

# Comrades Ultra, 89km (56mile), South Africa

Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> June 2005 – Youth Day

It is said that the Comrades race is a journey that will change your life. I think this is true. The organisers promote the race as 'The Ultimate Human Race'. This is also likely to be true. What is for certain is that the race was 80 years old this year, and it is the oldest ultra run in the world – a real classic.

Imagine being at the end of the race, in a large stadium waiting for the runners to come in. I had finished just under 3 hours ago. The atmosphere is electric. Everyone is standing, everyone is cheering, everyone is clapping. There are 60 seconds before the final cut-off time. A chap is staggering towards the finish line. He'll easily make it, but we all cheer him along just in case. Then on the opposite side a lady enters the stadium. She also is struggling. She's got 30 seconds now. She only has to go 50 metres. She can barely stand. She staggers forward. She's got 20 seconds now. She can make it. The crowd are all shouting. The noise is deafening. She's got to make it. She's got 10 seconds now. She's not going to make it. My eyes are swelling up. I try to shout encouragement but you try to shout and cry at the same time.

The whistle blows. She collapses a few metres in front of the finish line. The paramedics are there helping. She goes home with nothing - absolutely nothing. She has been on her feet for 12 hours, covering 89km. How cruel can that be ? There were still people entering the stadium - all too late. I was so sad. Even now I swell up with the images of this day. Yet they all seem to shrug it off saying they will try harder next time. At least they got to the finish – thousands don't.

A couple of hours earlier a man falls in front of our eyes – again just metres from the finish line. Other runners nearby grab him – one at each leg/arm. The man isn't light. They struggle. They can hardly walk themselves. They have also been on their feet for almost 10 hours. They too have completed 89km. One of the runners drops a leg. The whole party collapses. They pick man up again. They are metres from the finish line. They drop him again. Other runners join in. Everyone is completely knackered, but they make sure that the man gets across the line before the 10 hour time. This is what The Comrades is about.

The race is run between Pietermaritzburg and Durban. Consider it a mountain road that leads down to the sea. Each year they change the direction. This year was known as the 'downhill run', although believe me there are plenty of uphill sections, and the downhill sections send a jarring pain up your legs. To cap it all the downhill run is some 2.5km longer to compensate for the 'ease of it all'. Some believe the 'uphill run' is better – I can relate to this.

It was a difficult race to pace. I completed the race within 9 hours 31 minutes (finish position of 3926 out of approx. 13000). The distance is so far that conservation of energy is the key. The first half should be done as slow as possible – even then you're probably going too fast. My half way time was 4 hours 20 minutes which was too fast, in hindsight.

Two thirds in to the race, I was walking uphill and running the downhill/flat sections. Towards the end I was walking the uphill, and alternating running and walking on the downhill/flat sections.

I was so knackered to the end I didn't know whether I would have enough energy to run around the stadium track at the end. 1km from the finish I decided to walk just to make sure. Had I not been there I would find this hard to believe: 5 minutes from the finish and I'm walking. I wasn't the only one. Indeed I seemed to pass loads of people quite happy to walk to the finish some 10 miles from the finish.

Weather wise, I understand the conditions were the best for several years. The sun was out providing a temperature of about 18°C, but there was a slight breeze. To avoid the full effects of the midday sun the race starts in the dark. Thankfully I was able to wear my black bin liner for the first 15 or so miles until the sun came up. It gets cold at night – this is their winter.

It is said that every South African should do the comrades run at least once. I can understand why. One section I teamed up with another lad. I couldn't speak his language He couldn't speak mine. We both pushed each other along, one lamp post to another. Without question this is the hardest race I've completed – but the comradeship was on every hill, around every corner, right next to you.

On reflection I realise that 'The Ultimate Human Race' is a play on words. Initially I thought it was the ultimate race you could run, now I think, they mean the race that unites the human race – the ultimate comrade.

What about the journey ? I think you need to go to South Africa and meet the comrades for this, but I know my journey has only just started.

*Rhys Watkins*