

The 2019 Comrades Marathon

Article and photos
by VG Naidoo

The “up” run

The 94th Comrades Marathon took place on 9 June 2019 with the theme “SIZONQOBA”: together we triumph. The 86.83 km ultra-marathon, dubbed as the “ultimate human race” started at the Durban City Hall and finished at the Scottsville racecourse in Pietermaritzburg.

Interesting statistics

This year’s approximately 25 000 entries surpassed all previous years’ entries including the 2000 millennium year. The entries were filled within six days of the closing date in November 2019! On race day, approximately 21 625 runners were qualified to hit the road whilst the balance of the entries either did not qualify or withdrew for other reasons.

The runners included 6166 novices which is a good sign for this great event. The overall entries comprised 15 855 South African men; 1022 international men; 3982 South African women and 278 international women with Britain totalling 381 entries. The rest of Africa was represented by 411 male and 97 female runners - of whom 189 runners were Zimbabwean. Gauteng boasted with 11 265 runners, followed by 4823 runners from KwaZulu-Natal and 2436 from the Western Cape.

The oldest male runner was 80 years old and the oldest woman 70 years, whilst the youngest runners were 20 years old. The 35-39 years age category attracted 5389

runners. Interestingly, 420 men and 85 women were vying for their green numbers, participating in their tenth Comrades. The top club team was Vitality CG with 982 runners; the most common running shoes worn by 9056 runners was brand Asics while 119 runners shared the Dlamini surname.

Three hospitals with 50 doctors and interns and 20 nurses were available, along with a three-bed fully equipped ICU-type resuscitation area, a critical care emergency facility at the finish line area and a mini laboratory.

One thousand marshals and 200 community marshals assisted law enforcers. The 40 refreshments stations were staffed by 4000 volunteers from sponsors and service providers. Transport on race day included 40 15-seater buses; four 35-seater and 28 60-seater Bailer buses to transport athletes who did not make the cut-offs or were unable to continue with their race.

Events leading up to race day

The Comrades Expo which was held at the Durban Exhibition Centre ran for three days prior to race day and was well-equipped with all things Comrades, including memorabilia. Kyle Govender and his IT team were responsible for the registration process. This team had to ensure that the runners were satisfied when they received their entries as any discrepancy could declare a runner disqualified.

As usual I visited the media centre at the exhibition centre, chatted with Delaine Cools, the Communication Manager and her staff and collected my media accreditation. The race director’s media briefing was held on the Thursday while the pro-elite athletes’ media briefing was held on the Friday. Various coaches with their top runners attended this briefing, and they responded with enthusiasm and confidence. Gift Kelehe, the 2015 up runner champion and a former policeman was one of the familiar faces.

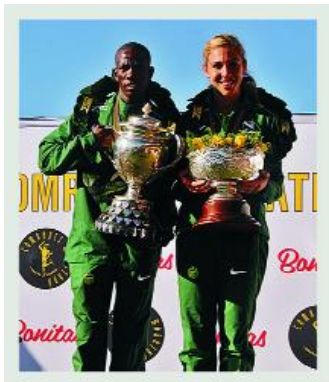
I then made my way to the SAPS’ Striders customary pre-Comrades pasta lunch where as a past chairman and race organiser I was tasked to be the programme director. Approximately 70 runners attended as well as the club president Maj-Gen (ret) M C Ngcobo and Charles Naidoo of Charles Electrical. Previous Comrades and 2019 Two Oceans winner, Bong’musa Mthembu acted as motivational speaker. He provided some good tips from which the novices definitely benefited. The club chairman, Lt-Col Mchunu handed a token of appreciation to Bong’musa and his coach Mabhida.

Race day

An alarm clock is a must for all involved with this ultra-marathon event as every minute counts for officials and runners alike to ensure a successful event. The novice runners were perhaps more anxious than the

experienced and seasoned ones, as I recall being in a similar situation 21 years ago. Like previous years, my dear wife Sarah ensured that I was awake on time as I also had to be at the starting line ahead of the starter’s gun. My early transport arrangements paid off as I was privileged to be transported to the start by a runner residing in the Bluff area not far from me. Greig Tanner and his wife Collette chatted about the race en route while I wished him all the best as he attempted his tenth Comrades. Collette dropped us at the City Hall where he made his way to the starting line, and she proceeded to her spectator spot while I made my way to the media truck. The area was buzzing with runners from all directions, but security officers and fences ensured that only runners were permitted to their respective seeding spots.

One media truck was to follow the women lead runners, while the other was to follow the male lead runners - I opted for this latter truck along with 16 other media representatives. At 05:15 we departed towards Pinetown to await the first runners after the 05:30 start. The captain of our truck decided that Fields Hill, approximately 21 km from the start was the ideal “stand-off” point, along with the spectators who awaited the runners. Seventy-five minutes into the race we saw flashing blue lights signifying the lead runner, whom we did not recognise but from past experience we knew it was of no significance as he would fade away. We stopped at key points to capture photos of the top male runners since we did not have sight of the lead women runners, but learnt through communication who they were. We passed Hillcrest with



The winners: Edward Mothiba and Gerda Steyn, who set a new "up run" record of 5:58:53



Nkosinathi Mdlala of SAPS Striders Athletics Club KZN completed his 6th Comrades in a time of 9:40



Marelize Stokhof running in the colours of Pretoria Police Marathon Club, finished her 8th Comrades in a time of 9:50:50



Elizabeth Squires of KZN receives her green number from Bruce Fordyce after completing her 10th Comrades in a time of 10:22:44

55 km to go and two hours into the race, the spectators in this area gained momentum.

At the 36 km to go mark, an elite group of approximately 15 runners ran steadily bunched together. As the group approached, I called out Gift Kelehe's name who raised his head whereafter I gave him a thumbs up which he acknowledged and I encouraged him to push on. I hoped that he would be among the top three as he was a strong up-run runner, showing the same strength as when he won in 2015.

With 29 km to go, Gift was no longer part of the elite group of four and I had to focus on the front runners. At that stage the top three runners were the defending champion Bong'musa Mthembu; Edward Mothibi and Japanese runner Nao Kazami. At Polly Shorts, Mthembu slipped away from Mothibi, but to Mthembu's surprise, Mothibi ultimately overtook him to win the iconic hill. While taking advantage of the lead and running for his life, he widened the gap towards the finish. Mthembu gave his best to reduce the approximately 300 m gap, but it was not easy as Mothibi kept pushing on and preventing Mthembu from

achieving his third straight victory. When we entered Scottsville race-course, the spectators were ecstatic as the announcers gave updates, while the big screen assisted the crowd to monitor the front runner. When Mothibi's face appeared on the screen with a kilometre to go, the spectators went crazy knowing the front runner was a South African. Mothibi strongly crossed the finish line in a time of 5:31:33, extremely excited. He received his congratulatory hugs and handshakes from various dignitaries, posed for the media and headed off to hug his wife and three children. Bong'musa crossed the finish line a mere 25 seconds later in a time of 5:31:58. Despite being disappointed, he continued to hug and congratulate Mothibi in true sporting spirit. Nao Kazami from Japan, the 100 km record holder, finished third in a time of 5:39:16. Unfortunately, Gift was not part of the top ten, missing out on his seventh gold medal.

After approximately 27 minutes, the first woman runner and fellow South African Gerda Steyn (29) running for the Nedbank Athletics Club under the tutelage of Nick Bester crossed the finish line triumphantly in a new record time of 5:58:53. Gerda slashed more than

ten minutes of Russian athlete Elena Nurgalieva's 2006 "up-run" record of 6:09:23. Alexandra Morozova from Russia crossed the line approximately 20 minutes later in a time of 6:17:40 followed by Ireland's Caltriona Jennings in 6:24:12.

After the post-race media interviews, I attended the victory ceremony and past winners' jacket handover. Then it was time to catch up with police runners at the finish line. I got the following responses:

- Capt Elizabeth Squires from SAPS Striders KZN: "I couldn't be a happier person as I completed my tenth Comrades in 10:22:44 and received my green number. It was hard work but I enjoyed it. Thanks to my family and friends for their support."
- W/O Krishna Soogrim from SAPS Striders KZN ran his 20th Comrades and received his double green number finishing in a time of 11:18:46: "I am so excited and waited for this moment. Lots of sacrifice and commitment and thanks to my family, colleagues and club members for their support during the past years."

- Lt-Col Theo Sekete of Limpopo and the Chairman of SAPS National Marathon Association finished in a time of 9:53:16: "I am happy to have completed my 18th Comrades and am looking forward to receiving my double green number in two years' time. It was good to see fellow SAPS runners on the route encouraging one another. I will be back next year."

The presentation of trophies to the top ten SAPS finishers will be done at the SAPS National Half-marathon Championships in September in Bloemfontein.

I made my way to meet Greig and Collette at his club tent, who willingly offered me a ride home. Greig successfully completed his tenth Comrades, earning himself his green number. Congratulations to the CMA for another successful event. My thanks and appreciation go to Delaine Cools for her willingness to update and supply the required information.

Until the 95th edition of the ultimate human race next year, let's show the same unity in fighting the scourge of crime, similarly to the unity and support shown during this event.