

## “It Will Humble You”



*Those four words to an aging marathoner will not be taken lightly. Mixed with four glasses of wine, they are no longer just a slogan, but the ultimate challenge of “I double, double dare you to”. Taking that challenge is how I ended up on a flight to South Africa to participate in the world’s oldest and largest ultramarathon; the Comrades.*

I went primarily because some advertising agency had such a damn great catchphrase “It Will Humble You”. Had that phrase been something else like “Have Fun”, I would probably have just stayed in Kent sipping a few more wines instead of heading to the start line of the Comrades.

The Comrades Marathon is a grueling 56-mile run along a very hilly country road in South Africa. The course runs from the town of Pietermaritzburg in the hills outside of Durban, to the coastal city of Durban.

This year was the 92nd running of the Comrades. The entry field was capped at 20,000 and did require a qualifying time.

The race had the support of 6000 volunteers, 46 water stops, 40 Rescue Buses, 14 ambulances, and one Medevac helicopter. It had satellite tracking, 8 medical stations and the largest temporary medical tent in the world housing 65 doctors and 20 nurses.

The race was started by a World War I veteran in 1921 to commemorate the sacrifices of the South Africans killed in that war. It is the “Super Bowl” of all South Africa’s sporting events. The event is broadcast live on TV for the entire 12 hours. Of the 20,000 runners, less than 1,000 runners are non-Africans. Thousands of runners each year fail to complete the course in the required 12 hours. When giving up, they are bused to the finish line and are denied the coveted Comrades’ finisher’s medal.

This year’s Comrades was my first ultramarathon. After having run all the world’s major marathons, I was looking for a new challenge. I figured if I was to run only one ultra in my lifetime, it should be one of the world’s best.

I also thought that at the age of 67, it was time for a reality check. Time to push a little further or a little faster and see if the body stays together. Maybe I am still delusional, but no one, not even myself, has yet convinced me that I am old. The Comrades would be the test.

As far as being humbled by a race; that wasn't going to happen. Anybody that knows me knows there is no humbleness in my body.

My training plan for the race was very simple. Run hills and run slow. Going the distance was my biggest concern. In training, I never ran more than 20 miles. However, I did run two marathons in the month before the Comrades, and that gave me a bit of confidence. But I knew to accomplish my goal in South Africa I would also have to train the mind.

Finishing the Comrades would require an unyielding mind; one that was both realistic and delusional. I had to be sharp enough to convince myself that the stupidity of what I was attempting to do, was actually a brilliant idea.

While rationalization and delusion can be helpful, the real strength of the mind comes from knowledge and preparation. In preparation for this race, I read several books about the Comrades and its history. I studied reports on almost every Comrades' race ever ran. From the winner's comments, I learned I must "Run with an even effort," and push through the "bad patches". To do otherwise would bring on the most humbling experience to a runner; a DNF and the "ride of shame" in one of the Rescue Buses.

The Comrades Marathon has very strict cut-off times along the course. If you don't run fast enough, the road is closed off to you, and you must board a bus to the finish line. Other races with cut off times will generally let you continue to your destination along sidewalks and side streets. Those races only penalize you by not giving you a medal or shirt.

The Comrades has no qualms about humbling you. Having never had a DNF, I can only imagine what it must be like for a runner to ride the "bus of shame". Not wanting to be one of those runners, I developed a strategy for finishing the Comrades Marathon.

I will take the advice of the champions and run at an even effort and try to work my way through the bad patches. I will run more with feeling than with data. I will do that by covering my watch with a band-aid and only looking at it when I reach the six cut-off points.

And finally, when it comes time to face those daunting hills of South Africa, I know what I must tell myself to make it happen. Powerful words from The Little Engine That Could.

**"I think I can. I think I can."**



### ***The Race***

The Comrades Marathon started at 5:30 AM on the morning of May 29th. To make it to the start on time I had to get up at 2:00 AM to get things ready and ride the bus nearly 60 miles to the town of Pietermaritzburg. It was a small town with a big name I still can't pronounce.

For me, the early morning temperature of about 45 degrees was quite comfortable. But to the Africans, it was a chilly winter morning that required jackets, sweaters, and gloves.

I felt strong mentally and physically standing there at the start line in front of the city hall.

The night before the race I carbo loaded with rice at a Japanese restaurant called Daruma. The maître' d reminded me, as I went out, that the restaurant was named after the Japanese Daruma doll which was a symbol of perseverance and good luck. He said, "Think Daruma when you hit those bad patches tomorrow".

Each marathon in the world tries to be unique in its start. The Comrades began in the early morning darkness with thousands of African runners singing along to a beautiful old traditional Zulu mining song. The song's name was "Shosholoza," which means "keep on going."

After the singing, the theme music from "Chariots of Fire," was played, then a cock crowed twice, and with a shot from the mayor's gun, the race was on.

My run started from the middle of the pack, which meant I was already behind in time on the 12-hour limit since the timing was based on gun time. I found it interesting that the slowest runners in the field would be giving the world's fastest runners a 10 to 20-minute lead.

Once the race started, it didn't take long to reach the first rise of the notoriously hilly course. In the darkness, with runners tightly packed together, it was hard to gauge the length and height of that first hill. Knowing that getting over it would be a significant test of my hill training, I took the advice of former champions and ran with an "even effort." I had no problem going over the hill into the valley beyond. It was really a confidence builder to be able to do so.

What surprised me in the early miles was that almost every runner was walking the hills. And while they walked, they never moved to the side. That hindered any speed I had and made it tough to make progress through the crowds. I quickly realized that there was no use in trying to move up. I settled into a running pace that was just barely faster than the speed of the walkers themselves.

Because the country road was narrow and had no shoulders, the congestion went on for nearly 15 miles.

There were many hills, but they were not as steep as those that I train on in my neighborhood. With each one that I rolled over, I gained more confidence. In the first couple of miles, there were street lights that shined across the runners. From the top of one ridge, those lights, alternating with the darkness between them, made the roads in the distance look like zebra stripes.

By mile 6, the sun began to come out, and spectators started to emerge from the small houses near the road. The day of the Comrades is one big party for the South Africans. It is just as popular as Patriots Day is in Boston.

For the South Africans, it is a time to barbecue. All along the course, there were marathon parties with people smiling and drinking beer. Wherever there were pockets of people, there were always small children who would high five you or offer you candy.

At Lion Park, about 10 miles into the race, I reached the first cut off point. There I took a quick look at my watch. I was quite happy to see that I was 35 minutes ahead of the Rescue bus. The Rescue bus is the "Bus of Shame" that snags stragglers who are not moving fast enough to make the cut off points. To ride it is to begin the humbling process that is the Comrades.

A couple miles after Lion Park, I reached the highest point on the course at Umlass Road. The elevation was 2850 ft. From there, I had a beautiful view of the "Valley of a Thousand Hills". I continued to run along at an "even effort" and hardly noticed going over the top of Umlass Road.



Thinking back to that part of the course, there was a sense of tranquility in rolling across those magnificent hills with their beautiful grasslands. It was like being adrift in the sea in a small boat gently floating up and over each ocean swell. It was so serene to run at that time that I believe I might have grasped a bit of that elusive runner's high.

The second cut-off came at around mile 19. At that point, when I removed the band aid from my watch, I saw that I was 43 minutes ahead of the buses. It made me feel pretty good to know that I had extended my lead.

My next target was to get through the marathon distance. I had never run more than 26 miles in training or in races. If I were going to “hit the wall,” it would be at that distance, and it would probably be a solid wall. I also considered the possibility of a second “wall” at the halfway mark.

As it turned out, my worries were not warranted as the marathon point was in the middle of a downhill slope, and I blew right through it without even realizing it.



Reaching the halfway point of 28 miles in the Town of Drummond was exciting with the crowds being perhaps the biggest of the race. It was also the third cut off point where I again checked my progress against the buses behind me.

In pulling the band aid away from the face of the clock, I was stunned to see that I was now only 20 minutes ahead of the Rescue buses. I was in total disbelief of how I could have lost 23 minutes of my lead. Sure, I was a little tired, but not sore. I had pretty much run the course nonstop. As long as I live, I will always wonder what happened then and there.

Whatever happened, it was sure a game changer. My full confidence went out the door as I projected my times going forward. If I lost 23 minutes in one leg of the race, where would I be after three more legs? The “I think I can, I think I can” mentality instantly flipped to “I know I can’t, I know I can’t”. It was like turning a light switch off. A complete shutdown. There were no thoughts of possible failure ahead. Failure was here now!

From that point on I knew I was alone and boxed in between the third and the fourth cut offs. The buses would be coming after me from behind, and the fourth cutoff would blockade me ahead.

I no longer saw a need to race anymore. Getting to the cut off fast would end the journey sooner, so I decided to just run the clock out. To take the time to take pictures of the hills in this “Valley of a Thousand Hills.” And to take the time to visit with the South Africans spectators along the route.

I realized I was now prey for those bus drivers looking for the injured and the stragglers. The Comrades was no longer a race for me. It was now an African safari, and I was the hunted. I decided not to go

down easy. I would resort to my SERE training from my military days to keep the clock running. (Survive, Evade, Resist, and Escape.)

At 30 miles into the race, I hadn't yet seen any of the Rescue Buses. If they were around, they were well hidden. There were still thousands of runners behind me. I expected many of them would miss the cut off, and then the buses would begin to roll. I believed the first buses to go past me would be full of runners and pose no threat. It would be after all of the runners at the cutoff were picked up that the search would focus on runners like me that were moving towards the 4th cut off.

I walked up the first hill after making the decision to stroll into capture. I now had time to see how truly beautiful the valleys were and take pictures. The spectators I talked to along the way were very friendly and sympathetic to an old guy out in the bush country.

I spent a lot of time taking high -fives from the children along the way. Usually, they stood in a long line of 10 to 12 kids with the oldest and tallest in front. The 3 and 4-year-olds would always be hiding in the back.

Once in a while, there would be one shy kid standing all alone; a little apart from the rest of the group. I always gave that child a little extra attention. I am sure that many of the 19,000 African runners in this year's race once were small children watching the race from the sidelines.

In time, as expected, the first "bus of shame" appeared along the road weaving through the runners. To my surprise, it wasn't a bus. It was just a van; a "van of the vanquished". Just as I thought it would be, it was full of humbled runners. It was quickly followed by another van and soon 2, 3, or 4 vans would pass by together. Ultimately, one van came through that was not full of runners.

Seeing it, I kicked up my feet and jogged forward. I was determined to signal to the driver that this guy was still a runner and not prey to be picked off the street. That van did drive by me and went after slow walking runners. I knew; however, other vans would be back later, and they would not be so easily deterred.



From that point on I was always doing a walk, look, and run routine. I had a wonderful time interacting with the spectators. There were three occasions where I stopped in to join a barbecue and spent 5 or 10 minutes drinking beer with my new comrades. As the number of runners on the road continued to thin



out, the drivers started to take more of an interest in me and frequently stopped to ask if I was ready to quit.

I joked with the spectators that I was on the run from the hunters, and they all were searching for me. At one beer stop, my new friends pointed out an oncoming van and asked me if I was going to get on it. I replied "Nope! I can run faster than that van." I then took off down the road to loud cheers from everyone around me. This game of cat and mouse went on for about an hour and a half. A bus would pull into sight, and I would jog quickly out of sight.



As the course quickly became devoid of runners, I became more and more the center of attention for not only the drivers, but also the spectators. Seeing no runners in front of me, I was beginning to feel like I was leading the race.

One university girl in a Mardi Gras type costume, wearing thick sparkling glasses, came on to the road to run alongside me. We jogged together for about a quarter mile while she discussed her desire to run the Comrades someday.

As she left, I looked back to see another van sneaking up on me, so I took off running again. As I moved forward, my left foot stepped into a hole, and I literally flew through the air twisting, turning and landing on my back. Lying face up on the road, with my arms spread wide and my feet together, I must have looked crucified.

While lying there, people came rushing up to me from all directions. I don't know if they all came to help, or some just wanted to see if the old man was dead. For the latter, they got there just in time to see the resurrection as I rose to my feet with the help of three set of arms from bystanders. If the Comrades Marathon was ever going to humble me, standing there encircled by so many people staring at me was certainly a start.

As I stood there assessing the damage to my foot, the driver of the van that was pursuing me rushed in to see how well I was doing. He appeared more concerned with getting me into his van than how badly I

might have been hurt. I was beginning to think the drivers were getting a bounty for every runner they recovered.

The van driver asked me if I was ready to quit. After examining my foot, and believing it to be just a bad sprain, I told him “not yet”. He responded, “You have only 4 minutes and 3 kilometers to the cutoff point”.

I replied. “That’s ok. Let’s see how close I can get”.

With that, I started to hobble down the road. If I were actually racing for a finish, my injury would have definitely been a show stopper. But with only a few minutes of freedom remaining, I could handle a short walk.

As I took off down the road, a matronly woman locked arms with me and refused to let go. She wanted to be my guardian angel, and she wasn’t going to let go until she knew I could fly on my own. I became an old man who needed help across the street. I wasn’t a runner anymore. That was a bit humbling.

As we inched down the road, I could see the shame-wagon creeping along behind us. I was wounded prey, and the hunter was just waiting for his quarry to fall. The woman walked with me for about 5 minutes and kindly said goodbye. Soon after that, I heard a horn honk, looked over, and there he was, the “Grim Sweeper.” With a devilish grin, he uttered, “Your time is up!”

Looking around, I saw that there were no runners left in sight; neither in front of me nor behind me. I was the last man standing in this section of the race. My “SERE” instructor from 45 years ago would have been proud of me. For over two hours I survived, evaded and resisted capture. I walked over to my captor, surrendered and jokingly said, “I believe I have reservations for one”.

The shame-wagon was more humbling than I imagined. Once you give up, the driver doesn’t ask you for your bib, he practically rips it off and takes it. He then turns you around and marks a large “X” across the number on your back bib. He might as well have etched a scarlet letter “L” into your forehead. You have been marked a loser. Welcome aboard!



On boarding the van, I found 6 other runners inside looking woefully depressed. I thought about starting a rousing rendition of, “Wheels on the bus go round and round”, but quickly realized that such a happy song wasn’t going to work for this audience.



So instead, I went into my fatherly confessor mode and tried to elicit some conversation. I opened about my failure being the result of getting old and tired. I then asked the other runners what went wrong with their runs. The answers were pretty much a book of runner's injuries.

One lady from Mauritius had hamstring issues. Another runner had severe plantar fasciitis. A German man had an asthma attack. And an older South African guy was faint and dizzy. You name it, they had it. The only maladies missing were Ebola and leprosy.

Once the confessions were over, the bus became a little livelier with conversations. We talked about previous races and South African adventures.

I was surprised to learn that a lot of these runners had previously failed to complete the Comrades. One runner had run nine times and only finished twice. For a second runner, this was his fifth failure in a row. The German said he had run three times; once getting within one mile of the finish line before the time ran out.

The more I heard, the more I began to wonder if these people had reservations each year for the van. My ride with my new comrades was short lived. Within 10 minutes we were at the 4th cut off point. There we found real buses waiting for us. We joined an army of other humbled runners and boarded sleek new tour buses that could transport 65 runners at a time.

The bus I entered was just as quiet as the van was when I first boarded it. This time, however, I made no effort to start up a conversation. I just sat quietly in the back and peered out the window.

My Comrades Marathon had ended at about mile 37 of the 56-mile course. As I looked out the bus window, I saw thousands of runners who were still pushing forward towards the finish line. I wondered how many of them would fail to reach that 5th or 6th cut off and must board a bus.

The 19-mile drive to the finish line was pretty much all downhill. There was plenty of time for me to think about my Comrades run, walk and fall. I remained in disbelief of how I could I conquer many of the hills of the Comrades but have nothing left for the run downhill to the finish.

The bus ultimately pulled up to the back entrance of a stadium, where many other Rescue buses were already parked. Those runners who did not have to pick up their checked bags could slink away into obscurity without having to enter the stadium.

My bag was checked, so I had to go into the stadium to claim it. I had another runner take the bib with the "X" off my back before entering the stadium. At the same time, I tossed away my pass to a free buffet that was offered to international runners finishing the race.

Going into that stadium and seeing hundreds of smiling runners cross the finish line and not being part of it was the final humiliation. The grandstands were filled, and the TV cameras were still rolling as all of South Africa was waiting and watching to see who would be the last to cross the finish line before the 12-hour time limit expired.

I quickly left the stadium and walked backed to my hotel to watch the finish on TV. The number of people watching the race peaks during the last half hour of broadcast. Everybody wants to see the "train wreck" of tired and beat up runners trying to outrun the clock.

As the clock wound down, the TV cameras panned between the hundreds of runners outside the stadium and those inside circling the track. The exhausted runners were all in a frantic dash to the finish line.

When the 12th hour came, and the finish gun was fired, there was a group of about ten runners near the finish line. Only one man made the cut. He proudly received a bouquet of flowers and the coveted finisher's medal. Another man, who was only a second behind him, received nothing more than an interview on TV. He would, like me, go into the Comrade's history bin of DNFs.

I carefully watched his demeanor as he was interviewed on television. He didn't appear to be humbled by his failure. Maybe a little disappointed, but I could sense he took pride in getting so close to success. Seeing that, I started thinking about all those runners I had met on the bus who had failed year after year to complete the race. They deserve respect. They failed, but they didn't quit. Only by quitting can you really be humbled.

So, I too am not going to let the Comrades humble me. Someday I'm going to come back to that start line as a stronger runner. And as I look again down that course ahead of me, it won't be "I think I can, I think I can." It will simply be, "I know I will."