

Comrades at last

Comrades Marathon, South Africa, 16 June 2001

MEN:

1	Andrew KEHELE	RSA	5:25:51
2	Leonid SHVETSOV	RUS	5:26:28
3	Vladimir KOTOV	BLR	5:27:21
4	Alexey VOLGIN	RUS	5:27:40
5	Fusi NHLAPO	RSA	5:30:38
6	Grigory MURZIN	RUS	5:32:59
7	Dmitry GRISHIN	RUS	5:36:04
8	Sarel ACKERMANN	RSA	5:36:50
9	Walter NKOSI	RSA	5:38:15
10	Michael MPOTOANE	RSA	5:38:43

June 16, Youth Day, is a special day in South Africa. It commemorates the day in 1976 on which the black youth of Soweto lost lives protesting against the education policies of the then apartheid government.

On the same day another special and unique event takes place in Kwazulu-Natal: the Comrades Marathon - the 'mother' of all ultras.

The undulating point to point route between Durban and Pietermaritzburg alternates direction each year, and the distance of 89kms challenges the most dedicated of runners to make it to the finish within the 11 hour cut-off time.

Few events on the South African sporting calendar attract as much interest as the Comrades Marathon. Year after year it unites friends, family and the South African public, irrespective of their diverse cultural backgrounds, from the unemployed to the company executive.

If there is one great leveller in South African road running, then it is Comrades. The 11 hours of live television coverage is



Uphill...



...and down dale



The author, **BLANCHE MOILA**, was the first black woman to win national (Springbok) colours for athletics, back in apartheid days. She has won national titles on the road and cross-country. Her personal best times include 4:34 (1500m), 75:00 (half marathon) and 2:41 (marathon).

She beat Zola Budd to the title of South African Sportswoman of the Year in 1985, and earlier this year received the State President's award for services to athletics and community service among the poor. She is a columnist for the monthly magazine "Running Free".



watched by almost the entire population of the country, some of whom take up the challenge the following year aspiring to be one of the thousands of Comrades heroes.

The race was first run in 1921 in memory of the soldiers that died in the First World War. Formerly held on National Day, 31 May, the date lost significance with the dismantling of apartheid.

Black runners had been allowed to participate from 1975, and with a deft twist the new date was determined to commemorate the youth that lost their lives protesting against the old regime.

Once Springbok colours became available for all, people from all races were brought together in striving towards the same goal: to represent their country.

In a mass race like Comrades, the aspirations of most runners may be different but they come together in a common struggle. Such a spirit attracts increasing numbers: this year there were over 15000 entries.

The number of female participants has also increased with a record 4000 last year in the millennium race, when the cut off time was extended to a once-off 12 hours.

The Comrades Marathon Association each year nominates four charity organisations as beneficiaries. This year was the turn of The Cancer Associations of Pietermaritzburg and Durban, South African Nature Conservation and The Sports Trust of South Africa.

Money was also raised through the sale of charity beads. Everyone, runners and non-runners alike, were invited to buy a coloured bead which represented a different charity organisation, and to wear it on the day. The beads were made by local communities, providing some income to the unemployed in the area.

There is a culture in South African running: if you have not run the Comrades Marathon, then you are not a runner. I regarded myself as an athlete, participating in distances from 10kms to the marathon.

I never had any intention of running this gruelling race over such an unnatural distance. But in Kwazulu-Natal, through which the race is run, Comrades is all. As a nursing sister in local communities, and a runner, I found myself constantly badgered to take up the challenge.

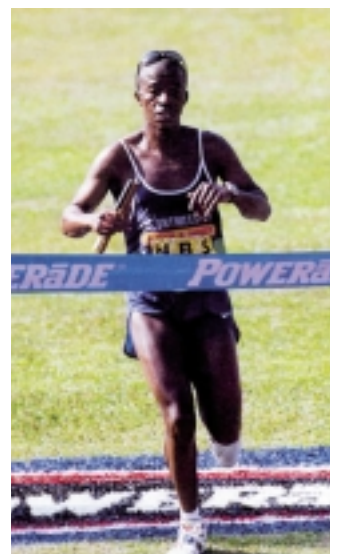
I gave in, and in 2000 I ran for charity - but also for myself. It is

probably the best thing I have ever done in my life. Nothing could have prepared me for the overwhelming feeling of anticipation and excitement as I stood on the start line. The spirit and camaraderie of the race, and the ecstasy of crossing the finish line was like nothing I had experienced before.

More and more international runners are taking part in this 'True Test of the Human Spirit'. This year in particular, all South Africans were given a reason to celebrate with Andrew Kelehe's win over a competitive international field.

Andrew became only the second black runner after Sam Tshabalala to win this prestigious race. The former top ten finisher surpassed even his own expectations and came within a minute of breaking the course record of Comrades great, Bruce Fordyce, nine times winner of the race.

I would like even more South Africans to run the Comrades Marathon. This is one day each year when all South Africans are united in the spirit of the race. People from all walks of life come together to achieve their goals; for most it is simply to arrive at their final destination - the finish line - before the dreaded sound of a gun shot signals the official end of the race.



Andrew Kelehe's home run

WOMEN:

1	Elvira KOLPAKOVA	RUS	6:13:53
2	Deb MATTHEUS	USA	6:23:04
3	Marina BYCHKOVA	RUS	6:24:20
4	Maria BAK	GER	6:25:48
5	Maria VENANCIO	BRA	6:39:03
6	Carol MERCER	RSA	6:40:59
7	Grace DE OLIVEIRA	RSA	6:41:04
8	Renee SCOTT	RSA	6:54:57
9	Valentina SHATYAYEVA	RUS	6:57:05
10	Madeleen OTTO	RSA	7:01:14

A Mafiking victory

From Riel Haumann

Andrew Kehele, a 36-year old policeman from Mafiking, became the first South African to win Comrades since 1997 by recording the second fastest ever 'down' run from Pietermartizburg to Durban.

Kehele was greeted by scenes of great joy in the final kilometres as he broke the domination foreign runners had established over the race.

Among the women, Russia's Elvira Kolpakova scored an upset victory over the German favourite, Maria Bak.

Some cautious manoeuvring early on in the men's race led to frequent changes of the lead, but no-one among the favourites made any decisive move until Fusi Nhlapo threw in a 3-minute kilometre 3:43 into the race.

Leonid Shvetsov had been keeping a wary eye on the changing lead, and responded to the move. With Kehele alongside him, he moved past previous leader Michael Mpotoane.

Last year's winner Vladimir Kotov, following his customary race schedule, languished some distance behind. Kotov started to

come alive 20 minutes later, but it proved too late.

With 17km to go, up the winding, tree-lined road of the last big climb, Shvetsov hit the front.

Kehele, hardly up to the powerful Russian's shoulder, was right alongside – and soon went clear with kilometres of 3:18 and 3:16. Shvetsev had no reply, and Kotov closed the gap no further.

The last few bone-jarring kilometres into Durban perhaps told hardest on Willie Mtolo, runner-up 12 long years ago, who had shadowed Kotov for most of the race.

Everyone slowed: Kehele took 11:30 for the final three



Helping hands along the way

kilometres but stayed 37 seconds clear of Shvetsov. A record four runners broke 5:30. 11,079 runners finished within the 11-hour limit.