

# THE COMRADES MARATHON AND POLITICS – A LONG AND WINDING ROAD

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Comrades Marathon is for many the pinnacle of their careers as road runners. Annually, for the past few decades, more than 15 000 runners have entered the gruelling 88 kilometre ultramarathon event between Pietermaritzburg and Durban.

Ironically only a small percentage of the 15 000 runners actually compete to win. A glance at the results over the years shows that a mere handful of the runners enjoyed the honour of winning the Comrades Marathon while a further small group actually were recipients of silver medals. The reality is that almost 90 percent of the field competes with the sole aim of completing the race within the designated cutoff times. In the words of Mick Winn, former chairman of the Comrades Marathon Association, the majority of these runners compete for the pride and satisfaction that lie in finishing the race and not to win (Alexander 1985:9).

The Comrades Marathon is without doubt the premier road race in South Africa. The subsequent question is what are the underlying reasons that make the Comrades Marathon different from other road races in South Africa? Is there something inherent to the Comrades Marathon that gives it something special and elevates it above other local sports events or road races?

There may be various reasons for the Comrades Marathon's popularity, but ultimately the answer lies in the severity of the challenge, which sets the race apart from its counterparts. Secondly, the history of the race with its colourful tapestry of rich tradition which stretches over almost a hundred years has much to do with its status. For many, the Comrades Marathon has become a metaphor for life, reflecting the perpetual challenges and adversities that confront human beings.

The race from Pietermaritzburg to Durban<sup>2</sup> is an arduous journey of over 88 kilometres that wind over endless hills that the runner must conquer inside the given cutoff time. Therefore the runner has to overcome not only the distance, but also any of his or her own physical and mental weaknesses. It is a race that tests the runner to the extreme.

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<sup>2</sup> The starting point alternates between Durban and Pietermaritzburg. The race from Pietermaritzburg to Durban is called the down race and from Durban to Pietermaritzburg the up race.

The Comrades Marathon is an open race and attracts runners from every conceivable walk of life, political persuasion and race. It attracts runners with varying abilities, levels of fitness and body size. Everyone is welcome and in the end the ultimate aim is to be able to say “I made it!”

It is hardly surprising that the Comrades Marathon is somewhat of a metaphor for the struggles and challenges experienced in everyday life. Since its inception in 1921, the Comrades Marathon has been like a sponge which absorbed and reflected the political strife, racial controversies and social class differences that are so endemic to the country.

However, importantly the Comrades Marathon has also in its unique way contributed to healing and uniting a cross-section of society. There may be political turmoil, but on race day everything seems to be forgotten and this great leveller unites the competitors in one gigantic struggle in the true spirit of *ubuntu*.

The spirit of the Comrades Marathon is not dissimilar to that of the Olympics as once expressed by Avery Brundage, former President of the International Olympic Committee: “What social, racial, religious or political differences of any kind may existed. . . were soon forgotten. . . and sportsmen from all over the world, with different ideas, assorted viewpoints and various manners of living, mingled on the field and off with the outmost friendliness, transported by an overflowing Olympic spirit” (Walters 2006:24).

## **2. PURPOSE OF THE ARTICLE**

The general tendency in social sciences is to disregard or to underestimate sport as a human activity. The result is that sport as an object worthy of serious attention or scientific studies, is neglected at most universities in South Africa. However, as will be indicated below, sport is intrinsically guided and underpinned by the same political and power relationships which manifest in other forms of human organisation.

For example, sport’s intrinsic political value and its ability to penetrate and influence various levels of society must never be underestimated. Former President Nelson Mandela understood the value of sport when he declared that sport is a mechanism which speaks a more powerful language than politicians (Interview, Springbok Saga, Supersport, 22 June 2008).

As Houlihan (2008:34) explains, there is a perception that the study of politics should be confined to a limited range of institutions and forums such as parliaments, cabinets, ministries and courts. However, although these institutions are indeed powerful, the study of politics also has a more subtle dimension. Power and the power relationships of non-state actors, such as the media, commercial sponsors of sport and ordinary sports people should not be underestimated.

The Comrades Marathon is a good illustration of the interaction between sport and politics. Since the inception of this unique race, it has reflected the political struggles and stresses, and the power relationships in this country. For instance, for decades the South African government tried to get the organisers of the race to enforce unfair racial policies. This article will attempt to illustrate how the Comrades Marathon managed to deal with these pressures. Furthermore, the Comrades Marathon developed as a catalyst for the incremental transformation of society through the decades.

The primary reason for this phenomenon is that the race itself offers the average runner the chance to compete and to express him or herself, notwithstanding race or colour. The broad field in the Comrades Marathon was, and is, a cross-section of the whole South African society. By simply taking part, the runner illustrates that, “yes unfair (racial) discrimination does exist in the broader society, but on ground level we can deal with it and also transform this into something better”.

The focus of the article will firstly be on the power relationships that are integral to sport. Regulatory power relationships between government and sports administrators and within sports structures have always been a part of sport, and there has always been an underlying tension between politics and power relationships.

This uneasy relationship between sport and politics will therefore be a common theme throughout the discussion of the Comrades Marathon. The second part of the article will illustrate how the Comrades Marathon, in its own unique way, dealt with this and sometimes unwillingly had to become the vehicle which society used to express its opposition to the apartheid government.

### **3. SPORT AND POLITICS: UNEASY BEDMATES**

Play, and its more structured brother sport, is fundamentally part of human existence and what it means to be human. Play and sport allow us “to explore our common roots and sensibilities wherever we live, whatever the cultures from which we draw sustenance, whatever faiths we revere” (*Time Magazine*, 7 June 2008: 38).

Play and sport are universal and are exercised with all their underlying tensions in all corners of the globe. Sport binds people together with its universal appeal and structure. The International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) has more affiliated federations than the United Nations (200 national athletic federations in fact), which link almost 90 percent of the world’s countries.

The former prime minister of the United Kingdom, Mr Tony Blair, wrote about the intrinsic value and power of sport. Blair described sport as something that can change the world, something to inspire people, something with the power to unite people in a way that nothing else can. Sport brings people together; the self-worth

and self-belief that it teaches are values that can last a lifetime (*Time Magazine*, 7 June 2008:116).

However, as suggested above, sport can also have another more sinister dimension. Under the surface of sport, politics and power lurk, articulated in a network of power relationships. Power relationships between central government and sporting bodies and within sporting bodies are integral parts of its structure, organisation and processes. In the end, this is what distinguishes sport from play as a human activity.

In the Gramscian notion of hegemony the ideological and cultural domination of one class over another is achieved by engineering consensus through controlling cultural forms and major institutions (Jarvie 2006:29). In this manner the South African apartheid regime controlled all cultural forms, including sport, for decades.

According to Bertrand Russell power is a core concept of the social sciences. Sport is intrinsically part of political sociology and will therefore be an integral part of this hegemony. Sport is one cultural form in which these agency/power dynamics can be studied because, as Sugden and Tomlinson (2002:9) explain, power relationships are inherently social relationships.

Hargreaves (1986:3) explains that when the term “power” is used, it actually refers to a relationship between classes and different agents. The outcome of the relationship is determined by the agent’s access to relevant resources and the use of appropriate strategies in the struggle with other agents. (In South Africa, the apartheid government was the agent that controlled the political processes and that held a dominant position because of its access to and control of the relevant resources.)

In South Africa’s political development, culture emerged as a prominent area of conflict and contestation between the dominant (white) classes and the subordinate (black) classes. In the underlying power relationship rigorous control and suppression over the means of production denied the non-white population the political and economic resources required for a viable counter-hegemonic strategy (Keech 2002:171).

Consequently, sport was also strongly subjected to the laws of Apartheid and affected by the impact of legislative and discriminatory policies. As Keech (2002:167) explains, the (white) authorities progressively used sport as a tool to maintain their political ascendancy.

The manipulation of rugby is a perfect example that illustrates how government used sport to maintain political ascendancy. Griffiths (2006:126-127) explains that the manifestation of Afrikaner nationalism through the Afrikaner Broederbond in sport was almost complete during the era before 1994. The Broederbond, founded in 1918, was a secretive Afrikaner organisation established to sustain Afrikaner culture and hegemony in society by ensuring that members of the organisation were put in positions of influence all across South Africa – especially after 1948. Of the

eight men who led South Africa on the rugby field between 1956 and 1965, only two were not members of the Broederbond. These two “outsiders” also only captained the team for a mere three test matches between them (Griffiths 2006:127). For many years the control of rugby was in the hands of Afrikaner nationalists.

The question was how to counteract this (political) dominance in sport? In South Africa sport was always an integral component of the social formation which challenged the apartheid government’s hegemony.

It is hardly surprising that the opponents of the institutionalised hegemony of racial sport policies realised the need for a plurality of forces and strategies to challenge government oppression (Keech 2002: 167). Sport was an effective way to oppose political policies at a sublevel, as the discussion of the history of the Comrades Marathon will hopefully illustrate.

In a way, the South African government was swimming against the tide in its efforts to use sport to fragment society into separate racial entities. For decades government used its power relationship to exploit sport to strengthen its apartheid policies. Sport was used as an instrument, not to unite and to build a nation, but to divide and to establish a divided South Africa. As a result, the non-racial sport movements and like-minded individuals became politically charged with the idea of establishing principles of unity and equity through sport in South Africa (Keech 2002: 285). In this regard the Comrades Marathon played an important role.

#### **4. THE COMRADES MARATHON – A RACE THROUGH TIME**

Since its inception, the fate of the Comrades Marathon was interwoven with the political and societal turmoil and realities associated with the apartheid policies of government. The race was therefore part and parcel of the overall unfolding of power relationships, tensions and realities of Apartheid. Trapped in the reality, the race could never entirely escape this broader context.

However, the Comrades Marathon in its own unique way also reflected and absorbed political tensions. In addition, and most importantly, the Comrades Marathon gradually played a small but important role in transforming society in a more positive way.

The Comrades Marathon’s uniqueness lies in its fabric, ethos and reputation as a great leveller of humanity. This is possible because of the human component of the race which has shaped, engineered, organised and run it. Its runners come from every walk of life. There are cabinet ministers, lawyers, teachers, ministers, trade union leaders, blue collar workers and the unemployed. In the race they are equally driven by the desire to finish and conquer the race and not by what divides them racially. This is why the Comrades Marathon is often referred to as the true human race. All the participants are equal in their desires.

During its formative years, the Comrades Marathon was predominantly supported by Natalians. However, it later became a true national event which drew competitors from all corners of South Africa and also from beyond its borders.

#### **4.1 The 1920s: the first races**

The first Comrades Marathon was held on Thursday, 24 May 1921, when 34 entrants lined up outside the Pietermaritzburg Town Hall for the start. None of the competitors realised then that these humble beginnings was the start of what would become an institution and an epic event.

The first big name in the Comrades Marathon was the legend Arthur Newton, winner of five of the races during the 1920s. Newton was also the first person to use the Comrades as a platform to protest against the policies of the South African government. Newton experienced trouble with squatters on his farm, because the area had been declared “black” as part of the government’s policy of segregation. The subsequent friction with the black community prompted Newton to run the race with the hope that by winning the race he would have a platform to bring his case to the attention of the broader public. Some authors such as Berry even argued that Newton ran the marathon with the express objective “to achieve sufficient publicity to embarrass the South African government” (Noakes 1992:129).

Arthur Newton was the first to realise the impact and prestige of the event and to use athletics in the power struggle which is such a substantive ingredient of politics.

In the 1920s, the first woman also entered the Comrades Marathon. The lady in question, Frances Howard, was a typist in the Durban Branch of ABC Bank. Needless to say her invitation was officially refused (Cottrell 1998: 47). This was in line with the prevalent sentiment in world athletics that it was unhealthy and unwise for women to compete in feats of endurance, because women would “become old too soon” (Wallechinsky 1984:132). However, Howard was undisturbed by this form of discrimination against women and finished 28th in a creditable time of 11 hours and 35 minutes. As an unofficial entrant she did not receive the coveted Comrades medal. However, her fellow runners and spectators held a shilling collection and presented her with a prize of a silver tea service and rose bowl (Cottrell 1998:47).

#### **4.2 The 1940s: a slight bump in the road**

It was evident that international tensions caused by the World War II (1939-1945) would also have an impact on the Comrades Marathon. The 1940 race went ahead albeit with a reduced field, but the curtain came down on the race from 1941 to 1945 as the war dominated all social activities on the globe (Cottrell 1998:63).

The 1947 race was held on 24 May, Empire Day, then a public holiday. The royal family was visiting South Africa at the time, and as a result, the 1947 Comrades

medals bore the additional inscription “royal visit” (Alexander 1985:127). The positive sentiments of the organisers towards the Empire were clearly evident.

### **4.3 The 1950s: The end of an era**

South Africa’s efforts to end its subservience to the British Empire/Commonwealth became evident when Empire Day, the traditional Comrades’ race day, was abolished as a public holiday. This step ended the long tradition in Comrades history to hold the race on Empire Day. The 1951 race was therefore the last to be run on Empire Day, Thursday 24 May (Alexander 1985:134).

The abolition of Empire Day and the fact that 24 May was no longer a public holiday left the organisers with a dilemma. However, loyalty and tradition prompted the decision to stage the 1952 race on the Queen’s birthday on Monday, 14 July 1952 (Alexander 1985:137).

### **4.4 The 1960s and the era of the “unofficial black runner(s)”**

The 1960s increasingly reflected the political changes and growing political awareness in South Africa. The Comrades was now run on Wednesday, 31 May 1961, Republic Day, which was declared a public holiday to commemorate the new constitutional status of the Republic of South Africa (Alexander 1985: 167).

The 1960s brought another dimension to the race, namely that of the unofficial black runner. Black athletes were banned from taking part in the Comrades Marathon by virtue of a complex set of laws which excluded them from taking part in any “mixed sport” in South Africa. The former Minister of the Interior (with sport as part of his department) Jan de Klerk, set out the sports policy thus: “South African custom is that within the boundaries of the Republic, Whites and non-Whites exercise their sport separately and this must be adhered to” (Allison 1986:120).

However, the reality was different. On the ground, civil society preferred to subscribe to the underlying values which permeated the spirit of this unique race. The Comrades Marathon was already strengthening the important values of togetherness and nation-building, which underlie this great leveller. If not publicly welcomed, the unofficial non-white athletes were not discouraged either. Undoubtedly the efforts of the unofficial black runners were respected and appreciated by their fellow white runners.

During the 1961 race, the first of these unofficial runners was John Mkwanyana. He finished strongly in 8 hours and 15 minutes, and while negotiating the last few metres and crossing the finishing line he received a rousing applause from the spectators at the pavilion. His time would have placed him 31st out of a total of 98 athletes who finished the race (Alexander 1985: 167).

A second unofficial runner made his appearance in the race and had a longer relationship with the Comrades Marathon. Unofficial starter, Sam Draai, made a

good debut to what later developed into an impressive Comrades legacy (Alexander 1985:177).

During the 1962 Comrades Marathon, an international flavour was added to the race when four athletes of the Runners Club of England entered the race. At that stage, international pressure was slowly building up to isolate South Africa from international events. A South African team was picked to challenge the British runners. To the surprise of many, the inexperienced England team went ahead to win the team race and to add insult to injury, John Smith, as a mere novice, claimed victory and narrowly missed the record (Cottrell 1998:74).

During 1969, two unofficial black athletes were noticed and also a female runner, Mrs Maureen Holland, who finished the race in 10 hours and 10 minutes and 38 seconds. Although the officials frowned on unofficial participants, especially white male runners, the organisers seemed to condone black athletes and women precisely because they were not allowed to enter (Alexander 1985: 205).

#### **4.5 The 1970s: the storm clouds gather**

Strictly speaking, the unofficial participation of black runners in the Comrades Marathon was contrary to official government policies. However, ultramarathon running falls outside the ambit of the Olympic Games and the popularity of the Comrades was predominately domestic. The way the organisers dealt with black participation was by staying mute, which did not solve the problematic aspects of the race. Black participation, which was a mere trickle in the 1960s, increased slowly and in the process this increased participation was slowly placing pressure on the organisers. They were caught between a rock and a hard place - they officially had to adhere to national legislation but were not prepared to ban unofficial black runners.

At the same time pressure mounted from fellow white athletes to integrate the race and to allow blacks and women to compete in an official capacity. The number of black athletes and women had increased over the previous few years but still no recognition was given to them. At the finish they had to leave the stadium empty handed and through another exit. Many official white runners gladly gave up their medals to them to emphasise the point.

The call to allow black athletes official status reached fever pitch in the mid-seventies because of the existing logistical problems. The organisers could house the black athletes, but under the law had to apply for a so-called international status. If approved by the Minister of Sport, the organisers were then faced with the mammoth task of having to provide separate amenities such as change rooms and refreshment areas. Under the then existing apartheid laws blacks and whites were prohibited from sharing these facilities (Cottrell 1998:87).

Adding to the dissenting voices was former legend and winner Hardy Ballington. He made the following suggestion: "There is no doubt that if the Comrades was

thrown open to all races it would end in complete chaos. The hundreds of non-whites who would enter the race would make it impossible to control” (Alexander 1985:243).

By 1974, the pressure on the organising club, Collegian Harriers, was mounting. The club was caught in the crossfire. On the one hand, it was impossible to meet the government’s requirement of separate amenities. On the other hand, strong pressure groups were demanding that the race should be integrated. In the end, the club decided to maintain the unofficial status of the black runners and not apply for international status (Cottrell 1998:87).

However, everybody realised that this was a temporary solution and that changes had to be effected. In athletics, political changes were already in progress with a palace revolution in the South African Amateur Association which replaced the old guard with more progressive administrators (Le Roux 1984:41).

Finally, the organisers (Collegian Harriers - Pietermaritzburg) applied for international multiracial status. Although this was an *ad hoc* status for the 1975 race, it alleviated the problem in the short term. It also opened the door further and was clearly a step in the right direction.

Sadly, under the sports policy the black athletes needed to be identified according to ethnic affiliation. There were not enough Zulu tags and as a result they unhappily had to display Xhosa tags. The transformation was definitely not a smooth one (Alexander 1985:265).

Once the door was opened to the official participation of the black runners, the trickle became a small stream of ever-increasing numbers. During the 1977 race, an ever stronger contingent of black and Coloured runners entered, the numbers jumping to 65 black, 20 Coloured and five Asian runners.

During the 1978 race, racial tensions were hardly noticeable, mainly because of the positive attitude of the runners. The standard of the black runners was also improving. For the first time black runners showed up at the front, albeit temporarily. The honour went to Piet Mokala from the Reef and Themba Malinga of Durban (Alexander 1985:313).

It seems that the racial controversy that had dogged the race for so long had at least subsided in the context of the values to which the Comrades ascribed. The standard of the local black athletes was improving and added to the excitement of the race. The first real break through of black athletes happened in the 1979 race when Hoseah Tjale, a 22-year old athlete of the Rand Athletic Club, finished twenty-first with an impressive six hours, 21 minutes and 35 seconds. A whole group of black runners also moved into the silver medal position spearheaded by Zwelitsha Gone who finished 100<sup>th</sup> and collected his fifth silver medal (Alexander 1985:265).

Looking back at the 1970s, it is evident that in sport the Comrades Marathon was at the foreground of political events. In spite of the fact that the race was marred

by controversy and easy solutions were not always at hand, the organisers seemed to be able to cope.

Sports administrators had to deal with an almost impossible and illogical sports policy while trying to make organisational sense with the ever-increasing demand of black runners to compete on equal and equitable terms with their fellow South Africans. Although some of the decisions were *ad hoc* and unfair they all contributed to chipping away at racial barriers. Lastly, the impact of the great leveller of all the sport codes, the Comrades Marathon, smoothed out the social differences.<sup>3</sup>

#### **4.6 The 1980s: the decade of the black armband**

During the 1980s, the world turned its back on the South African government's racial policies. On the sporting front, especially in athletics, South Africa was totally isolated, and more and more of the top South African road runners turned to the Comrades Marathon as the door to international participation was firmly shut.

In 1981, the controversy that had dogged the Comrades Marathon for decades reached a new zenith. Government was celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the Republic and announced that the Comrades Marathon would be used to celebrate this event (Cameron-Dow 2001:3). For many runners this step by government was a provocative exploitation of an institution that should have been left outside of political opportunism.

One of the top runners, Bruce Fordyce, was part of a group who decided to wear black armbands to demonstrate their resistance to government intrusion. A heated debate preceded the race, which was as unpleasant as it was unwanted for the organisers and the athletes taking part. After the race had finally started, the rights and wrongs of the prerace debate faded, but the division between fellow runners tore at the heart of this unifying event (Cameron-Dow 2001:3). When Mkize, the early leader, passed the local population he was greeted with black power salutes and cries of "Usuthu" and "Amandla" (Cottrell 1998:101). For his part Fordyce was pelted with tomatoes by a fellow runner and also warned by a friend that the government's secret service were going to attempt to contaminate his drinks with a substance to make him drowsy (Cameron-Dow 2001:3).

Fortunately the Comrades Marathon was bigger than opportunist politics from both sides and the race survived as before.

During the mid-1980s, it became evident that the ultradistance black runners were slowly maturing and would be a force to be reckoned with in future. During the 1988 race, a 31-year-old Sasolburg labourer, Sam Tshabalala, showed the pluck of a true Comrades champion by winning the event in 5 hours, 35 minutes and 51

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<sup>3</sup> It should be remembered that this integration and partial normalisation of athletics occurred 30 years before political transformation normalised South African society.

seconds. Although the time was slow, Tshabalala's name was engraved in Comrades history as the first black man to have won the race (Cottrell 1998:101). Tshabala was followed by the popular Willy Mtolo, in second place. It seems that the days of white dominance of the race were over.

#### **4.7 The 1990s: an era of political normalisation**

The 1990s brought a sense of political normality to South Africa and, as a result, also to the Comrades Marathon. Nelson Mandela was released from prison and the country experienced its first democratic election.

This opened the door for international participation and the American marathon great, Alberto Salazar, won the 1994 race in grand style building on the German Charley Doll's great victory the previous year.

#### **4.8 The first decade of the new millennium (2000-2008): the internationalisation of the event**

This last decade has reflected the dominance of international winners especially from Russia and other former Eastern Bloc countries. On the local front black runners continue to fill the ranks of the top ten.

Devoid of any political controversy for a couple of years, the feeling was that the Comrades Marathon was at last sailing in calmer waters. However, the abolishment of 31 May as a public holiday meant that the organisers had to look at the closest date available to stage the race. The decision fell on 16 June, Youth Day, which commemorates the sacrifices made by the youth during the Soweto Uprising.

Initially moving the race from 31 May to 16 June happened without incident, but the increasing popularity of the race and the fact that it was being broadcast live on national television created tension, especially in the ANC Youth League. There was criticism from this quarter that it was not appropriate or sensitive to hold a sporting event on this most significant and sanctified public holiday (<http://www.time-to-run.co.za/news/2006/may-june/290606.htm>) (date accessed 11 November 2008).

So, it seemed that once again the Comrades Marathon was being unfairly manipulated by political agendas. The race was then moved to the Sunday preceding Youth Day. This step was also insensitive, because there were those who had religious objections to staging a race on a Sunday. Ironically the date will have to change again to accommodate the FIFA Soccer World Cup due to be staged in 2010. As a result, the 2009 race was held on 24 May; in a strange quirk of fate the race is back where it started – on Empire Day. The 2010 race will be staged on 30 May, just one day before the former Republic Day. It seems that the full circle has at last been made.

## 5. CONCLUSION

What makes the Comrades Marathon different enough from any other sporting event to have warranted a roadmap of its development in this article? The answer to this question is a simple one; the reason is that the Comrades Marathon is distinctively different from any other high profile sporting event staged in South Africa. The Comrades Marathon is not a race solely for elite runners, it is a race for everybody. No one is chosen for the race, the Comrades Marathon is open to general entries. The result is that the entry pool encapsulates a cross-section of society, with all its prevailing tensions, beliefs and values. No other event with a similar high profile is able to do this.

The Comrades Marathon is indeed a long and winding race up and down countless challenging hills. On another level it is a microcosm and a reflection of the prevalent political situation in South Africa. In the same way that the exhausted runner slowly approaches the finishing line inside the cutoff time, the race itself has provided answers within the challenging context of politics. This is what made the race special. Whatever the level of political interference, the race and its people will prevail for many decades to come.

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