

# COMRADES 2022 NO. 8 | THE ULTIMATE HUMAN RACE

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Ultra-running and investing have many parallels, including having a workable strategy, committing to it, and sticking to the plan.

It's been a hiatus of three years of not running an ultra, my last being the 2019 run – it also means one is three years older!

This year, Comrades was pushed out to late August from the usual June run due to Covid-19, so the training mileage in the extremely challenging Cape Town cold winter months was far less than before. Starting on the morning in the cold Pietermaritzburg starting pens, for the first time ever I decided to run with my watch off, which meant I would have to feel the run with my body and synchronise this, to run in harmony within the time limits.

I therefore took it easy for the first 20 kilometres, which stood me in good stead. It has been the first run since Covid-19, over a lengthy period where we all had ample chance to reflect on our priorities in life. It provided a new perspective on the privilege of being able to do so. Similarly, the fantastic crowd support also had a 3-year break, which meant the supporters were very excited, which was evident in the incredible vibe on the road.

One of the lesser-known aspects of ultra-running and “why we do it” (and which some runners like me have substantial guilt about) is that we do it simply “because we can” – when so many others don't have the opportunity to, for whatever reason. Add the natural ageing process (“how long can we still do it?”) and it then becomes “therefore we must do it while we can!”

Considering this background, one of the more emotional moments at Comrades comes shortly after passing the questionably smelling chicken farms of Camperdown, at around the 32-kilometre mark, when passing the Ethembeni School for the disabled in the dry, dusty and desolate industrial-looking area of Cato Ridge.

Feeling a little tired and maybe a little sorry for yourself, you reach the young primary school-aged disabled children lining up, right against us on the road. Cheering us on, on top of their voices, screaming encouragement whilst dancing with the biggest smiles and laughs you have ever seen, one needs to hold back the tears when you see their jubilation – notwithstanding their missing arms, legs and other limbs, which we all take so for granted.

Knowing they will never have the opportunity I have, passing them, it's time to chin up and buckle down to the monster climb that is Inchanga. The legs changed from “heavy” to “aching” as I needed to keep pushing to get to Drummond at halfway, where I would time a one-minute stop to greet my wife, Liesl, supporting me.





Getting to the halfway mark in 5 hours 35 minutes is the slowest I have ever done, but I was feeling good and strong on the coolest Comrades I have run.

The second half of the race is where most of the downhill sections come on the down run, with big sweeps on the national road blocked off for the race. Keeping the pace respectfully easy in negotiating a safe finish, that for me would be a great result. The crowds get fuller at around the 60-kilometre mark going through the leafy suburbs of Kearnsey and Hillcrest. Reaching Kearnsey, I had to ask a spectator where I was, as I had arranged to meet Liesl again at Kloof. Yet to try and make head or tail of the order of the water points, where Pinetown actually is, 8 Comrades later, still remained a large mystery to me, especially considering that each year the race also alternates directions – nowhere in the world, other than Comrades, does this happen!

We kept dropping on the increasing descents that pressurise one's quads and reached Kloof at the 65-kilometre mark, when Liesl called me out from the crowd of runners. Over her shoulder, I saw a couple seated at their camping table. But, there was one open chair – which I promptly decided looked like the perfect place for a 1-minute rest with Liesl! The honour

they felt being able to offer a runner battling through a race of this magnitude this rest stop, which may help him to the finish, was a joy to experience as they encouraged me to keep strong.

I now had around 28 kilometres to the finish with 4 hours to the cut-off, meaning a soft, gentle run of 8.5 minutes per kilometre was needed, although you also know you don't want to use up all the time either in making it too tight. You do want a little bit of time in hand, just in case of cramps – keeping in mind that my training was a tad short, increasing this possibility. Just like financial planning, you want to keep the percentages in your favour on a “risk-adjusted” basis.

It's not unlike financial planning, where the highs and lows of the run play on your mind and increase to mental stamina to stay on course. Much like the emotional ups and downs of an investment strategy, we need to stick to the plan and have the confidence of our previous convictions when embarking on our journey.

After this came the big descent down the 3 kilometres of Fields Hill, and without overdoing it, the opportunity to make up some time where I could not let the mind drift and possibly start walking without realising it. This is where the mind games kick in, and the self-negotiations are at their highest levels.

Pushing down, then came another monster, Cowies Hill, at 75 kilometres. It's time for a well-earned 5-minute walk after a good few hours of shuffling.

Mentally, it's quite tough to try and run 91 kilometres. It's so much easier to break it down into bite-sized chunks and give yourself short-term goals and rewards for shorter spurts of say 3-5 kilometres, and have a matching reward like a good 2-minute walk with something to eat where there's much on offer at the well-stocked water points. This is another metaphor we apply in financial planning, where short-term goals should be part of a long-term retirement plan, making the end goal easier to achieve.

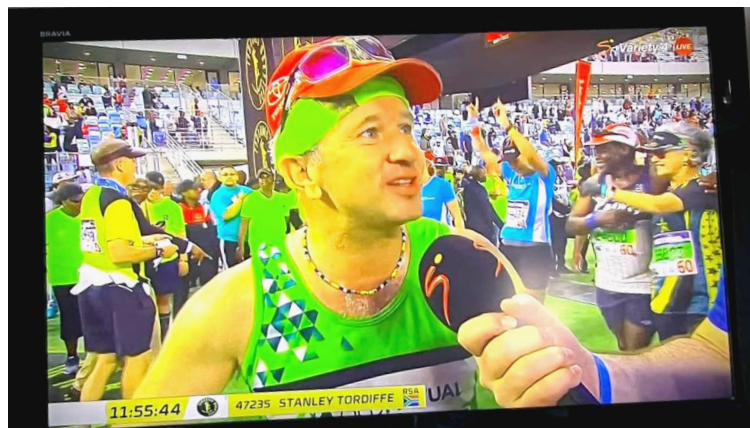
Going over Cowies Hill, it was another few kilometres down until we got to the iconic Tollgate Bridge at the 85-kilometre mark, and I had a full hour to do the last 6 kilometres. Cresting under the bridge, I felt magnificent seeing Durban below, feeling on top of the world. From there, it's a 6-kilometre shuffle down to the finish at the well-lit Moses Mabhida Stadium as the sun started its early Durban sunset. Things could still go wrong. For some, they do, but in my mind, this was where I mentally conquered this Comrades. For the most part, it's now done. The rest was a formality – I needed to keep my shuffle calm and, most importantly, focused.





Coming into the stadium with hundreds of fellow runners and thousands of wildly cheering supporters, I finished my 8th Comrades 8 minutes before the 12-hour cut-off time. My second worst time, but probably my best Comrades run, considering everything.

However, it still wasn't over yet! Seeing the simultaneous joy and sheer relief in my facial expression when crossing the finishing line of this gruelling hilly 91 kilometres, former Springbok rugby prop Toks van der Linde then called me out for a TV interview. Talk about always needing to be prepared! He asked me what makes this race so special. I replied: "No matter how fit you are, how strong you are, it's always gonna test you."



While being an ultra-runner gives me an added understanding needed as a financial planner, on this day, it certainly was more a case of being a financial planner helping me to be a runner in conquering one of the world's most enthralling running experiences. A fantastic day out on the "ultimate human race", as Comrades is known, I was reminded about being true to a realistic personal tailored plan, working it, sticking to it, and then seeing the privilege within this.