours around the hills and roads of the Lickeys, my running home for the next 6 weeks. In this time, I ran, walked, jogged many a bottle of water, gels and biscuits in a knapsack on my back around the Lickeys, managing two 'runs' of 35 miles, the longest time on my feet being 6 hours and 7 minutes, well short of the 8 + hours and 65km prescribed in the coaching schedules. (As a result of completing the first of the 35 miles 'runs', it is only now that I have the confidence to send off my entry form for 'Comrades' on 5/5/06, three days before the closing date. The deed is done). I did have a 'rest' on Saturday 20/5/06 when I ran uphill for 21 miles and down (at the end) for 3+ miles when completing the White Peak in 3:54. (I had not realised when I entered, that the run was uphill for 21 miles. Upon reflection, a Coincidental bonus for later?). The next day, I walked/ran 16 miles around 'home', the Lickeys, totalling 42 miles in 24 hours, which is ok is it not?

In order to get some added 'race' info (and hoped for mutual support), I logged onto the 'Comrades' website forum and noted the comments/anxieties from runners in SA and the rest of the world. My 23 weeks' long runs total of 530 miles (833km), plus the bits during the week, 250 miles ?, total 780 miles (1248km), looked a tad short of the 1100 miles (1760km) over 28 weeks training that everybody else seemed to have put in as recommended by the 'Comrades' Coaches and veterans of previous runs. GOBI from the UK and Simon from Switzerland seemed to be the prime movers in Q/A, Gobi because he had been there already and done it and Simon because he was as unsure as me!

My support crew and I agree on a drastic taper for the first weekend in June, 50% reduction in mileage from the last weekend in May. Second June weekend, 15km on Saturday, 5 miles on Sunday.....ALL SLOW. As with my successful Baltimore Marathon in 2002, no runs/jogging, nothing, just rest for the four days before the race. All through this eight week period, I have had great difficulty in keeping between 9 to 10 minute mile pace, 7+ minutes miles are so much easier! I have sore knees, hips, back and instep, but there is nothing more to be accomplished now.

**Wednesday 14.6.06**  
**Balmoral Hotel lobby**  
**Durban 10.00am**

Question to concierge : "How long will it take to walk to the Durban Exhibition Centre?"

Answer : "Do not walk sir, take a taxi, much safer" Welcome to Dodgy Durban!

A 5 minute taxi ride deposits us at the DEC for Registration and Expo. When trying to register, I am refused. I am told "You are an International athlete and special". We are led to International Registration and are warmly welcomed. We are given yellow day glow wristbands (to indicate we are International), race info pack and where to go to buy bus tickets for Sue to travel to PM and for us both (hopefully!) to get back to DB. I am wished 'Good Luck' for Friday and thanked yet again for coming to SA to run the 'Comrades'.

The calm is broken by a shouted invite to join a table as one of the occupants recognizes my Gloucester 20 Finishers T Shirt. We sit down and the shouter introduces himself as GOBI and the man sat next to me is Simon from Switzerland. Coincidence or what?

Over tea and biscuits, we are introduced to a succession of foreign runners, all of whom Gobi seems to know! An hour passes quickly as we all (runners or not, wives and girlfriends) exchange talk of life for us all over the last 6 months. Despite coming from different parts of the world, all seemed only to have one issue to resolve : 'Comrades'. We leave wishing each other good luck and trying to convince ourselves that Friday will not be a problem. We tour the Expo, see the great man Bruce, buy mementoes, and talk. People see the English T shirt and want to talk, talk about Friday and English football. There is a recurring theme though : "Thank you for visiting SA, will you come back next year?" Next year? How would I know, let me finish this year first!

## Friday 16.6.06

**3.30am** Despite not feeling like it....breakfast!

### 4.00am

Get kitted up, making sure correct number on front of my vest (full name, country of origin, how many 'Comrades' completed, smaller number on back).

### 4.30am

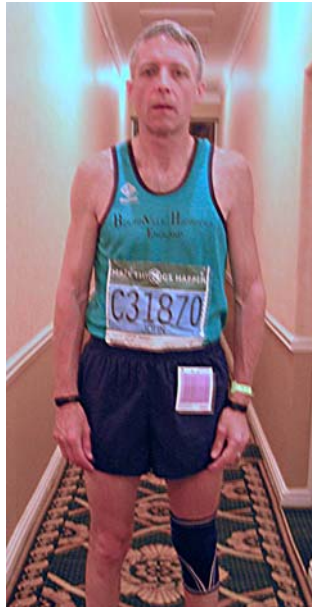
Meet in lobby as agreed with 2 Namibian women, some Japanese, Chinese and Germans. Outside, we meet and walk to the start with innumerable African Nationals.

### 5.00am

We get to the start area and Sue is not allowed to enter, she has to walk the dodgy Durban streets alone to get to the buses to take her to PM. Despite a number of people standing around, enquiries reveal that no one is bussing it to PM. However, a man named Michael (who has just left his wife into the start area) offers to walk Sue around to the buses. Sue ushers me passed the start area fences with good luck wishes ringing in my ears and I hesitantly leave her with Michael and I enter the chaos of the baggage trucks area where I get a new number for my Tog kitbag. Will my kit really get to PM?

### 5.20am

I have found my way to my 'C' seeding pen and I am going over (again) my race plan. I now recall speaking with Dave Dixon (Comrades



CEO) at the LM Expo back in April, when I joked about the comment 'start slowly, get slower' (he smiled, a knowing kind of smile) and I then wondered if my plan to run for 50 minutes to the first drinks station (approx 6km), walk for 2 minutes, run for 25 minutes then 2 minutes walk etc etc, review the situation at halfway was correct.

OH POOH, I have forgotten to put suntan cream on!!

Blasting Chariots of Fire music impose into my thoughts and a loud cannon shot to my left, extols to the world that 'Comrades' 2006 is under way. At **5.32am** on my watch, I cross the Championship timing mat and my 'Comrades' Odyssey has begun.

As we climb our way out of DB, we are about to join the (closed) N3 motorway to PM. To my left, in the crowds, I notice a big black momma shouting to us all. She is in her dressing gown and wearing slippers. It is 5.55am. For the next few kms, crowds are on the bridges over looking the motorway and along the hard shoulder, shouting encouragement.

After a constant steady uphill climb, we come to the first drinks station. On my watch, 50 minutes have elapsed, on schedule! What a surprise, the water is ice cold, in soft plastic sachets, you bite into them and instant water – brilliant! Why don't we have them in London? I recall reading somewhere that 'Courage is making the first walking break'. Everyone else is running, but I walk after 60 minutes, for my planned 2 minutes. So soon I am running up the first of the 'Big Five', **COWIES** and amazingly without stopping!

Onward and upward. I am joined by a man who asks where I come from in England. He knows of Cadbury and we discuss the merits of eating choklat on long runs. He also wants to discuss how lucky England Soccer were the night before! He leaves me with wishes of good luck and thanking me for visiting SA. I am musing over the fact that we (Sue and I) were lucky, we only saw the last ten minutes and the goals too! I am startled awake by a voice to my right, "Come on John Ward, you are looking great!" It is Sue! Why/How Is she here, why is she not in PM? As we climb **FIELDS HILL**, my worried thoughts are interrupted by Shaheed, who sees I come from England and wants to talk soccer!

Unknowingly, I have slipped from my 25 minutes run, 2 minutes walk mode into a more comfortable run/walk/jog the hills, trot down the other side scenario. There are people at the side of the road having breakfasts and



**Botha's Hill - 53km to go!**

barbecues. Somewhere along the route, I notice a portable bar complete with keg and six optics! Without fail the shouts come up : "Come on International, welcome to our country". We are well on our way now to **BOTHAS HILL** (53km), the 3<sup>rd</sup> of

the 'Big Five'. Through the drinks and food stations, the young children at the side of the road shout out to me "Come on choklatman" or "Gimme choklat Mista". They have noticed the significance of 'Bournville Harriers England' on the front of my vest as being associated with Cadbury!



**Arthur's Seat**

Having cleared Bothas Hill and passed the Wall of Honour (a wall at the side of the road dedicated to previous Comrades), amazingly Sue pops up again! And there is Michael. Now I know how Sue got here and wonder what Michael's wife thinks about the woman he is with. (Sue has never met Michael's wife and still has not!). At 44km to go, I stop to wish Arthur Newton ( a 5 times Comrades winner from the 1920's) 'Good Morning Arthur' as legend has it, he would sit here for a drink and something to eat on his training runs. Legend also claims that giving such respect, will ensure a good second half to your race. Just before **DRUMMOND**, I arrive at a well populated Halfway (43km) in 4:28, Coincidentally in about the time I had hoped for, despite my change of planned routine.

With Drummond well behind me, I stop for the 3<sup>rd</sup> (?) time to loosen my shoelaces. My insteps are very sore. I still have 30km to go. Is it here that I recall reading on the 'Comrades' website 'Learn to love hills, both up and down'. They were not lying. In a perverse kind of a way, I now look forward to an uphill section,



I can have a rest and walk! Coming to the 26km to go sign, I notice my right quad and groin area beginning to seriously cramp up. 'No not now, why can't you wait for another one and a half hours?' Then a Coincidence, around the next bend is a drinks station and the ice cold water sachets reach parts of my anatomy that no water bottle would have ever reached! With shouts of 'Come on International' in my ears, I am joined by a man from the Northern Cape on his 'Annual Pilgrimage to KwaZulu-Natal'. As he leaves me, he tells me "Its all downhill from here, well, there is one small hill left".

LIAR! LIAR! I have done my homework; I know well what is left to do.



At 25km to go, my spirits are lifted when Sue and Michael are there again to shout encouragement and issue the proverbial lie : "Your looking good!".

Somewhere down the road (or was it up the next hill?), I realise that Sue has seen me three times and I have been RUNNING on each occasion! We come to the Umlaas Road Junction at 19km to go (the highest point @ 870m, but it does not tell you) where hoards of people are gathered to cheer you on. 'Come on International, welcome to our country'.

Just before the 9km to go marker, is a sign stating '**POLLY SHORTS**'. This is a monster, some 2km long. Few people jog up this hill, let alone run it. (We were to find out later at the finish, that a black novice South African was



Just a few more km

leading the race at the bottom of this hill, but the experienced Russian six times 'Comrades' runner, had passed him before the top of the hill and went on to win by over two minutes). I walk it all, discussing with a man from East London (?) SA, the merits of running on the English canal networks towpaths. Two weeks earlier, he had been on a barge holiday at Stratford on Avon!

Over the top now and I have to stop at 6km to adjust my shoelaces for the 6<sup>th</sup>(?) time. My feet are REALLY sore now. I know from here that there are three 'inclines' to negotiate, but nothing has forewarned me about the last one at 2.5km to go. It reminds me of Rose Hill, home at the Lickeys.

When I breast this hill and start trotting, I realize that if I start RUNNING downhill, I can break the 10 hour barrier. Full Concentration begins, this is the fastest mile I have run in the last eight weeks!

**FINISH** I enter The Oval (PM cricket ground) and (it seems) abruptly, I have finished. There is me and 4/5 others in the vicinity (shades of sub 3 hours @ LM).

I cannot believe that for just under 10 hours, it is so quiet, so few runners. Have 10 hours passed so quickly, I was not even hungry! As I pass through the finish gate, my thoughts are of months of (not enough) training, bravado,



**Over the line**

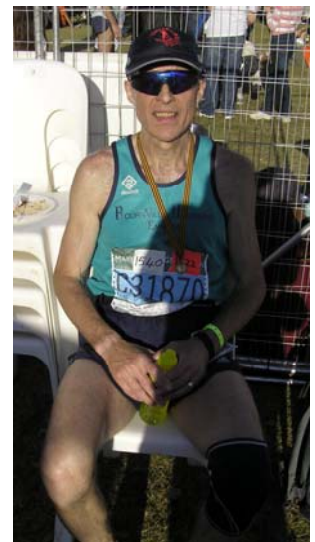
courage and commitment, that have enabled me to join the 76515 previous Comrades who have completed their Odyssey. My support team, one here somewhere in the finish area, the other at home in the Lickey, will be well pleased with my endeavours.

Because of my day glow band, a 'Comrades' Official greets me with the

question : "Congratulations, are you ok?" His second question is : "Are you an Aston Villa Fan?" He has spied the BVH England on my vest front. We discuss the current status of West Midlands soccer and he then asks : "Will you come back next year?"

I am then passed to another Official. Congratulations, are you ok? He asks if I had a good day and we discuss the route, particularly toward the end. As I am passed to a 3<sup>rd</sup> Official, I am asked : "Will you come back next year?" The 3<sup>rd</sup> Official gives me my medal, a patch and a time card, it states 9:58. As I am directed to the drinks area, he asks : "Will you come back next year?"

I wend my way through the drinks area and Sue is (naturally) waiting for me by the exit gate. We make our way to the International area and have tea and cakes (very good) and soup and Energade and then more cakes and coffee, with the nationalities from our hotel. Gobi turns up to offer congratulations. He has failed in his attempt to gain a silver medal (sub 7:30), but pleased with under 8 hours. Simon of Switzerland has finished, but time unknown. Whilst at the finish, we see the prize giving, the Russians are tops again this year, with the men's and women's winners. I see the 11 hour Bus finish. There are 300+ people in it.



**A well earned sit down!**

Pity the runners behind who wanted to do a sprint finish! (A 'BUS' is the SA version of 'PACE' groups at the LM).

As the sun is about to set over PM, we head for the bus to take us back to DB. This trip proves 'interesting'. Even the

locals enquire of the driver if he has passed his driving test! A young black runner passes out half way to DB. His friends pass no heed. The wife (who was a nurse) of a German runner attends to him. Two white SA runners who are doctors also check him over, he is stable. We reach DB and the fainter has recovered. It transpires he has had no drinks or food since finishing, he cannot afford to pay for it. We are dropped off at our hotel, all of the staff clap and cheer as they see the medals around our necks. We need feeding.

### ***Saturday 17.6.06 8.00am***

I get out of bed and my ankles and lower shins are very red and swollen. I hobble to breakfast, where we are clapped and cheered again by the staff. I find a newspaper and discover I am 4191<sup>st</sup> overall out of 12002 registered runners and 3822<sup>nd</sup> male. How can this be for just under 10 hours?. I force myself later to walk around U Shaka, a SA version of our Sealife centre. We meet other 'Comrades' there, some in a much worse/better state than me!

### ***Sunday 18.6.06 8.15am***

After an early breakfast, we are collected from our hotel by Craig, a big softly spoken ex rugby player, he is to be our tour guide for the next six days. Sue explains to him that its not my age as to why I am limping, but the fact that I had completed the 'Comrades' two days earlier. You can see he is impressed with me. "Lovely, well done " he says "Are you coming back next year?"

From the hotel next door, we collect three men. The oldest was a wizened 60+ year old Italian called Carlo, his

30+ year old son Fabian and their 40+ year old in law Michael. Craig and 'The Lads' as we called them (although how three men all over the age of 30, could be deemed as 'Lads', escapes me) were to prove great company over the coming days as we wended our way to J'Burg via Lake St Lucia, Swaziland and Kruger, Pilgrims Rest and the Cullinane Mine. Craig loved all sports, the 'Lads' were mad for any of the World Cup, and amazingly, Carlo would regale us with stories of his trips elsewhere, Alaska and a Trans Siberian Railway journey to name but two. We all wanted to see animals and Craig proved he knew a lot about them and loved them too on our tours through the Park. At all the hotels and stops during the week, Craig took great delight in telling his friends and acquaintances about his 'Comrades' passenger. Even 'The Lads' were getting into it. In nearly all cases, Craig's contacts would ask the same question : 'Will you come back next year?'

All too soon we were in J'Burg at the end of our 2600km drive, knowing we all had to go home, but not really wanting the tour to end. We say our goodbyes to 'The Lads' and thank Craig for his company and knowledge. We have had a great holiday. He says : "Lovely, well done, are you coming back next year?"

**PS** In 2005, the Comrades Committee introduced for the first time a 'Back to Back' medal for those competitors who ran 'The UP' run one year and 'The DOWN' run the next year.....**What would YOU do?**

**PPS** Oh, did I ever mention where 'The Lads' came from?

**WHY TORONTO CANADA,  
WHERE IT ALL BEGAN!**