

Comrades on the Road: Stories from South Africa's Iconic Race

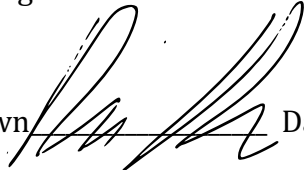
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the MA in Creative Writing at the University of the
Witwatersrand
15 March 2024

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
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Published Materials

I wish to acknowledge the publications that commissioned reporting used in this manuscript. Versions of stories that appear in this project were originally published as follows:

“56 Miles of Freedom.” *Runner’s World*. November 2017.

“South Africa’s unlikely ultramarathoner helps others cross the finish line.” *The Christian Science Monitor*. July 6, 2018.

“Lapping the living room: Lockdown marathoners get creative,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 8, 2020.

“We Are Here Because of Him’: The Runner Who Defied Apartheid.” *The New York Times*. September 24, 2022.

“The not-quite-redemption of South Africa’s infamous ultra-marathon cheats.” *Business Insider*. December 30, 2022.

“The Comrades,” *99 Percent Invisible*. Episode airing January 24, 2023:

“Never afraid to chase: A Black woman aims for ultra-marathon history.” *The Christian Science Monitor*. June 13, 2023.

“I connect to the pain’: Finding a second chance in ultrarunning.” *Al Jazeera*. July 1, 2023

“I refuse to be old’: The 81-year-old runner who became a South African celebrity.” *The New York Times*. December 11, 2023.

Acknowledgements

I have been reporting on the Comrades Marathon since 2017, and I owe a vast debt to every runner, race organizer, or general South African ultramarathon enthusiast I have spoken to in the years since. Each of them, in their own ways, have shaped my thinking and writing about the race. I wish I could thank each of them individually.

Of course, I must specifically acknowledge the runners (and families of runners) who are subjects of the stories on these pages: Sindiswa Magade, Wendy and Nana Nxumalo, Sibongile Mzili, Nompumelelo Madonsela, Thokozile Mtshali, Zwelitsha Gono, Hoseah Tjale, Bruce Fordyce, Sergio and Arnold Motsoeneng, Maros Mosehla, Galaletsang Mekgoe, Ashleigh Adams, and Shahieda Thungo. All of them have been unfathomably generous with their time and memories. Telling their stories has been one of the greatest privileges of my professional life.

I would also like to thank all of the Comrades experts I have consulted across the years. Comrades board member Isaac Ngwenya is an unwavering, passionate advocate for the race’s “hidden” histories, without whom this text would be much poorer. Former Comrades archivist Roxy Thomas tracked down my most granular, off-the-wall requests, and gave me free reign to while away my days in the remarkable race archive she has organized.

Sifiso Xaba and a colleague of his who I’m referring to in my text as “Sipho,” along with other members of the Chesterville Athletics Club, are basically single-handedly responsible

for reviving the legacy of Robert Mtshali, the first Black finisher of the Comrades. Before they came along, even the race itself didn't have any record of his existence. My own writing about Mtshali owes its existence to them.

I also wish to thank my fellow students in the creative writing MA for their spirited critiques of my work and their comradery through this process. Karen Milford, Victor Houliston, Dorothy Brislin, Lidudumalingani, and Paula Andropoulos, I look forward to reading all of your books in the near future. Thank you to my instructors, Ivan Vladislavic, Robert Muponde, Masande Ntshanga, and Peter Kimani for their close, smart reads of my work. Above all, I am grateful to my advisors Bronwyn Law Viljoen and Phillippa Yaa de Villiers for their help shaping the project, saving me from my own writing tics, and pushing me in sometimes uncomfortable new directions.

Thanks also to my friends and family, and in particular to Pascal Fahrni, who reminds me every day to not to take myself too seriously. My life would be smaller and duller without him.

Finally, this project is dedicated to Sindiswa "Sindi" Magade, for trusting me with her story, and in so doing so, setting me on the path that led me here.



Introduction: All of South Africa in a day¹

Every journalist has a favorite question to ask. It can be a sharp one or a silly one. Usually, it's nothing particularly ambitious or clever. It's just something to make the people we talk to open up, spin off course, forget that the person in front of them is there by professional duty. Maybe it is complimenting someone's outfit. Maybe it is asking about the baby who is their subject's phone lock screen. One journalist I particularly admire told me the question that had taught him the most was simply, "and then what happened next?"

Here is mine: "Would you like to go for a run?"

I got the idea in the autumn of 2017, when I was writing my first magazine story about the Comrades, an iconic 90-kilometer footrace run in South Africa each winter. The piece was a profile of a Johannesburg domestic worker named Sindi Magade who was training for her first Comrades. I found Sindi through the president of her running club, and in the months before the race, we met sometimes for coffee at a café at an outdoor mall in the upscale Joburg suburb of Fourways. It was the kind of generically hip place with angular metal furniture and exposed light bulbs dangling from the rafters. The location was Sindi's suggestion, but I had a feeling she chose it for my comfort rather than her own, and our conversations there felt wooden and detached. A wiry woman in her late 30s, Sindi was friendly but nervous. As we talked over milky coffees served in glasses, her eyes flicked past me. She stammered apologetically every time she forgot a word in English. I was nervous too – the assignment I had for *Runners World* marked the first time I had landed a magazine feature. I didn't want to mess it up.

¹ A version of my reporting about Sindi Magade was originally published as "56 Miles of Freedom" in the November 2017 issue of *Runner's World*. <https://www.runnersworld.com/races-places/a19457092/comrades-marathon/>

A version of my reporting on the history of the Comrades marathon was published as a radio documentary entitled "The Comrades" on the podcast 99 Percent Invisible on January 24, 2023: <https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/the-comrades/>

A version of my reporting about people running long distances during COVID19 was originally published as "'Lapping the living room: Lockdown marathoners get creative," *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 8, 2020. <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/2020/0408/Lapping-the-living-room-Lockdown-marathoners-get-creative>

From our conversations in the café, a faint outline of Sindi's life story began to take shape in my head. She had grown up in the 1980s in a village in the Transkei, a so-called "homeland" designated by the apartheid government for Xhosa-speaking Black South Africans. It was a postcard-pretty place, where pastel rondavels were speckled over rolling green hills, and the frothy, turquoise ocean roared softly in the distance. But there was no work there, so like many of the Transkei's inhabitants, Sindi's parents went away each January to Johannesburg to work for white people -- her mother as a maid, her father as an airport porter. Her first pair of shoes were hand-me-down heels her mother brought back from her employer one Christmas, that she wore proudly until the boys at school started their taunts. *So, you think you're a fancy madam now? Are you trying to be white?*

Sindi couldn't remember a time she didn't love sports. She played soccer with the boys in the village until they grew too big for her to keep up, and then she switched to netball. But her biggest love was running. She competed barefoot in athletics competitions on the gravel track behind her high school. And later, when she dropped out of school and moved to Cape Town to clean houses, she ran laps around a local sports field after work.

The long distances started later, when she moved to Johannesburg, a city that sprawled endlessly into the *highveld*, where the commute to work in shared mini-bus taxis could easily eat up half your pay. She began to jog home to save money, and then something strange happened. She realized she liked it. Other people she knew who jogged for exercise told her that as the miles added up, they felt heavily and sluggish. But Sindi found the opposite was true. On her long, slow runs, she simply sunk deeper into a rhythm, relaxing into the sound of her own rasping breaths, or the woosh-woosh-woosh of cars sliding past on the road beside her. Often, it was the only time in the day she was really alone.

By the time we met, she was living in Diepsloot, a township 15 kilometers from the café where we sat. She was a full-time domestic worker for a middle-aged couple. They were kind people, she said, and paid her enough that she could afford to take a shared taxi to work. "But I usually run," she announced to me one afternoon in the café, as a white dog roughly the size and shape of a puff of candy floss sighed theatrically from under the table beside us. "Sometimes, when I'm training for something, I run both ways."

I set down my spoon on the saucer. "Could I come with you sometime?" She blinked back surprise, and then her face cracked into a wide smile.

“Ok,” she said. “Why not?”

And so, I found myself, about a month before the 2017 Comrades, driving to Diepsloot just before dawn. My small Hyundai scraped along the pothole-cratered roads, lit only by the florescent lights of sticky roadside taverns, still open from the night before. I checked the clock: 5:45 am As amapiano beats thumped through the bars’ open doors, my headlights picked out the rows of commuters already walking brusquely through the dark towards the township’s main road. They were dressed in the puffy black jackets and khaki pants of the city’s security companies, and the coarse blue jumpsuits of its gardeners.

On the fringes of every South African city, a mass exodus like this one is a daily occurrence, as residents of the country’s poorest neighborhoods trudge off to work in the houses and shops of its richest. I knew this, but as a resident of the suburbs, I rarely saw it myself. In fact, the only times I could remember witnessing this morning migration were when I was up early for a flight, or to drive to a road race in another neighborhood. I was always surprised then to see the roads thick with people at that hour, cutting across our city on foot, moving quietly between its many different worlds.

Diepsloot sits north and east of Johannesburg, and it sprung up in the years following the end of apartheid in the mid1990s, a knot of shacks that grew into a village of shacks and then a full-blown city ready to serve the gated communities and “golf estates” – those ubiquitous South African housing developments encircling a golf course – also gobbling up open land nearby. Two decades later, the township still had a haphazard, perpetually unfinished look to it. There were few paved roads, or sewers, and streams of blue-grey liquid carved gullies into the roadside. Street corners were piled with rubbish bags that looked like they had been patiently awaiting collection for weeks. Many had been torn open to reveal the oozing mix of rotting things inside.

I turned into the parking lot of a small orange-brick office block, some government office or another, where Sindi told me it would be safe to leave my car. She was already there, bouncing on the balls of her feet to keep warm. “Ready?” she asked me. And then we began to jog.

As we reached the main road out of the township, long lines of rusted mini-buses merged furiously into traffic, wheezing and heaving their way south toward the suburbs of Fourways and Bryanston. Our breath was ragged as we jogged past the women grilling

vetkoek on street corners in giant, sizzling vats of oil, past the children in crisp uniforms holding hands as they cross the street together, past the ladies laying out neat rows of used blue jeans and t-shirts with text like “Pi Phi or Die” and “Roosevelt High School, Class of 2015” to sell to passerby. We darted in and out of the road, and more than once, Sindi had to grab my arm to pull me away from a mini-bus flying past.

After less than two kilometers however, the city’s grip seemed to loosen, and the crowded settlement faded to rolling brown fields. In the distance, I could just make out the shape of a housing complex, which looked like a single house copy-pasted across the pink skyline. A few minutes later, we passed the gates of Steyn City, a massive, half-finished private housing development with aspirations to be a fully functional city – fitted with schools, hospitals, malls, and office blocks. I glimpsed a grandiose faux-Tuscan villa ringed by a Colosseum-style wall, which I had read was South Africa’s most expensive house. Around it, cranes hovered over half-finished houses and apartment towers. The whole thing was tucked behind a heavily fortified perimeter, with the idea that one day, its residents could live their whole lives there, never having to step outside.

Past Steyn City, Johannesburg picked up again, in a blast of suburban shopping malls, luxury car dealerships, and open lots with cranes dangling above them. Billboards advertised Swedish furniture and personal trainers. A few kilometers later, we turned down an empty and eerily silent street, the only sound the click click click of someone’s electric fence shorting.

Soon, we pulled to a stop in front of the complex of low slung white-washed houses where Sindi worked, and went inside. As we stretched in front of her employer’s pool, Sindi joked that I would be running my first Comrades in no time. I said that when I did, I’d hire her as a coach. As we bantered, I realized that although we had barely spoken on the run – mostly because of my lack of fitness – something had passed between us. Nearly imperceptibly, our dynamic had shifted. The next time we met in the café, she asked if she could tell me about her husband Zane, a jealous, angry man who once shoved her to the ground in front of her running club teammates for being late finishing practice.

I nodded. “What happened next?” I asked.



Running in Diepsloot with Sindi (far left), May 2017

“What makes you so interested in the Comrades?”

I’m at a house party at an artsy old house in the Joburg suburbs, the kind with pressed tin ceilings and framed photos of old *Drum* magazine covers on the walls. A woman I’ve just met, a lawyer in high-waisted vintage trousers and Birkenstocks, is kindly making conversation about my work. She probably assumes this is a simple question for me, given how much of my time I’ve devoted to thinking about this race over the past few years. I shoot back my stock-standard reply. “I just want to understand why so many people here think it’s *normal* to run 90 kilometers for fun.” She laughs. I change the subject.

The truth is, though, I find this question almost impossible to answer, even to myself. It’s true that part of it is the running culture. In South Africa, one meets ultra-marathon runners with perplexing frequency – at parties and petrol stations, guarding buildings and taking my deposit at the bank. When you donate blood here, the health questionnaire asks if you regularly do strenuous exercise, such as training for the Comrades Marathon. Once, in front of a bar near my house, I ran into a man in a Comrades hoodie selling wire bead animals. “You’ve run the Comrades?” I asked excitedly. “Yes, twice,” he replied gruffly,

impatient with my surprise. “Did you want to buy something?” I purchased a stout bead zebra the size of a fist in apology.

This is unusual because nearly everywhere in the world, ultra-running – defined as any distance longer than a standard 42-kilometer marathon – is considered a distinctly fringe pursuit. In the UK, for instance, one journalist recently marveled at the sport’s meteoric rise by pointing out as recently as the year 2000, fewer than 600 people finished an ultramarathon annually. But in 2017, 18,000 did. Those figures are impressive, I suppose, until you consider that in South Africa, nearly 18,000 people finished the Comrades alone last year. That’s not to mention any of the country’s other big ultra-marathons, like the 56-kilometer Two Oceans in Cape Town (10,000 runners) or the 50-kilometer Om Die Dam north of Johannesburg (4,000 runners).

The impact of these races permeates every level of running in the country. When I moved to South Africa, I remember being struck by how deeply ordinary it is to run very slowly. There is little shame in being in the back of the pack, where anyway you will be among people who are shuffling along in order to train their bodies to handle the hours upon hours on the road that they will face come Comrades day. There is, in other words, an ordinariness to running slowly here that does not exist in many other places.

When I lived in the United States and England, for instance, long distance running was a sport with a lot of gravitas, something that seemed reserved for *serious* athletes. It involved expensive shoes and complicated speed workouts and race-day nutrition plans. And speed mattered. It felt like an unspoken truth that a slow finishing time – let alone walking a chunk of a long race – was a little shameful. I’m not the only person who has observed this. Back-of-the-pack runners in major Western marathons like London and New York have complained for years of being jeered by spectators. “This is a race, not a walk,” one jeering onlooker told a London Marathon runner in 2019. “If you weren’t so fat, you wouldn’t be so slow.” New York Marathon runner Martinus Evans started his now famous “Slow AF Running Club” after a similar taunt was lobbed at him in kilometer 26 of the New York Marathon. “You’re fucking slow, buddy,” someone in the crowd told him. “Go home.”

In South Africa, by contrast, slow runners are at best embraced, and at worst, too ordinary to really complain about, because there are so many of us. To illustrate the difference I’m talking about, look at the finishing times at the 2023 New York Half Marathon

and the 2023 Two Oceans Half Marathon, which is the largest South African race at this distance. Last year in New York, half of the 24,745 finishers completed the race in under two hours, and only 20 percent took longer than two and a half hours. At the 2023 Two Oceans, on the other hand, only one in five runners crossed the line in less than two hours, and more than half were still on the course when the timer hit 2:30.

I think this is the trickle-down effect of the Comrades, and other South African ultras, races so long that they are impossible for most people to do at any pace quicker than a slow plod. Comrades runners train themselves to conserve energy, walk frequently, and move no faster than a conversational pace. To train, they run shorter distances in this style too. And because in any given year so many South Africans are training for the Comrades, their style of running has become a norm. In turn, that encourages other slower runners and walkers to participate too, since they know from experience that the back of the pack is not a lonely place to be.

I myself am a good example of this. In 2018, I made it a New Year's resolution to get in better running shape by doing a road race in Johannesburg every month. Depending on my schedule, I would pluck races from the calendar nearly at random. Sometimes I had trained for them, and sometimes I sidled up to the start of a 21-kilometer race knowing I would probably walk half of it, and that that would be perfectly fine. The distances I ran – usually 10 or 21 kilometers – were short enough to feel manageable, but long enough to see the city shift beneath my feet. That year, as I jogged and walked all these races, I also saw more of Johannesburg than in the three previous years I had lived in the city combined. I ran races that lapped township neighborhoods of identical “matchbox” brick houses with rusted asbestos roofs, and races that rambled through nature reserves or suburbs where every house had a personal guard seated in a tiny wendy house outside. These races often felt to me like they briefly reordered the universe. People from the city's so-called “leafy” neighborhoods -- Johannesburg code for rich -- came to township to run, places they otherwise knew only by name, as the neighborhoods of their gardeners or domestic workers or nannies. And residents of those townships moved sure-footedly through the suburbs, laughing and blasting music, taking up space. Each of us, at some point, found ourselves moving through the city in new ways.

Of course, South Africans aren't the only people in the world to love running very far. Name any distance, over any geography, and I can pretty much guarantee you that there is someone, somewhere, who has thought, *let's give this a shot*.

Take 24-hour track races, of which there are dozens in the world. The set-up is exactly what it sounds like. You run laps around a 400-meter track for a day straight. As many as you like. As fast – or as slow – as you want to go. “Mind boggling, super mental, like death by a thousand paper cuts,” reported Camille Herron, the American ultra-runner who set a women's 24-hour world record at a one such race in Arizona in 2018, completing 262 kilometers, or 675 laps of the track, scarfing tacos and beer as she ran. Most of us lack the interest in that particular genre of self-inflicted pain, but its devotees claim there is nothing more transcendent. In fact, one of the most famous such runs is the “Self-Transcendence 24 Hour Track Race,” held each September in south London by devotees of the Indian spiritual guru Sri Chinmoy, an ultra-marathoner who preached running as a way to transcend one's physical and spiritual limits. (Chinmoy was also the creator of the “Self-Transcendence 3100 Mile Race,” an annual 52-day, 4,989 kilometer run around a single city block in Queens, New York).

In the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, runners around the world began to organize similar kinds of long-distance runs in the tiny spaces to which they were confined. Even if they were not pursuing spiritual enlightenment perse, these runners seemed to me to share the same desire to run their way out of their heads. I interviewed a Polish runner whose quest to run a marathon in every country had been indefinitely put on hold when the world shut down. He flew home, and jumpy and bored in his quarantine hotel room, ran a marathon around his bed (5626 laps). After he finished, in 8 hours and 32 minutes, Wojciech Machnik told me, “Look, today this is what I can do. And this is probably my one chance in my life to do this,” – as in, a marathon around a bed. For others, too, these strange runs to nowhere seemed to act like a spin cycle for the anxious brain. I Zoomed a Filipina woman who charted a marathon course from her kitchen to the elevator outside her flat and an Italian veterinarian in Dubai told me he ran a marathon along the corridor of his Dubai apartment building to distract himself from unfolding horror in his home country. “There are no real answers for why this is happening, and this is a way to take my mind off of all that,” he said. Just a few kilometers from me, in the Johannesburg suburbs, a runner

named Stuart Mann woke up on a rainy, autumn morning in April 2020 and, as cold rain lashed his shoulders, swam 2.4 miles across his 12-meter-long pool. When he finished, he popped out, had a cup of tea, and then biked 180 kilometers on a stationary bike while reading Harry Potter to his daughter. And when he was done with *that*, he ran a marathon back and forth along the length of his driveway. It was a full Ironman triathlon, all of it completed within 20 meters of his bedroom. Why? In perhaps the most limiting moment of his life, “it was an opportunity to try something completely different.”

Even in less extreme moments in history, running vast distances is a challenge often linked to transcending human limitations. In Mount Hiei, Japan, every so often a monk takes on a challenge known as *kaihogyo*, where they must run 1000 marathons in 1000 days, on a course that picks its way between 250 Buddhist shrines. The idea, of course, is enlightenment – to find out what sits at the ragged edges of human consciousness, beyond exhaustion and suffering. “When you are nothing, then something, pop, comes up to fill the space,” one monk who completed the challenge told The Guardian, though he was a bit circumspect on what, exactly that something is. I guess you have the right to keep your trade secrets after you run 1000 marathons in three years.

The list of mind-boggling distance running challenges goes on. There is a famous six-day ultra-called the Marathon des Sables (Marathon of Sand) where people run 250 kilometers across the Sahara carrying their food and clothing on their backs. Another, the Leadville 100, takes its runners 161 kilometers up and down the craggy peaks of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. Perhaps the world’s strangest ultra is the Barkley Marathons, held each Spring in Tennessee. The race begins at a random hour between midnight and noon on race day, signaled by its organizer – a hobo Santa Claus-esque figure name Gary “Lazarus Lake” Cantrell – blowing into a conch shell. Instead of firing a starting gun, he lights a cigarette, and then runners take off into the Tennessee forest where James Earl Ray, the assassin of Martin Luther King, wandered for more than two days after escaping prison in 1977. Runners complete an unmarked loop of about 32 kilometers through the mountains, charting their way with compasses and paper maps, and collecting pages from books placed at several checkpoints along the route to prove they haven’t cut the course. Then they do the same thing four more times. The cutoff is 60 hours, and only 17 people have ever finished the race in its four-decade history. (Like Sri Chimnoy, Lazarus Lake is partial to

designing unusual races, and also runs a series called the Backyard Ultra, whose flagship event is an endurance race in his own backyard where runners complete a 6.7-kilometer loop as many times as they can until they drop out).

All of these ultra-marathons push the limits of human endurance, and perhaps for that reason, none of them have much mass appeal. Most of us would rather be reading a book or cooking an omelet or cuddling a baby or doing any number of other things than running for that long.

So, what's different about South Africa?

On May 24, 1921, around 4:30 am, two teenage boys, Eric and Douglas Clapham, took off on their bikes from their house in Pietermaritzburg, a small, heavy-lidded city in South Africa's eastern Natal province. Outside, the late autumn sky was still a blank black. The boys carried a list with them – names of the 48 men who had promised their father Vic that they would run a harebrained race he'd charted for them that day, all the way from Pietermaritzburg to the coastal city of Durban 90 kilometers to the east. The run was to begin at City Hall at 7am, and Eric and Douglas were responsible for getting the runners to their house well ahead of that time. Their mother was in on it too, already awake and frying steaks and eggs on their coal stove to feed the runners.

The day Vic had chosen for the race, May 24, was the birthday of Queen Victoria, a holiday celebrated in South Africa as Empire Day. Vic was a railway driver and World War I veteran, and had set his strange race to coincide with the holiday because of what it symbolized – the empire for which he had fought as a soldier in World War I. COMRADES MARATHON, announced the poster put out by Clapham's organization, the League of Comrades of the Great War. MARITZBURG TO DURBAN (APPROXIMATELY 54 MILES). A local newspaper called it a "go as you please marathon," which made the race sound more like a leisurely stroll than a 90-kilometer run.

But that morning as Eric and Douglas tapped on doors around the city, it seemed many of the runners had not been fooled. They realized what was to come –ten plus hours over undulating hills and crunchy gravel roads, all for the questionable glory of finishing a race no one had ever heard of. At the time, jogging wasn't even seen as a healthy activity. In the lead up to the Comrades, local newspapers advised would-be runners to "not drink

water on a run” because “it will only make you tired and lazy.” So, it’s no wonder that when the Clapham boys knocked on their doors, more than a dozen of the men who’d pledged to run Vic’s race simply didn’t answer.

Still, 34 of them assembled gamely outside Pietermaritzburg’s elegant city hall, the largest red brick building in the southern hemisphere. At ten past 7 in the morning, the weather now “fine and mild,” according to news reports, Pietermaritzburg’s mayor fired a gun in the air, and the first Comrades marathon began.

“Leaving the city, a dusty sand road meandered over the hills and through the valleys all the way to Durban,” wrote an official Comrades history describing the course of that first race. And the runners were soon covered in it, a fine dust that turned to a film of mud against their sweating bodies.

Vic had organized the race to honor his fallen comrades, the men who had died beside him in the East Africa campaign of World War I. If those soldiers could endure marches of hundreds of kilometers in tropical heat, he reasoned, a 90-kilometer run wasn’t an impossibly task. Though he never quite articulated it this way, it’s easy to imagine that he saw his race as an inversion of what he experienced in the war. There, death was brutal, constant, and seemingly meaningless. You endured it because you had to in order to survive. In the Comrades marathon, however, the pain was your own choice. You decided it meaning.

By the halfway point in that first run, a 26-year farmer named Bill Rowan had pulled ahead of the field. By the end of the race, he had a lead of more than two miles on his nearest competitor. A handwritten ledger from that day dutifully records the performance of those 34 men – 14 finishers and 20 more who’d realized, as Mandela said all those years later, that their dreams were taking them in another direction.

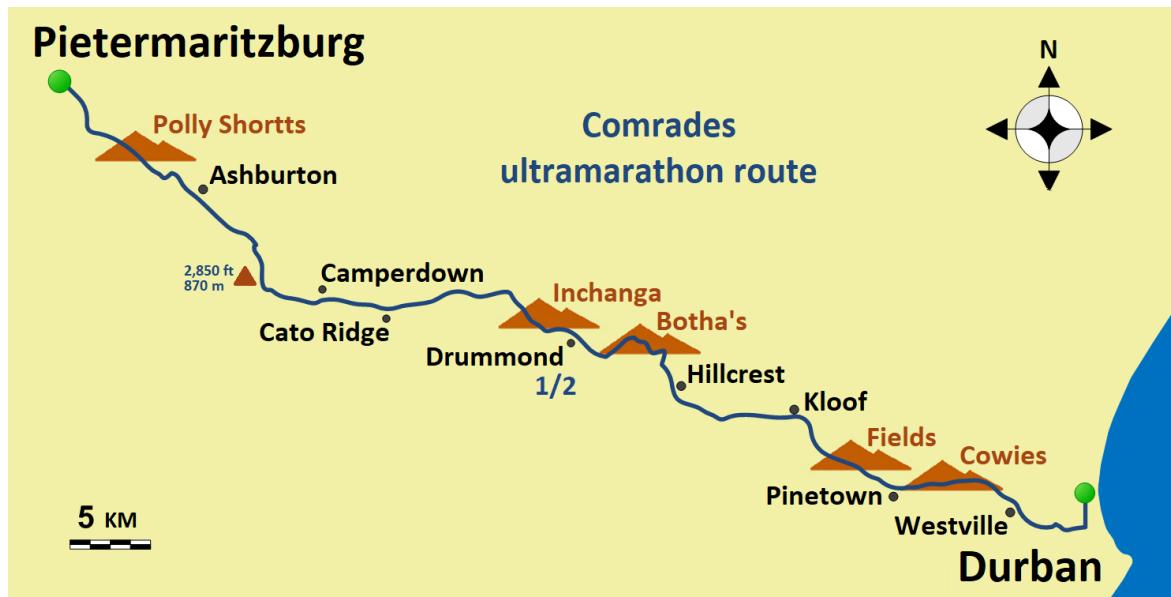
Still, something about this race stuck. Vic organized it again the following year, going in the opposite direction of his first race – “up” from Durban to Pietermaritzburg. This time, more than 2000 spectators gathered at the start line in Durban to see the runners off. Rowan returned from the Belgian Congo, where he now worked, to defend his title. He was joined by an eclectic cast of new characters, including Bill Payn, a local school teacher and national-team rugby player, who ran in his rugby boots and made mid-race stops for an egg

breakfast, a curry chicken lunch, and a tot of peach brandy. The Comrades was delightfully odd, and people loved it. Vic agreed to a third edition

The scene didn't change much in the coming years. Each year, the race alternated direction. It was either a leg-trashing "down" run from Pietermaritzburg to Durban, like that first race, or it was a lung-burning "up" run in the other direction. In any case, well into the 1960s, the Comrades remained a curious sideshow in South African sporting life, eclipsed by team sports like rugby and cricket. But the race did share one important feature in common with most other sporting events of the time. Like the country's government, its boardrooms, its best schools and its highest paying jobs, Comrades was reserved for white men, and white men only. Occasionally, a woman or a Black runner would toe the starting line bib-less, and run the race unofficially. A Durban typist named Frances Hayward did it in 1923. A Black runner, Robert Mtshali, finished in 1935. Despite its contemporary reputation for radical inclusiveness and togetherness, however, historically, the race played by the same brutal rules as South Africa.

As the 1970s dawned however, something was beginning to shift. On a continent of newly-independent Black countries, South Africa was increasingly isolated and reviled. South African activists and their supporters around the world organized boycotts of the country's oranges, wine, and cigarettes. Musicians skipped the country on their world tours. Many countries wouldn't let South African passenger planes fly in their airspace, forcing them to take circuitous routes over international waters. But for South Africans, one of the most painful forms of isolation came in the realm of sports. The country was barred from major international competitions like the Olympics and World Cup, and desperate to be let back in. So the government started desegregating minor sports, like road running. In 1975 the Comrades officially dropped its prohibition on Black and female runners. And the moment couldn't have been better timed, because the very next year, decades after most of the world, South Africa got its first TV channel. Soon, starved of any international sports events to broadcast, that station began broadcasting the Comrades in its tedious entirety. What viewers saw looked like a parallel universe to the apartheid society they lived in – Black, coloured, Indian, and white runners jogging beside each other, sharing bottles of water, and hugging on the finish line. Its elite runners, Black and white, became bona fide

celebrities, and the Comrades became something no modern ultra-marathon had ever been before: a mass spectator sport.



Comrades Marathon route

In June 2023, I was in Pietermaritzburg watching the start of the Comrades. The race had just begun, and I was watching the backs of the final runners disappear into the pitch-black morning. As I turned around to walk back to my car to head to my next spectating point, I noticed a figure out of the corner of my eye, his arms wrapped around a massive bulk. I felt my pulse quicken, but when I turned, I saw a thin, middle-aged man holding a small mountain of jerseys. He bent down again and scooped another off the ground.

It was a ritual I had seen every time I went to the Comrades, which takes place in the height of South African winter. In the early morning before the race, temperatures can be a prickly five degrees Celsius, and runners, who often wait an hour or more at the start, sometimes cut a head hole in a black plastic bin bag or arrive wearing their oldest, most raggedy jersey. As the first bars of the national anthem begin to play, they begin, en masse, to shed these second skins. Standing on the sidewalk nearby, I have been hit more than once by one of these cotton projectiles. And then, a few minutes later, when the runners have gone, people who live on the streets of downtown Durban and Pietermaritzburg swoop in to collect them.



2017 Comrades Start Line, 5:40 am

The Comrades is many things to many people, but to me it is this: a place where the entirety of South Africa – in all its messy, often infuriating complexities – fits into one frame. It is 20,000 people singing a Zulu migrant laborers hymn in unison on the race start line – *Shosholoza, Ku lezontaba* – taut with the same excitement, the same reverence, for the near-impossible thing they are about to do. They are accountants and politicians and domestic workers and bead animal salesmen. And the race is, in the same breath, those quietly swooping into the darkness behind them, picking up the things they have left behind.

“It’s like living your entire life in a day,” Tommy Neitski, a 42-time finisher of the Comrades, said to me last year. He meant that in an emotional sense – that on a 90-kilometer run you will despair and you will rejoice. It will be hard and then it will be easy and then it will be hard again. At times, the only thing you will see is your feet in front of you, shuffling as you tell them, *one more step, one more step*. And then you will look up and suddenly witness, cresting beyond the hill in front of you, the sea, still and blue and very far away.

I have, of course, never run the Comrades, but I have spent many years spectating it, and in that time, I have had a thought similar to Neitski's. He lived his entire life the day of the Comrades. I feel on that day I see the entire country. When I think of the race, my various years of spectating it come back to me in slivers. A handwritten "NO JOBS" sign fluttering from the gates of a farm supply store in the town of Ashburton. A group of men in running shorts and singlets folding forward towards Mecca in unison on the floor of a shop in downtown Durban before the race, their running shoes lined up in a neat row at the door. An old woman holding out a tray of orange wedges sprinkled with salt, repeating with grandmotherly concern a single line to passing runners. "You want an orange, love?" A runner dipping his hand inside his singlet to pull out the old Comrades medal hanging from his neck, raising it to his lips as he jogs past a group of children in wheelchairs gathered outside their boarding school in the KZN hills.

Every year, these tiny, insignificant moments flatten me, to say nothing of the stories of the runners themselves. Whatever alchemy of desire and sorrow and ego has brought people to the start line of a 90-kilometer race, the stories that unfold that day are invariably cinematic in their drama, heft, and intensity.

In the pages that follow, I will tell you a few of these stories. They span nearly the length of the race's history, beginning with Robert Mtshali, a Black hospital clerk from Durban who, in 1935, broke the Comrades' color barrier. I went looking for Mtshali's story hoping to better understand what motivated him to run a grueling race to which he had absolutely not been invited. In the end, I found only the shards of this story. But they were embedded in another – that of his four daughters, whose lives had been profoundly shaped by both Mtshali's accomplishment, and by the series of personal secrets and betrayals that followed it.

Some of the stories in this book, much like Mtshali's, sprawl across decades. Zwelitsha "Tiger" Gono, a school teacher from the rural Eastern Cape, ran his first Comrades marathon in the early 1970s, before he was technically allowed. And then he did it 41 more times, watching the race – and the country -- around him transform as he ran the same 90-kilometer course. Maros Johannes Mosehla, meanwhile, shattered a three-decade old record in 2023 when, at the age of 81, he became the Comrades' oldest ever finisher. But getting there was a story a lifetime in the making.

Other pieces in the book ponder how the Comrades transformed – and the limits of those transformations. In the 1980s, during apartheid’s violent, dying days, a runner called Hoseah Tjale, a delivery driver with a lopsided gait and signature bucket hat, came achingly close to becoming the Comrades’ first Black winner – and in doing so made the Comrades feel like it belonged to an entire generation of Black runners for the first time. “We are here because of him,” one runner told me in 2022, as he waited to snap a selfie with his idol at the Comrades expo. Among the heirs to Tjale’s legacy were a pair of brothers from the rural eastern Free State named Sergio and Arnold Motsoeneng. In 1999, they very nearly pulled off the greatest heist in Comrades history, but were caught soon after, setting off a scandal that morphed into a country-wide discussion of the morality of Black South Africans. And in a very different vein, I look at the career of Galaletseng Mokgoe, a firefighter from Rustenburg determined to become the first Black woman to win the race – a title that remains unclaimed to this day.

And finally, there are stories in this book that are, quite simply, about what pushes so many ordinary South Africans to do this thing that nearly anywhere else in the world would seem beyond their reach. You’ll meet Ashleigh Adams, a runner from Alex township in Johannesburg and Shahieda Thungo, the pacer for the Comrades’ slowest runners, and learn how the Comrades helped pull each of them back from their life’s greatest crisis.

What unites all of the runners I have chosen to follow is the force with which the Comrades has sliced through their lives. It has, in many ways, done the same thing for me. Writing about this race has been, undoubtedly, one of the great privileges of my professional life. It has brought me close to many extraordinary people, and given me hope about South Africa’s future in even my darkest moments here.

Last year, in Durban for the first Comrades since the pandemic, I suddenly got the idea to call Sindi Magade. I had last seen her in 2019, two years after I profiled her for *Runners World*. By that point, she was running her third Comrades, and her life brimmed with ambition. She was going to go back and finish high school, she told me. She was planning to learn how to drive. In 2022, I wanted to know what had become of those dreams, so I sent her a WhatsApp message. A few hours later, I noticed it hadn’t gone through, so I texted one of her teammates. *Hey, is Sindi around Comrades this year? I seem to have an old phone number for her.*

He wrote back quickly. *Hello Ryan. Sindi Magade has sadly passed on in 2021.*

No one close to her really understood what happened, he continued. One day she felt sick at work, so when she knocked off, she went to a clinic in Diepsloot. “In no time, she passed on,” he wrote.

Since then, I’ve thought often of what Sindi told me about her first Comrades experience in 2017. When it felt hard, she said, she repeated a mantra. *No one is making you do this.* And the words pushed her forward. No one is making you do this. No landlord. No children. No boss. No angry ex-husband. In a life neatly fenced in on all sides by obligations, this moment belonged uniquely to her. And so there came a strange point, she said, deep in the race, when her body hurt magnificently, an ache that seemed to touch every part of her. But still, somehow, she almost didn’t want the race to end. Because for as long as it carried on, she was exactly where she had chosen to be.

This is a book about people trying to live a bigger life than the one that has been scripted for them, and the beautiful South African race that has made that possible.



Sindi Magade (center) walking to the start line of the 2017 Comrades Marathon in Durban

Little is Known²

There's a famous moment in South African sports history. Chances are, you know it already. Maybe you were lucky and you were actually there in person, sitting in Ellis Park Stadium in downtown Johannesburg on that day in June 1995 with a Castle Lager sweating in one hand, a boerewors roll dripping tomato sauce in the other. Maybe you belted Shosholoza without really knowing the words and gasped as that South African airways jumbo jet passed right over the stadium, close enough to see GOOD LUCK, BOKKE stenciled on its undercarriage. If you were one of those lucky fans who got a ticket to the Rugby World Cup Final that day – or even if you just watched on TV – you surely remember the electricity of the moment when Joel Stransky's drop goal sailed between the posts in extra time, and South Africa clinched its victory over New Zealand's All Blacks. Or maybe you just saw *Invictus*, Clint Eastwood's Hollywood retelling of the story, with Morgan Freeman doing his best Nelson Mandela in aviators and an awkward South African accent.

In any case, this is the scene: Mandela in the center of a neatly clipped rugby pitch, wearing a green and gold jersey buttoned awkwardly to the collar. He's an old man now, remember, not the handsome young revolutionary with parted hair and pinstripe suits who went away to prison in the 1960s. This is the man the world saw when he came out three decades later, a 76-year-old with a shock of salt and pepper hair, wearing a slouchy pair of khaki trousers. He's the new president of the new South Africa, standing on a field where, a few years earlier, he would not have been allowed because of his skin color. At his back is the roar of 63,000 South African rugby fans, and in front of him, shaking his hand, is

² A version of my reporting on the history of the Comrades marathon was published as a radio documentary entitled "The Comrades" on the podcast 99 Percent Invisible on January 24, 2023: <https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/the-comrades/>

A version of my reporting about Mandela at the Comrades and about meeting Bruce Fordyce in 2017 initially appeared in "56 Miles of Freedom" in the November 2017 issue of *Runner's World*. <https://www.runnersworld.com/races-places/a19457092/comrades-marathon/>

A version of my reporting on Frances Hayward appeared in "Never afraid to chase: A Black woman aims for ultra-marathon history" in *The Christian Science Monitor* on June 13, 2023: <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2023/0613/Never-afraid-to-chase-A-Black-woman-aims-for-ultramarathon-history>

their greatest hero, a ruddy faced, blond tank of a man named Francois Pienaar, the Springboks captain.

It's June 1995, and for the first time since the end of apartheid, a South African sports team has won a major international tournament, the Rugby World Cup -- and on their home turf to boot. Sure, all but one members of the squad are white, and 95 percent of the fans in the stadium are too. Sure, the country's best Black rugby players still aren't being considered for the national squad, for all kinds of complicated historical reasons. But Mandela's presence says: This belongs to all of us. For now, for this moment, this fragile, hopeful, divided country is in this together. It's our victory. It's our team.



The president and the captain, 1995

Whatever you think of Mandela's grand gestures of forgiveness and unity now, he was a master of the craft, and he saw the intimate place that sports occupied in the lives of his countrymen. "Sport has the power to change the world, it has the power to inspire," Mandela declared. "It is more powerful than government in breaking down racial barriers."

If the rugby World Cup was where Mandela made that point most visibly to the world, though, his real sporting passions lay elsewhere. Famously, he was skilled amateur boxer in his years as a young lawyer and revolutionary, and praised the sport as “egalitarian. In the ring, rank, age, color, and wealth are irrelevant.” His first sporting love, though, was distance running.

For most of his adult life, indeed, Mandela was a regular hobby jogger -- an unremarkable feat, perhaps, were it not for the fact that he did it without ever leaving the eight-by-seven-foot prison cell to which he was confined for two decades. “Running taught me valuable lessons,” he later wrote in his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*. “Training counted more than intrinsic ability, and I could compensate for a lack of natural aptitude with diligence and discipline. I applied this in everything I did.”

So when Mandela got out of jail, it made sense that he didn’t just go to the rugby. He went to the Comrades too.

It may not be the next Clint Eastwood blockbuster, but picture this: the finish line of the 1995 Comrades, three weeks before the president hoisted that rugby trophy to the snap snap snap of a thousand news cameras. Mandela has just congratulated the two winners -- they’re both white, by the way -- and now he’s standing with the race’s organizers, posing for a photo that looks like a prep school uniform catalogue. On every side of him are white people in crisp blazers embroidered with a Comrades logo and purple Comrades neckties. These are the people a local newspaper has just referred to as to “the almost exclusively white, male, Natal colonial set which controls Comrades.” But Mandela’s smile is wide and genuine.

The Comrades, Mandela told a similar crowd gathered at the finish line two years later, had been the dream of a white World War I veteran looking to honor his fallen fellow soldiers -- a noble, if narrow aim. But like South Africa itself, that vision had transformed over the decades. Comrades runners’ had begun to look much more like the country around them, and the race was now a thing that “unite[d] people from all over the country.”

Mandela, ever the consummate diplomat, didn’t dwell long on the race’s history that day. He didn’t say that the first race, in 1921, took place on a holiday known as Empire Day. Or that it took the struggle, humiliation, and grit of many brave people to get from that little race to the multiracial mass sporting event over which he was now presiding. He didn’t

mention that the very name of this race, Comrades, was one electrically charged with history here -- how not many years before this speech, he himself had been a very different kind of comrade, a leader of the armed struggle against apartheid. Or that change came to this race itself, like many parts of South Africa, only begrudgingly. "The buzzword here is democracy," complained one of the race's organizers in the mid 1990s, explaining their plans to diversify their board.

Instead, Mandela told a personal story. "Let me share one of my childhood dreams with you," he began. "When I was a young boy, one of my favourite pastimes was stick fighting." He was a great stick fighter, he went on. But that wasn't enough. He wanted to be the "best stick fighter ever." But he couldn't do it. He couldn't manage. Similarly, "those runners who did not make it to the [Comrades] finish line will naturally be feeling quite disappointed." But no matter. "You will either resolve to be back to try Comrades again next year or your dreams will take you in another direction – one to which you will perhaps be better suited."

It's hard not to search for deep meaning in everything Mandela said in those years. But I think here, perhaps, he just meant what he said. This race is really hard. This race is not for everyone. Sometimes our dreams are beyond our capacities. Failure is a part of life. So is getting over it.



Nelson Mandela at the finish line of the 1995 Comrades Marathon at Kingsmead Cricket Stadium in Durban

On Thursday, May 24, 1923, five dozen ruddy farmers and beefy rugby players gathered outside the Pietermaritzburg City Hall to run the third edition of that “go as you please” Comrades Marathon that Vic Clapham had started two years before. This time, however, to the great delight of the local press, a “plucky lady runner” sidled up to the start line. She was dressed in “a businesslike green gymnasium costume” and leather-soled plimsolls, her wavy hair cropped short.

The rules stated that the race was only open to white men, and when Frances Hayward had submitted her entry before the race, Vic Clapham had turned her down. Fine, she wrote back to him, but I’m running anyway. So when the gun fired that morning, she took off with the rest of the pack. By the time the 31-year-old typist reached Durban late that afternoon, word had gotten out that there was a woman in the Comrades, and a crowd of thousands gathered to cheer her on. Eleven hours and 35 minutes after she set off, Hayward crossed the finish line at the local cricket stadium, where the city’s mayor, Walter Gilbert, was waiting to shake her hand.

“I did not find it so very difficult to cover the distance over rough roads and through a hilly country,” she told a reporter later. “I was weary when I finished but the big crowd on the sports grounds were surprised that I did not collapse as nearly everyone thought I would.” She explained that she would “have been content if I had beaten just one man,” but to her delight she beat two (not counting the 38 who dropped out along the way). Because she wasn’t an official finisher, there was no medal waiting for Hayward at the finish, but a local newspaper organized a collection from the public to buy her a delicate silver tea set and rose bowl instead.

Hayward’s performance flew in the face of centuries of beliefs that women were simply too fragile to perform the same athletic feats as men. Only a few years earlier, Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the International Olympic Committee, had described women’s sports as “impractical, uninteresting, unaesthetic, and we are not afraid to add: incorrect.” Too much athletic activity was thought to render a woman infertile, and most women’s

sports of the time discouraged participants from being too competitive with one another. One report on Hayward's Comrades finish jokingly referred to her performance as "another signal of women's emancipation from the thrall of good-natured disdain in which mere man has held her."

We don't know exactly what Frances Hayward made of all those restrictions on women's sports, because there is no evidence that anyone thought to ask her. But from her refusal to accept Vic Clapham rejecting her Comrades' entry, we can guess that she thought they were more or less bullshit. She was a rarity for her time in many ways: an unmarried Englishwoman who had traveled to South Africa on her own, for the adventure of seeing the colonies. She was also a long-distance swimmer, and she ran the Comrades, by her own account, "to shock everybody," and in the evening after the race, she went out to the theatre. Hayward never ran the Comrades again, but for the next 50 years, she woke up early each year on the day of the Comrades and drove her car each year to Drummond, a town at the race's halfway point, to cheer the runners on.

So she was probably there a decade after her own historical run in 1935, when Robert Mtshali ran by in a pair of belted shorts on his way to becoming the Comrades' first Black finisher. Did she say anything to him, or to the other "unofficial" runners of color who passed by her over the years? Did she feel pride at seeing them break the same rules she had? Or did she feel that they didn't belong in a white person's race?

There's nothing to tell us one way or the other. We also don't know if he knew about her, or where exactly he got his own inspiration to run this long, strange race that didn't want him. If the archive on Frances Hayward is achingly thin, for most of the Comrades' history, Mtshali's story was even hazier. "Little is known of Mtshali's background or his performance in the race," explained the chair of the Comrades board, Bobby Maharajh, apologetically in 2005. "Our archives mention [that] Robert Mtshali completed the distance, was heartily cheered by the crowds and received a presentation from the mayor of Durban. However, we would love to know more about the man and his background."

By then, the Comrades had been recording its history with painstaking precision for close to a century. An official ledger from the race gave a blow-by-blow of each year's run, providing details down to the weather conditions. It noted who passed who and where, who stopped for a massage, a beer, a hot chicken curry, who ran in rugby boots, who came

back from the Belgian Congo to defend their title. However, well into the twenty first century, the race's official canon had little to say about the runners who tore up the Comrades rulebook, and allowed it to see its own future. About them, somehow, little was known.



Frances Hayward in the early 1920s and the mid 1970s

The last time Francis Hayward watched the Comrades in person was in 1974. She was 83 years old, and she had certainly seen the news: the race was considering allowing women and Black runners to compete officially for the first time. By then, the white colonial society Francis Hayward set sail for as a young woman had sharpened its racial caste system into an ideology called apartheid – literally “separateness” in Afrikaans. Segregation and its hierarchies permeated every aspect of South African life, from where someone could live and work to whom they could marry to, of course, the sporting events they could participate in.

Even for apartheid's most fervent supporters, however, by the 1970s the international isolation in response to their segregation in sport had become a major source of heartbreak. South African anti-apartheid activists fervently campaigned for their country to be expelled from the world's major sporting competitions, and it was working. The country had been booted from FIFA, the world's soccer body, in 1963, after it refused to

field a racially-mixed national squad. South Africa's national football federation tried to negotiate its reinstatement by promising to send an all-white team to the 1966 World Cup and an all-Black team to the 1970 World Cup. FIFA rejected the proposal.

The same year, Dennis Brutus, a leader of the movement to isolate South Africa through sport, was shot in the back at point-blank range while trying to escape from prison. The case drew international outrage, and soon after, the International Olympic Committee withdrew South Africa's invitation to the 1964 Tokyo Summer Games, for which they had attempted to hold segregated qualifying events. "We expect that when tourists visit our country they will accept and respect our way of doing things," interior minister Jan De Klerk explained. "And when we send teams overseas, they must know that we do it in our way." South Africa was formally expelled from the IOC in 1970, and in popular team sports like rugby and cricket, nearly every international tour the South African team went on became a flashpoint for anti-apartheid protests.

South Africa's government was desperate to win back its place in the sports world, and so in the early 1970s, it began slowly desegregating some domestic sports – including track and road running. It was just the kind of heartwarming move that could get them back into the international scene – or so they hoped. At the time, integrating running – especially distance running -- didn't seem like a big deal, mostly because it was still quite niche in the country, as it was in most of the world. In particular, long distances like marathons were an activity for quirky extremists, and the idea that the average person might go out and run in a big loop *for fun* was nearly unheard of.

Then, in 1972, American Frank Shorter stormed to a surprise victory in the Olympic Marathon in Munich. Televised live to millions, the race introduced many Americans to the tedium, drama, and glory of marathon running. A generation of distance running celebrities followed in Shorter's wake. And as participation in races in the US and Europe grew, running a long distance like a marathon began to shift from the realm of the absurd to the kind of thing your sporty colleague did on weekends. In the '70s, marathons in big Western cities like Boston, New York, and London grew into mass participation events that drew huge crowds of spectators.

In South Africa, race organizers watched this wave of enthusiasm from afar as they contended with their government's new plan to racially integrate their sport. The policy

was actually not all-inclusive. Government-run competitions like national championships were integrated, but privately-run races like the Comrades were left to make their own choice. And initially, they had no interest in changing. The race committee fretted that if allowed Black runners in, they would need separate toilets and changing rooms – since those facilities were always segregated. Blacks might “overrun” the event, given their numbers in the country.

These questions ran in parallel with the old debates about women and running. Well into the 1960s, long distance races around the world barred women because of the damage they were thought to do to their reproductive organs. Even after activists forced American and European marathons to allow women’s participation, Comrades’ organizers argued that women were too frail for their race, and that their participation was simply not “ladylike.” “To my way of thinking, the Comrades Marathon is a serious athletic event, and when one has women and non-whites participating, it becomes a bit of a circus,” explained one ruffled race official.

The pressure mounted, however, for the Comrades to get with the times, and stop making South Africa look so sad and parochial. In 1975, the marathon officially removed gender and race as restrictions to entry. That first year, Black runners ran with their ethnicity written on their chests in large block letters, because they were considered “international” runners representing their ethnic homelands. In a singlet blaring that he was SOTHO, Vincent Rakabaele became the first recorded Black finisher, in twentieth place. Meanwhile, Betty Cavanaugh – who had already run the Comrades unofficially four times – won the inaugural woman’s race.

Finally, it seemed, the revolution that Frances Hayward and Robert Mtshali sparked a half century earlier had arrived. The Comrades was changing, and the country was about to witness it in real time.



Vincent Rakabaele runs the 1975 Comrades Marathon

On January 5, 1976, South Africans sat on their couches and watched the future arrive. For the first time, the TV screens in front of them flickered to life, and a white man and woman seated in front of a beige carpet appeared on the screen.

“We welcome you to the opening evening of the complete television service of the SAUK,” the man says in Afrikaans. “We are privileged to have this opportunity.”

For more a decade, many of South Africa’s leaders had vigorously resisted this moment. As TVs flickered on in countries across the world in the 1950s and ‘60s, they insisted that it was a dangerous invention. Like the atomic bomb or poisonous gas, TV was modern “but that does not mean desirable,” cautioned Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd. “The government has to watch for any dangers to the people, both spiritual and physical.” Albert Hertzog, his minister of posts and telecommunications, went a step farther. He called TV “the devil’s own box for disseminating communism and immorality,” and said it was the enemy of apartheid. “South Africa would have to import films showing race mixing, and advertising would make [Black] Africans dissatisfied with their lot,” he said.

Finally, though, practicality won out. The apartheid government realized that satellite technology would eventually allow South Africans to pick up TV broadcasts from overseas, and that video tapes would be easily smuggled into the country. Better, they thought, to have a state-run channel whose content could be effectively controlled “to the advantage of our nation and country,” wrote a government commission in the early 1970s.

When the channel went live in 1976, that content included heavily censored news, cheerful family dramas about the white middle class, British police procedurals dubbed into Afrikaans, and lots of local sports. Sports were especially useful to fill time on the new station. They were relatively simple to film and had a built-in audience of fans. The stakes were high, and drama was all but guaranteed.

Within a few years of TV going live, the South African Broadcasting Corporation began playing highlight reels from the Comrades Marathon. They proved so popular that in 1983, the SABC started showing entire race live, a 13-hour broadcast that began before dawn and didn’t end until the evening. It was a runaway hit, and its star was a young white archeology student-turned-professional runner named Bruce Fordyce.

Two days before the Comrades in 2017, I met Bruce Fordyce in the foyer of the Durban Hilton. The place was teeming with spandex, like the entire guest-list of hotel is ready, at a moment’s notice, to take off on a collective jog. Groups of runners in marathon finishers t-shirts and running shoes color coordinated for an 80s workout video were sprawled across every chair and couch, sipping espressos and comparing favorite races. Two men appeared to be trading Gu gels in the doorway like they were baseball cards. But I could see that the biggest crowd was gathered around a short man of about 60. He had floppy blond hair gone white and a sunken face, and he seemed to be holding court about the upcoming race.

What’s the bathroom situation? Someone asked. Answer: It’s grim. Just pee yourself and grab an extra water sachet at the next aid station to clean off.

How are the hills, really? “Let me put it this way, they’ll make the hills in the Boston Marathon look like a speed bump.”

Fordyce laughed at his own joke, revealing the disarming smile that graced South African magazine covers and TV commercials throughout the 1980s. In those days, he was one of South Africa’s most beloved sports heroes, a celebrity status forged at the lucrative

intersection of athletic talent and personal charm. He won the race nine out of ten years in the 1980s, and in between smooth-talked South Africans into buying mattresses and breakfast cereals with a beguiling boy-next-door persona.

Fordyce also won friends – and enemies – with his politics. In 1981, he and several other runners wore black armbands to protest the fact that the Comrades took place on Republic Day – a holiday venerating South Africa’s forced departure from the British Commonwealth because of its apartheid policies. The reaction along the race course was small and mean. Fans jeered and threw tomatoes and eggs at the runners. Volunteers at aid stations refused to give them water. Fordyce won easily, impressing supporters with his unruffled calm.

It was a brave stand, to be sure, but watching Fordyce in the Durban Hilton, I thought of a conversation I’d had with Poobie Naidoo, an Indian runner who had also worn a black armband that day. When he crossed the finish line, a Special Branch police officer grabbed him by the shirt and shoved him aside. The officer demanded the terrified Naidoo’s name, address, and employer, and then kicked him out of the stadium without letting him shower. None of that happened to Bruce, by dint of his race and elite stature. “You can’t shove the race winner to the side like that,” Poobie said.

Indeed, Bruce Fordyce seemed to move within a protective halo throughout his career, a sharp reminder of the unequal society in which his celebrity was forged. He parlayed his running career into a lifetime of motivational speaking and coaching. Today, he lives in an airy Johannesburg house with golden retrievers padding around on the Oregon pine floors and a heritage plaque outside explaining that this was the house of elite Comrades runner Bruce Fordyce. Meanwhile, his closest rival, a Black runner named Hoseah Tjale, drifted from Comrades glory back to the same job he’d held before he began running, as a delivery driver living in a shack settlement outside Johannesburg. He retired from that work in the early 2000s, and now works as a small-scale farmer on a small tract of land three hours north of the city.

Some of the elite Black runners of Fordyce’s time drifted even further into the “little is known” column. In 2010, for instance, word spread across the South African running community that Vincent Rakabaele, the runner who finished twentieth in the 1975 Comrades with SOTH0 stitched across his chest, had died without fanfare the previous year.

As fellow runners tut-tutted about the sad loss, a journalist named Duane Heath went searching for his grave, and discovered something even more shocking. Rakabaele actually died seven years earlier, in a village in the Lesotho highlands, of a stomach sickness no one around him could name. No one in the running community had noticed.

“Everybody just assumed he’d gone back to Lesotho. It’s what happened to a lot of good Black runners from those years,” said Alan Robb, a four-time winner of Comrades in the 1970s. “I don’t know why, but they all seemed to disappear and no one kept in touch.”

No one kept in touch with Robert Mtshali either. When the race’s chair said in 2005 that “little was known” by Comrades organizers of his barrier-breaking performance, even that was something of an overstatement. Because until early 2005, the race wasn’t even aware of Mtshali’s existence.

That discovery was the doing of the Chesterville Athletics Club, a running club from the Durban township of the same name. Its chair, a naval officer in the new South Africa’s military named Sifiso Xaba, was a longtime Comrades runner who turned on his TV one day in 2004 to find a documentary about the SS Mendi, a British steamship ship that sunk in 1917 while carrying hundreds of Black South African troops to fight in the Great War in France. He immediately had two thoughts. First, he was moved by the work the filmmakers had done to excavate the legacy of these soldiers, whose contributions to the war had been largely ignored in South Africa for nearly a century. Second, he wondered: if so many Black South African soldiers were fighting and dying in the war, what had those who made it home done to commemorate them? Might some have chosen, like their white colleagues, to remember their friends on the road between Durban and Pietermaritzburg?

Xaba and his teammates decided to ask the Comrades if there had been any Black runners in the race’s early years. But when they went to Comrades headquarters in Pietermaritzburg, the archivists said they had nothing in their files on any Black runners who completed the race before the 1970s. One of the club’s runners, a human rights lawyer I’ll call Sipho, was convinced that wasn’t the full story. So he went to the archives of the Natal Witness, a Durban newspaper, and asked to see their archives from the 1920s and ‘30s. Then he began to flip through them, scanning the days around the Comrades Marathon each year.

For three weeks, there was nothing. And then, he was flipping through the 1935 edition when he saw it. *NATIVE FINISHES*, the headline read, beside a grainy, blown out photograph of a young man in belted shorts and canvas sneakers. *A human touch was added to the race this year by the participation of a young native, who entered unofficially*, the text continued. Sipho knew he'd found it.

"What did that feel like?" I asked him 17 years later, in the living room of his house in an estate in the Johannesburg northern suburbs. He didn't answer for a second, and I felt him breathe sharply. Then he looked at me and burst into tears.

"When we think of famous Comrades runners, the first person, every time, is Bruce Fordyce," he said through sobs. "He is the one who gets the credit for doing what he did as a white liberal to change the race. But what about people like Robert Mtshali?" His entire body shook, big wracking sobs that traveled from his gut and made his whole upper body quiver.

Sipho suffered from memory loss, and by the time I met him, couldn't remember many of the details of that search, all those years ago. But as is often true with dementia, the past and present had folded in on themselves in his mind. His emotions about Robert Mtshali were as fresh and raw as the day he first experienced them. "It wasn't fair," he repeated, as I gazed down at my notebook, unnerved by the unexpected display of emotion.

Weeks later, I sat with Sipho's teammate Xaba at the Comrades expo, and he finished the story for me. After Sipho found the news article, the Chesterville runners decided to go searching for Robert's descendants, who they reckoned probably still lived in Durban. As they remember it, they called a journalist from the SABC, who thought the whole thing sounded like a firecracker of a story. Then, with the cameras recording, they started looking up Mtshalis in the phonebook, door-stopping them to find out if they were, maybe, related to a man called Robert? It was a dead end. They tried the local cemeteries. Nothing there either.

All they could hope now was that when the segment aired on the SABC, someone who knew Robert Mtshali would see it, and get in touch. Someone remembered this man; they were sure of it. They just had to find them.

Robert Mtshali's daughters

When you look at this, what do you see? Just another photographic studio? No, friend. It's more than just that.

This is a strong-room of dreams. The dreamers? My people. The simple people, who you never find mentioned in the history books, who never get statues erected to them, or monuments commemorating their great deeds. People who would be forgotten, and their dreams with them, if it wasn't for [me]. That's what I do, friends. Put down, in my way, on paper, the dreams and hopes of my people so that even their children's children will remember a man... 'This was our grandfather' and say his name. Walk into the houses of New Brighton and on the walls you'll find hanging the story of the people the writers of the big history books forgot about.

-- "Sizwe Banzi is Dead" (Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona)

There wasn't much Wendy Nxumalo didn't know about the Comrades Marathon. When she was a child in the 1980s, watching the iconic race been a near-religious ritual in her family. In fact, it was the only Sunday of the year when she could remember being allowed to skip *actual* church. Instead, her mother Nana would wake Wendy and her four brothers in the brisk, high-altitude dark of Johannesburg winter and hand them each a cup of sweet, milky tea. They would wrap themselves in blankets and gather around the small black-and-white television at their house in Soweto, the city's largest Black township, for the 5:30 am start. From then until the last runners limped and lurched over the finish line in the winter twilight 11 hours later, they barely moved.

It was a ritual born of apartheid South Africa's bitter isolation from the world. If you were South African in the 1980s, there was no World Cup squad to cheer for, no Olympic athletes. Apartheid had cut off the country from the world's sports, and as a result, it had made spectacles of quirky local events—a multi-day canoe race, a vast open-water swim, and the Comrades, a road race two marathons long that wove through the hills near the Indian Ocean coast.

The Nxumalos didn't have any particular connection to the Comrades, but they were ravenous sports fans. Soccer. Rugby. Cricket. Running. They watched it all. So when a news

segment about the history of the Comrades flashed across Wendy's TV one day in 2005, she was barely paying attention. She knew the race's backstory already.

Then a photograph of her mother's father Robert appeared on the screen.

Wendy's breath caught in her throat. He stood in front of a tangle of foliage, wearing a dark-colored suit and squinting into the sun, his face drawn and serious. On screen, the presenter was explaining that this man, Robert Mtshali, was the first Black person to finish the Comrades. He'd done it in 1935, a particularly remarkable feat given that Black runners were only technically allowed to compete in the race in the 1970s.

The presenter continued, talking about the local running club who had recently found out about Mtshali's run in an old newspaper article, and how the Comrades Marathon was now looking for more information about him. But Wendy couldn't focus. That photo. That photo was *here*, in her mother Nana's bedroom, tucked into a stack of old family snapshots. They never knew much about the man in the picture, who Nana said abandoned her family when she was still never young. The shadow that passed over Nana's face when she spoke about him was enough to tell Wendy she didn't want to talk about it anymore. Still, Wendy thought it was strange, given how much the Nxumalos loved the Comrades, that her mother never once mentioned that her father had run it – let alone that he was a historic figure in the race.

Now Wendy was hearing the presenter say that Robert had died in 1967, but that the Comrades Marathon Association had recently discovered that he had a daughter, who still lived in the home where she'd grown up in New Brighton, on the outskirts of the windswept coastal city of Port Elizabeth. The camera panned over a squat, peach-colored house.

That was even weirder, Wendy thought, because her mother's only sister had died years before. And she'd certainly never lived in Port Elizabeth. Wendy picked up the phone.

"Mom," she said, "turn on the TV."



Nana's photo of her father, Robert Mtshali

600 kilometers away, in Durban, Nompumelelo Madonsela saw her father's face appear on the screen too. The man in the dark, double-breasted suit looked just as he did the last time she saw him, fifty years before. For a moment, she was six years old again, shrieking with laughter as her father picked her up and swung her around the small living room of their little peach-coloured house in New Brighton.

He had a booming alto voice and a sharp tennis back hand, and he loved music. Sometimes when he got home from work, he would push back the furniture in the living room and turn on his gramophone. Then he would pull Nompumelelo or one of her two sisters into a waltz. *One two three one two three one two three* he would count as they danced and they tried not to step on his glossy shoes.

She sometimes imagined then what it would be like to be a grown up, with a husband of her own. She'd seen how her parents danced, pressed close and smiling. That must be what love looked like, she thought.

But she also knew from her parents that love had a fearsome power. Sometimes it happened when it wasn't supposed to. Before Nompumelelo was born, her mother lived

in Durban, and she loved someone else. The families had gathered. *Lobola*, the bride price, was paid. And then.

Then what? The details were a bit hazy for Nompumelelo, but she knew that sometime between the engagement and the marriage, her mother met someone else. He was a handsome office clerk, already married with two small daughters. But he told her he wanted to leave.

“Come with me,” he said. It was the mid 1940s. He said he was going to Port Elizabeth, a city 900 kilometers down the coast, for work. She said yes, and the two of them ran. That’s how Nompumelelo and her two sisters came to grow up in a place called New Brighton, where the wind came up off the sea and shrieked between the neat rows of identical government-built houses. Their road, Teya, was known to be where Zulus and Sothos settled when they arrived in the township, and their street was full of the music of their languages.

Then one day in the late 1950s, when Nompumelelo was around 8 or 9, her mother got word from her family back home that her brother was seriously ill. She needed to come quickly. They took the train to Pietermaritzburg, a city near Durban, three little girls and their distraught mother. It’s hard to remember exactly what happened next. Nompumelelo was so young. But somehow her mother fell ill too. Within a few months she was gone.

Sometime later – Nompumelelo can’t recall anymore how long – their father came to take them home. But when he arrived at their grandmother’s house, she refused to let him in. “Get out!” she screamed from the doorway. “Leave these children alone.” She’d never forgiven Robert for what he’d done when he ran away with her daughter, how he had humiliated the family like that. So no, he wasn’t taking these children away again. The last Nompumelelo saw of her father was his back, shoulders hunched, retreating from the house while her grandmother told him never to come back.

And he didn’t. She waited, but he didn’t return for them. Nompumelelo thought at the time that it was like both her parents were dead. So it felt particularly cruel when, in early 1968, she got a letter in the mail from Robert’s new wife, telling her he had passed away. Her father’s second death meant that Nompumelelo, now 17, was officially an orphan, and suddenly a darkness tugged at her. She had to get away from this. So she moved to Swaziland, and took up with a volatile man, who seemed to both love her and despise her. A

man who hit her and then begged her not to go. They had three children. He loved them too, and hit them too.

After 15 years, she finally left. She brought the kids back to Durban, cleaned houses, fell in love again. A few years later, in 1990, she watched on TV as Nelson Mandela walked out of prison, and into a new South Africa. She didn't think much anymore of her father.

But suddenly here he was again on her television screen. The presenter was saying something about Robert Mtshali, the first Black man to run the Comrades Marathon. This she knew. Her dad went running every day of her childhood, and he had once told her about the big faraway race he did before she was born.

Then a woman called Sibongile appeared on the screen, standing in front of *her* childhood house in New Brighton.

Wait, Nompumelelo thought, who is *she*?

Sibongile Mzili was born in July 1961 in the front bedroom of what they called in those days a "matchbox house," one of the squat square little homes that South Africa's white government built by the tens of thousands on the fringes of all its cities for Black laborers. It was in New Brighton, a windswept grid of matchboxes sliced apart from the "white" city of Port Elizabeth by railroad tracks and factories.

Sibongile was her parents' first child, and so they gave her a name whose meaning was a prayer of gratitude: "We thank you." Maybe they were supposed to want boys, but it was clear to anyone who knew the Mtshalis back then that they were delighted to have a girl. Her mother Edith dressed her in crisp white dresses and black Mary Janes, and her father Robert was forever coming home from his job at a local logistics company in town with a new toy for her. A tricycle. A doll with soft, white skin. Her own tea set. "He loved me too much," she says. Even when her brother Mduduzi came along three years later, she felt her father's preference for her, a secret that hung unspoken between them.

Her father was much older than the other dads she knew. But he still seemed young, somehow. He played tennis at the club up the road, and sometimes he went for runs, out and back through New Brighton's flat streets. Sibongile's mother told her that once, when he was still young, Robert ran a long, long race between Pietermaritzburg and Durban. Even

in his late 50s, he was trim and handsome, and never looked out of place beside Edith, 22 years his junior.

But Robert could also be jealous, possessive. When Edith was out too late at church choir practice, he screamed, telling her he was locking the gate at 6 pm, that it was dangerous to be out late, that he couldn't be left alone with the children. He grew big bushes along the edge of their property, hungry, wild plants that shrouded the house from view. When Sibongile asked to go out and play with the neighbors, he was firm. "Stay inside with your toys," he told her. When Edith asked if her three sons from a previous marriage could come to stay, Robert was firm. No, he said. They aren't mine.

And then one evening in June 1967, ten days before Sibongile's sixth birthday, Robert was crossing a road at the edge of New Brighton, where railway tracks cleaved the Black township from the rest of the city. A bus pulled out of a nearby station struck him. He died on the spot.

After that, it didn't much matter to six-year-old Sibongile who Robert Mtshali had been. Now he was an absence. The blank half of a bed. A lost paycheck. The gate was unlocked. There were no more toys. Sibongile wasn't anyone's favorite anymore. She only had a photograph of him, one he had taken by a professional photographer years before. In it, he stood between those overgrown hedges outside their house. He wore a suit and squinted at the camera.

Years later, Sibongile was looking for that photo when she came across another, of three small girls.

"Who's this?" she asked her mother.

"Those are your father's other daughters," Edith replied, her voice flat.

"Where are they?" Sibongile asked, a live wire of excitement running through her. All her life, she'd only had brothers. Her mother's three older sons had come to stay with them after her father died, and between them and Mduduzi, she had always been thoroughly outnumbered. She often dreamed of what it might be like to have a sister instead, someone to share the dolls and tea set with.

"I don't know," her mother said quietly. And that was that. Her mother had been through enough, Sibongile thought. She didn't want to hurt her any further. So she put the photograph back where she found it. She tucked the question away too, and promised

herself not to think about her sisters anymore. For forty years she basically succeeded. Then in 2005, she heard the Comrades Marathon was looking for family members of Robert Mtshali. They wanted to tell the forgotten stories of the race's Black pioneers. Sibongile felt a surge of pride. She called their office. "I'm Robert's daughter," she said.



Sibongile's photo of her father, Robert Mtshali

Robert Mtshali wasn't anyone's father yet on Friday, May 24, 1935, when he lined up with 48 other men outside the smart red brick City Hall in Pietermaritzburg, a sleepy South African city an hour inland from the Indian Ocean. They were mostly local guys, and they bobbed up and down on the soles of their thin canvas sneakers to keep warm in the predawn winter chill.

By 1935, the Comrades had been going for more than a decade, and it had achieved a level of local renown. Vic Clapham was a minor Pietermaritzburg celebrity for the strange run he'd organized every year since 1921. By the '30s, local newspapers covered the race – which alternated directions between the two cities – with fawning attention, and fans turned out along the route to cheer on their favorite runners. "Come and get a Great THRILL," Comrades organizers promised in the 1935 race program, which dutifully listed the name of each competitor and his hometown.

"His," of course, because the Comrades was only open to men – and only white men at that. Women were too brittle to run so far, the thinking went, and in this little outpost at the edge of the British colonial empire, white and Black people didn't play sports together.

By the mid 1930s, however, the Comrades had already had a few interlopers, all of them white women, and there seemed to be a general understanding that an occasional “unofficial” runner like this was ok.

Still, when a Black hospital clerk named Robert Mtshali approached the start line that morning in 1935, it would have certainly been a spectacle. He was 27, short and slender, and he wore a white shirt tucked into a pair of belted black shorts, like he was headed out for a recreational morning of croquet. Just before 6, another runner, a Durban local called Max Trimborn, cupped his hands over his mouth and let loose a wild cock’s crow. A race official fired a pistol into the air, and the runners took off into the dark morning.

In those days, the Comrades was a low-budget, DIY affair. Participants organized friends on bicycles or in cars to follow along with water and a bite to eat. The more laissez faire among them stopped off for a pipe or a beer and a chicken curry at one of the quaint hotels that lined the course. Much of the race, for anyone, was lonely and solitary. As the hours passed, the distance between individual runners stretched out for kilometers, and between towns, there weren’t many spectators.

Robert Mtshali never told his daughters what the race that day was like. Still, it’s easy to imagine that for him, it was a particular kind of lonely. Even if he wanted to, he couldn’t stop in those hotels along the course: As a Black man, if he wasn’t working there, he wasn’t allowed in the doors. Later, in the 1960s and early ‘70s, “unofficial” Black runners would complete the entire Comrades, only to be blocked at the gates of the sports club where it finished so they wouldn’t “embarrass” the race by actually crossing the finish line.

That was much later, though, when the number of “unofficial” runners had become a persistent, embarrassing reminder of the race’s failure to meet the times. In 1935, Robert Mtshali’s choice to run was still just a charming curiosity. When he finished the race in 9 hours and 35 minutes, a Durban city councilor approached him to congratulate him on his finish. There wouldn’t be a medal, of course, he explained. But the city had organized him a gift to commemorate his achievement. It was a bag of oranges.

A newspaper article the next day ran beside a photograph of Robert, a lone figure on the road with a car and a horse parked side by side a few yards behind him. His gaze is

angled towards the camera, as though he is watching the photographer watch him as he jogs away.



Robert Mtshali runs the 1935 Comrades Marathon

When Nana, Nompumelelo, and Nompumelelo's sister Thokozile saw the news story about Sibongile, they both called the TV station to tell them Robert was *their* father too. The journalists passed the message along to the race organizers, who decided the best thing to do was invite all the women to the next Comrades.

By now, much of that first meeting is buried under the years that have come since. It might have been at the Durban airport, or in the belly of the city's convention center, or in a wood-paneled downtown restaurant. Wherever it was though, for all the sisters, it was like seeing a ghost. When Nompumelelo and Thokozile saw Sibongile walk across the room, they thought for a second they were seeing a sister who had died years before, For Sibongile, looking at Nompumelelo was like seeing that photograph of her father in the hedges outside the New Brighton house come to life. She had Robert's same long forehead, the same eyes that flared open wider when she got excited. And Nana – Nana was curvy in all the same places as Sibongile, so different from the women in Sibongile's mother's family.

Though her face was snotty with tears, Sibongile laughed. With their twin asses, they were so clearly, unmistakably sisters.

Later, the four women together went to see a plaque to their father that had recently been nailed to the entrance of Comrades founder Vic Clapham's old house in Pietermaritzburg. Embossed in bronze was the newspaper image of Robert running in 1935, and below it, an inscription:

Robert Mtshali:

Inspirational early pioneer, Mtshali was the first black man to complete the Comrades Marathon in 1935.

Unveiled on 10 June 2005, this plaque is dedicated to all the men and women who completed the Comrades Marathon unofficially prior to 1975 when it was officially opened to all races and both genders.

Then the women went to the race itself. The Comrades still started outside the Pietermaritzburg City Hall and ended 90 kilometers away in Durban, but otherwise, there were few clues to suggest this was the same race Robert Mtshali finished 70 years before. In 2005, there were 13,000 entrants, a technicolored tidal wave of spandex and Nikes that packed the entire road. The race wasn't held on Empire Day anymore, but the 16th of June, a new public holiday in memory of a schoolchildren's uprising against apartheid. Unlike the gangly farmers and stout rugby players who lined up beside Robert in 1935, most of the race's participants were now Black, and the race was a huge deal – a kind of South African Superbowl Sunday. Supporters fanned out across the entire course, cranking boomboxes, grilling sausages, and pressing foil-wrapped baked potatoes into the hands of dazed runners. Helicopters chop-chop-chopped overhead, capturing aerial footage for a live TV broadcast.

The sisters had all seen the Comrades before, of course. Nana and her daughter Wendy watched it on TV every year, and Thokozile and Nompumelelo lived not far from the course. But this was different. Now, it belonged to their family. They had become race VIPs who got put up in the type of fancy hotel Sibongile had spent her working life cleaning.

Strangers kept hugging them, telling them how grateful they were to Robert Mtshali. For Nana, to whom he had only ever been a hole in her life, this was particularly startling. “Now I can tell somebody what my father left for me,” she says.

The Mtshali sisters had lived whole lives before they met each other. Now they flung them wide open, beckoning each other in. Sibongile invited her sisters to her eldest daughter’s bridal shower, her “kitchen party.” Nana started calling them on their birthdays, Mother’s Day, Christmas. They traveled to see each other, piecing together the shards they each had of Robert’s life, and telling each other the stories of their own. When people asked Sibongile if she had siblings, began to delight at saying yes, “four brothers and three sisters.”

She and Nompumelelo became especially close. Sibongile says Nompumelelo treated her as she always imagined an older sister would, doling out advice and the occasional R200 note. In 2009, Sibongile was visiting Nompumelelo and Thokozile when she noticed dark strings fluttering across her field of vision. They took her to a doctor, who diagnosed diabetic neuropathy. Slowly, the world started to slip out of focus. By 2011, when she turned 50, she could see nothing at all.

In 2019, the Comrades called the sisters again. The race gave out a series of different medals to finishers, depending on their time. They had decided to name one after Robert Mtshali – the first time in the race’s century-long history that such an honor went to a Black runner. The Comrades wanted the Mtshalis back again as VIPs.

That year, they gave Sibongile a special job, to fire the gun officially ending the race. All afternoon on race day, she and her sisters sat in a glass VIP box at a horse racing track in Pietermaritzburg. Above the finish line, a bright red LED clock ticked towards 12 hours, the final cut off time. In the minutes leading up to it, they watched the final runners staggering in, their singlets streaked with bands of salt, eyes glazed. As the clock turned over into the final minute of the race, Europe’s “The Final Countdown” pumped from the speaker. A race official pushed a prop gun into Sibongile’s hand and guided her to the finish line. A roar went up from the crowd, soft at first and then louder and louder. With ten seconds left, the stadium began to chant in unison.

Ten! Nine! Eight! Seven!

Sibongile tilted the gun upward. Her finger grazed the trigger.

Six! Five! Four! Three! Two! One!

She squeezed. A shot rang out. On the finish line, a woman in an orange jersey named Zukiswa Mabulu tottered backwards from the shock of the sound, nearly crashing into the race officials swarming the course to block anyone behind her from finishing. Her gaze was glassy as a crowd gathered around her. She'd completed the run in 12:00:00, good enough for 16,448th place. The race was over.

"The cemetery isn't well kept," Sibongile told me apologetically. It was July 2022, and I was behind the wheel of a rented silver Suzuki in New Brighton. A few months earlier, I'd started looking into the life of Robert Mtshali, and found his four daughters. When I called Sibongile, she invited me to come see the famous peach-colored house where she, Nompumelelo, and Thokozile had grown up. "And I'll take you to our father's grave," she said.

In the car, she navigated from the house towards the cemetery with her eyes closed, gauging where we were by the car's stops and turns. She guided me out of New Brighton to the adjoining township, KwaZakhele, where the city rambled away into open grassland. Ahead was what looked like a huge field, backing onto a rusted, decommissioned power station. "Here," she said, knowing exactly where we were.

As I got out and walked towards the cemetery gate, Sibongile's husband Thobile stopped me. "We're going to say a prayer first for Oom Rob, to let him know we're here," he said, using the Afrikaans word for "uncle." He dropped his head and Sibongile began to speak, telling her father that she was well and we had come to pay our respects. "There's a lady here from America," she said. "She wants to meet you."

We opened our eyes again and Thobile took Sibongile's hand. The three of us walked into what looked like a lumpy field. Lanky brown cattle wandered over the mostly unmarked graves, methodically pulling grass into their mouths. A few of the tombs were still demarcated with old concrete crosses that slump tiredly towards the ground.

Back in 2005, when the Comrades first found Sibongile, and then her sisters saw her on TV, the race organizers had promised the family they'd do up the grave, and give Oom

Rob one of those fancy etched headstones like anti-apartheid heroes always got. She wasn't sure what happened, exactly. But they never came.

This cemetery used to stretch back towards New Brighton, she explained, but over time, the city started to run out of space. The council began building little brick houses on top of the older graves. To Sibongile it seemed like only a matter of time before the same thing happened to the field where her father was buried too. Already, the houses reached to the edge of the walled cemetery. Inside, someone had built a small enclosure for the cattle, with a little shack to sleep in. Bit by bit, the living were crowding out the dead.



Thobile and Sibongile Mzili, New Brighton, 2022

Tiger Gono's forty runs

"We are now beginning our descent into Mthatha," an Afrikaans voice drawls over the plane's loudspeaker, and my eyes snap open. Below my window, the city's tin roofs are twinkling, seeming to flicker on and off as the sun darts through the clouds around us.

At the car hire desk a few minutes later, a man in an Avis baseball cap is explaining to me the ins and outs of a blood red Datsun Go. When I ask him if there's some place I should visit in the city, he winds up his answer like a pitch. "According to me, the way I see it, there's a museum in town you will like. It's about Nelson Mandela."

And then I'm pointing myself towards the city, fiddling with the radio dial until Celine Dion suddenly comes blasting through the static. *There were days when the sun was so cruel.* Outside, the outskirts of Mthatha assemble on either side of my car, women selling tomatoes in little pyramids, knots of teenage girls in school blazers holding Styrofoam cartons of chips, knobby-kneed sheep munching piles of garbage, a hundred little street-side businesses announcing their wares with enthusiastic signage.

Lovely Hardware

Tavern Now It's Open! Safe Parking Behind.

Highway Spaza. Beer. Sofa Covers.

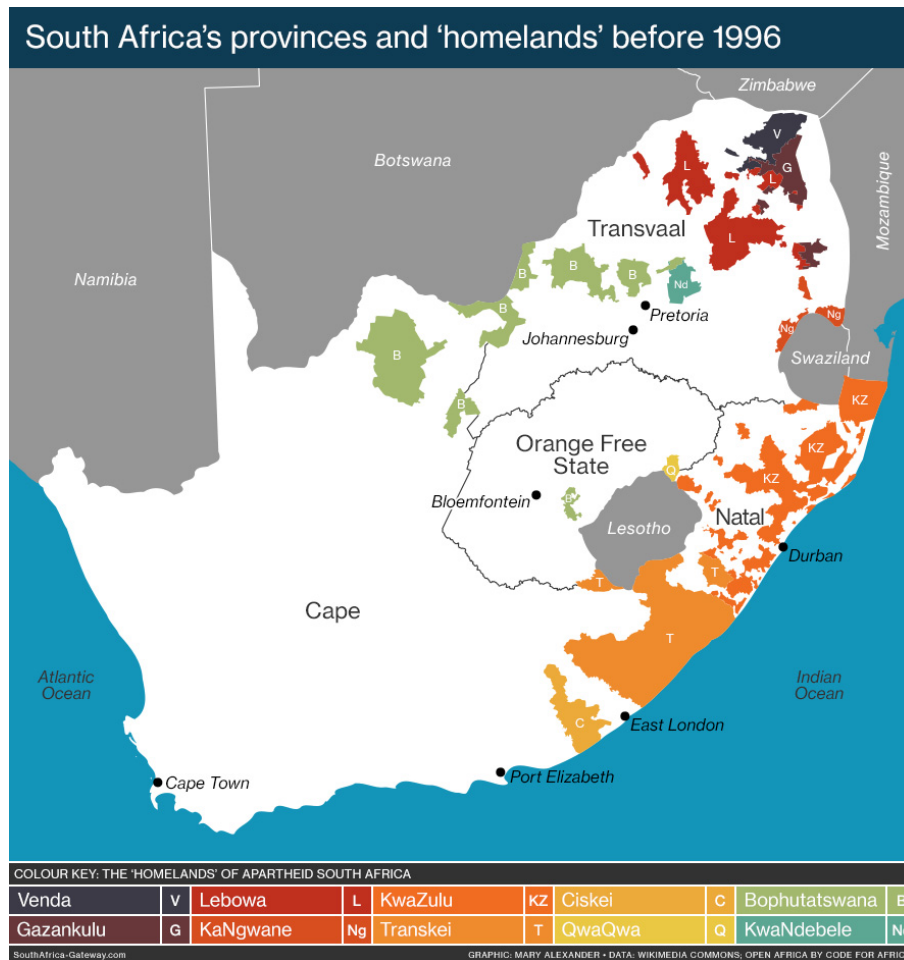
Grosary Store

I'm on my way to see a man named Zwelitsha "Tiger" Gono, a retired school teacher who in 2016 became the first Black runner ever to complete the Comrades 40 times. He was also one of the first Black runners ever to finish the race at all – running it as an "unofficial" entrant in the early 1970s, before its formal desegregation. On the phone, when I called to ask for the interview, he had batted away the significance of this achievement. "It was not so difficult," he said. But speaking about his runs, his voice was delighted, and he laughed uproariously between nearly every sentence as we planned my visit. "By the way," he said off-handedly at the end of our call, "we don't have much cell service out here. Ha!"

I didn't know what to make of all this joy. It felt so genuine and unadulterated I worried maybe I'd accidentally told him he won the lottery, rather than that I was a journalist coming to ask him some questions about his life.

Now the Datsun is pointed towards Mfundisweni, a village three hours from Mthatha. On the way out of the city, I pass through the downtown. It looks like how the 1970s imagined the future, all concrete office blocks with bug-eyed little porthole windows, stubby triangular brutalist skyscrapers, TV towers reaching their metal tentacles towards the clouds. The city has the space age aesthetic of a very particular moment in South African history, when this country was beginning to seem to the world pitiful and parochial, a bunch of scared white people playing voortrekker at the southern tip of Africa, shooting out from behind their wagons at anything that rustled in the distance. All around it, empires were falling. Countries were becoming independent. South Africa had to prove that it too was a modern, sensible place, and what better way than its architecture? Across the 1960s and '70s, its cities filled up with the kind of buildings I'm now driving past in Mthatha, all sharp angles and solid concrete, like heavy paperweights to keep apartheid from fluttering away.

Back then, Mthatha was Umtata, the capital city of a newly minted "independent" country inside of South Africa called the Transkei. "The present Black homelands in South Africa were determined by a process of occupation by Whites with a European background on the one hand, and by Blacks with an African background on the other," explained a guide to the so-called "Bantustan" system written in the 1980s. "The Whites, driven by a determination to improve their position, to accumulate wealth and to rule the country, practically overran the Blacks, who did not display the same ambitious urges." And so, the guide continued, some territories had been peeled off South Africa proper and given to "the Blacks" to run on their own. The Transkei was one of these, a spine of rugged coastline in South Africa's southeast, and the rolling green hills inland from it.



South Africa's Bantustans, with the Transkei in orange (source: southafrica-info.com)

As I'm driving, I'm struck by how different Mthatha feels to many other cities I've been to in South Africa. Normally, this country's cities are tortured, brooding characters. They have been sliced apart by segregation and now the scars are thick and rubbery, raised welts that seem like they will never fully heal. But Mthatha and other Bantustan capitals existed in an almost fictitious parallel universe – one where people didn't have to be segregated because this wasn't South Africa at all.

I can understand now why, when I spoke to Zwelitsha on the phone, he related differently to apartheid than Black runners like Hoseah Tjale who lived in the "white" South Africa. It wasn't that it didn't shape his life as much as theirs. Of course it did, but its contours looked different out here. In the rural Transkei, apartheid wasn't so much about the daily humiliation of the passbook or your boss handing you a chipped enamel mug for your coffee so that your lips never touched her fine china. Instead, for a young Zwelitsha, its

wounds were the holes it created. When he was growing up in the 1950s and '60s, apartheid was that thing that sent his mother Millie somewhere far away to work in the "umlungu's kitchen," a place whose main memorable feature to a young Zwelitsha was as a source of largesse. From umlungu's kitchen, via registered post, came the thin stacks of notes that his gran used to buy him black oxfords and grey wool trousers, a crisp white school shirt and packs of London mixture sweets. He learned to understand that his mother's absence was her way of loving him.

Three hours later, as the Datsun rattles along a narrow concrete road with its shoulders nibbled away by the surrounding grass, I am trying to imagine what compelled Zwelitsha to step into a very different, very white world, when he signed up for his first Comrades as a young man. But my thoughts are interrupted by a sudden pronouncement from my phone's GPS.

"You have arrived."

I look at the sheep grazing on the hillside around me. It is clear I have not, in fact, arrived. I pull over into the grass and try to call Zwelitsha, but as he warned me on the phone when I was back in Johannesburg, there is no service (ha!). So I drive on. A few hundred meters further along, I reach a compound of pink rondavels, where a woman is dunking t-shirts into a basin of sudsy water.

"Hi," I begin uncertainly, stepping out of the car. "Do you by any chance know a man named Zwelitsha Gono?"

She shakes her head, then tells me to wait. I hear a shuffling inside, then the muffled rise and fall of two women speaking to each other. A few seconds later, an older woman sticks her head out the door.

"There are Gonos this side," she jabs towards one hill, "and this side." She points to another in the opposite direction. I thank the women and get back in my car. Then, like the well-prepared visitor I am, I choose one of those directions at random and begin to drive.

I figure I am probably on the right road when I pass the post office and realize it is the one Zwelitsha described going to as a child with his grandmother to collect money sent by his mother from umlungu's kitchen. A hundred meters further down the road, I see that

my phone has a single bar of service, and before it can change its mind, I call Zwelitsha. “Keep coming,” he says, and then “I told you not to use a GPS.” He giggles.

Another kilometer down the road, I pull to a stop in front of a man in his 70s wearing a blue sweat-wicking Comrades Marathon shirt tucked into formal grey slacks, and green running shoes. He has the loose, lanky limbs of a runner and he is standing in front of a turquoise house. He waves me inside the gate.

Before this, I hadn’t really known what to expect from Zwelitsha Gono. Google him, and scattered news stories appear about the “incredible local runner” poised to finish his twentieth, then thirtieth, then fortieth Comrades. Sometimes he appeared a supporting character in stories about the rarified “quadruple green number club,” Comrades-speak for the dozen or so runners who have finished the race more than forty times.

The stories, at times, held out tantalizing clues about the man – like that he ran two Comrades in the mid 1970s before Black runners were officially allowed, or that he was a school teacher from the rural Eastern Cape who had completed more Comrades than almost anyone else in the world. A commemorative coffee table book about the Comrades mentioned him briefly on a page entitled “forgotten runners of colour” and another Comrades history noted in passing that he had first participated in the 1973 race.

“Zwelitsha Gono, a 21-year-old student, was the first black runner,” it said simply. And that was it.



Zwelitsha “Tiger” Gono, Mfundisweni, 2019

Now, sitting across from me at his glossy dining room table, with a bobble-headed orange chicken wandering over his feet, the real Zwelitsha begins to fill in the gaps.

He was born a few kilometers from here, in a place called Cetshe, in 1951. When he was still a baby, he says, his grandmother turned to his mother Millie and said, “you need to go and look for a job in the white man’s kitchen. I am old and I can’t work at umlungu’s kitchen anymore, you have to go and work for your child.”

And then she was gone, to a place with a strange-sounding name, Kokstad, to work for a man with an even stranger one, Ralph. Zwelitsha was left in the village with his gran, where he learned to herd livestock, swim with the current, and how to get away with stealing his neighbors’ peaches. When he was seven years old, he began school. More than sixty years later, he recounted the experience in a short memoir that he wrote with his wife Christina:

Just a reminder at that time we were still under apartheid government, blacks were given... arithmetic... to count the white boss’s sheep, cattle and goats. Reading and writing a few nouns and verbs in both broken English and Afrikaans to communicate with “baas” and “madam”. Home language was mainly to write a letter home and read the bible! HA-A-A-A-HA-HA.....!. those were the old apartheid days. At 12, he was sent to high school at a nearby boarding school. There, he watched as one by one his classmates dropped out to go work for the *baas* and *madam*. Some were recruited by the gold mines in Johannesburg, others the sugar cane fields in Natal. But Zwelitsha had his eye on another job – he wanted to be a teacher.

So from high school he went to teaching college, where he specialized in visual arts and on the side, began running in athletics events for fun. But he quickly discovered he had a knack for running, and began bagging small cash prizes in local marathons and 10ks “Because of these awards,” his memoir explains, “our hero never ran out of cash.”

At the time, South African athletics, like most everything else in the country, was divided by race. Although a few races were integrated, the most prestigious events were reserved for white runners. At local races, Zwelitsha began to hear talk of a particularly mad white race run each year between Durban and Pietermaritzburg called the Comrades. One day, he simply got it stuck in his head that he would run this race. No particular reason, he says. It was just the longest, most complicated race he’d ever heard of, and he wanted to see if he could do it.

In June 1973, he walked up to the start line outside the city hall in Pietermaritzburg. In lieu of a race number, he wore pinned to his chest a sheet of paper that said simply UNOFFICIAL, along with his running nickname, Tiger. Over the prior decade, a few other Black runners had toed the same start line, with the same “unofficial” bib pinned to their singlets. And unbeknownst to Zwelitsha, inside the Comrades organizing body, a debate was afoot over whether it wasn’t high time the race formally desegregated and allowed women.

But that day in Pietermaritzburg, Zwelitsha didn’t know any of this. He was just there to run. “I never bothered myself about that,” he says. “I just told myself, I am not going to stop.” When I ask him about the crowd, he laughs again. “Whites everywhere, whites all around me!” he says.

Zwelitsha has a way of interspersing his stories with jokes like this. I wonder if it is, at least in part, for my comfort. I am a white person and his visitor. He doesn’t want to make me feel guilty for the way this story turns out. So he moves quickly over his memories of the rest of that day. Race officials shooed him away from official water tables and refused to allow him access to tents where other runners were stopping to have their sore muscles massaged along the route. “One might ask a question, why this?” He later wrote. “The answer was simple. Tiger was a black South African. So he had no right to enjoy white benefits!” But along the route, he says, he was kept going by the cheers of passerby, Black and white. “People were clapping their hands, cheering me on,” he says. He finished the race in 6 hours and 58 minutes, but was not given a medal, or recognized by race officials.

It was as if, he said, he had never been there at all.

Back in his house in Mfundisweni, I wonder aloud whether that demoralized him. Surely, I ask, a part of him must have felt humiliated by that treatment. “No,” he says. “I was already thinking of 1974.”

I’m a bit disappointed. I’ve come all this way imagining an emotional, dramatic arc to this story, and now here’s Zwelitsha, telling me he didn’t dwell on it. Maybe that’s true, and he is untouched by bitterness, or maybe he just isn’t interested in sharing those old hurts with me. Either way, I stop pushing, and ask if I might have a tour instead.

We step outside. From his yard, he points out the compound where he grew up a few kilometers away, as well as the school where he taught for four decades, on the next

hillside. He leads me to the gash of red dirt road running past his house that has been the site of nearly all his Comrades training since the 1970s – 20 kilometers out to the main road, 20 kilometers back.

“Does that ever get dull?” I ask.

“Yes, running is boring and so strenuous,” he responds without apology. “I think that’s why none of my children have become Comrades runners themselves.”

He has eight children. “When I die, my legacy will be my children and my Comrades medals,” he says.

I try to ask questions about his training, like how he manages the physical challenges of such a long distance – particularly now that he is nearing 70 -- and also the mental ones. But like many Comrades runners, he speaks about the race with a disorienting casualness.

“This is how I’ve managed 40 Comrades,” he says at one point, and my pen hovers over my notebook, ready to take in whatever wisdom will come next. “I don’t allow myself to be exhausted.

“You don’t allow it?” I say, not concealing the incredulousness in my voice.

“No, no, I don’t allow it.”

Hoseah Tjale's shoes³

Hoseah Tjale is standing beside the finish line of the 2022 Comrades Marathon, beneath the soaring metal ribs of Durban's soccer stadium. He's wearing a pair of vintage Asics. They're a bright new-shoe white, with a blue and black V running across the arch.

"I like your shoes," I tell him as a runner sprints over the finish line in front of us.

"Thanks," he replies, hiking up the leg of his gray slacks. "Asics gave them to me in the 1980s, when I was a sponsored runner."

"You've kept them since then?"

"I never wore them back then."

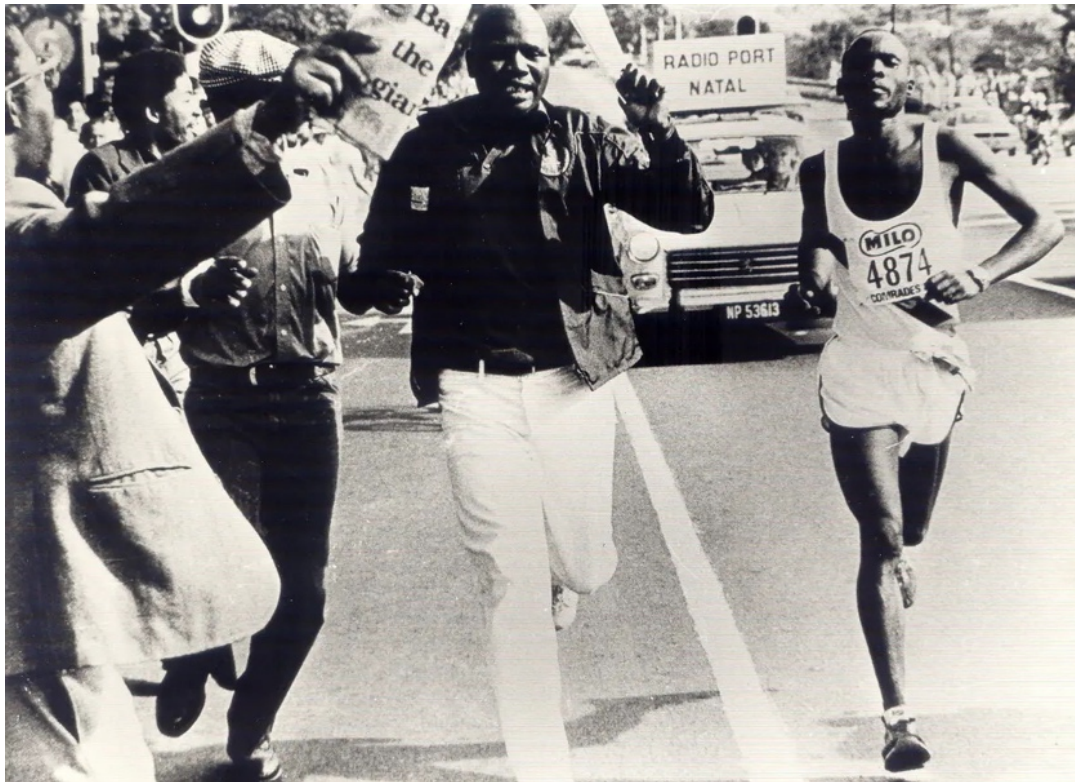
"What do you mean?"

"They gave me lots of pairs in those days. Some of them I used for racing. Some I kept in their boxes until I needed new shoes. When the heels come unglued, I get them repaired. I have more pairs, back at my house."

The details of this story settle over me like a cloud of dust. I'm standing in front of a man who, forty years ago, would shoot off from the Pietermaritzburg City Hall at 5:30 in the morning and run 90 three-and-a-half-minute kilometers in a row. Who graced mattress ads and soft drink commercials in 1980s apartheid South Africa, a revelation in the race's mostly-white front pack. "He was our great," a long-time Comrades runner told me. "The moment we saw a Black guy doing this, we knew we could do it too."

His story felt larger than life, a tale of almost cinematic scale. *Invictus* on the road. In the *New York Times* profile I wrote of Tjale a few days after the race, the accompanying photo showed Tjale running in the Comrades one year in the '80s. His feet were completely off the ground, arms pumping, gaze focused straight ahead. A man ran alongside him, one arm raised, a huge gap-toothed smile on his face. This is it, I think when I look at that photo, this is everything Hoseah Tjale represented. Hope. Possibility. A world beyond the broken, violent country that existed on either side of that race route.

³ A version of my reporting on Hoseah Tjale was published under the headline "'We Are Here Because of Him': The Runner Who Defied Apartheid" in *The New York Times* on September 24, 2022
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/04/sports/comrades-marathon-hoseah-tjale.html>



Hoseah Tjale runs the Comrades (undated photo)

And Hoseah Tjale *was* that, undoubtedly. But he was also a man who thirty years after his retirement from running has never thrown away a pair of sneakers from his sponsors, who still drives the mint green 1974 Toyota Hilux pickup he bought forty years earlier, and keeps trophies from major marathons displayed on his mantle alongside framed certificates of participation from courses he completed at his job as a delivery driver for a gaming company. He has a laugh that turns into a rasping cough when he gets going, and a sharp, quiet way of observing the world.

“So many runners have talent,” he told me a few days earlier, as we sat in my blue Hyundai driving from Polokwane, where he lives, to Johannesburg. Patches of charred black *veld* streamed by on either side of us, a marker of controlled fires set each winter to keep the savannah from going up in flames during the long months without rain. “But they have nowhere to go. So they don’t go anywhere. They disappear.”

In a way, though Hoseah Tjale was next to me, I feel like he was talking about himself. This was the first time he had been back to the Comrades since the final time he

raced it, in 1995. Since then, he'd retired from his job in Johannesburg and moved home to grow corn on a chalky plot of land near Polokwane, a city three hours northeast of Johannesburg. He stopped running entirely, letting his wiry running frame give way to a soft paunch. A few times, the Comrades tried half-heartedly to invite him back for a visit, but he refused them curtly. "I was done with the Comrades," he told me without further explanation. "For me it was finished."

Journalists, too, had tried their hand. In 2017, I was working on a story about the Comrades for *Runners World* and decided to ring Tjale to see how he remembered the race's historic transformation in the 1980s. "I'm sorry," he said when I finished my introduction. "I don't speak about that anymore." The line went dead.

I didn't think much of it, until early 2022, when I began to consider the race's history in more depth. One afternoon, I was sitting in the Comrades archive in Pietermaritzburg, chatting to a race board member named Isaac Ngwenya. I mentioned that I'd like to do a profile of Hoseah Tjale. He felt crucial to the race's history, but I could make out only the vaguest details of his story. I asked Ngwenya if he could make an introduction.

He said he'd consider it, but he warned me that Tjale felt betrayed by the race. He had grown tired of being treated like the sidekick of the more famous white runners of the era like Bruce Fordyce, Ngwenya thought. The few times they spoke, Tjale was something between modest and exasperated. Yes, he'd been a fast runner as a young man. Now he was neither fast nor young, and he had a different life to focus on. That was that.

"But let's give him a call now and see what he says," Ngwenya said to me abruptly. And before I could protest, Tjale was on speaker phone, and Ngwenya was inviting him to come to the 2022 Comrades as a VIP. And then I heard Tjale, improbably, saying yes.

So a few days before the race in August, I drove to his farm to interview for him for my *New York Times* profile, and then drive him to Johannesburg to catch his flight to the Comrades. It was the end of winter, and his fields were empty, just brittle stalks of maize slumped over each other in the dust. He greeted me in a blue fleece bearing the logo of the gaming company he used to work for, a short man with a bald head and a speckle of gray stubble on his chin. As we circled his fields, he explained proudly that he'd bought this land with money he saved up from running over the years, tiny sums squirreled away while he was living in a dilapidated men's hostel – a kind of dormitory for Black workers – in

Johannesburg. Since he retired, he had never once gone back to the city, he said. In fact, he had never again been south of Polokwane, and he was unsentimental about his years there. “It was just work,” he said.

Given his disinclination to travel, I still didn’t know why he had agreed to go to the Comrades this year, especially after refusing so many invitations before. But I didn’t want to break the spell by asking. So I got in my car and followed his bug-eyed green Hilux as we drove to his house in the nearby village of GaMogano. The 15-kilometer drive passed through a smattering of cinderblock villages and then Moria, the headquarters of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), one of South Africa’s largest and most influential churches. Every Easter weekend, the rolling hillsides here turn into an enormous tent city, with hundreds of thousands of pilgrims from across the country. Tjale could hear faint traces of the booming sermons from his bedroom.

At his house in the next valley, I wandered through his living room, looking at the certificates and news articles that adorned the walls. After a few minutes, Tjale’s wife appeared with a tray of pap, a sweet-spicy relish called chakalaka, stewed butternut, and grilled chicken. We ate quietly, and then she ushered me into a guestroom crammed with old photo albums and yellowing binders of official papers. I sat for a while on the edge of the bed, listening to the laughter bounce off the walls as the two of them chatted in the lounge in Sepedi. For more than two decades of their married life, they lived apart – she here, and him in Johannesburg. They saw each other twice a year, and he told me openly that he had a girlfriend “that side,” a domestic worker with whom he had a daughter. But now, that was all past him, he said. He was home, and his family was here.

The next morning, Tjale and I set off, headed for Johannesburg so that we could both catch our flights to Durban. In my backseat was a grocery bag bursting with lemons he had picked for me from a tree in his yard. “Are you excited?” I asked.

“I still don’t know why they invited me,” he said, staring out the window. My heart squeezed. We drove on in silence.

A few days later, I found myself wandering with my notepad around the massive tin shell of the Pietermaritzburg YMCA, where the race was putting up around 300 runners who couldn’t afford accommodation. They stretched out on thin foam mattresses, eating pap and chicken curry from Styrofoam containers. I stopped to speak to one, a wiry man

called Donald who looked to me like he was old enough to remember watching Tjale race. I thought he might give me a tidy quote for my *Times* piece. "It's because of him that most of us are running," he said, pinching off a handful of pap. "Because of him we saw it can be done." I circled the quote, scribbled a star beside it. Perfect. I opened my mouth to thank him for his time. But Donald was still going. A few years ago, he continued, he'd been getting off a commuter train in Johannesburg's central train station when he saw an older man lugging a heavy box of flowers into a shop. That face looked familiar, he thought. When he got closer, he realized why. It was the legendary Comrades runner Hoseah Tjale. And now, here he was, delivering a box of flowers in a train station, his body twisted from the exertion. Donald couldn't believe it. This man had been an elite. A celebrity. The best of the best.

What was a man like that doing in a place like this?

Well, it was a long story.

Kgadimonyane Hoseah Tjale grew up in the 1960s in a rural area called GaMogano near the city of Pietersburg-- now Polokwane-- in South Africa's northeast. When he finished eighth grade, his parents didn't have money to send him to high school, so he dropped out and went to work as a gardener in the white city. A few years later, he moved to Johannesburg, "because in those days, everybody moved to Johannesburg to work." There, in a tidy, leafy suburb north of the city, he clipped hedges during the day, and after dinner, washed the family's dishes. In between, sometimes, he would go for a jog.

In the late 1970s, his running caught the attention of his employer, who helped him buy a pair of sneakers and join a running club. He began entering races, and soon, winning. And the longer the distance, the better. "You could just relax into it," he said. "When it's shorter, you're tired the whole way."

It was also a fortuitous moment to take up distance running in South Africa. Across the country, running clubs were just beginning to integrate. Tjale joined a large Johannesburg club called the Rand Athletic Club. And in 1979, they entered him in the Vaal Marathon, a race through the crisp *veld* and belching oil refineries south of Johannesburg. On the start line that morning was another novice runner a year older than him, a lanky white student wearing the green and old singlet of a local university, Wits. The two men

sized each other up. They were about the same height, both slight and wiry. The gun popped, and the two took off in the lead pack. As the race wore on, they shucked off their challengers, and three kilometers from the finish, a race official pulled up in a car alongside the white guy, who was then in first position.

“Hey Witsie,” the man shouted to him, referring to his university. “You’re winning. But we don’t know who you are. Could you tell us your name so we can announce it when you come into the stadium?”

“I’m Bruce Fordyce,” he said.

“Thanks. And there’s a Black guy just behind you. Do you happen to know who he is?”

Fordyce shrugged. “I’ve never seen him before,” he said, “and right now I’m just trying to stay ahead of him.” He took off along the dusty road.

For the next decade, it seemed they were always trying to stay ahead of each other. Fordyce won the Vaal Marathon, Tjale the Maseru Marathon. Fordyce won the Comrades, Tjale the Two Oceans. And in between, newscasters paraded them out as apartheid South Africa’s ultimate feel-good rivalry. “In South Africa what a refreshing sight it is to see, a Black man and a white man striving side by side in search of victory,” a mustachioed Australian TV commentator twanged as the two men battled it out in the final kilometers of the 1985 Comrades. “A Black man and a white man in unison,” intoned the presenter. “It’s a pity we didn’t see a bit more of that Black and white in unison over in that country.”

“When it comes to marathons,” explained an advertisement for Edblo mattresses in the mid ‘80s, “Bruce Fordyce and Hosea [sic] Tjale know how to get into shape properly.” Above the text, the two men ran side by side in egg yolk yellow singlets, fists balled, mouths open, mid breath. “They’ll tell you sleeping is one of the most important parts of their training program.”

Why should you run with Edblo

When it comes to marathons, Bruce Fordyce and Hosea Tjale know how to get into shape properly. They'll tell you sleeping is one of the most important parts of their training programme.

And that's why they chose Edblo — mattresses scientifically designed to give the perfect balance

between comfort and support, for the deep, recharging sleep a marathon runner needs. In their books, it's a winning combination.

So get a good start this year. With the revitalising effect of a deep, recharging sleep a marathon runner needs.

edblo

Deep recharging sleep. It's like an extra 2 hours sleep a night.

Edblo mattress ad

And yes, they both slept. But nearly everything else about Tjale and Fordyce's training programs was wildly different. Fordyce, the son of a doctor, began running marathons as a hobby when he was an undergraduate at Wits University in Johannesburg. In 1983, after his third straight victory in the Comrades, he dropped out of an archeology graduate program to become a full-time athlete. For the next decade, he lived off speaking gigs and corporate sponsorships, working with coaches and nutritionists to get himself into shape for major races. Tjale, meanwhile, started his running career as a gardener, and later became a delivery driver. He clocked 25-kilometer training runs from the crowded workers' hostel where he lived to his job in an industrial flatland flanked by jaundiced yellow mine dumps called City Deep. On weekends he ran local races at any distance on offer, from 10k to 100k. And not because he loved the challenge of running so many different races, but because he needed the small bits of prize money they offered.

“On the road was the only place I sometimes felt like apartheid wasn’t there,” Tjale explained to me. He is not the only person who’s told me this. “In the Comrades everyone always needed help at some point, and people always gave it,” said Poobie Naidoo, who also ran in that era. It didn’t matter if in your real life you were a gardener or a professor, a Black man nervously arranging his documents for a surprise police inspection outside the train station or the white officer tossing him into the back of a police van. On the road between Durban and Pietermaritzburg on that one day, you were just a person in pain, cajoling your broken body forward to the finish one step at a time. The race broke everyone down in the same way, he said.

But how much did being a Comrades star change things, really? It didn’t stop Tjale from being arrested for not having the right stamp in his own *dompas*, the notorious apartheid ID document that dictated where Black people were allowed to be in “white” cities. It didn’t stop spectators from throwing bottles at Naidoo when he ran the Comrades in a black armband as a protest against the apartheid regime. “We carried on because we wanted to say, we’re not going to take this shit from them, no matter what they do,” Naidoo said.

No matter what they do. In 1983, Tjale had announced publicly that he was leaving his running club, the Rand Athletic Club, because his coach had called him “black Kaffir” after a race in Cape Town.

The coach denied it. “Half the time he doesn’t understand what we are saying,” Dick Welch scoffed to a local newspaper. “What I did say is I was sick and tired of being a kaffir taxi driver.”

“We have been assisting him in various ways but he is never satisfied,” he continued. “He never says thank you.”

“I remember the Comrades that changed my life,” Bruce Fordyce says, sitting in front of a life-size photo of Bruce Fordyce. We are at the booth for his training company, Fordyce Fusion, inside the belly of the Durban Convention Centre at the Comrades Expo. *Deja vu* ripples through me. Four days earlier, I had been sitting with Hoseah Tjale inside his dining

room in Polokwane when he had declared suddenly, “there was one Comrades race that really changed my life.”



Bruce Fordyce and Hoseah Tjale in 1985 and 2022

“It was 1983,” Fordyce continues. “The first year the race was on live TV. And I had a great race that year. I won by 15 minutes. I broke the record. I really made it look easy. And after the race was over, I stopped over on my way home to see some rock art that my archeology professor had recommended on someone’s farm. While I was there, the farmer came out and said, you won’t believe this but my phone is ringing off the hook. They’re all looking for you.”

“It was 1979,” Tjale tells me. “It was the first time I finished Comrades. I came 21st. I was the first Black guy. And afterwards, this white man comes to me and says he works for a pharmaceutical company in Johannesburg called Hoescht and they want to offer me a job.”

“The calls were from media, from companies who wanted to sponsor me,” Fordyce continues. “After that, I went straight to Wits and quit my graduate program so I could focus on running. That was the year that changed everything.”

“At the time I was working as a gardener,” Tjale goes on, “Every year, I had to get permission from the King back at home to keep working in the city, and I could only do that kind of job, live-in stuff. But when that many came to me at the Comrades, I knew right then, these guys are going to sort out my passbook. Now I’m going to have permission to stay in Johannesburg for a while. That race changed everything.”

By the end of the 1980s, Tjale was growing frustrated with the Comrades, which demanded months of focused training, but offered no prize money to its winners. Elite runners ran for the glory – and the possible sponsorships that trailed in glory’s wake. “This is the biggest race in the country... but although they want the publicity they don’t think about the top people,” he told a newspaper in 1987, announcing he was considering quitting the race. “I’m going to run the smaller races, where you can win R200 or R500, because then I can live.” Comrades chairman Bullet Alexander explained that prize money would “go against the traditions of the race,” opining that, in any case, it was a shame Tjale wanted to quit because he had always believed he “has the potential to become the first black to win the race.”

Everyone said so. Everyone thought so. By then, Tjale had made the Comrades podium three times, and he was stronger than ever. Everyone knew how this story would end. But then, in 1989, Fordyce paid Tjale and a bunch of other top runners R1000 to participate in a 100-kilometer race he organized in Stellenbosch in April, in defiance of the sports boycott. Because of the timing of that race, Fordyce skipped the Comrades, and Tjale ran it on tired legs. Instead, a lanky railway worker in a candy-striped running jersey named Sam Tshabalala surged to the front of the pack, and became the race’s first Black champion.

Fordyce won the Comrades a final, ninth time the following year and Tjale finished second, but by then, both of them were well into their 30s, and their times were beginning to slip. In 1995, Tjale raced his final Comrades, dropping out before the finish. He walked off the course, and then returned home to Johannesburg, where he lived in a shack at the end of a long, narrow dirt road lined by shacks. Inside was the mattress Edblo had given him when he did the advert with Fordyce a decade earlier.

43 years after the Comrades that changed his life, 29 years after the last time he crossed its finish line, Hoseah Tjale is here again, with a stadium full of roaring fans in front of him. Isaac Ngwenya, the Comrades board member who invited him, has arranged for him to sound a horn marking the cut-off for a medal given to runners who finish in less than six hours. It’s something only a couple dozen men do each year, and which Tjale himself did nine times. The race organizers always invite dignitaries to mark these symbolic time cut-offs, and this year, Tjale has the prime slot.

Wearing gray slacks and that pair of crisp white Asics, he stands beside the finish line and marvels to me as the top finishers sprint past him. In his days, nearly every top runner was white. Now, all the top men are Black, wearing the jerseys of the big corporate clubs that had whisked them off to weeks-long training camps ahead of their run. They run into a stadium named for Moses Mabhida, an old South African trade unionist. The men's winner is a wiry university security guard with bleached blonde hair and Keanu Reeves sunglasses named Tete Dijana. By the time the dust settles on his win a few days later, he has earned around R720,000 in prize money and bonuses from his sponsors and employer, equivalent to more than a decade of his salary.

"There was none of that in our times," Tjale says to me as Dijana and his teammates drape their arms over each other, exhausted and giddy. We watch as race officials fuss over the men, pushing electrolyte drinks into their hands and draping them in branded towels. TV reporters shove microphones towards them, and the crowd in the stadium roars each time another finisher streaks past.



Hoseah Tjale at the 2022 Comrades finish line (Rogan Ward for the New York Times)

I think of Tjale's final races. In 1993, he finished 51st. In 1995, he didn't finish at all. There was no send off. But now, in a strange way, he is getting another chance. I think of

him the day before, swarmed by fans in the Durban Convention Center. He posed for selfies in a cow-print bucket hat I'd bought him, the closest thing I could find to his iconic racing hat. He laughed with delight when I handed it to him, and then wore it the entire day with a blue canvas jacket covered in race patches. Fordyce was there too, of course. He came, as he did every year to run a booth at the expo where he sells his autobiography, *Winged Messenger*, and his personal Comrades training program. He, too, was surrounded by admirers.

Now, as the clock approaches six hours, Fordyce sits in a makeshift sound stage near the finish, providing commentary for the Comrades' TV broadcast. On the stadium pitch, a race official hands Hoseah a small air horn, and ushers him towards the finish line. He faces Tjale, and begins to count down from 10. Tjale shifts his weight. At 1, he pushes down on the horn, and it quacks meekly.

Six hours on the dot. The crowd whoops. I can't help but think, his shoes look radiant.

Sergio Motsoeneng's watch⁴

I want to warn you up front, this story is going to unravel. The wheels are going to come off. A small town South African lawyer is going to palm a brick of cash to a marathon organizer. A R1 million heist is going to be sunk by a pair of cheap sports watches. Big city reporters will chase a pair of bewildered brothers through their little mountain town like paparazzi pursuing Princess Diana. The story is going to wind up the centerfold in a tabloid with Salma Hayek pouting on the cover. The whole thing will become a scandal whose half-life is, apparently, forever. Because even now, 23 years later, South Africans can recite it back like a kind of collective memory. The twins. The watches. The subterfuge. It's the kind of story that people never forget, but also no one really remembers either, full of dead ends and half-solved mysteries and just enough detail that anyone can make it mean exactly what they want it to. Tug at any of its loose threads, and the yarn just keeps getting longer.

But anyway, that's getting ahead of things. Because before all that, before the scandal and the shame, came the moment that started it all. The famous race itself. And to understand how things ended up where they did, there's nowhere else to start, really, but right there.

It is Wednesday, the 16th of June 1999. South Africa, with its batik-wearing, peace-brokering founding father, is the world's darling. Today, in fact, is Nelson Mandela's last day as president. In a few hours, he'll hand over the reins to his deputy, a bookish academic-type named Thabo Mbeki, proving to the doubters that this democracy thing really has legs. Today is also one of the new South Africa's new public holidays, Youth Day. It falls in early winter, about a week shy of the shortest day of the year.

That last bit is important, because it means that at 5:59 am, when this story starts, it is still pitch-black outside. In front of the red brick city hall in Pietermaritzburg stand 12,974 people who probably aren't going to watch that presidential inauguration. That's

⁴ A version of my reporting on the Motsoeneng brothers was published under the headline, "The not-quite-redemption of South Africa's infamous ultra-marathon cheats" in *Business Insider* on December 30, 2022: <https://www.businessinsider.com/the-not-quite-redemption-of-south-africas-infamous-marathon-cheats-2022-12>

because they'll be spending the whole of today running. They're at the start line of the Comrades, a race is now the stuff of an entire country's New Year's resolutions and mid-life crises. And this morning, the cool air buzzes with the collective energy of thousands of people gathered to do a ridiculous thing for the story.

Sergio Motsoeneng, though, isn't running for the story. He's not planning to spend a day on the road making memories. He's 21 years old, with soaring cheekbones and a torso so thin you can see the air ripple through his lungs when he breathes, and he is here for one reason and one reason only: to win. His running club has told its members that they'll pay a R1 million bonus to anyone who can break the course record, and Sergio is going to do it.

Sure, if you really think about it, it seems kind of unlikely. He's one of the youngest runners entered, in a field crowded by veterans who've won world championships, in a sport where most people peak in their 30s or 40s. And he's never run this far in his entire life. But he's also got a pretty compelling reason he needs to win. That R1 million is the equivalent of 70 years of his father's salary as a school caretaker. Sergio has ten siblings and no job. He grew up foraging for wild spinach, which his family ate with pap for nearly every meal. He could remember, when he was little, watching the white man whose farm they lived on run his tractor over the land, harvesting field after field of maize and beans. When he was done, Sergio's father and the other farmworkers walked those same fields, picking up for themselves whatever the white man had left behind.

He has no desire to go back to that. This race is going to be his ticket out.

From the loud-speakers, the synth-y beats of the theme song from the '80s running cult film *Chariots of Fire* blast over the crowd. The red brick city hall glows orange under the floodlights, and as is custom, runners begin to peel off the black bin bags and ratty jerseys they've brought to keep warm while they wait. Then another recording plays – Max Trimborn making a throaty imitation of a cock's crow, just like he did in person the day Robert Mtshali ran the Comrades in 1935. On a raised platform above the start line, the city's mayor lifts a handgun and points its steel barrel into the sky. He fires, and below him, 12,974 people surge forward into the dark city.



1999 Comrades start line

For years, the idea of winning the Comrades has vibrated through Sergio at a kind of constant, low frequency. Ropey and slight, he was always shy in school. Confidence, it seemed to him, was a trait reserved for people who had money. It wasn't a coincidence that the kids who always raised their hands in class were the same kids whose parents picked them up in cars. The ones who had new shoes and trousers every season always had a crowd of friends gathered around them at lunchtime. Money seemed to make them settled in the world in a way that he, the child of farmworkers, never had the right to be.

But on the track, Sergio always felt like another person. Beginning as teenagers, he and his younger brother Arnold won race after race in Phuthaditjhaba, the small sunburned city where they grew up in the bowl of the Maluti Mountains, near South Africa's border with Lesotho. Those short distances paid mostly in dinky plastic trophies and bragging

rights, maybe the occasional check for 10 or 20 bucks thrown in. But the boys had bigger ambitions.

One day when Sergio was maybe 15, and Arnold was 13, they befriended a white guy from the nearby town of Bethlehem. Eugene Botha was short and jovial, with the twitchy excitability of a boxer, and he was also fucking fast. He'd been a professional runner once, in Johannesburg, before moving to this rural corner of the country to run a fire extinguisher business. Now in his late 20s, he coached high school running on the side. Sergio and Arnold could see his runners, who came from the town's mostly white schools, were good, and they wanted to know how he did it.

Eugene was charmed by the boys. They had pluck. At the time, his business often brought him to Phuthaditjhaba, a 45-minute drive from Bethlehem, and he began taking Sergio and Arnold on long runs through the mountains, or drilling them in speedwork on a local track. "You know, they just had the style, the strength, the everything," he says. "A runner can always recognize another runner. They were the best in Phuthaditjhaba. At all the races they entered, they won them by far."

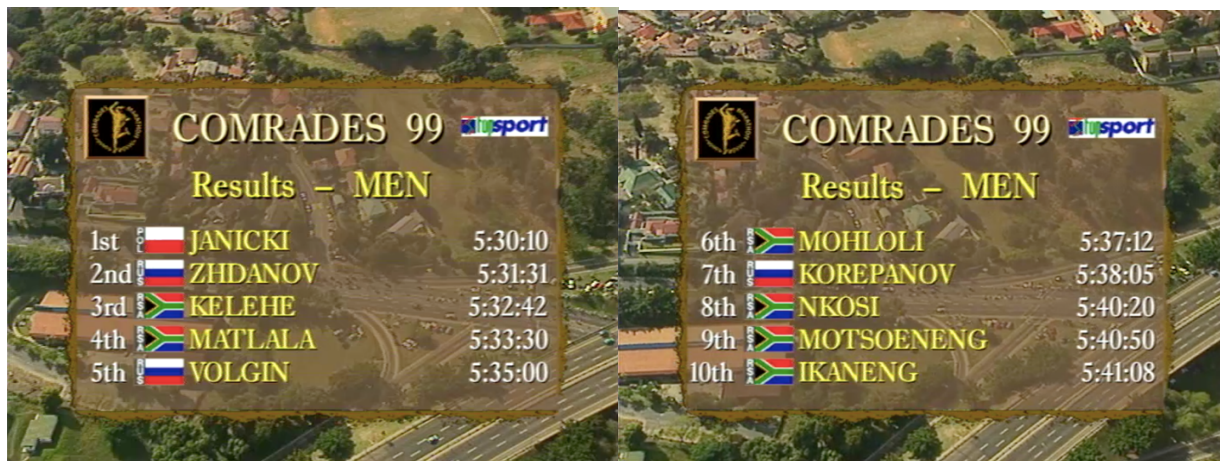
From the start, the boys were impatient. They wanted to get to longer distances, the marathons and the ultras, the ones that had real cash prizes. Hold back, Eugene told them. You're so young. Most long-distance runners peaked in their 30s, and that was still half a lifetime away for the boys. It didn't make sense to punish their bodies like that, not when they had so much potential, not when they were just getting started.

But Sergio and Arnold were stubborn. And it didn't take long for them to lock their imaginations onto one race in particular. They had grown up watching Comrades winners catapult to fame, becoming the stars of mattress commercials and sports drink ads, making front page news.

So it made sense for ambitious young runners like the Motsoeneng brothers to point themselves in that direction. By the late 1990s, first prize in the Comrades was R100,000. And that prize money was only the beginning. From there, they knew, cash would come hurtling towards you at high speed – sponsorships and bonuses and public speaking gigs. And then the big corporate running clubs started offering additional money to runners who could break the course records. That was it. That was all the boys needed to hear. Against

their mentor's advice they decided: this was the race they were going to win. And not in ten years. Now. Starting with Sergio.

Five hours and 40 minutes after the start gun cracks that morning in May 1999, Sergio staggers across the finish line at Kingsmead Cricket Ground in Durban. He looks dazed as a race official drapes him in a blue and white Powerade towel. He's come ninth. It's not the record-breaking run he was hoping for, but it is, unequivocally, a phenomenal performance. The TV commentators are stunned. A top ten finish from a no-name runner barely out of his teens, and on his first go at the thing no less. "Motsoeneng coming through and surprising us all," says Bruce Fordyce, now a pundit. No one adds anything else really, because there isn't much to say. If they dig deep, they could find the names of a few other smaller races where he'd finished among the leaders. But honestly, no one in the studio really knows who this guy is.



COMRADES 99 multisport			
Results – MEN			
1st		JANICKI	5:30:10
2nd		ZHDANOV	5:31:31
3rd		KELEHE	5:32:42
4th		MATLALA	5:33:30
5th		VOLGIN	5:35:00

COMRADES 99 multisport			
Results – MEN			
6th		MOHLOLI	5:37:12
7th		KOREPANOV	5:38:05
8th		NKOSI	5:40:20
9th		MOTSOENENG	5:40:50
10th		IKANENG	5:41:08

Screenshot of 1999 Comrades Marathon TV broadcast showing the top ten men's finishers

That night, there's a dinner for Sergio's running club, which has the unwieldy, tongue-twisting name of the insurance company, pain relief gel, and pasta brand that co-sponsor it: Rentmeester Reparil Gel Fattis & Monis. It's been a big day for them. They've got four runners in the top ten, including Sergio, and three more in the top 50. Everyone is celebrating, having beers, slapping each other on the back. But some of the runners and trainers notice that Sergio looks off, like he's sick maybe. He's being really quiet.

But by the time Sergio gets home to Phuthaditjhaba the next day, he's apparently recovered from whatever was ailing him, and he's all smiles again. His family meets him

outside their two-bedroom brick house in a flurry of hugs and tears. It's been a sleepless night, spent singing and praying and dancing in the street. They watched the race together on their tiny black and white TV, squinting for footage of Sergio among the front runners, they tell him. But they never saw him until the end, when the cameras panned to him sprinting into the stadium ten minutes behind the winner, arms pumping, face drawn. And that, his mother says, is when they began to dance.

Sergio has won R6000 in prize money, plus a medal made of real gold. It's no R1 million, or even R100,000, but his dad's salary is R1200 a month, so it's not nothing either. He starts to buy groceries for the family, new shoes for himself, cloth for the tailoring business that Arnold has started while completing a fashion design course three hours away in the city of Bloemfontein. The money passes through his fingers like water. But still, he feels powerful. Finally, he thinks, he's got something to show for this strange hobby that has been the bane of his parents' existence for so many years.

Their father Jonas had told them, more than once, to cut it out with the running. Their father's rages were red-hot, often stoked by alcohol. He was fed up with this running bullshit, his sons constantly begging him for taxi fare and race entry money, and he didn't hesitate to tell them, you boys need real jobs.

But now that Sergio has finished in the top ten of the most prestigious race in the country, his dad seems to be seeing the light. For the first time in a long time, he looks proud of his son.

A few weeks later, Eugene is home in Bethlehem when his phone rings. It's deep winter now. The days are short and cold. The man on the other end of the call introduces himself as being from Rentmeester, Sergio's running club.

Do you know the runner Motsoeneng? He asks.

Yes, I do.

Do you know there are two of them, brothers?

I do.

Would you be able to tell them apart?

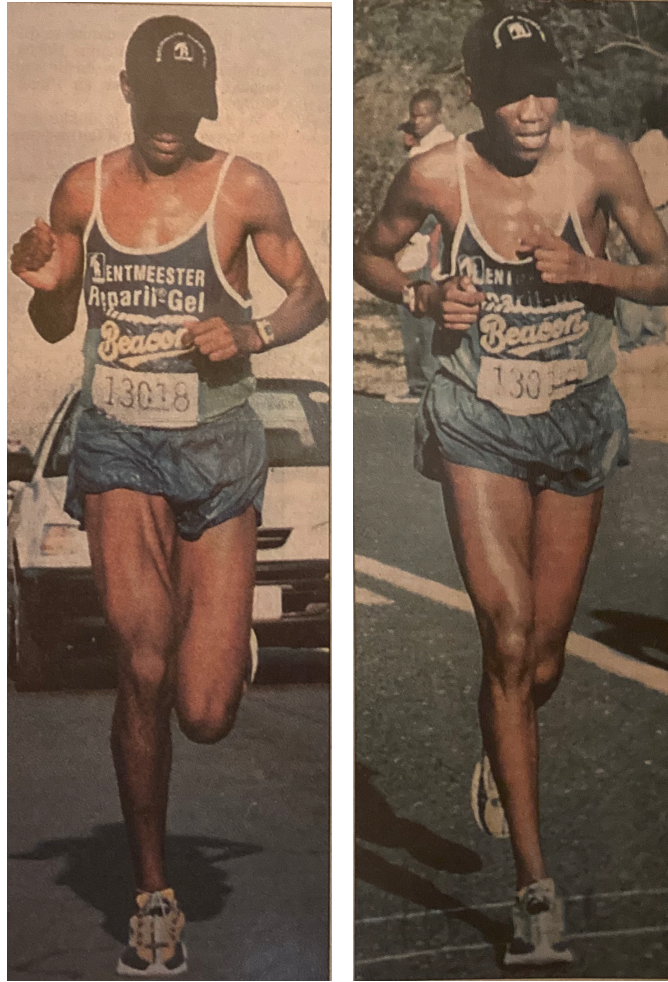
Of course. They aren't twins.

Ok, says the man on the other end, we're going to fax you some photos now. Please tell us what you see.

Eugene's fax machine chimes to life, then spits a page on its tray. He picks it up. In front of him are two side-by-side images of a lanky Black runner with a blue and green Rentmeester singlet hanging off his trim frame, and a black cap pulled low over his face. He's wearing Comrades race number 13018, and has on a pair of blue and yellow Nikes.

Immediately, Eugene sees the problem. The right image is clearly of Sergio, his mouth cracked open in concentration, fists balled. He's got a scowl on his face that is classic Sergio. It's the same look he had when he crossed the finish line, a gritty mixture of pain and determination. Then Eugene looks at the photo on the left. This runner has his head tilted forward, so that his face is shrouded by the bill of his black cap. But Eugene can see he's a bit stockier than the guy on the right. There is a scar running down his right shin. He's also got his watch on the other wrist, and it's yellow, not pink.

Eugene's stomach drops. Because this runner, wearing Sergio's number, racing Sergio's incredible, unprecedented top-ten Comrades race, is, without any shadow of a doubt, Arnold.



Arnold (left) and Sergio Motsoeneng (official race photos)

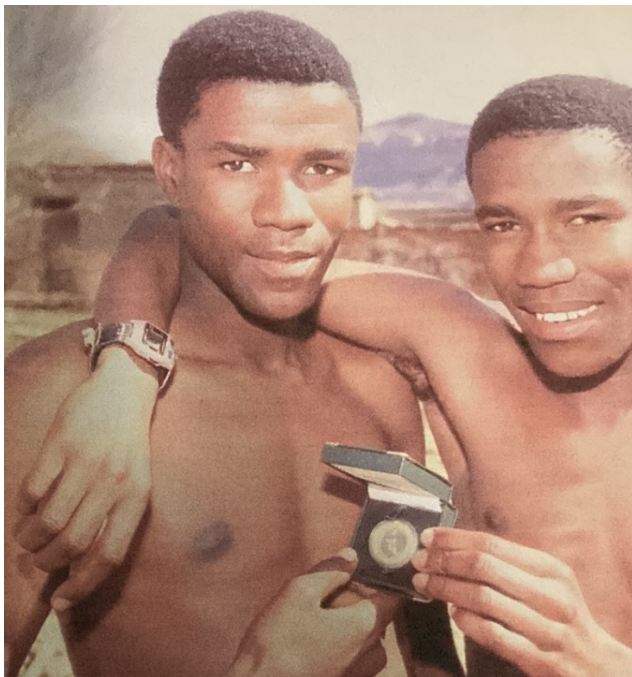
The sun is setting quickly as I scramble up the steep hillside outside Phuthaditjhaba. Ahead of me, Arnold Motsoeneng moves nimbly, hopping over rocks and thorn bushes with the light, sure-footed steps of someone who has done this many times before. And he has. For going on thirty years, this mountain he and Sergio nicknamed the Titanic is where they have come when they want to run hill repeats, back and forth, up and down, until their legs and lungs are burning.

Tonight, though, we are walking, Arnold at the front, Sergio and their other brother, Moratoe, at the back, and me in the middle, taking big ragged breathes in the thin air. “You doing ok?” Arnold calls back to me. His voice is warm and gentle, and he smiles at me with

the same dazzling cheekbones that graced magazine covers in 1999. I smile back, flashing him a thumbs up.

A few weeks earlier, I was sitting in my house in Johannesburg, Sergio's number punched into my iPhone, screwing up the courage to hit dial. By then, I'd spent hours scouring the internet for information about the Motsoenengs, reading article after article with titles like "Two Brothers, One Ultramarathon, and the Greatest Cheat in Running History" and "Top 10 Worst Sporting Cheats."

Every version of the story shared a few crucial details. In 1999, two lookalike brothers from an impoverished corner of South Africa had concocted a clever plan to win their country's biggest road race. They ran it in relay, swapping running vests and timing chips in roadside toilets along the route. And they very nearly pulled it off, except for one crucial error. They were wearing different colored watches – one pink, one yellow -- on opposite hands. As a result, when race officials compared photos from different points on the course, they could see that the runner registered as Sergio Motsoeneng was actually two distinct people.



Left: Arnold and Sergio Motsoeneng, 1999 / Right: Moratoe, Sergio, and Arnold Motsoeneng, 2022

Besides those key facts, however, the details of the incident were slippery. In many versions of the story, the brothers were identical twins. One was always called Sergio, but

the other appeared alternately as Fika, Arnold, and Sefako. In the most basic version of the story, they swapped places just once, halfway through the race. But some tellings had them switching several times along the route, speeding between handoff points in a getaway car in an elegantly choreographed heist. Sometimes, they shaved off time by cutting large sections of the course altogether. One or two stories speculated there was even a third runner, a “Mr. X,” who also run with them.

One thing was clear from these stories -- the media had never been particularly sympathetic to the Motsoenengs. The press coverage from the time was speculative, gawking and at times, venomous.

This all happened, after all, at a fragile moment in the life of the new South Africa. There were plenty of people out there, white people especially, who were still praying to see it fail. “People were saying, ‘look what they did to this race, that’s what they’ll do to the country,’” remembers Dana Snyman, a tabloid journalist from the time. And a Black person caught lying and cheating was a kind of proof positive that they were just a crooked, corruptible kind, that if you dangled a bit of money in front of them they just couldn’t help themselves. Reporters wrote that the brothers were “getting rich” off their “skullduggery” and opined that they’d “turned an illustrious event into a race of shame.”

So I figured when I called Sergio, he’d tell me to fuck right off.

Instead, he listened quietly to my pitch. Sure, what they’d done was unethical, I said. But they’d also grown up in one of the most immoral worlds imaginable, apartheid South Africa. They were giving themselves an advantage in a world that had disadvantaged them in every possible way. I wanted I wanted to hear their side, I said.

I told him that I also wanted to understand how they’d made their lives in the long shadow of this scandal. Their story felt to me like a kind of analogue prequel to twenty-first century social media shaming, where the entire internet lays into someone’s stupid tweet, and they are forever branded. That, it seemed to me, might also be what happened to the Motsoenengs. They’d done an idiotic thing when they were young and now, 23 years later, it was still the only fact most people knew about them.

As I said all this, Sergio murmured in agreement. Then, to my great surprise, he invited me to come meet him. He’d show me around, he said, and tell me what *really* happened – both that day in 1999, and also a decade later, when he’d come back to finish

third at the Comrades and then immediately gotten busted for having a banned substance in his system. That final chapter, frankly, was really messing with my story of a young man and his careless lack of judgment, the tragic tale of cancel culture gone wrong. But Sergio assured me, it would all make sense when we spoke. Something about the hormones in pork, a dodgy drug testing lab, and a rival coach out to sink his career. “Trust me,” he said, “I’ll explain everything.”

So that’s how I end up here, catching my breath on a mountain top as I look down over the topography of the Motsoeneng’s whole lives. From up here, Phuthaditjhaba stretches out below us like a scale model of a city. They point out their schools, their favorite running routes, and the old track stadium where they used to compete in athletics competitions as teenagers.

In those days, they didn’t run for South Africa, but for a place called QwaQwa. One of ten “homelands” established for Black South Africans by the apartheid government. Overlaid on a map of South Africa, they looked like a Jackson Pollock painting, a splatter of tiny, non-contiguous territories dotted across the country. QwaQwa was a tiny nub of land backing up against the Lesotho, whose name was a San phrase meaning “whiter than white,” for the flat, snow-capped peaks that wrapped around it like vertebrae.

Sergio and Arnold’s parents, Emily and Jonas, had grown up on a nearby farm in the *platteland* of South Africa’s eastern Orange Free State, born to families who were long-term tenants of a family of white farmers. She left school in grade 5 to take care of the family’s baby. He milked their cows. Their first two children were girls, born on the bed in their single-room house. Then came Sergio Sithole, and two years later Arnold Sefako.

From the time they were young, the Motsoeneng boys were inseparable. When it came time for Sergio to start grade 1 at the farm school, several kilometers’ walk away, he was inconsolable. He didn’t want to leave his brother. Finally, after a few months of this angst, his parents relented. He could quit until Arnold was old enough, so that they could go together.

Mafahla, the other kids called them, *the twins*. Two boys who seemed to know each other’s thoughts without asking. One day, they went to play on an old rusted car in one of the fallow fields. Their father had specifically warned them not to climb on it, but the lure

was too great. Arnold scrambled onto the roof, and then he lost his balance. On the way down, he reached out to brace his fall, and as he landed, his arm cracked like dry wood.

When they got home, Jonas separated the boys and demanded to know what happened.

"He tripped running," Sergio said. The father stomped over to where Arnold was waiting to give his report.

"I tripped running," Arnold said.

The pact between them had been wordless. They never discussed what they'd say ahead of time. They just knew.

As soon as Eugene registers what's happening in these photos, he picks up his phone, and calls Clem Harrington.

Already, Eugene can see this story has legs. Even before the two photos land on his fax tray, allegations were churning. In early July, a decorated Comrades veteran named Nick Bester, who had finished fifteenth, lodged a complaint to the Comrades Marathon Association against Sergio. He had a habit of counting the runners who passed him on the road, he said, and he could swear on his life, he never saw this Motsoeneng guy go by.

At first, the Comrades dismissed the allegation. Their records showed that runner number 13018, Sergio Motsoeneng had passed over all the timing mats at regular intervals. There was no reason to believe he'd cut the course or otherwise done anything untoward. "It's a real joke, and I doubt they have any proof," Rentmeester's manager, Dewald Steyn, told the Pretoria News. "There is no way Sergio could have cheated."

But then another runner made a complaint, and Nick got a journalist to dig up these race photos. In a few days, Eugene realized, they'll be splashed across the front pages of all the big newspapers, with headlines like PHOTOS SHOW CHEATING COMRADES ATHLETE.

Eugene knows it's not looking good.

Eugene thinks Clem will know what to do. He's a lawyer in Bethlehem, and also, handily, a Comrades runner himself. He finished the race 21 times before he was 40 years old, some kind of record. And also, he used to send a lot of guys to the gallows in Pretoria, back in the old apartheid days. Not that those are the stakes here. But Clem is bulldog. He's a fighter. If anyone can sort Sergio and Arnold out, it'll be him.

At first though, when Eugene confronts Sergio, he denies he did it. Sergio, you have to speak the truth, Eugene begs. These guys will take you out.

Finally, Sergio relents. Ok, he says, we cheated. Clem remembers he laughs when he says it. It's a nervous laugh, maybe, but it doesn't exactly come across as sympathetic. He sounds like he's sad he got caught, not sad he did it. And frankly, that kind of attitude is not going to make this thing go away.

So he tells Sergio, look: we've got to make a plan to get out in front of this. They're talking about banning you both from road running for life. And that would be a damn shame, because you're both *good* runners. You've got some real talent. Even running half a Comrades at the pace you did is no joke. You could do great things one day, if you just own up to you did.

So here's what we've got to do, Clem says. We've got to convince them you did it because you were desperately poor – which is true, after all. And we've got to make you seem sorry, really, really sorry. And to do that, you're going to have to pay the Comrades back that R6000. That will show them you're not thieves at least.

But Mr. Harrington, Sergio says, I already spent all the money.

I know, he says, but I have an idea.

The way Sergio and Arnold tell it to me, they can't remember exactly when they decided they would cheat, or whose idea it was to begin with. So much passed wordlessly between them in those days. They spent so much time together, running out and back to the Lesotho border, hitchhiking to races in Joburg and Durban, that it was hard sometimes, to unpick whose thoughts were whose.

That year, 1999, Arnold was studying fashion design in Bloemfontein, and Sergio was back home in Phuthaditjhaba, where the family had moved when they were kicked off that white man's farm back in 1987. Their dad worked there as a school caretaker, and all of them lived squashed in the two-bedroom caretakers' cottage on the property.

Sergio was training for his first Comrades. He'd done well in enough races that he'd been signed to Rentmeester, one of the country's elite clubs. And a few months before the race, Rentmeester made an announcement – it would give a R1 million bonus to any of its athletes who could win the race in a record-breaking time.

Sergio had been training, really training, on his own then, he says. But when he heard that announcement, something inside him shifted. People were constantly confusing him and Arnold, stopping him on the street to congratulate him for a race Arnold had won, and vice versa. Once, a few years earlier, Sergio had been named to an Olympic development squad for athletics. It meant he wasn't supposed to compete in marathons anymore, so that he could focus on the shorter distances, but he couldn't help himself, the money was too good. So yes, he ran once or twice under Arnold's name. Who was it hurting? Everyone always said they looked like twins anyway.

And so at some stage, they say, it just seemed obvious to them both. They should run the Comrades together. When Sergio's race packet arrived, they scrutinized the course map, which showed where there would be portable toilets. They picked a spot, just before halfway, where they hoped it would be easy to slip in and out of the crowd. And that was it. They were ready to go.

To pay the Comrades back, Clem explains to Sergio, the Motsoenengs are going to sell their story to a tabloid. It shouldn't be too hard. After all, reporters from Joburg and Durban and Bloemfontein have already been staking out the little school caretakers house where the Motsoenengs live, peeking through the palisade fence, asking questions of the neighbors. At the sticky Bethlehem pub where Clem often eats dinner alone, the waiter has appeared a few times recently with a bottle of wine he never ordered, announcing that it's a gift. Like clockwork, a few minutes later, a reporter follows, all smiles, jovial-like, asking casual questions about those runner brothers.

Clem thinks though, that they should go for *Huisgenoot*, an Afrikaans tabloid known for its celebrity gossip, and its scoops, many of which are unabashedly paid for. So he calls them up, and negotiates the fee. A few days later, reporter Dana Snyman is in Phuthaditjhaba, in that little two room house where the whole lot of them are living. He interviews the brothers for four hours while a knot of other journalists huddles outside. "The overwhelming impression I got from them was sincere," he remembers. "They were desperate and they were naïve. They tried their luck, and they didn't get away with it. It's not like robbing a bank. To run a Comrades, even half a Comrades, that's very tough."

When the interview is over, Dana hands Clem the agreed upon fee. He shakes Sergio and Arnold's hands, tells them to stay in touch. And then he heads back to Joburg to write the story, which appears under the headline POOR BROTHERS' DREAM BECOMES A NIGHTMARE. Beside that splashy teaser, on the magazine's cover, is a photo of Salma Hayek, gazing sexily into the middle distance, her lips slightly parted.

On the first page of the story is a photo of the two. Sergio has his arm draped over Arnold, the famous, doomed pink watch dangling from his wrist. They're holding Sergio's gold medal, and he's smiling.

The story beside the photos packs a dramatic punch. Just before the race's halfway mark, Dana writes, Arnold arrived at the agreed-upon spot of their swap. He spotted Sergio in the crowd. The two locked eyes, and Sergio slipped into one of the portable toilets. Arnold followed. Inside, in that tiny room that smelled of sweat and shit and chemicals, they hurriedly peeled off their clothes, when suddenly, bang! There was a knock at the door.

Sergio, are you in there? It was Dewald Steyn, one of Rentmeester's managers. I've got your energy drinks out here for you.

Inside the toilet, the men froze. They couldn't open the door now. He'd see for sure that there were two of them inside.

I feel sick, Sergio called back out.

Hurry up, Dewald said. You're losing time.

Outside, he waited. Inside, they waited.

Finally, Dewald said he'd leave the drinks, and walked off. Sergio and Arnold waited a little longer, then Sergio slipped out the door, and onto the road to run the race's second half. Arnold waited a little longer, then hitched a ride back to Durban, where he caught a mini-bus taxi home.

"We thought we'd make money," Sergio is quoted saying. "Now we're poorer than ever."

A few days later, Clem and Eugene and Sergio drive to Pietermaritzburg, where Sergio returns his gold medal, and Clem hands over that fistful of cash. "I'm sorry, I did wrong," Sergio tells the Comrades Marathon Association board simply, and then lets Clem take over.

“We ask South Africa to forgive him,” he pleads, and for the CMA to give him “the minimum possible sentence” – meaning as short as possible a ban from road running, and no legal charges of fraud. He was driven by desperate poverty, Clem says. He is such a talented runner, Clem says. A diamond in the rough. Don’t let this be the end of his career.

It’s been an embarrassing year all around for the CMA, actually. In addition to Sergio, two other runners in the top ten have been disqualified, both for doping.

In the end, Sergio and Arnold each get a six-year ban from racing. Clem is satisfied – it’s punishment enough to scare them straight, but on the other side of it, they’ll still be young enough to compete. They’ll have a chance, one day, to put this behind them, to show South Africa who they really are.

Hindsight is 20/20, but suddenly, after the news comes out, everyone has a story about the Motsoeneng brothers.

Remember the City-to-City Marathon between Johannesburg and Pretoria in 1998? One of those brothers bolted out of the blue into second place a few kilometers from the finish.

“We” – the front runners “were far, far ahead of the rest of the guys,” remembers Nixon Nkodima, who was also racing. Then suddenly, some guy comes out of nowhere and passes them all, like he’s running a 5k pace 45k’s into an ultra. *Maybe he’s on drugs*, Nixon thought. It didn’t make sense otherwise. Everyone else was leaden, their legs turning over on will power alone. But this guy, he looked like he could run all day. After the race Nixon’s coach lodged a complaint, but the race directors found no evidence of wrongdoing. Someone called Sergio Motsoeneng started the race. Someone called Sergio Motsoeneng finished it. It wasn’t like there was CCTV footage.

But hang on, that wasn’t the only time.

It turns out Arnold had been entered in the Comrades the year before. He didn’t finish. Apparently he dropped out at halfway. Didn’t that feel like huge red flag. Was he trying to hand off to Sergio? Had something gone wrong?

Even the story about how they cheated in the 1999 Comrades itself feels fuzzy, incomplete. They say that between the two of them they ran the whole race. But Nick Bester says he never saw Sergio pass him, and Sergio’s time in the second half was blisteringly fast.

A timing mat showed that the runner registered as Sergio Motsoeneng passed the race's halfway point 20 minutes behind Nick. But somehow, that same runner beat him by seven minutes.

"They were in the toilets so long, they would have had to cut the course to catch up," Nick says when I call him. By then, I've spent hours in a tiny AV booth at the South African Broadcasting Corporation, scanning flickering footage of the 1999 race for Sergio and Arnold's faces in the knot of front runners. But there's no smoking gun. I see Arnold only once, veering out of the pack at an aid station a couple hours into the race, Nick a few paces ahead of him. The next time runner 13018 appears, it's Sergio staggering across the finish line. There's nothing that proves Nick's story, and nothing that disproves it either.



Sergio at the 1999 Comrades Marathon Finish (screenshot from TV broadcast)

Shame blooms out from the lie like a bloodstain, dark and heavy and hard to wash out. Even after the story comes tumbling out, Sergio and Arnold never speak to anyone about what happened. They don't explain to their parents. They don't confess to their closest friends. "We just wanted to forget it ever happened," says Sergio's wife Christine, who was then his

girlfriend. So he didn't volunteer, and she didn't ask, until the silence cauterized the wound, allowing them to continue living.

Not long after the scandal slides out of the public eye, Jonas Motsoeneng feels ill and visits a doctor. "Our father never went to the doctor, so you understand it must have been bad," Arnold says. He has a brain tumor. There's nothing that can be done. In the early hours of January 1, 2000, as South Africa spins into a new millennium, he dies in a hospital in Phuthaditjhaba.

In time, the silence around what happened that day at the Comrades yawns open wider, until it begins to feel like the only natural thing. And there in that quiet, everyone begins to tell their own stories about what happened. Those brothers were cunning. They were stupid. They were desperate. They were framed.

"I don't want to think any more about what happened that day," their mother Emily says. "But I can't believe that it happened. I don't believe they cheated." She cradles a copy of the *Huisgenoot* article as we talk. "Can I keep this?" she asks suddenly. There's a photo of the family that the journalists took when they visited, the entire group of them frozen mid-laugh in their little caretakers house. She doesn't have any photos from that era, she says. It might be the last photo of Jonas before he died.



The Motsoeneng family, as seen in *Huisgenoot*. From left to right in the second row: Sergio, Emily, Jonas, and Arnold.

After the brothers are banned from running, after the journalists disappear, after their father is in the ground, life lurches on. Arnold, who largely managed to stay out of the limelight during the scandal, returns to his tailoring course in Bloemfontein. Eventually, Sergio goes into business with him, at a little factory Eugene helped them set up in Phuthaditjhaba. On the side, improbably, they become running coaches.

This, for some people in the running community, is appalling. There are runners and coaches who won't even speak to them, like they are worried their dodgy dealings are somehow infectious. But Arnold is determined not to retreat. "We did not do that ... because we do not have talent to make it. The only thing is that we were looking for cash. But apart from that we knew we could make it," he says. And they're going to prove it. So when their bans are lifted, they start racing again. They start winning.

In 2010, Sergio, the phoenix rising, finishes third in the Comrades. In a photo taken as he sprints towards the finish line, he is grinning, an inversion of the tense, drawn face he wore when he crossed the line a decade before. "It just goes to show he did not have to do what he did in 1999," says Cheryl Winn, the chair of the Comrades Marathon association. "He has great ability... his third-place finish proves just that."

Sergio himself is the model of contrition. "I am a family man now," he explains. "I realized that one makes mistakes in life... I lived through hell for the five years [of my ban]. I feel I have paid my dues."

Finally, the story can end like it was supposed to. A scrappy runner. A gold medal. A redemption fit for the big screen.

When I pull up to Eugene Botha's house in Bethlehem, I'm not sure at first that I'm in the right place. MR PEPPER GUNS, reads the sign outside, beside a cartoon of a mustachioed chili in a sombrero brandishing a handgun. I'm sitting in my car checking the address on Google Maps when a short, muscular white man emerges from a dark garage, wipes his hands on his jeans, and gestures for me to follow him inside.

"Hello, sweetheart," chirps an African Grey parrot as we walk into his living room, which is crowded with the paraphernalia of his two businesses. The first is the same fire extinguisher supply company he has had since the days he charged up and down

Drakensberg peaks with the teenage Motsoeneng brothers. “And now I’m also doing this non-lethal gun thing,” he says cheerfully, gesturing to a glass display of rifles, revolvers, and AK-47s. They shoot pepper spray, he says. “Better that way,” he explains. “These days, if someone breaks into your house and you kill them, you’re going to be the one who gets in trouble.”

Eugene grew up south of Johannesburg in the 1970s and ‘80s, a childhood neatly bounded by apartheid’s social laws. He lived in a white neighborhood, went to white schools and white churches. His friends were all white, and when he began to compete in athletics as a teenager, so were all his competitors. But he came of age at a moment when that was beginning to change.

His running club was part of the first generation to desegregate, and there for the first time, he began to meet Black people who weren’t nannies or gardeners or domestic workers. They were teammates, their sticky bodies wedged together in the back of mini-buses on the way home from races, laughing and swapping stories about the hills, the other runners, how absolutely bloody crazy the whole thing had been.

South Africa was changing then, he muses, making space for the next generation of young Black runners, kids like the Motsoenengs. For him, what happened to them after they cheated is a travesty of justice. The judgment was unrelenting, he says. “People in government steal millions, and yet this [Sergio] is the guy they want to go after.”

In the middle of the conversation, Eugene gets up suddenly to find an old medal of his. It’s from 1991 City to City Marathon. “Tenth,” he says proudly, handing me the gold-coloured slab from behind the gun counter. “I got some real money from that one, you know. They gave cash to all of the top ten, and then my club, they had a prize for the first white runner.”

In the background, a cycling race is playing on TV, and I think maybe I’ve misheard him over the low drone of the commentary. “The first what?” I ask.

“The prize for the first white runner,” he says. “That was when the Black guys were starting to win all the big races. So they had to do something to keep us from giving up.”

Six weeks after the 2010 Comrades, Arnold is at home when he sees the news slither across his TV screen.

It's a ticker at the bottom of the screen on some sports program.

MOTSOENENG TESTS POSITIVE.

He feels like someone has reached down his throat and grabbed his gut with their bare hand. It can't be. Not this again.

But it is.

The Comrades has finished analyzing the urine samples of its top competitors, and Sergio has come back positive for a performance-enhancing steroid called nandrolone.

"When they gave me the results I said no, no, no, go to hell," Sergio tells me. We are sitting in an unfinished concrete outbuilding of the brick house he has been building himself, by hand, one room at a time, for the last decade and a half in a Phuthaditjhaba neighborhood called Elite. He's a teacher now, of a subject called "life orientation," whose curriculum is all about developing students – morally, spiritually, psychologically – "so they can achieve their full potential in the democracy of South Africa," as one government website explains. He drives an old green forest green Mercedes and has ten pit bulls who sleep in bed with him. His daughter is in university studying journalism, and he keeps his wife Christine, his high school sweetheart, saved in his phone as "The Love of My Life."

Of course he didn't cheat, he continues. He, of all people, understood the consequences of a decision like that. He, of all people, knew how it could snap a life in two.

In person, Sergio fizzes with charisma. He laughs easily, with a smile that cracks across his entire narrow face. But he is holding me at a distance. When I ask to visit the school where he works, but he demurs, saying he would rather not remind his colleagues of the scandal. As it is, when he disciplines his students, he says, the pluckier ones demand to know why they should have to listen to a liar and a cheat like him.

I still want to believe his version of events, because if I don't, the whole story I have in my head starts to come undone. What he and Arnold did in 1999 feels like a South African parable, of two young men born into one of the most unequal societies on earth, trying – imperfectly, messily – to find their way out of it. "'I am sorry about what happened at the Comrades,'" Sergio told *Huisgenoot* all those years ago. "But people also need to know: I did not kill. I'm just tired of being poor."

So I'm listening closely as Sergio lays out his theories of what might have happened. Nandrolone is found in uncastrated pigs, and there are known cases where athletes tested positive after consuming wild pork. He ate a lot of meat when he was training hard. Maybe it was that. And also, rumors have swirled for years about Comrades athletes and coaches spiking their rivals' sports drinks, or swapping urine samples before they were shipped off to the lab. In 2012, two years after Sergio was disqualified, Comrades winner Ludwick Mamabolo was stripped of his title after testing positive for a stimulant. But he fought the charge, and was eventually exonerated. The procedures for doping testing had been so haphazard, his lawyers argued, that it was impossible to say with any certainty if the sample tested had even been Ludwick's at all. He got his medal and winnings back.

As Sergio tells me all this, I nod along, scribbling notes. It feels like we're up on that mountain in Phuthaditjhaba again. The world is laid out below us, small and vast and hard to see very sharply. It's coated in dust. It is many things, all at once.

"We all make mistakes," Sergio says to me. "And then we all carry on."

The day after my interview with Sergio, I'm with Arnold, twisting my car up a steep road to the border with Lesotho. He wanted to show me this route they used to take often in training, 20 kilometers up, 20 kilometers down, waving to the border guards as they went. The air is dry and thin, and it smells of wood smoke. Below us, in the valley where the Motsoeneng brothers have lived nearly all of their lives, the high-altitude sun glints off tin roofs. A shepherd coaxes a small flock of grey sheep up a hillside, their bells tinkling.

Back in 1999, Arnold explains to me, the two of them went along with a complicated version of what happened on the road that day, one where they swapped multiple times throughout the race. It's what everyone wanted to believe anyway, he says, because it made such a good story. No one cared, actually, what really happened. But in truth, he tells me now, they switched only once, at halfway. Nothing more complicated than that.

And 2010? Sergio was framed, he says, and it broke him. "It broke me too, to be honest," Arnold says. He too is resolute about Sergio's innocence. Why would he have cheated? He who knew just how bad it could get.

"If he took it, I would know. Each and everywhere he goes, I go," Arnold tells me, looking out the window. "I knew, that's it for him," Arnold says. Gone, was any hope of

convincing people they'd just made a stupid mistake all those years before. Their reputation, finally, had been sealed.

Of the two Motsoeneng brothers, Arnold has always been the more reserved. In 1999, he faded into the background of the cheating scandal. Even now, he is content to let Sergio, clever, fast-talking, and brash, be the face of their story. For most of the three days I've been here, he's been ducking away from me. "I've got a lot of work coming in," he tells me when I call. Or: "I had a meeting" or: "Loadshedding, my battery went flat." This morning, I waited outside his house for 45 minutes. When he appears at my window, he doesn't explain the delay. He doesn't invite me inside.

Whatever actually occurred back then, I know, sits silently between these two men, a wordless pact of the same kind as Arnold's childhood broken arm. I have asked and I have asked, and I'm still no closer to a confession.

So instead, I begin to imagine what it must have been like racing that day in 1999. Arnold was a poor teenager then, from a windswept rural corner of South Africa, and he was keeping pace with his country's best runners, on the biggest stage of his life. Of course, he knew it was a lie. But it must have been a thrill too, right?

"Yes, it felt easy," he tells me. It was one of those charmed days runners are blessed with every now and again, where you feel like you could run forever. He was weightless. He was brave. Nothing hurt. "Even now, when I'm training, I'm thinking, I wish it could feel like that day again."

The next day, on the dirt soccer field where he coaches an elementary school cross country team, I watch the kids plunk down glossy Mickey Mouse and Spiderman backpacks. Here, on the edges of Phuthaditjhaba, the city slips constantly in and out of focus. A city bus grumbles past, then a shepherd on horseback, as the kids shed their black oxfords and peel off the knitted sweaters and button-down shirts of their school uniforms. Standing in white undershirts and rolled up grey slacks, they chatter excitedly. A lot of them run barefoot, same as Arnold and Sergio did when they were kids.

They call Arnold *ntate*, the Sesotho word for father. He speaks back to them like they are tiny adults, his voice steady as he explains the day's drills. And then they all take off running, arms untucked and flailing.

“Sometimes these kids get lazy and start cutting the corners,” he says to me as we watch a group of kids rounding a bend on the opposite side of the field. “And I tell them, when you do that, you’re not cheating me. The only person you’re cheating, in the end, is yourself.”

Maros Mosehla's record⁵

For the first 24 years of his life, by his own accounting, Maros Johannes Mosehla didn't exist. At least, he didn't exist officially. All the evidence suggested he had been born, of course, but he had no birth certificate to prove it. No ID book. Nothing to say for sure that he was either Maros – the name his parents had given him at his birth in 1942 – or Johannes – the name he had chosen more or less at random in 1960, when he was 18 and finally started school, and a teacher told him he needed a white name too. Actually, until that moment, it's possible no one anywhere wrote down his name at all. His parents didn't know how to read, and apartheid South Africa cared that his existence be official only when there was a place they needed to keep him out of. As long as he was just a stringy teenage shepherd in the mountains of Lebowa, not old enough to pay tax or look for a job in the nearby chrome mines, not working as someone's garden boy in the city of Pietersburg, he wasn't anyone to those white authorities.

And so, almost certainly, those same authorities didn't blink when, in 1966, a request arrived in their offices from the principal of a local primary school to issue a passbook to a 16-year-old boy named Johannes Mosehla who, it was said, had just finished his primary school education. Never mind that the "boy" who appeared to be photographed was clearly an adult, slight as he was. It didn't matter. A quasi-fictional character had been born, a schoolboy with an Afrikaans name, born in 1950. For the rest of his life, Maros' says his bureaucratically-generated alter ego would walk alongside him, appearing whenever he needed to show someone his ID. In day-to-day life, with his family, out with school friends, he was Maros, born January 11, 1942. And yet every time he needed proof of who he was, he became someone else, a much younger man named Johannes.

Being two different people didn't matter much, at least until Maros got old. And then, suddenly, those extra eight years counted for a lot. There were social grants on the line. And something else too. Because late in his life, Maros had become an ultra-marathon runner,

⁵ A version of my reporting on Maros Mosehla was published under the headline, "I refuse to be old": The 81-year-old runner who became a South African celebrity" in *The New York Times* on December 11, 2023: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/11/sports/ultrarunning-south-african-octogenarian.html>

and when he lined up at the start of the 2023 Comrades Marathon, those eight years mattered a great deal. That day, those eight years meant he was either a very fit 72-year-old about to complete an improbably long run, or he was an 81-year-old about to make history. Never had someone so old finished the Comrades. Maros was about to do it. Or Johannes was not.

By his telling, Maros Mosehla was born in 1942, in the village of Ga-Mogashoa in what is today South Africa's northeastern Limpopo province. To get there from Johannesburg, I follow the N12 highway two hours east to eMalahleni, a small city whose name translates literally to "place of coal." The day I drive through, a pink-grey smog hangs over the city in a heavy, foamy layer, and 18-wheelers dragging loads of black coal chunks drive with their lights on to cut through the fog-like shroud. In the distance, a huge power plant looks painted in watercolor, blurry and smeared on the horizon.

From there, I turn and head north, into scrubby farmland flanked by signs with messages like "Stop Farm Murders" and "Eaten today? Thank the farmer. And the farm worker." A sign in sunny yellow hues boasts that Hunters Dream Lodge is also a wedding venue and conference center. As I pass, a group of men in camo fatigues are, for some reason, scrambling under the chain link fence. Huge trucks trundle past, loaded with rocks or logs, rattling my little city car and sending plumes of dust into the air. The roads are lined with small wooden stalls selling huge mesh bags of oranges and avocados. As I approach Ga-Mogashoa, small brick houses with metal roofs and shops advertising live chickens, car tires, and funeral services crowd up to the road. The sky is a dull, still blue. I check my weather app. It is the first week of spring, and it is 27 degrees Celsius outside.

I find Maros sitting on a rock beside several bags of groceries, in front of a Shoprite grocery store about three kilometers from his house. I first met him a few months before, at the winners breakfast the day after the Comrades Marathon. That day, in a cavernous hotel banquet hall, the race's dignitaries drank orange juice out of wine goblets and listened to the staggering list of course records that had been broken that day. The women's winner, Gerda Steyn had broken the best time for the women's down run by nearly ten minutes, and the top three men had all finished comfortably inside the old men's down run record. The men's master's record – for a runner over 50 – had also toppled. But the loudest applause of

the morning came when race director Rowan James announced the Founders Trophy, a prize given each year to the Comrades' oldest finisher. "At 81 years old, running a time of 9 hours 26 minutes," he began, "from Polokwane Athletics Club, Maros Mosehla!"

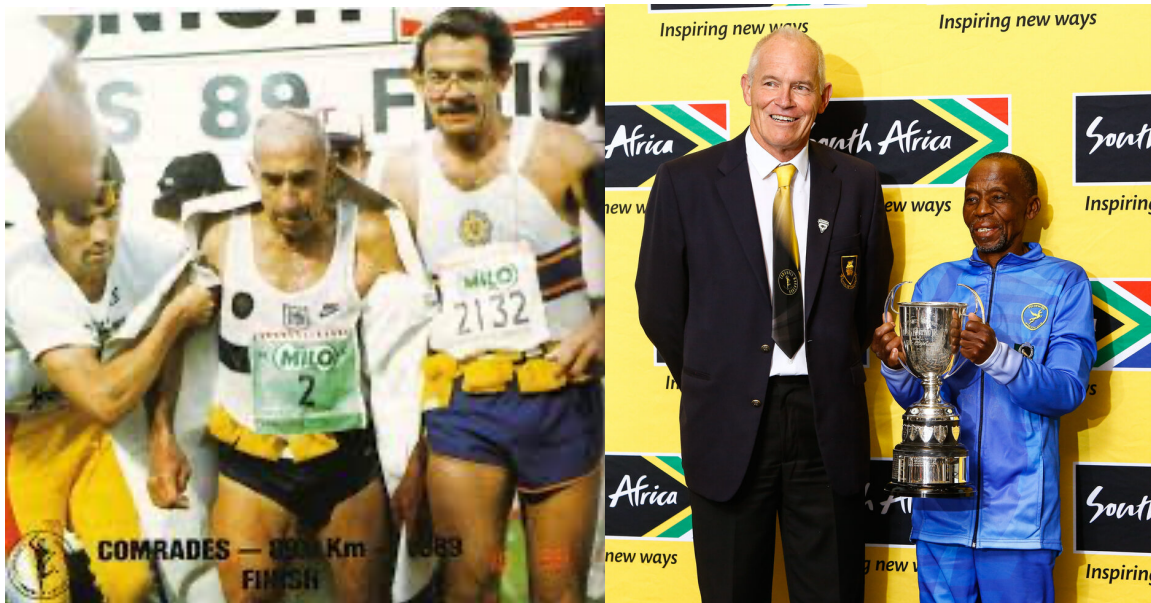
I watched as a tiny bald man in a blue tracksuit wove through the tables to the stage. He had the wispy build of a teenager, and he waved to the crowd – who had risen into a standing ovation – like a politician greeting his acolytes. The crowd whooped as James handed him a gold-colored goblet the length of his torso. I was on my feet too, awed by what I was seeing. Because Maros was not only the oldest finisher of the year – he was the oldest finisher of all time, breaking a record that had been set in 1989 by an iconic South African distance runner named Wally Hayward.

As I watched Maros cross the stage, I thought of the footage I'd seen of Hayward's 1989 finish. It's two minutes before the race's final cutoff – then 11 hours – and Hayward jogs unevenly towards the finish at Kingsmead Cricket Stadium in Durban, his shoulders hunched forward, legs rubbery and bowed. His eyes are vacant. As he crosses the line, holding the hands of the runners on either side of him, he crumples onto one of them, and then falls to his knees in exhaustion and emotion. It is remarkable footage to watch, because you can see that this man – a Comrades champion five decades earlier -- has completed the race by sheer force of will, wholly against the wishes of his body. He is still huddling there, a towel draped over his shoulders, when a race official fires the gun announcing the race is over.

Maros, by contrast, ran into the same stadium 34 years later with long, loose strides. He looked like he might be out for a casual jog. No one was propping him up, and he grinned widely as he crossed the finish and pulled gently to a stop. He had finished 4319th. That put him ahead of two thirds of the runners who completed the race that day, 96 percent of whom were more than 20 years his junior.

Now, as Maros approaches me in front of the Shoprite in Ga-Mogashoa, I am struck again by the contrast. As he scoops the heavy shopping bags effortlessly into my boot, I think of the Motsoeneng brothers, who cheated in the 1999 race by swapping places in a race toilet, and to all the time I devoted to deciding whether they were good guys or bad guys, whether they were cheaters of a calculated sort, or something more accidental. In the end, I had settled on this: a person's life can exist at the precarious intersection of talent,

ambition, and a calculated sense that, to really get ahead of a life whose odds are stacked against you, you have to give yourself an extra boost. The Motsoenengs had lived on that razor's edge. Did Maros also?



Wally Hayward at the finish line of the 1989 Comrades (left) and Maros Mosehla at the Comrades winners breakfast in 2023.

“I don’t believe for a second he’s 81.”

A month before I made my trip to see Maros, I had been on the phone with a Comrades old-timer, a gregarious man in his 60s who has completed the race four dozen times. I called him to talk about something else, but somehow the subject drifted to Wally Hayward’s old record, and the man who has supposedly blown it to pieces.

“There are people looking into this, that’s all I’m saying,” he continued, his voice dropping into something low and conspiratorial. “Wally Hayward was a great, great man, and we wouldn’t want this record taken from him unfairly.”

“I’m pretty sure Wally Hayward’s reputation is secure,” I replied dryly, trying to make sense of the undertones of his comments. Hayward has a kind of hagiographic status among an older generation of Comrades runners, and for good reason. He first won the race in 1930, at the age of 21. He then took 20 years off from distance running, before returning to become Comrades champion again three times in the 1950s – breaking the course record each time. He then took *another* 35 years off, returning in the late 1980s to finish the race

two more times – the last being one month before his 81st birthday. That final, stumbling finish had sealed his reputation as one of the greatest Comrades runners of all time. One of the race's finishers medals had been named in his honor.

I knew where this runner's comments about Maros were coming from. I had heard the rumors too. Two days before the race, a Comrades official had told me quietly that they weren't actually sure the old man was going for the age record because they had two different ID numbers – with two different birthdates – on file for him. Only one said he was 81. It was all very confusing. They were running it all past Home Affairs, just to be sure everything was in order. But by the time we got to the winners breakfast the morning after the run, it seemed everything had been cleared up. Maros had run as an 81-year-old. But the Comrades old timer wasn't buying it. "You know he didn't even have a birth certificate until a few years ago," he said. "How are we actually supposed to believe he isn't lying?"

The skepticism felt small and mean – not just to Maros but to Wally Hayward too. Was his legacy really so fragile that his age record being broken would send him spiraling into historical oblivion? And was it really fair to blame Maros for the fact that he was born into a country that barely saw fit to officially record his existence, where he had to petition to have particulars of his own existence recognized?

But as I began combing through the articles that had appeared about Maros in the days after his remarkable run, and I had to admit, some of the details were odd. He spoke of getting his start in running in 1963, when he said a teacher at his primary school encouraged him to try athletics. But if Maros was born in 1942, he would have been 21 in 1963, surely too old to be a schoolboy running on his primary school's gravel track. He said he represented his Bantustan, Lebowa, in a national championship in the 1500 and 5000 meters in 1971, when he was 30, an age at which most runners have aged out of those short distances. *It was weird*, I thought. It didn't make a lot of sense.

Then again, so much about the world Maros came from made little sense.

He spent most of his early life living in a country whose rulers were animated by the idea that groups of people must be kept apart at all costs. Apartheid was propped up by mundane cruelties, many of them bureaucratic. To maintain a world based on racial segregation, after all, you had to get very good at making categories, and at keeping people

inside of them. There had to be ways to patrol the boundaries, to make distinctions that in life could be blurry and shifting heavy and solid.

The most notorious weapon in this arsenal was the passbook. Half ID document, half domestic passport, passbooks dictated who a Black South African was, but also where they were allowed to be. By the time Maros was handed his first passbook in 1966, the document was required for any Black adult who wanted to travel to a “white” part of South Africa – including the cities where the country’s jobs were concentrated. To stay in one of these cities – or more accurately, in the crowded bedroom communities that huddled on their fringes, known as “townships” -- your passbook had to be endorsed by your white employer. Police regularly conducted raids and set up road blocks to those without valid pass documents. Any government official could cancel a person’s permission to be in a white area at any time, for any reason. By the 1960s, police were making a half million arrests annually for passbook infringements. As a result, South Africa had one of the highest prison populations per capita in the world.

Needless to say, the “dompas” – or “dumb pass” – as it was commonly known, was despised. The same year that Maros started primary school, in 1960, the anti-apartheid movement launched a nationwide campaign against the infamous document. Demonstrators were told to burn their passbooks, or simply left them at home. On March 21, a group of nearly 10,000 people marched to the police station in Sharpeville, a newly created township south of Johannesburg. As the day wore on, the crowd swelled, and the police grew jumpy, shooting teargas into the crowd. When they tried to arrest one protestor, the demonstrators surged forward, and police sprayed the crowd with bullets, murdering 69 people and catapulting apartheid into the global eye.

That is all to say, in the world where Maros Mosehla spent most of his life, an ID document was not a neutral thing. It was used to humiliate and dominate. It was meant, above all, to keep people like him out of places they weren’t “supposed” to be. Now, in a new South Africa, he was being asked once again to use his ID to prove he belonged.

Maros’ house in Ga-Mogashoa is massive and rambling, with six bedrooms and walls that don’t reach the exposed rafters and exposed wiring connected to dangling light bulbs. He was still in the process of building it, he explained apologetically, gesturing to a stack of

cement bags lying in wait in one corner of his entrance hallway. He meant that literally. Maros has worked all his life as a builder, and he has been constructing this house for his family for years in dribs and drabs, adding new features whenever he has the time and cash to do it. There's a big living room with scruffy couches and a large TV. But the toilet is still outside, and the air smells perpetually of wood smoke from the fire Maros' wife Virginia has set up in the unfinished garage to cook over.

He leads me through the house and out the backdoor, where I can hear something tinkling softly, like a windchime. When we step outside, I see that it is hundreds of race medals, which he has strung across his washing line. They glint in the hard spring sunlight. He runs his hand over them, and the melody begins again. "This is where I received the premier," he says, gesturing to the courtyard around us. A few weeks after the Comrades, the leader of this province, Limpopo, had made a home visit to commemorate Maros' remarkable achievement. Five of his 17 children had come to town for the event, and the whole village had joined the party, eating and drinking under a tent the premier and his team set up right where we are standing.

Walking through Maros' house, I am struck by something. This is a man who spent his life on the fringe of white officialdom, a person deemed barely worth counting. But here in Ga-Mogashoa, he would never be mistaken for marginal. He is an elder and a person of means. His life has been recorded, even if those records exist far from Home Affairs databases.

I can hear the pride in his voice as he describes the day of the Premier's visit, and I immediately feel my resolve to investigate his age, which had been so pronounced on the drive here, slacken. I want his story to be true, and even if it's not, do I really want to be the one to interrupt the victory lap of an old's man's life? Whether he's 72 or he's 81, he's still a remarkable runner. The confusion about his age, it seems to me, is more likely bureaucratic hiccup than calculated menace. So why not just let him have this one?

It doesn't take long for Maros to realize I know about the age discrepancy. But his response is calm and unruffled. "I will show you the documents," he says evenly, no trace of malice in his voice. Though we have exchanged our pleasantries in English, when it comes time for the formal interview, we sit down with his friend Benson, a school teacher who listens to

Maros' answers to my questions with such undisguised wonder that sometimes he forgets he is there to translate for me. "What did he say now?" I nudge, as Benson leans back again, slapping his knees and muttering, "wow, wow, wow!"

Maros lays out the story like this: He was the youngest of six children, born on January 11, 1942. He was delivered, as all his siblings at been, at the family's home, because there was no clinic nearby. In those days, recording the birth meant walking through the village announcing your family's blessing so everyone could hear. And that day was a funny one, because by chance two babies were born the same morning, Maros explained, himself and a round-faced little boy named Tswaweddie Kgopane.

Maros spent his childhood tending his family's cattle on the rocky hillsides and in valleys scooped between them. At times, he and his friends walked for more than 30 kilometers a day with their herds, and slept beside them in the grass. He knew them each cow by name. On his days off, he and his friends played soccer on scrabbly, improvised pitches in the village. They called him the "old man," because most of the boys he played with were two or three years his junior.

In 1959, when he was 17, Maros asked his father if he might go to school so that he could learn to read and write. That wasn't an unusual sequence of events around here, he says, because there was no primary school in the village, and anyway, no one's parents had gone to school. It hardly seemed important. The only jobs around here were herding or working in the asbestos and chrome mines. "In those days, you herded cattle until your father relieved you, and then you went to the mines. Or if you were lucky, then you could go to school," Isaac Ngwenya, a Comrades board member, told me when I relayed this story to him. Maros was one of the lucky ones, and at 18, he enrolled in the equivalent of kindergarten.

This isn't one of those stories where the brilliant runner gets his start jogging to school and back each day. When I asked him, he shook his head. "No, I walked." And later, after he took a semester off to work in a local chrome mine, he bought a bicycle. "That was a big deal in those days," he says. He had to pay a tax to own it, as all adults in Lebowa with bicycles did. So it was precious.

At the same time though, he *was* beginning to run, he says. A few years into his primary school education, one of his teachers encouraged him to try athletics, and soon he

was competing full-throttle -- first in local cross country meets and later representing all of Lebowa, one of the so-called “homelands” the apartheid government set up for Black ethnic groups. He was 158 centimeters tall, match-stick thin, with the aerodynamics of a paraglider. “I was light,” he says. “And fast. So I was always winning.”

When he finished primary school in 1966, he says his school principal told him he would need to be registered for some form of ID in order to get the papers saying he’d completed his education. Since he was already in his mid-20s, he wasn’t really supposed to still be in school, and if he were an adult, he should technically already be paying taxes to the apartheid government. So, the principal explained, he was going to register Maros as the same age as some of his other students – about 16. Shortly after, Maros received his *dompas*, and his life as Johannes Mosehla began.

“Everything in my life, I started late,” Maros says. He didn’t finish school until the age of 30. He didn’t marry until his early 30s, or have a child until he was 35. And running the Comrades came latest of all.

After he finished school, Maros did run longer races for a time, eventually joining a marathon club in Pietersburg, the white city a couple hours down the road from his home. The group was newly racially integrated, he remembers, but that didn’t stop his performances from pissing off some of the club’s old timers. In 1981, he says he was leading a marathon in Pietersburg when a white race marshal purposely directed him to take a wrong turn. He figured it out in time to sprint back and still win the race, but “I was so angry that I declined to take the prize.”

A couple of years later, busy with work and the demands of life as a new husband and father, Maros stopped racing altogether. Instead, he would jog a few kilometers before work sometimes on the concrete road behind his house, where trucks growled past carrying cargo of asbestos and chrome from local mines.

He didn’t take up running competitively again until 20 years later, in 2003. By then, the Comrades had mushroomed from a plucky little run with a couple thousand participants each year into the world’s largest race longer than a marathon. It attracted 15,000 – 20,000 runners a year, tens of thousands of spectators, and even large TV audiences. In the years that Maros was away from competitive running, it had become the

pinnacle of distance running in South Africa. And so soon, he had set his sights on running it too.

When he ran his first Comrades in 2006, he signed up, of course, using that ID book, the only one he had. Johannes Mosehla. Born February 12, 1950. He did the same when he ran the next year, in a blistering time of 7 hours 57 minutes, and again the year after that.

But by the time he registered for the race a fourth time, in 2009, he had a new document in his possession. It was a birth certificate, listing his birthdate as January 11, 1942. He had applied for it the year before, submitting a strange grab bag of evidence to prove he wasn't the man he had existed as, in the eyes of the state, for more than 40 years. He showed me, for instance, a copy of the ID book of Tswaweddie Kgopane, the little boy he says was born the same day as him, a kilometer down the road. And there was a handwritten letter from his primary school. Strangely, it said that his birthdate had been registered in their logs as a different date, February 12, 1945. Growing up in a world where few had thought to record his existence on paper, this was the kind of muddy evidence he had.

And so in 2008, came into the possession of his first ever birth certificate, and along with it a new ID. Both documents stated that he was Maros Johannes Mosehla, born in 1942. "A new identity document... reflecting your correct date of birth was issued in your favour," explained a letter signed by the Director General of the Department of Home Affairs to Maros in 2008. "[Your previous] identity number... has been cancelled in the Population Register and may under no circumstances be utilized henceforth."

I stay over at a local hotel, and the next morning, Maros and I go for a jog on a road near his house. As we pass the hillsides where he once herded his father's cows and the houses he had built over his 50-year career, passerby shout greetings. He rattles off a list of his favorite construction projects as I huff along beside him: The local headman's home. An education college. A nursing home.

"Whenever I build a house, it must come out splendid, because it is an advertisement of my work," he had told me the night before, via a particularly poetic translation from Benson. "When I see my buildings, it makes me feel proud, like when I run with the young ones."

Now, as we run, we are mostly quiet, though he occasionally breaks the silence to point out another landmark to me. The plot of land where he grew up. The house he is building for one of his sons.

“People ask me why I refuse to be old,” he says. By now, he had outlived two wives, and two of his 17 children. “It’s running.” But perhaps he felt I was still not convinced, because when we arrive back at his house, he asks if I’d like to meet an old childhood friend of his, someone else who can verify his age.

“Well, I hope he’s still alive,” he says as we pull up to the man’s house in my car a few minutes later. “I haven’t heard from him in a few years.” But sure enough, we find the man, Seakane Mamaile, sitting on a plastic chair in the center of his small courtyard, drinking coffee from a chipped metal mug as two small orange cats curl around his legs. He wears a red page-boy cap with a large hole on the top, exposing a wide circle of bald head. When he sees Maros, he claps his hands on his friend’s back in delight, and the two men begin chattering away in Sepedi. Seakane speaks no English, so I say nothing, aside from telling Maros to ask him when he was born. “1940?” he says, his inflection rising into a question. I nod and write it down. The two men carry on, their conversation peppered with names and dates I can’t recognize, their personal histories fluttering right in front of me, just beyond my reach.



Seakane (left) and Maros in Ga-Mogashoa, 2023

Galaletsang Mekgoe's gold medal⁶

The TV cameras swept across the row of elite runners gathered on the start of the 2023 Comrades. Skin prickling with goosebumps in the 5-degree morning, they waved and flashed nervous smiles.

Ahead of them, the race's 87.7-kilometer course curled into the still-pitch black winter day. At their backs, 16,000 hobby runners sang and snapped selfies as patchy speakers croaked pop songs over the crowd.

Galaletsang Mekgoe could have been in the front row, if she wanted. The year before, she'd finished fifth in the Comrades. The 26-year-old firefighter from a rural Northwest village had picked off a field that included Camille Herron, probably the most decorated female ultra-runner in the world. In the Comrades' century-long history, no Black woman had ever come so close to winning it.

Now, however, as the cameras dipped and panned over the elite field, Gala was nowhere to be seen. "I don't like to stand out," she explained to me a few days earlier, running her tongue over the braces she'd gotten a few months before to make her feel more confident in photos. "I'm not that type." And so on race morning, she tucked herself into the third row of runners, where she could be alone with the nerves blooming in her stomach.

The starting gun popped, and she sprinted into the darkness after the leaders.

That was okay for her though. Gala had never been afraid to chase.

⁶ A version of my reporting on Galaletsang Mekgoe was published under the headline "Never afraid to chase: A Black woman aims for ultra-marathon history" in *The Christian Science Monitor* on June 13, 2023: <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2023/0613/Never-afraid-to-chase-A-Black-woman-aims-for-ultramarathon-history>



Elite women's start, 2023 Comrades Marathon

The week before, on a misty Thursday morning, she jogged onto the main street in the town of Dullstroom, where she'd spent the month before the Comrades at a high-altitude training camp with six of her running club teammates. Their pack of lanky runners wound up the road, past old white ladies walking fluffy dogs in sweaters and gift shops selling local gins and wedges of fancy cheese. When they reached the edge of town, where a ribbon of road stretched out towards the pine tree plantations in the distance, they tucked in their arms and started to sprint.

Gala was the only woman in the group, and within a few seconds, she'd fallen to the back of the pack.

It was always like this. She had her paces, they had theirs. But often she still ran with them, watching their backs recede into the distance as she tried to imagine her own competitors, her own race.

"It takes a lot of mental strength to run with the boys," her teammate Edward Mothibi, a former Comrades champion, observed later as we sat around the fireplace in their shared house. "It is not easy to be the one chasing all the time," he said.

By now, though, she'd more or less gotten used to it. Gala had spent more than a year training with these men, who in 2022 claimed five of the top ten spots at the Comrades. "There's no other lady from our area who's fast enough to run with Gala," said her coach Dave Adams.

Dave had spotted Gala at a race in 2018. He was a retired engineer on the platinum mines with a thick Irish accent. He wasn't a professional coach, and he'd never been a fast runner himself. But he loved the sport, loved the number crunching of it. Paces and splits and kilometers logged. He'd been president, for a while, of his platinum mine's marathon club, and he'd spent a couple years already coaching a team of mineworkers when Gala came along.

He had never coached a woman before. At the time, she was a 10-kilometer runner – fast, but not fast enough to really shine. He thought she might do better over longer distances, but he hadn't known how much better. In 2022, he signed her up for the Comrades and told her: look, just run half the race. Just for practice. Instead, she'd finished fifth, in the best time ever recorded by a Black woman in history.

"She's our last-born sister," said Tete Dijana, a soft-spoken university security guard who won the Comrades' men's race that year. It wasn't just that they ran together. In Dullstroom in the evenings, Dave cooked them big plates of spaghetti bolognese and cottage pie, and they scrunched together on their guesthouse's couches, laughing and joking about dying their hair a rainbow of colors before the big race.

Most of them came from the same place, the rundown villages that clustered around South Africa's magnificently wealthy platinum mines. They'd been raised by domestic workers and miners in tiny, crowded houses. They used their prize money to pay their siblings' school fees and build new roofs for their parents' houses. And they were hungry, in a way that was hard to explain to outsiders, for a life bigger than what had been scripted for them.

"Definitely, I am here to make history," Gala said.



Gala finishes fifth at the 2022 Comrades Marathon (Tobias Ginsberg for News24)

“The day I get beaten by a woman in Comrades is the day I stop running,” declared Graeme Fraser, a decorated Comrades runner who finished in the top 10 several times in the 1980s. At the time, no woman had ever finished the race faster than 6 and a half hours, well short of Graeme’s typical finish time.

But in 1989, with seven kilometers to go to Kingsmead Stadium in Durban, a wispy schoolteacher from Benoni named Frith van der Merwe flew past him. True to his promise, Graeme stopped dead in his tracks. Then he turned around and walked straight off the course. A few minutes later, Frith shattered the women’s record, finishing in 5 hours 54 minutes. She was more than an hour ahead of the second-place runner. Graeme Fraser, as promised, never ran the Comrades again.

But some barriers proved more stubborn. 20 years later, when Gala was born in a village near the platinum mining town of Rustenburg, only one Black woman had ever cracked the race's top ten. The most decorated woman of color ever to compete in the race, Farwa Mentoof, eventually sold one of the 1-ounce gold medals she received for a top ten finish to pay her bills.

"The issue has always been resources," Olive Anthony, told me. In 1980, she became the first woman of color ever to complete the race. "It's really as simple as that."

Gala didn't know any of this history as prepared for the race in 2023. Her own ultra-running idol was a 32-year-old white South African woman named Gerda Steyn. A Free State farm girl turned global distance running phenomenon, Gerda was so heavily favored to win the race that one former winner said bluntly, "there's Gerda and then there's everybody else."

At a press conference for elite athletes two days before the race, nine women, including Gala, were invited to a conference room stage to speak about their hopes for the race. The MC, one of the race's top brass, stumbled over the names of several of the top women, mis-pronouncing Gala's name with a hard G. But when he reached Gerda – whose name begins with the same rasping h-sound – he had no trouble. "So," he began coyly, "are you planning to break the course record?" She giggled. The journalists' cameras clicked.

By then, Gala had studied Gerda's career, spending hours at her training camp scrolling her Wikipedia page and old race results. She knew that in Gerda's first Comrades, she took more than eight hours to finish – the time of a fast amateur. That was back when she was Gala's age, and she had steadily picked her way up the ranks since, breaking the course record for the up run in 2019. "Sometimes I think I can just suffer a bit better than other people in a race, even if they have more talent than I do," Gerda once said of her success.

"She is the best, but for her to get where she is now, she was beaten many times first," Gala said. It was a comforting thought, that you didn't have to be born a champion. She, after all, hadn't been. She was just a pretty athletic kid in a pretty poor family. Her dad, who had spent his career as a mine worker, was injured when she was small, and moved back home to the Northern Cape, leaving her mother to raise her and her siblings on

whatever cleaning jobs and government assistance she could scrape together. Gala had always been a good athlete, but it wasn't until she found ultra-running in her early 20s that real, honest-to-God greatness was on the horizon. Gerda's story was different, but to Gala, her idol's trajectory made the future she dreamed of feel possible.

Still, sitting beside Gerda in that Durban hotel, she wished she had a little more time before she had to run against her. "You have been running towards this moment and now that it's here, you want to reverse the days," Gala said to me. When her turn to speak came, she took a ragged breath. "[To end up] on the podium, it takes a lot, a lot of sacrifices," she stammered out. Of the nine women on stage, she was the only one who wasn't white. The crowd clapped loudly, and she beamed, braces flashing.

The sun was still rising in pastel smudges of pink and blue on race morning when Gala felt it, an old, familiar pain prickling in her leg. A few months earlier, she had tweaked her calf muscle during a 50-kilometer race. It hadn't quite been the same since. But this morning felt different. She tried to ignore the tug in her leg as the race wound past pungent chicken farms and tiny agricultural outposts and fields of hunched sugar cane.

She thought of the year before. She had taken unpaid leave from her job as a firefighter in a nature reserve to join the training camp in Dullstroom. She hadn't told her family, who depended on her salary, where she was until the morning she arrived in Durban for the race. Fine, they told her, but don't expect us to watch the race.

If she wanted them to care that she was here, she knew, she'd have to prove herself. When she felt tired on the course that day, "I thought of them because I am the breadwinner," she says. "I was fighting for top ten to pay back the risk I took."

In that race, she'd also started slow, steadily gaining positions as the hours dragged on. Along much of the course, a crowd pressed in on all sides, and she heard their shrieks of delight as she passed. *A Black lady!* they shouted in Zulu. *Go fight for us!*

Late in the race, she spied a willowy figure ahead of her. It was Camille Herron, an American ultra-runner with a dozen records to her name, who was widely considered the best in the world. But out there on the Comrades course, she looked exhausted. Gala kicked past her. "You never know who God has written in the big book to win the race that day," she said of that moment.

Afterwards, she'd returned home from the race to a parade held in her honor, where she and her teammates stood on the back of a bakkie as fans ululated and grabbed for their hands, screaming their names. Her R35,000 in prize money soon dissolved into house repairs and school fees. "I was so proud I could do that," she says.

Then, she had been a surprise, a prodigy. But this year, everyone was expecting something of her. Sometimes at her training camp she turned off her phone so she wouldn't see the messages from people back home, asking for help. It was too much sometimes.

And her leg was really starting to hurt.

Five hours and 14 minutes after the starting gun fired, Gala's teammate, Tete Dijana, sprinted across the finish line at Kingsmead Cricket Stadium in Durban, a huge smile cracking across his face. He'd shattered the old race record by four minutes.

Over the next 15 minutes, three more of her teammates – Edward, Johannes Makgetla, and Joseph Manyedi – crossed the line. As soon as Joseph crossed in tenth place, they'd knotted themselves into a tight group hug. Tete was crying.

A few minutes later Gerda Steyn, crossed the line with blonde braids flying. She, too, had shattered the record.

Still out on the course, Gala was watching her own dream slip away.

Since the halfway mark, the pain had been shooting up her leg with every step, growing progressively worse. It was an old injury, flaring up on the biggest stage of her life. She fantasized about quitting.

During that elite runners press conference a few days before, one of the male runners, a former Comrades champion named Bongmusa Mthembu, had described what it was like to be deep into the Comrades, at the moment when you become convinced you have nothing left. "At some point your body is finished," he said. "You're going to run with your mind, you're going to run with your soul."

Here, now, she was doing that. Every step hurt, but Gala kept going. Even as she watched the tenth-place runner pull away from her, and with it her hopes of a cash prize. Even as she entered the stadium to muted cheers.

The finish line was empty when she crossed. Dave had fallen sick and wasn't at the race. The men were doing their doping testing. Her club manager had already packed up

and headed off to the VIP lounge to celebrate the winners. And race volunteers were hustling to remove cordons that had been set up to funnel the top ten women towards the race officials who would give them their gold medals.

Gala stared at the ground, holding back tears. She limped away from the finish line, clutching her calf. "My leg," she whispered to a medic, slumping into a plastic chair.

Two gangly teenagers with a stretcher appeared beside her and she lowered herself slowly onto it. A journalist handed her his phone – Dave was on the other end. "I'm really proud of you," he told her. "You ran a great race." She croaked out a hoarse "thank you" and turned her face to the side to cry.

The next morning, she put on her club's green track suit and headed to the prize-giving ceremony at a beachfront Durban hotel. The local government official giving a keynote quoted Josia Thugwane, the South African marathon runner who had shocked the world when he took Olympic gold in 1996, and then disappeared into obscurity. "I'm the greatest story never told," he told a reporter decades later.

Gala drank apple juice out of a wine glass and clapped politely as the women's winners were announced. As they fumbled with their giant novelty cheques, her stomach twisted.

But she had still won a prize herself – for being part of the top finishing elite women's team. She hobbled on stage to collect it. And when her training mates went on stage to collect their individual awards, she stood up and cheered louder than anyone.

"It wasn't this year," she said afterwards. "But my time is still coming."

Ashleigh Adams' second chance⁷

"The voices in my head are loud like silence," Ashleigh Adams says, leaning towards the microphone in front of her.

It is eight days before her first Comrades in June 2023, and she is on stage at a send-off party for her running club in Alexandra, a township in Johannesburg, reciting a poem about how she got here.

"My shoes have holes, yet I put my hope there," she says, her voice smooth and deep. Under the vocals, a backing track pipes a vaguely mournful piano melody into the room. "The direction of my run is in my veins."

"Yes, girl!" someone yells from the audience, and on stage, Ashleigh pauses, like she is suddenly watching herself from the outside. She has a lot of these disembodied moments now, as she prepares to run a race so long it will take a day to finish. That seems like a crazy thing for anyone to do, doesn't it? Let alone someone whose life has meandered in the way hers has. Because up till now, Ashleigh Adams has not generally been the goal-oriented type. She's 35, and she's never had a job longer than a few months at a time. For years, until quite recently, she was too busy drinking to see her daughter. Even now, they share a single room with another woman, and the whole setup feels a little flimsy, like it could crack apart at any time.

But anyway, here she is, about to run 90 kilometers between two cities she's never seen before. She wants to know what it'll feel like to walk right up to the edge of her limits, and peer over onto the other side. This seems as good a way as any she can think of.

"I am trying to give myself a second chance," she explains to the crowd.

Ashleigh Adams didn't always believe in second chances. Maybe not even first chances, because that would mean that something, somewhere along the line, had gone right. And her life never really felt like that. She grew up in the 1990s, when South Africa was a soft new country, in a township outside Cape Town. She was raised by her gran, but the love of

⁷ A version of my reporting on Ashleigh Adams was published under the headline, "I connect to the pain": Finding a second chance in ultrarunning" on *Al Jazeera* on July 1, 2023: <https://www.aljazeera.com/sports/2023/7/1/south-africa-comrades-marathon-ultrarunning-long-distance>

her life was her father, a soft man with a big intellect. “The most precious person in the world to me.” He was a truck driver, so she saw him only in small bursts, when he came home to rest between stints on the road.

When he was there, he read constantly. The stack of self-help books on his bedside table never dwindled, and when he was gone, Ashleigh would flip through them too, hoping to find little fragments of her dad in *Why Moved My Cheese* and *One Minute Manager*. “It was like seeing into his mind,” she remembers.

Ashleigh was ten when he was shot and killed, and the aperture on her world began to close. “Part of me died with him,” she says. “If he hadn’t died, I’d be a soft person.” She fell into trouble, flunked out of high school. Then she moved to Johannesburg, where she could crash with her mother. But they had never been close, and it was hard to get her footing. Ashleigh cycled through low wage jobs – at a supermarket, painting houses, installing lightbulbs in government houses. At night, she drank. “And I opened my legs for anyone.” For fun. For money. For another bottle of wine.

She was 19 when Sade was born, and wholly unable to cope. Ashleigh left the baby with her mother, and after she died in 2014, sent Sade off to live with her brother. He was an addict too. Not that it mattered. “For a long time I didn’t care what happened to me,” she says. “I thought me and my baby were put on this earth to suffer.”

Eventually, she didn’t even bother to look for work anymore. Instead, she walked each morning across the rumbling highway overpass that separated scruffy Alex from Sandton, the skyscraper suburb known as Africa’s richest square kilometer. She followed the BMWs and Mercedes a few more kilometers down the road to the mall. Inside, past the Louis Vuitton and Rolex stores, was a bookstore. There, she would sit all day and devour stacks of self-help books, the kind her dad always loved. There was *Who Moved My Cheese?*, *The One Minute Manager* and *Awaken the Giant Within*. She studied the secrets of an endless fount of Tibetan monks, daytime TV hosts, and Fortune 500 CEOs with straight, blinding white teeth.

Then she slid the books back on the shelves, walked the five kilometers back home to the drafty single room in Alex where she lived, and drank again, until she blacked out. “I couldn’t face the world sober,” she says. Anyway, those books were for people whose lives mattered, she told herself, not for her.

Two weeks before the Comrades, Ashleigh and I go for a run. It's always a bit of a nerve-wracking prospect for me to jog with an ultra-marathon runner, but now doubly so, because Ashleigh has been extremely vague about the distance and pace we'll do today. It's not intentional subterfuge, but she runs without a watch, and her phone is a little brick of a thing – no GPS, no Strava. Rarely does she have any idea how far she's gone, or how fast. This is strange to me, because Ashleigh and I are nearly the same age, and I have been glued to my phone for the better part of the last decade. I couldn't even navigate to the Alex sports club where we are meeting without it. "I like to be in the moment," she tells me to explain why she doesn't have WhatsApp. What's the farthest she's gone in her training for Comrades, I ask, hoping to use the answer to gauge something about her paces or style. "I'm not sure. Could be 60 kilometers, something like that," she replies. "I don't really keep track."

In some ways, it's better I don't know what I'm in for. As a runner, and as a person, I'm prone to dread. If I know there's a monster hill in the middle of my route, I'll think about it from the first step, rehearsing my exhaustion before it has even happened. Some people like to come into a run mentally prepared. I, on the other hand, like to be as willfully ignorant as I possibly can.

We meet in the parking lot of the Kwabhekilanga sports ground, an oval track not far from where she lives in Alex. The sun hangs low and orange over the Sandton skyscrapers in the distance as Ashleigh guides us onto the road and we begin to jog. At first, the road plunges downhill, and as we pass roadside stalls selling chicken feet and fronds of kale and loose cigarettes, I feel confident. *Maybe I should run the Comrades one day*, I let myself think idly, as I often do when running is easy.

We pass a sticky tavern where Ashleigh used to hang out. The bass of some music I can't quite make out vibrates through the doors. A pair of glassy-eyed men thrust quarts of Black Label beer towards us and whoop. "Go, umlungu, go," one yells, using a local word for white person.

Ashleigh first started running in 2019. No particular reason. A friend invited her, and she was feeling bloated and bored. *Why not?* She thought. She ran around Kwabhekilanga in jeans and canvas sneakers. It hurt worse than her worst hangovers. And

she loved it. The next day when she woke up sore, she thought, *this is what it feels like for pain to have a purpose.*

“You build yourself up, you demolish yourself, and then somehow you keep going,” she remembers. It was like everything the self-books had been telling her. But suddenly it felt like something she could do too. “I just connected to that pain I was feeling. The way running hurts gives you this surety that you’re still alive.”

I am starting to hurt as we coast towards the six-lane road that cleaves Alex from the nearby suburb of Kelvin. It is rush hour, and mini-bus taxis are heaving plumes of exhaust at us as we stop to cross the street. “Where are we going?” I ask.

“The Kelvin hill,” Ashleigh says, and then jogs off. I follow her for another kilometer along the road until she turns sharply, and then I see it. The hill juts upward from the road in front of us at a seemingly right angle. Ashleigh doesn’t slow down, so I try to follow, but within ten meters, she’s lost me. I try to focus on proximate landmarks – a tree, a telephone pole, a Toyota Tazz clinging to the pavement. Every step of the 500 meters up is a negotiation between my brain and my lungs. When I finally reach the top, I find Ashleigh jogging there on the balls of her toes, not even out of breath.

“If you weren’t here, I’d do ten repeats,” she says, laughing as I double over. “I love hills. I just switch off and connect to the pain.” As we jog back down to try the hill again, she tells me about her early days running, when this life and her life in the bars still coexisted.

“When I was running I would hear a voice saying, you need to stop drinking if you’re going to keep doing this,” she says. “And then I would think, but why? Beer is the only thing that’s been there for me.” For her birthday in May 2019, a friend bought her three liters of wine. That night, she drank it at home alone, glass by glass, until it was gone.

“The next day, I was so sick I couldn’t get out of bed,” she says. “I told myself never again.” And she kept that promise. I ask if she knows how many days she’s been sober.

No, she says. She hasn’t been counting.

On June 11, just before 5:30 am, Ashleigh stands outside the city hall in Pietermaritzburg. The crowd belts South Africa’s national anthem. The cannon fires. 16,000 people surge away into the dark morning.

“I want to see what my limits really are,” she told me the day before, as the rest of her teammates huddled for selfies on the beach in Durban.

But on the road that day, her mind feels light. She doesn’t talk, as she often does on the road, to her dead parents. “Sometimes I find them sitting on my shoulders,” she had told me a couple weeks before, as we sat in the KFC at Alex Mall while ran thrashed the building. She doesn’t worry about her daughter Sade, now 16, or wonder when they’d make it out of the single, tiny room they shared with another friend, each of them sleeping in a puddle of blankets on the floor. She doesn’t wonder when, or if, she’ll find a job again.

She is just running. She passes children kneeling on the ground to pick up the sweat-drenched sweaters runners had flung off as the day warmed up, and her heart twists. She knows what it’s like to feel that desperate. She passes spectators who shout her name in a dozen different accents, and her heart rises to her throat.

By the afternoon, the sky overhead is thick with braai smoke. Everything on Ashleigh’s body seems to be chafing. “Your body wants to give up, and you have to keep talking to it,” she says. But as she rounds the bend into Durban’s Kingsmead Stadium, the pains shooting from her body fall suddenly silent.

“It was like I was witnessing myself living my own dream,” she says.

10 hours and 28 minutes after the race begins, she crosses the finish line. And in that instant, the world cracks open a little wider.

“If this thing felt impossible and then I did it, what does that mean for the life I have coming next?”

Shahieda Thungo's bus⁸

There's always a moment, you know. Everyone has one. When the Comrades seems like it will break you. When you realize, in some way-too-late burst of lucidity, that running 90 kilometers is an insane kind of hobby. That you could be home, watching the damn thing on TV under a pile of blankets, instead of here, covered in your own dry piss, dry sweat, dry tears, shuffling through a cloud of braai smoke and annoyingly good cheer. When your moment happens, you're going to be surrounded by happy drunks, spectators clutching the slender necks of their Black Labels, singing Rihanna and screaming, "keep going! you're almost there!" That's the worst part. Because you're not almost there. You've still got another three hours of this. Jesus Christ. There's a lady with a sign that says, *you're running better than the government*. You want to smile but it's like you don't even have those muscles anymore. How is it possible than running has made your *jaw* so tired? Speaking of jaws, you've eaten nothing today but cold baked potatoes, a lifetime fucking supply, which are starting to taste like a slurry of cement and salt going down. That's how it feels, ok. But everyone feels like this. If you think you're the only one in this pain, let me tell you, you're not. So let's go. You won't feel like this forever. Two more steps. Just two more. Keep doing that. Keep going.

In 2018, Shahieda Thungo's moment began around 2:30 pm, coming over the hill that spits runners into Pinetown, a monotonous expanse of car dealerships and petrol stations on the fringes of Durban, about 20 kilometers from the finish. Until then, she thought, things had been going pretty well, which for Shahieda mostly meant one thing – she was on time. She was a race-appointed pacer, and her strange and singular job that day at the Comrades was

⁸ A version of my reporting on Shahieda Thungo was first published under the headline, "South Africa's unlikely ultramarathoner helps others cross the finish line" in *The Christian Science Monitor* on July 6, 2018: <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2018/0706/South-Africa-s-unlikely-ultramarathoner-helps-others-cross-the-finish-line>

Shahieda also appeared as a character in my radio documentary entitled "The Comrades" on the podcast 99 Percent Invisible on January 24, 2023: <https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/the-comrades/>

to cross the finish line as close to the Comrades' 12-hour cutoff as she possibly could, dragging as many struggling runners as possible along with her.

It was a precision maneuver, requiring a metronome-like command of the race. If she ran even a little late, she wouldn't finish at all, and neither would the people in her pace group. In her pocket, she carried a piece of torn out piece of notebook paper that marked what time she expected to arrive at each of the race's five cutoff points. She allowed herself five extra minutes in the second half of the race than the first, but that was her only concession. Otherwise, the pace had to be completely steady. Eight and a half minute kilometers, one after the other, all the way from Pietermaritzburg to Durban.

She had calculated that she would finish at 5:25 pm That was about five minutes before the cutoff, when a race official on the finish line would fire a gun into the air, and then a row of volunteers would suddenly uncoil across the line behind him, linking arms to block anyone who came after them.

But now, shuffling through Pinetown with her pacer flag-on-a-stick bobbing from her backpack, Shahieda wasn't so sure she'd make it. Her body was encyclopedia of minor pains, things she never knew could hurt. The beds of her fingernails stung. Her eyebrows ached. Pain shot into the crooks of her elbow. The tips of her ears.

And all around her, her pace group was singing a call and response.

Durban! Hey!

We're coming! Hey!

Moses Mabhida! Hey!

We're coming! Hey!

It was a prison of her own stupid making, since she was the one who started the song. She was the one who, since 5:30 in the morning, had been issuing a steady stream of pep talks, therapy sessions, and jokes to those running with her. And now she was surrounded by it, an enthusiasm she wished she could find infectious.

The day before at the race expo, milling around a cavernous convention center with her pacer flag, people kept approaching Shahieda for advice. And she had told people to expect this very thing. "You're going to have a moment," she said. It didn't matter how

much you'd trained, or how easy you thought you were taking it. There was going to come a point when this race sucked beyond reason. And then, right then, you'd better know why you were here.

Shahieda did. As the chants from her pace group billowed around her, she silently reached down and tapped the laminated piece of paper pinned to her thigh. It was a note from her 13-year-old daughter, Nkazi.

"Mom," it read in bubbled letters. "I love you loads! Make me proud."

She tapped it again. She thought of those long nights after her chemotherapy treatments, when she was too weak to move, and a six-year-old Nkazi made her tea or brought her cans of sharp ginger soda. When she promised herself over and over again that she would beat this thing for this little girl, who had already lost so much.

She tapped the note again, and kept running.

You probably don't think you're running a 12-hour Comrades. No one does. Actually, it would be a crazy thing to think – that you're going to finish a minute or two before the race's cut-off. No. Of course you're training to go faster. Of course you don't want to be sprinting into Moses Mabhida stadium in Durban with "Final Countdown" pumping from the speakers, the crowd roaring under those huge metal ribs, the announcer calling out the seconds left with probably a little too much glee in his voice. *30 seconds! 20 seconds to go! 10 seconds!* That's not you.

Maybe you're racing a 10-hour Comrades. Maybe you spent hours working it out – how fast you'd need to be through each section of the course, when you should walk, what the optimal nutritional alchemy of oranges and potatoes and Energades would be. Maybe you even started up there in the A or B seedings, one of those compact, wiry types with a sports watch the circumference of a coaster. Maybe you once ran a marathon in three hours. Yeah, the Comrades is long, but you've got plenty of time. How hard could it be?

But now something has gone wrong. The wheels are falling off. Your legs aren't turning over. You keep getting passed by middle-aged men with jiggling potbellies and barrel-chested rugby-player types with labored, heavy strides. There is a woman in false eyelashes and a pink tutu. But the last straw is that old man in a maroon and white Rand Athletics Club singlet that looks older than you are. His head is down, lungs puffing, as he

moves past you with a ferociously jerky stride that barely passes for running. "One foot in front of the other," he says as he shudders ahead of you, a bit of advice so condescendingly simple it makes you wonder what you must look like to be in need of that.

You're staggering out of an aid station, thinking about his words, feeling sorry for yourself, delicately holding a baked potato wrapped in foil like it's a grenade. Then you hear it. There's just this rumble, getting closer and closer. "Bus incoming!" shouts one of the volunteers at the aid station, swinging her arms like some kind of lunatic air traffic controller. Everyone jumps out of the way like it's a presidential motorcade. "Bus incoming!"

You turn around for a second, as much as your neck will allow anyway, and there it is. A wall of people. Every color of spandex in the rainbow. Some have their arms linked. They block the entire road. And they're all singing. *Easy! Easy! Easy, wena!*

Soon they are on top of you, around you, in front of you. "Keep going!" some stranger chirps to you, holding out a bag of biltong. You take a piece, try to remember how to chew, and finally swallow the whole thing instead, a glob of fat and rubber that lodges in your throat. But salty. It's not bad actually. Inside the melee, you look up long enough to see the pacer's flag, sticking out of her backpack, bobbing up and down as she runs.

12:00, it reads.

No, this can't be.

You're not supposed to be running a 12-hour Comrades.

But before you can think more about this, the bus is roaring away, and you have to go with them. If you miss this one, you miss the whole thing.

By time Shahieda went over the starting mat in front of the Pietermaritzburg City Hall at 5:42 am that morning, more than 18,000 runners were already on the course. She started in G batch, the last group of runners, and she made it a point to be at that back of that pack too. By the time she made it onto the course, the elites were already three kilometers into their race, sprinting out of the city. A hundred meters behind her, a small fleet of buses rumbled along in low gear. Written on their sides in block letters was an ominous word: BAILERS.

All day long, she would run a few steps ahead of these buses, which picked up runners who dropped out, or didn't make to one of the race's cutoff points in time. "It's our job to give them something nice to look at," she cracked as she set off. "I can't be fast, so I have to be cute."

It had been eight years now since that day her husband J. came home from his gallbladder surgery, tired but fine. Then a few days later, a fever flushed over him. Nothing serious, but a little weird. So they went back to the hospital. An infection from the surgery, the doctor said. It had spread to the lungs. It could get to his heart if they didn't move quickly. Sorry, but they'd have to keep him for a while. She heard the words like they were being spoken underwater. J. was already being hooked up to tubes.

She was still at the hospital when she got the call. Some bad news, the nurse on the other end was saying. Shahieda's biopsy was back. She had skin cancer. A week later, J. was gone.

The downest of my downs, she would say later. Six months later, when she finished chemotherapy, she still couldn't drag herself up from the misery. A doctor gently suggested anti-depressants.

"Give me a year," she told him. She wanted to see if she could sort this thing out another way. And so, she began to walk, long rambling strolls that took her through the fields near her house in the Protea Glen section of Soweto. She would walk until she reached a place where no one was around, and then she would scream until she cried. "And afterward, I felt a bit better," she says. Over time, "the distances became longer, and the screaming less."

Soon, the walking became running. A few hundred meters at first, then further and further. She signed up for a 10k "that clobbered me good and proper," and then a 21. It was something to do. A few months later, when she tried to register for the Two Oceans half marathon in Cape Town and saw that the race was full, she shrugged and registered for the Two Oceans' 56 kilometer ultra instead. Why not? It was something to do besides remember that the world had imploded.

As she ran, she often chanted quietly to distract herself from the heavy legs and burning lungs. *One-two-one-two-one-two-one-two*. At one race, another runner joined in. Then another and another. Soon, Shahieda had informal pace groups running behind her at

almost every race, their only goal to finish before the race's cutoff. She ran six-hour marathons and three-and-a-half-hour halves. She did 45-minute 5kms.

Every race ended the same way, in a pile of sticky hugs on the finish line. Over and over, the people who ran with her said the same thing: I couldn't have done this without you. *In your life, you might not be the smartest in your class*, she had often told Nkazi. *You might not be the prettiest. But you'll get there. It's not about comparing yourself to other people. It's about running your own race.*

And now here she was, literally running her own races.

After a while, people started to ask if she didn't maybe want to push herself, see how fast she could go. But she didn't. Honestly she really didn't.

"That back is where my people are," she would say. The ones who need her. The ones who helped her survive.

On the sideline of the Comrades, watching the runners stream past, you start to wonder, *could I do this? Can anyone do this?* There are all kinds out there, some you're sure you wouldn't know for a runner if you saw them in Pick N Pay cradling an orange. If they can all do it, these people who in their daily lives do such ordinary things as buy oranges, why couldn't you? Suddenly, a montage begins playing in your head: the early morning alarms you won't snooze, the beautiful landscapes you'll see on your long runs, the strangers you'll hug on race finish lines. Ignoring the fact that you have never not-snoozed an alarm in your life, that all sounds pretty good. Which is a weird place to get to, even in a daydream. Because we aren't talking here about getting in shape for your first 10k. This is a race between two cities, a distance that would take you more than an hour *in your car*, which incidentally has the power of 170 horses, while you have the power of maybe one horse, if that horse was also regularly overdoing it at Wine Wednesdays and buying chips for lunch at work because they "forgot" to pack one.

But in a way, it makes sense. See enough people do something, and that thing, that once impossible thing, is suddenly on the cusp of doable. There's a story that sports psychologists like to tell about Roger Bannister, the Oxford University medical student who first broke the four-minute mile in 1954. Until then, four minutes had seemed like an almost superhuman barrier, one that would require a perfect storm of circumstances to

break. Then, on a windy May day in Oxford, England, a junior doctor ran a mile in 3 minutes 59 seconds. The track was wet, Bannister was under-trained. And like that, reality shifted. Within two months, his record was broken again, and by the following year, three more runners ran sub-4. Now, more than 1,600 people have run a mile in under four minutes. The barrier, it turns out, was largely psychological.

In her moment, in her darkness, Shahieda hears J. It seems crazy but it's his voice, she's sure of it. *You've got real cojones, running this crazy race*, he tells her.

And suddenly they are 23 again. His stupid pick-up line. "Hey," he said as he passed her on the escalator in the gym, "you look like someone I know." She rolled her eyes. And she shrugged him off. But that was it. That was the beginning.

She thinks of the years that followed, all 13 of them lining up like soldiers at attention. Good years and terrible years. The good years when they played endless games of pool late into the night, until her pregnant belly got so big it dragged across the table as she aimed her cue. The bad years, like when she lost that baby at 11 months old and vowed she'd never have another. The good years, when she got pregnant again.

The bad years, when he got sick. When he died. When she and Nkazi were left alone. And now, somehow, it's another good year, and he's here, laughing with her again. *You've gotten this far*, he says. *You've raised our daughter. You're doing well in your life. So yeah, you've got this race.*

And then there's the voice of her mother, all tough love. *I didn't bring someone into the world who'd come this far and fail*, she tells Shahieda as she runs. *If it were easy, everyone would do it.*

And so she keeps going. Five more kilometers pass, then ten. And just as she was telling all those people at the expo, she's starting to feel better. Lighter. The singing doesn't make her want to punch someone anymore.

And suddenly she is in Durban. The air smells like salt. She can see the sea, a grey-blue stripe on the horizon. Now there are hundreds of runners behind her, following her, listening to her final promises. *Fix your hair. Lipstick, ladies. We are about to be on TV, and you don't want to look like your problems.*

And then they are all there, running into the stadium with the roar of the crowd pressing in against them, then collapsing over the line into sobs and wobbly-legged embraces.

Eleven hours, 52 minutes, and 33 seconds.



Shahieda (center, with green socks) at the finish line of the 2018 Comrades Marathon

Conclusion

“So that *tsotsi* put his gun to my face, like this.”

The voice drifted across the hot, still room, and I looked up from the book in my lap. On the other side of the police office waiting area, a lanky young man in ripped black skinny jeans was sitting across a plastic divider from a heavy-lidded police officer, jiggling a baby on his lap. He mimed a finger gun and pressed it against the plastic at the officer’s eye level. “Like he was going to shoot me in the eyes,” he said, his voice flat. At the next desk over, I heard a dreadlocked man with a lilting West African accent asking if another officer if she had seen his wife. “She hasn’t been home since yesterday,” he explained.

“You think we arrested her?” the policewoman replied.

“It’s possible.”

I shifted my weight on the narrow wooden bench. Beside me, a white woman of about 60 with leathery skin and a hot pink t-shirt with the word LOVE written in sequins across the chest raised a thin, penciled-on eyebrow.

“Agh, shame, man,” she whispered in a gravelly voice to no one in particular, before drooping her head to look down at a video of a cat playing on her phone in her lap.

It was a Sunday morning in November 2023, and I was at the police station in Booysens, a working-class suburb south of Johannesburg. The day before, someone had quietly plucked my iPhone from my shorts pocket while I waited in line for a beer at a soccer game. I needed to report the crime for the insurance claim. So here I was, leaning against a chipped wall painted the color of mayonnaise, waiting my turn to tell my story.

And in the meantime, I was eavesdropping. We all were. The room was full of one of the most diverse cross-sections of South Africans you’ll find anywhere: victims of crime. There were domestic violence cases and hijacked SUVs, house robberies and muggings at knife-point. The Booysens Police Station offered no pretense of giving any of us privacy in our sorrow. Instead, when you were called, you explained what happened to you in earshot of the entire room. The fatigue and judgments of the officers ricocheted back into the waiting crowd. “You need to go to the shelter?” one officer asked a hunched woman with her face buried in a scarf. He sighed. “He’s hitting you or what’s the problem?” Beside me, a

couple whispered furtively to each other in Portuguese. In the next room over, someone laughed uproariously at a joke I couldn't hear.

I've lived in South Africa for a decade, and the longer I'm here, the more I struggle when people outside the country ask me what South Africa is like. "For who?" I always want to ask back. Of course, any society is impossible to neatly summarize in the kind of soundbite that casual conversation demands, but I think this is especially true in South Africa, a place that feels in a place like a microcosm of the whole world. The people who live here are the descendants of Khoi-San nomads and Dutch "explorers" and Portuguese traders and Xhosa herders and French Huguenots and Indian farmers. The list goes on. It is a breathtakingly diverse, impossibly unequal, brutally violent society of people who do not like to be told what to do. It is hard to explain, and lately, I feel like it's getting even harder.

Still, there are moments when I feel like I can see all of South Africa at once, when its mosaic shards melt together unexpectedly. That sweltering Sunday morning in a century-old Cape Dutch building, sitting beside a faded poster that said SAY NO TO CORRUPTION, I felt it. The people around me were at once hopeful, cynical, resigned, and philosophical. In their narration of their experiences, I felt South Africa reduced to its elemental hopes and fears. "You'll look for her?" the dreadlocked man asked of his wife. He was at once hopeful and afraid of disappointment. All of us were.

I thought of the other places I had been that compacted South Africa like this. There was the great concrete tube of a high-rise apartment building where I lived when I first moved to Johannesburg in 2014. 54 stories high, it balanced on a hillside overlooking the city center, and was crowned by a glowing red advertisement for a local cell phone company. Together, these features made the building, Ponte Tower, impossible to miss in the city skyline. For decades, since the doors to its apartments were flung open in 1974 with orange shag carpet lining the walls, Ponte had been a kind of vertical waiting room for admission to South African society, housing Johannesburg's newcomers and then spitting them back out into the city. In the 1970s that had been young, single European men who came to work in apartheid South Africa's flourishing industries. Later, it was Indian and

Coloured families quietly breaking apartheid's segregation laws, then returning political exiles, and today, immigrants from across Africa.⁹

From my tiled bachelor flat on the thirtieth floor, I listened to my neighbors chatting in Lingala, Ndebele, Portuguese, and Venda, and farther away the roar of rugby matches, mega-church preachers, and hooting mini-bus taxis crisscrossing the city below. On winter mornings, the fog that rolled over the city was sometimes lower than my window, giving the impression that I was literally in the clouds. And then, as the sun rose, it rolled back like a curtain, and the city would poke through, revealing its skyscrapers and yellow mine dumps and snarling highways and suburbs flushed green with trees, like a scale model of the world.

The other place I have seen South Africa in miniature this way is, of course, while running. I explained in the introduction to this book that the Comrades first captured my attention because it felt like the slightly-unhinged obsession of an entire country. Or the obsession of an entire, slightly-hinged country. Why, I wondered, did running 90 kilometers as a recreational activity have an appeal that cut across the thick lines that so often divide South Africans – class, race, gender, geography? As should be clear by now, a lot of the answer to that question rests in the country's history as an isolated, sports-mad country at the edge of the world. That's why I have devoted so much of this book to the stories of Comrades' runners of the past.

Their experiences help us understand how such an extreme sport took off here in a way it hasn't almost anywhere else in the world. People like Robert Mtshali, Frances Hayward, Hoseah Tjale, and Tiger Gono are testaments to the restless, relentless South African desire to go where you aren't allowed. They not only pried open the world of South African running, they also offered a glimpse of what the country itself could look like if it were freed from the divisions it had imposed on itself. Today, any of us who run in South Africa stand on their shoulders. We are the Garmin-wearing, Mageu-guzzling inheritors of their unconventional dreams.

⁹ This paragraph on Ponte draws on reporting that I have previously published in a variety of places, including the radio documentary "Ponte City Tower," aired on the podcast 99 Percent Invisible on September 26, 2017, and the article "South Africa's Tower of Dreams," published on *Slate* and *Roads and Kingdoms* on February 6, 2015. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2015/02/ponte-city-in-south-africa-africas-tallest-apartment-building-was-built-as-an-apartheid-tribute-but-now-its-something-more-important.html>

When I decided to write a book about the Comrades, part of me secretly hoped this conclusion would be the story of me triumphantly finishing the race myself. As I leafed through scrapbooks of brittle old Comrades news clippings and sat transfixed on the metal media bridge over the finish line year after year, I waited patiently for the “anyone can do it” attitude of South Africans to seep into my bloodstream, and my own motivation to become an ultra-marathon runner to take hold.

I guess at the bottom of it, I felt there must be a reason I wanted to write about the Comrades that I myself didn’t quite get, something sitting warbled and fuzzy in my consciousness, like a radio turned a click beyond the actual station.

After all, I clearly liked the idea of distance running. I liked it very much. And I could tell you many reasons why. I liked how meaningless it was, running for hours to cover a distance that a car could take you in 15 minutes, often with the verifiably crazy goal of ending up at exactly the same place you started. And I enjoyed how the foolishness of the task apparently belied some certain inherent nobility. Distance running valorized suffering. It promised that our pain has some kind of purpose. People were always being saved by jogging long distances, the edges of their broken psyches polished into something smoother and wiser. “Running is both exercise and a metaphor,” writes Haruki Murakami. “In long-distance running the only opponent you have to beat is yourself, the way you used to be.”

That seemed nice to me. Narratively tidy. I imagined long distance running like a particularly dramatic Instagram filter, cranking up the saturation until reality was so sharp, so bright, so vivid it almost hurt to look at. Wouldn’t that be nice, I thought, the world stripped of its nuance, of its shading, reduced to a single, methodical task – one foot in front of the other, again and again.

But there was still this problem: while I liked the idea of running very long distances, I could shake my ambivalence about actually doing it. I didn’t find that it allowed me to transcend the ordinary plane of being, or see my life with new definition. The city where I lived – where I still live now – was polluted, crime-ridden, and bone dry. It hurt my lungs. The city was full of hills. They hurt my legs. Sometimes, sure, a long run stopped my brain from spinning, but as a form of therapy, I must say it didn’t really compare to my actual

therapist. And it had never, as long as I could remember, caused me to think a single profound thought.

Like many people, after I went running, I was usually glad I did it. I was that kind of smug exerciser. It made me feel accomplished, capable. Sometimes, like when I was flying down a long hill after a creeping climb, or the rhythm of my feet matched the rhythm of the next song on shuffle on Spotify just-so, I was even glad to be running in the moment I was doing it. Of course though. Isn't that obvious? When running, like any difficult task, felt improbably easy, it was intoxicating, like those days when I sat down at my computer and whole paragraphs just appeared on the page in front of me fully formed. *Damn*, I would think, *Writing is fantastic*. But most days it was hard. Pages covered in blobs of words, unnerving in their sullen, almost insolent disinterest in becoming coherent thoughts. Anyway, running was like that too. Very hard, mostly, and mostly I just want it to be over.

Perhaps I was just not trying hard enough. I often considered that while watching the final, creaking hour of the Comrades, as the last of the winter light drained from the sky and several thousand people stumbled haggard and hallucinatory over the race's finish line in either Pietermaritzburg or Durban. For the most part, these weren't the kind of people you'd see on the street and immediately clock as extreme distance runners. Their energy was more "dad with a beer at a soccer game" than elite athlete. But here they all were. Mind over matter. They'd hit the wall, to use the running parlance, and then carried on. They'd found second winds and third and fourth... for 90 kilometers. Long distance runners like to say this philosophical-sounding thing about pain being a given but suffering being a choice. Looking at all these thirsty, wild-eyed people, I thought, they were proving that. Or maybe they were just proving that you could suffer a long time and still continue on. Either way, as a writer, I liked the story that's being told there. Life hurts. Keep going.

Then I attempted a long run myself. I would wiggle into a pair of spandex shorts and stuff my pockets full of energy gels that stuck in my mouth like melted, caramel-flavored plastic. I blasted 90s pop and took off down my tree-lined street. At the beginning, it was always a slog. *Your body knows you're not running from a lion, and it's wondering why it has to keep going*, a friend of mine always joked. But usually after a kilometer or so, the sludge in my legs seemed to dissolve, and for the next stretch of minutes – sometimes as long as an hour – running felt light and glorious.

Then it got tough again, and a voice crept into my head, reminding me in no uncertain terms: *no one is forcing you to do this. You can stop whenever you want.* In all the books and articles I've read about distance running – even some that I myself have written – people heard that voice and then calmly, almost surgically, excised it from their minds. They told the voice to fuck off. Made it feel small and meaningless in the face of their own brave determination to finish.

Not me. When I heard that voice, I thought, *exactly right.* It wasn't like I was going to win this race. Was there any point in a "personal record" anyway? I wouldn't live longer if I finished it five minutes faster. I was doing this for fun, allegedly. So if it wasn't fun, I probably should stop. A few years ago, I was two kilometers from the finish of the Soweto Half Marathon – a race that winds between the matchbox houses and Johannesburg's most historic Black township. I could literally see the stadium where the race finished, but it sat at the end of a mercilessly long slab of highway baking in the summer sun. Every step felt hot under my feet as I heard the voice in my own head telling me I could walk. I tried to fight it. I knew that as theatrical as my brain and body were being, it wouldn't actually kill me to keep jogging for 15 more minutes. But who was I kidding? *It didn't matter.* I hit the brakes. I walked every delicious step of those last two kilometers, as runners streamed past me on all sides, their racing singlets streaked with salt, bodies curved forward like quotation marks. I could feel the determination to finish strong pulsing off them. I didn't share it.

By the time I finished this manuscript though, I wasn't running Comrades, but I *was* running more. In the middle of my second year working on this book, I joined Ashleigh Adams' running club, Run Alex, and learned for the first time another of South African running's unique pleasures: in this country, this is a team sport. At races, I would spot the back of a runner in our club's pink and red jersey in the distance (we call ourselves "the watermelon gang"), and pull myself alongside them so we could continue together.

Two weeks after my morning at the Booyens Police Station, when I was 18 kilometers into the Soweto Half Marathon, that dreaded race I had walked the final half hour of years before, I saw my teammate Peter slumped into a slow walk on the merciless stretch of highway that leads from the township back to the race's finish at a large stadium.

“Let’s run to the top of that hill,” I told him as I ran up beside him, gesturing a few hundred meters into the distance. “Then we can walk,” I promised.

“I don’t know if I can make it,” he mumbled, but when we reached the promised hill top, he kept running. Now it was me who wanted to walk, but I was afraid to lose him, so I wove through the crowd behind him, annoyed at where my motivation had led me. Three kilometers later, we crossed the finish together. We hadn’t walked another step, and I had beaten my best time in the race by more than ten minutes.

Three weeks after that, at 5:30 am on a hot summer Sunday, I shuffled over the start line of a Johannesburg race ominously known as The Tough One. If the name isn’t enough, let me tell you a few other reasons why you might not want to run this race. First, it is 32 kilometers long, a wonky distance with absolutely no meaning to the outside world (“I ran three quarters of a marathon” lacks a certain office break room chat “wow” factor). Second, it winds through a grid of Johannesburg suburbs whose appearance I would characterize as aggressively dull. I’m talking kilometers and kilometers where the only scenery on either side is nearly-identical face-brick apartment complexes tucked behind tall walls, united in their starry-eyed ambitions to be somewhere else (“Welcome to Tuscan Village,” reads one side. “Reve de Provence,” blares the sign at the entrance of the next). Many of these places are too new for trees, so the streets have a washed-out, sunbaked quality – not to mention, little shade. Their ambient color is beige, and they are broken up only by roaring highways, strip malls, and fast-food joints that seem to still be sweating out the grease of last night’s hamburgers into the morning air.

Finally, last but not least on the list of reasons to sleep in the last Sunday in November instead of running The Tough One is the race’s elevation profile. Imagine the letter V. That’s it. That’s the whole image. You spend the first half of the race tumbling downward, feeling light and fit, wondering *wow, why have I never run a marathon before? It’s not that hard after all.* And then you spend the final 15 miserable kilometers of the race atoning for the sin of your pride, ascending hill after hill through the porridge-colored suburbs as the high-altitude summer sun rises furiously behind you.

In short, this race is a terrible idea.

It was also one of the best things I did all year.

Before The Tough One, it had been a decade since I'd run a distance for the first time. I was hung up on the idea that I simply couldn't go farther than 21 kilometers in a single stretch. My body would give out, and more importantly, I wasn't mentally cut out for it. My brain was unapologetic in its disinterest at overcoming new athletic challenges, particularly when they involved spending three plus hours shuffling slowly along a concrete path. I had watched the final hour of the Comrades enough time to know that the mind is a distance runner's most important muscle. When it is in good shape, it can cajole the most broken of bodies on another step, and another. But when the mind gives up, the body agreeably follows. And my mind had given up on long distance running before my body even had the chance to start.

I wish I could say that I worked hard to overcome that mental block. But the truth was, towards the end of 2023 I ran a couple of half marathons where I was still having fun at the end of the race, and I thought, maybe I could go farther. I didn't think I could run a marathon, but 32 kilometers didn't seem *so* far off. I messaged Shahieda, patron saint of Johannesburg slow runners, for her blessing. *Are you driving a bus at Tough One?* I asked. And then *The furthest I've run is 21k. Do you think I can do it?*

Hey missy, she replied.

I normally drive a 4h30 bus.

You can do it

That was enough. I filled out the registration form and paid my R300. On race day, I never actually found Shahieda's bobbing blue flag (*sub-halala*) but as is true at the back of any big South African race, we were all Shahieda's people. We danced to Tyla at the aid stations, belting *make me sweat / make me hotter*. We bit the slippery corners of the plastic bags of water they hand us, puncturing ragged holes with our teeth that sent the water spraying everywhere. We found each other in the middle of another long beige hill and said, *come on, run to the next stop sign with me*. And then we went, dragging each other along 100 meters, then 200, until eventually running another kilometer felt like a real possibility. *This is the farthest I've ever run*, I said to no one in particular as I passed the 25-kilometer marker. *Well done*, someone said, and shuffled on. At an aid station at kilometer 28, a woman handed me a red paper cup and said in a conspiratorial whisper, *coke and brandy... without the brandy*. I laughed and threw it back in one incredible sip, feeling the cold

bubbles pop against my throat. In the final stretch of the race, as we jogged across a field that feels impossibly long, I turned to the man next to me, a tall, muscular 20-something who has yo-yo-ed back and forth around me for the entire race. *Want to race?* I asked.

Before he answered, I was gone, sprinting as hard as I could toward the finish 30 meters away. Five strides before we crossed the line, he caught me. We flung ourselves over the line and high-fived. He walked away, and I went a few more steps before lowering myself into the grass. Black spots fizzed at the edges of my vision. I felt a bit like throwing up. And yet all I could think was how happy I was to be there. I was on the far side of a thing I once thought impossible, alive and sore and wondering what was next.