

Comrades of a Particular Type

An alternative history of the marathon, 1921–1983

Note: *Completion times for the Comrades Marathon in hours and minutes are given thus: 7h30.*

The Comrades Marathon is run between Durban and Pietermaritzburg, the direction alternating each year — the distance between the two cities being about 90 km., and the difference in altitude 610 m. (2 000 ft.). It is an event capable of moving writers to heights of lyricism. The sports medical specialist, Tim Noakes, writes of ‘poetic running . . . intangible beauty . . . proving that man is beautifully made and indeed the wonder of the universe’.¹ Even prosaic accounts dwell on the physical and spiritual dimensions of the race, its status as one of the world’s major ultra-distance events and the comradeship amongst the runners, especially those at the rear. Without a doubt it is a truly people’s event with mass participation: well over ten thousand runners in close communion with many thousands of spectators along the route and at the start and finish. The Comrades Marathon might justifiably claim to have been one of the first sporting events worthy of the new South Africa. Nevertheless this image is not true of the Marathon throughout its history, which has been characterised by a variety of influences including militarism, imperialism, gender discrimination and racism.

From the outset, the Marathon had unusual political dimensions. A.F.H. Newton, one of the race’s great figures and a five times winner (1922–1925 and 1927), took up running at an advanced age (39) to publicise his conflict with the authorities over land compensation for his farm, *Ihluku*, near Harding in southern Natal where he grew cotton and tobacco. As the *Natal Witness* indelicately put it: ‘After farming for over twenty years in Natal he discovers his farm in the middle of a ‘black area’ where hundreds of kafirs are allowed to settle’.² Claiming fair price for the expropriated land and improvements, he was offered only ‘prairie value’. Predictably his athletic prowess (his Zulu name was *Mantabeni* — Master of mountains) failed to impress the local bureaucrats and he left for Bulawayo in 1925.³ He described himself at this time as a ‘penniless tramp’ and, being without the price of a train ticket, is said to have walked for a month to reach Rhodesia.⁴ The imperialist press lamented his loss and used it to demonstrate that South Africa was divesting itself of British leadership which would be inherited by Rhodesia.⁵ Returning to win again in 1927, Newton explained his absence from the prize-giving:

I do not, nor ever did, look for these prizes . . . I learned to run for one thing only, viz., to obtain common justice from the Union Government, and thereby make the position safer for Natal settlers in the future. I kept the 1922 prize as a memento, all the rest I have given away as fast as I got them . . . because they were not what I ran for . . . I value the safety of Englishmen in Natal more, and the fact that I am willing to forego all prizes to obtain this proves my statement to the hilt. I was a Natal citizen for nearly a quarter of a century, and learnt during that time that the country was worthy of cleaner government than she was getting. I then learnt to run with the sole objective of exposing the dishonesty, in order that the people could take steps when they knew what was going on, to command honesty in their officials. When I know you have succeeded I shall no longer be an outcast from your country.⁶

There may be a measure of dissimulation in this statement, with hints in the press of earlier athletic endeavour: at the time of his first Comrades win it was reported that ‘some years ago [he] won a small Marathon from Durban to Greenwood Park’.⁷

Nearly half a century later in 1981, a more overt political demonstration took place. The organisers of the Marathon were inveigled into linking the race with the Republic Festival, which celebrated the 20th anniversary of the National Party’s achievement of its political ideal. The editor of a running magazine argued that ‘the association between the two “just happened” without too much serious thought being given to the possible political implications’.⁸ If this was the case, it showed a deplorable lack of awareness of a highly partisan political act. By way of response, runners with anti-apartheid sympathies, with the University of Cape Town Athletic Club in the van, proposed the wearing of black armbands in protest at the linking of a sports event to the celebrations of a repressive regime. The organisers promptly banned UCT’s entrants arguing that they intended to disrupt the event and incite other runners. They demanded letters from the debarred runners dissociating themselves from their club’s viewpoint but within two days the ludicrous nature of the ban became apparent and it was retracted.⁹

In the event, about two dozen runners wore armbands, a phenomenon which was highlighted by the fact that two of them (Bruce Fordyce, 1st; and Danny Biggs, 5th) were amongst the gold medal winners. Fordyce had a tomato thrown at him at the start in Durban; Biggs was called ‘commie’ and ‘kaffirboetie’; and three Springfield College of Education runners were stopped at Cowie’s Hill and disqualified, at which point a white runner threw a plastic bottle at them. The much vaunted spirit of comradeship seemed not to extend to the right to express peacefully the idea that most South Africans had no reason to celebrate the Republic Festival: insults and foul language were used by some spectators and participants. At the finish in Pietermaritzburg the identities of the armband wearers were recorded, ‘in case we are asked who they are or the numbers involved’, according to an official.¹⁰ Given that some of the most inquisitive people of the era were the security police, this struck a somewhat sinister note. ‘We sincerely hope’, thundered the *Natal Witness*, ‘that the organisers will think twice in future before allowing the Comrades to be associated again with what many people regard as a political cause’.¹¹

Some of the contrary reactions are extremely revealing about the intolerance and authoritarianism of the age for which public events like the Comrades Marathon provided a thin veneer of normality. Frank Martin, leader of the

Natal Provincial Council, attacked black armbands as 'jingoism' and 'disgusting'.¹² Letters which appeared in the athletics press were even further removed from the supposed spirit of the Marathon. One accused armband runners of breaking regulations by 'advertising'. Another, who wisely remained anonymous, suggested that 'Maybe someone would have put them out of their misery and shot the lot of them' and that their medals should be forfeit. A third attacked Bruce Fordyce for his 'reprehensible conduct', 'abuse of the Comrades' and his 'utterly unpatriotic manner'.¹³ Contributions supportive of the armband runners were by contrast well argued and moderate.

Officialdom's attitude to politics and sport, whether it emanated from the state or the various athletics bodies, revealed a consistently conservative stance. Newton's 1920s racist protest passed without comment; but there was a heavy-handed response to principled opposition in the 1980s to the symbols of the police state. In 1983, Andrew Boraine's participation symbolised another struggle with authority when, as the banned former president of the National Union of South African Students, he had to get permission from the Minister of Law and Order to travel to Durban and participate.¹⁴ There is no record of any protest by the sporting establishment at this gross invasion of personal liberty.

Militarism and imperialism

The athletic tradition fundamental to late Victorian and Edwardian society 'prompted thousands of young sportsmen to volunteer to serve king and country, and could provoke acts of tragically incongruous gallantry . . . The delusion of athleticism was that sport and life are identical, and it was a delusion which could not survive the horrors of twentieth-century war'.¹⁵ The obnoxious J. Astley Cooper, proponent of the Pan Britannic Contest and Anglo-Saxon Festival from 1891,¹⁶ saw the Great War as unifying the Empire. The sporting analogies of his kind ('the greater game') humanised and legitimised a brutal war by evoking the concept of fair play and relating it, bizarrely, to the Flanders trenches.¹⁷ Some took the symbolism to extraordinary and fatal lengths: Edgar Mobbs, who died at Passchendaele, went over the top punting a rugby ball.¹⁸ While imperial sport served as an emblem for the British war effort, the Comrades Marathon may be described as a military memorial for its survivors.

Thirty-four runners set out from Pietermaritzburg on the 90 km. run to Durban on 24 May 1921 for the first Marathon. The idea was that of Vic Clapham, an engine driver, who put it to the League of Comrades of the Great War. The League lent the sum of £1 to the inaugural Marathon, a miserly amount in view of the large contingent of ex-infantrymen taking part.¹⁹ The Pietermaritzburg municipality made a grant of £25.²⁰ Clapham believed that if relatively unfit civilians could be trained to undertake military forced marches, this potential could be converted into comradely athletic activity. Kelly points out that up to 1924 the race was essentially an ex-soldiers' fun run,²¹ but even after it became more serious the military connection remained. In 1927 Clapham, evoking Great War imperialism, was quoted as saying that 'the sports grounds of the British Empire were the training ground for soldiers' and linked the Marathon to 'the heart to carry on just as the boys carried on on the fields of Flanders, on the sands of Egypt'.²² Two years later, the Marathon was described as 'perpetuat[ing] . . . the memory of the trials endured by the men who fell in the Great War by putting the contestants through the severest

physical test;²³ with a hint that the preparation of fit soldiers was still an objective.²⁴ The finish for down runs was, symbolically, at the Durban Light Infantry (DLI) Drill Hall. In 1931 the MOTHs donated as the team prize the Gunga Din Shield, a military icon consisting of an electroplated Great War steel helmet mounted on a teak base. It is still awarded annually. As late as 1961 the DLI Hall was seen as a finishing venue 'with an appropriate ex-soldier background'.²⁵

From 1921 until 1951, Comrades Marathon was held on Empire Day (24 May). The originator of this celebration was Lord Meath, who saw the potential of patriotic exercises on Queen Victoria's birthday. From 1910, Empire Day was a South African national holiday. It celebrated force of character rather than intellect²⁶ and was aimed in particular at children who were bombarded with propaganda about self-denial, discipline, duty, fealty to the Crown and the idea of Empire. Its heyday was the inter-war period: in 1922, 80 000 schools throughout the Empire were involved.²⁷ The Marathon was the ideal symbol for an Empire which emphasised force of character and brawn, rather than the cerebral.

Mr Justice Tatham, speaking on Empire Day in 1921, concentrated on duty and honouring one's word. Following him, the Reverend Nendick Abraham exhorted his listeners (to cheers) to 'play the game', and be prepared to lose rather than play unfairly.²⁸ Empire Day was characterised by loyal speeches such as these, wreath-laying at Queen Victoria's statue, saluting the Union Jack, marching schoolchildren and sports events in Alexandra Park organised by patriotic societies like Combined Patriotic Services. On the years when the Comrades Marathon finished in Pietermaritzburg these events were linked to the race and the day ended with an open air concert featuring the Natal Carbineer regimental band.²⁹ In the fashion of the time, due deference was shown to anyone recently connected with England. Of H.J. Phillips, second in the 1921 Marathon, it was said that he was a 'very successful cross-country runner *at home*'.³⁰ By 1925 the Marathon was reputed to be 'regarded with interest all over the Empire'.³¹ In the early 1930s, when its future seemed in some doubt, the *Natal Witness* remarked in an editorial 'It would be a pity to see this Empire Day contest die out;' two years later it proclaimed more confidently 'Empire Day will always be Comrades Marathon Day',³² a sentiment reiterated at regular intervals. Commentary connected with the Marathon, for instance the Mayor's message, dwelt on the symbolism of Dick King's ride and in 1933 the Sons of England commemorated it by laying a wreath at King's statue on the Durban Esplanade on Empire Day.³³ In 1934, Percy Osborn, mayor of Durban, sent a message to his Pietermaritzburg counterpart evoking King's ride and commenting favourably on 'a message that be carried by hand by Afrikaans- and English-speaking South Africans, who, in the world of sport only recognise and appreciate the true sporting spirit that has done so much for the British Empire'.³⁴ At the time of the 1936 Marathon a relay race from Johannesburg to Durban to coincide with the British Empire Exhibition later in the year was mooted, but nothing materialised.³⁵ The Comrades Marathon also served to bind the major towns of this ultra-loyal part of the Empire, 'their young men participating in friendly rivalry in this great race which has produced "gentlemen of the road"'.³⁶ In 1939, Sidney Smith suggested to the General Purposes Committee of the Durban Council that milestones along the road should commemorate Marathon winners.³⁷ Although Empire Day was abolished as a public holiday in South Africa in 1951, the Marathon was transferred to the Queen's Birthday (14 July)

for the years 1952–1953 and then from 1955 to Union Day (31 May) after an aberration on 12 June 1954.

Women

Women posed an early problem for the Marathon. The perceived wisdom of the first quarter of the century was that athletics were detrimental to the grace, figure and child-bearing abilities of women. It was feared that they would become infertile or be unable to breast feed, an alarm reinforced by the decline in the birth rate resulting from casualties of the Great War. Eugenists believed that athletics would do such irreparable harm to adolescent girls that the future of the British race would be threatened. Although these ideas were challenged in the 1920s, it was not until 1928 that the Olympic Games admitted women runners (although swimmers and tennis players had been allowed from 1924) at which point general records were kept only for women's events under 1000m.³⁸ It was only from the 1960s that women began to run distances of 800m and over in major competitions³⁹ while the first women's Olympic marathon was run in 1964 at Los Angeles. The British tradition, in particular, opposed mixing of the sexes in athletics and segregation was supported by enough women to sustain a women's world games into the 1930s on the grounds that for anatomical, physiological and psychological reasons they required different sports from men.⁴⁰

The Marathon hardly commended itself to the Victorian concept of delicate femininity in which pallor and languor featured prominently. Institutionalised sexism expected 'ladylike' behaviour from women which was subdued, supportive and admiring. Both social and medical opinion opposed vigorous exercise: 'the freer the activity in terms of bodily and spatial mobility, the more powerful was the opposition, always based on moral and biological criteria'.⁴¹ The rhetoric of Social Darwinism consigned women to the home, to a restrained, refined and respectable existence. The vulgarity of rude health was at odds with the delicate nature expected of women and, it was feared, might lead to the development of a race of Amazons.

It is thus surprising that as early as the third Marathon in 1923 there was a woman entrant, Frances Hayward of Durban. Her entry was accepted by the race organisers, who had to return her fee when she was disqualified by the South African Amateur Athletic Association (SAAA).⁴² Miss Hayward ran, nevertheless, as an unofficial entrant and press coverage suggests that her involvement was highly popular. She finished in 11 hours 35 minutes with 30 men; 38 others failing to complete the race. In what must have been the dark, the 'cheering and the noise were deafening' and mounted police had to clear the way to the Lords ground in Durban for her. Some reports were highly patronising, noting the 'pluck' of 'little Miss Hayward'.⁴³ But the *Natal Advertiser* was outspokenly supportive: the 'outstanding event of the occasion was the wonderful performance of Miss Hayward. It will be greeted the world over as another signal of women's emancipation from the thralldom of good-natured disdain in which mere man has held her'.⁴⁴ Nor did the *Advertiser* fail to place its money alongside its principles, opening a Shilling Fund for the 'plucky young Durban lady, who has won unforgettable renown for her sex'⁴⁵ with a generous donation. After some cajoling the Fund was closed on 19 June with £51. 8s. A *Natal Witness* editorial put the view that the distance was too strenuous for anyone and recommended limiting the Comrades to 40 miles. At the time marathon runners were considered utterly eccentric and the popular

imagination was dominated by images such as that of Dorando Pietri's collapse at the finish of the marathon at the 1908 Olympic Games in London.⁴⁶ Clearly the exercise did Miss Hayward no harm as she survived until 1975 when she died aged 85.

Frances Hayward did not repeat her run and women returned to their traditional role of providing support for men.⁴⁷ In 1925, 'feminine encouragement' and enthusiasm were noted by the press at the start and in 1926 women featured in a sports event associated with the finish in Alexandra Park, participating in the high jump, a relay race and a one mile event.⁴⁸ In 1927, the *Natal Witness* was asking 'How long must women wait?'⁴⁹ This call was answered in 1931 by Geraldine Watson who ran as an unofficial entrant in three consecutive races. Of her first attempt, last in after 11 hours 41 minutes, it was said that she 'ran bravely' and 'received a warm welcome'.⁵⁰ The following year her run of 11 hours 56 minutes was described as 'plucky' and 'she looked well and chatted cheerfully'.⁵¹ In 1933, she recorded an excellent time of 9 hours 31 minutes, 42nd out of 85 runners, claiming plausibly that many men had finished only because of her presence.⁵² In 1935 there were four women walkers, two of whom seem to have finished.⁵³ It was to be over 30 years before another woman ran unofficially (Mavis Hutchinson, 1965)⁵⁴ and a further ten before their entries were made official. As the *Natal Witness* put it in 1946, in promoting the cult of manliness, the 'demands on stamina and endurance are such that only men toughened by months of training can hope to survive the test'.⁵⁵ The views of Frances Hayward and Geraldine Watson on this patriarchal reasoning would have been interesting. The marginal position of women was exemplified in 1950 by Miss J. Newmarch who participated on horseback. The runners, it was pompously reported, 'will not let her competition interfere with the more serious nature of their self-imposed task'.⁵⁶ The period 1965–1975 was one of several unofficial runners, either female or black and in 1972 'Some of the loudest cheers of the day went to the women and non-white unofficial competitors'.⁵⁷ Before women were finally admitted as official competitors there were bureaucratic bungles. Runner 901 of 1973 was a 19-year-old woman, Iva Mayall, whose presence with an official number was a surprise to spectators.⁵⁸ The reaction of officials was not recorded. Aleth Kleynhans was another *de facto* official female competitor (in 1974) but the organisers thought she was male. 'Officials at the start were not too happy when they saw that runner 2880 was a woman'.⁵⁹ She was met by 'angry Comrades officials who disqualified her on the grounds that she did not fulfil the "European Male Only" restriction'.⁶⁰ They refused to reveal her time or position and also disqualified a 14-year-old girl who finished the race.⁶¹ An editorial in the *Daily News* summed up the situation: 'Comrades means White males . . . In the nineteen-seventies this is an absurd anachronism . . . The Comrades are misnamed if they persist in holding out against women's lib or just plain human lib'.⁶² The first open Marathon was held in 1975 but the first woman home was not one of the two official female runners. Lettie van Zyl (8h50) was mistakenly given a medal which had to be returned for Elizabeth Cavanagh (10h08), the first official finisher.⁶³

Black athletes

Black runners were to prove an even more intractable problem to the conservative Marathon organisers. In the mid-nineteenth century, Zulu runners had proved robust enough to maintain a weekly postal service between

Pietermaritzburg and Durban, although as late as 1896 they were reportedly not allowed to use Pietermaritzburg's footpaths.⁶⁴ It has been suggested, although without any substantial evidence, that two Zulu runners competed for Britain in the 1904 Olympic Games held in St. Louis, finishing ninth and twelfth.⁶⁵ However, missing from the post-Great War camaraderie, '... the spirit of the returned soldier of the 1914–1918 war ...'⁶⁶ was any representative of the 74 000 black soldiers who served the Allied cause. Recruiting propaganda had referred to 'white comrades' and the contingent of 21 000 black soldiers shipped to France contained a high number of relatively well-educated, outward-looking men loyal to the Empire. In France, they were used as a labour contingent, housed in closed compounds and segregated from whites, especially white women. Their officers, frequently Native Affairs Department officials in civilian life, effectively transferred the customs of South Africa to the western front. Use was made of sport, including running, as a safety valve.⁶⁷ On demobilisation in Cape Town in 1917, black soldiers found themselves entitled to no war medals, or gratuities; and various pre-War promises concerning cattle, land, the poll tax and pass laws were not kept. Elaborate resettlement plans were made for white soldiers who received £4 each for clothing. Black soldiers received 'a suit of plain clothes' or £1.10s.⁶⁸ They may have gained in self-esteem and consciousness but made no social advance such as involvement in symbolic sports events like the Comrades Marathon. This was coincidentally the period during which white sports facilities in the Pietermaritzburg urban area improved markedly by calling on the public purse in various ways.⁶⁹

Early accounts relegated black spectators to the status of the childlike and incredulous. Alexander recounts the story of disbelief (*Hau!*) from a black bystander that Arthur Newton had reached Umlaas Road the same day from Durban.⁷⁰ In 1931 M. Schneider ran from Bulawayo en route to Natal as part of his training (although he gave up at Pietersburg). Asked by 'two native women why he was running [he] told them that his wife had run away and he was chasing her'. The *Natal Witness* reported smugly that the black women said they had not seen his wife.⁷¹ That same year, Geraldine Watson thought of stopping during the race but 'A small native boy said excitedly "Come on man, you will be late"'.⁷² Blacks were portrayed as looking on admiringly: 'a solitary European onlooker loudly clapped to have it taken up on the other side of the road by an admiring native'.⁷³ When a black man competed unofficially in 1935 reports treated him patronisingly: 'Interest was added to the race by a native unofficial entrant who at the Star and Garter was well up. Several cheers and "good lucks" were shouted to him by Europeans standing by the roadside ... The native passed ... still maintaining a good stride'⁷⁴ and passed namelessly and typically into oblivion as far as the press was concerned. The anonymous runner was possibly Robert Mtshali (9h30) who was 'given a rousing cheer when he jogged complacently around the finishing circuit ... he was the recipient of a small presentation from Councillor K. Shearer'.⁷⁵

Thinly veiled racial prejudice emerged from race accounts, as in 1936: 'Motorists were very considerate, with the exception of a few Indian taxis'. Had any Indian taxi drivers wished to run competitively at this time they would have been relegated to the Suncrush Marathon, a second class event reserved for blacks. It was first run in 1937 from Pietermaritzburg to Durban by 39 athletes and won by G. Murugasen (8h05). The following year 42 runners left Tollgate for the Indian Sports Ground in Pietermaritzburg with C. Sukul the winner (7h30). A large crowd watched the presentation by the Mayor of the

Suncrush floating trophy donated by Daly's of Durban,⁷⁶ manufacturers of the soft drink after which the event was named. The last evidence of the Suncrush Marathon is in 1939 when Murugasen won it again in 6h40, a time which would have placed him third in that year's Comrades. He played the role of unattached second in the 1939 Comrades and came to the rescue of M. Alexander with cramp at Hillcrest.⁷⁷ This was the era in which Natal's whites were at the crest of imperial superiority, secure in the imposition of segregation. Vehicles driven by members of the Indian community continued to be the villains of Comrades Marathon Day. In 1946, for instance, the winner Bill Cochrane running between Camperdown and Pietermaritzburg 'only faltered once when an Indian taxi, hooting wildly, overtook him and passed unnecessarily close'.⁷⁸

John Mkwanyana, a 1961 unofficial entrant, received the standard treatment, 'rousing applause from spectators', as he finished.⁷⁹ Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s a scattering of black runners competed unofficially alongside a few white women. Writing of black runners, Alexander comments that they 'acquitted themselves well . . . le[aving] little doubt that their successors could threaten the best times of whites'.⁸⁰ By 1973 protests about racial discrimination were becoming louder. Hardy Ballington, five times a winner in the 1930s, argued that an open Marathon would lead to chaos and supported a return to pre-war segregated races in which the top ten of each would officially compete in the other. Similar reactionary sentiment tinged with nostalgia for the rapidly disappearing colonial past had it that 'camaraderie was threatened by outside attempts to force a racial integration on the race, an integration which would in any case have come about quietly and in good time . . .', and inveighed against 'politically-motivated persons with other axes to grind' and a 'politically inspired vendetta'.⁸¹ The organisers, Collegians Harriers, maintained that they were constrained by national and provincial athletics regulations and government policy. Shaken by the post-1970 international boycott of South African sport, government policy was changed in 1971 under the aegis of Minister Piet Koornhof to permit blacks to compete in 'international' events, that is to say competitions with at least two foreign participants. At all other levels the government requirement was strict segregation.⁸²

Some supporters of integration, of whom there were many, maintained (mistakenly) that it was a way back into the Olympic Games from which South Africa had been expelled in May 1970. The government, faced by international opprobrium, clearly felt the same way because boycotted sports (South Africa was also suspended by the International Amateur Athletics Federation) were by 1974 allowed to hold multi-national rather than international events; that is, competitions open to all who belonged to racially structured governing bodies. In spite of this concession and using a variety of excuses — the Separate Amenities and Liquor Acts, 'tradition' and opposition to 'outside agitators' — Collegians Harriers voted overwhelmingly for an all-white race in 1974.⁸³ The attitude of Collegians is put into perspective by the fact that no law in apartheid South Africa ever forbade whites and blacks to race on a public road. Control of urban space (other than in the townships) provided a prolonged headache for the authorities as was demonstrated by the Aurora Cricket Club which had successfully staged mixed cricket matches in Pietermaritzburg in October 1973. Government control over facilities was of course severe, but if this could be surmounted in cricket it should have been overcome in road racing.

In the 1973 race, which finished on the campus of the University of Natal,

Durban, Vincent Rakabaele in 42nd place was preceded by a runner carrying a banner reading 'Harriers open Comrades'. 'He was received with mixed feelings by the large crowd . . . they had come for the fun of the Marathon, not to be reminded of the policies behind the "Whites only" decision by Collegians Harriers'.⁸⁴ Black runners were cheered at the finish but carried no numbers, earned no congratulations or medals, and had to use a side exit at the finish. They did, however, receive medals in an unorthodox fashion. John Morrison, then a University of Natal student, had collected various medals from previous runners and these were distributed accordingly.⁸⁵ The organisers stood by the fiction that the Comrades was simply a club event and therefore restricted to whites. The old white fear of being 'swamped' and the slavish reliance on government policy underlay this attitude.⁸⁶

The following year, anti-apartheid supporters proposed an alternative race, a boycott and the stalling of cars en route (said to have been proposed by a group of Durban businessmen). In the event, pamphlets were distributed at the start under a heavy police presence and about 20 runners wore black wristbands. One of them was Melchizedek Khumalo, a KwaMashu policeman who completed the last of his ten marathons.⁸⁷

In 1975, the Marathon was declared 'multinational', open to all but restricted to 1500 entrants including six from each race group other than white. As the *Daily News* pithily put it 'the Department of Sport sprinkled its magic formula on the event and proclaimed it multi-national'.⁸⁸ 'Much of the bitterness has been laid to rest',⁸⁹ said the *Natal Witness* optimistically but black runners were required to display their 'ethnic identity'. Thus, 'some bureaucrat with the finesse of an ox'⁹⁰ supervised the start, handing out race group labels, a situation made farcical by a shortage of Zulu tags and their substitution by Xhosa. This appears to have had nothing to do with the organisers, but was justified by Professor Botha of the South African Amateur Athletic Union (SAAAU) as standard practice. In the event only 16 blacks (of whom 13 were African)⁹¹ and two women participated officially. Vincent Rakabaele (Marievale Mine, 6h27) became the first black runner to win a medal. But 'true comradeship embracing people of all races finished well down the field' commented a Durban newspaper.⁹²

Black runners with the non-racial South African African Athletics Board (SAAAB) refused to participate in such a concessionary event when they were barred from so many others. The blatantly racist approach to black runners, a 'ludicrous example of petty discrimination',⁹³ aroused opposition from the SAAAB, which expelled Nithia Rajah and Harry Sukhdeo (and debarred Harrydeo Namchunder) for running in the 1976 race in which Rakabaele (5h59) became the first black gold medal winner. He was described as the 'plucky little African runner from Marievale'⁹⁴ in similar patronising tones to those earlier reserved for unofficial female runners. Rajah (6h53) was the first runner from the Indian community to win a medal but his time was not as good as Murugasen's 1939 effort, showing that the potential of black athletes had long been apparent.

Conclusions

Historians and sociologists have theorised about sport as a force for national cohesion or as a means of social control.⁹⁵ Neither seems appropriate to the history of the Comrades although a Marxist theory that 'Sport is a system of obsessive, repetitive and hence ritualised ceremonies, dominated by proto-

fascist and militarist rites⁹⁶ has a certain resonance in its early days. Like other colonial sports, the Comrades was an elitist and exclusive event which maintained distance between dominant and subordinate fractions of society: between men and women and, above all, between whites and blacks. As a military and imperial event it was illustrative of colonial hegemony. After the Second World War it was more simply focused on cultivating a culture of manhood and racism and at times (for instance, in 1981) it allowed itself to be used as an instrument of the prevailing regime. At all times it has been an institution interacting with and reflecting social and political forces around it. For much of its history this interaction has resulted in the promotion of a conservative agenda glorying in symbols of power reflecting masculinity and the current military and political order. It is also true to say, however, that from the mid 1970s onwards it began to represent a broader cross-section of South African society reflecting the future rather than its present.

NOTES

1. B. Fordyce, *Comrades*. (Johannesburg, Flower, 1985), p. 7.
2. *Natal Witness*, 29 May 1923 [hereafter *NW*].
3. M. Alexander, *The Comrades Marathon story*, (Craighall, Delta, 3rd ed., 1985), p. 25. Arthur 'Greatheart' Newton (1883–1959) had been a clerk and teacher before turning to the land and he served in the Natal Light Horse in the Great War. In 1923 he broke the world 50-mile record on the Comrades course and later held the 100-mile and 24-hour endurance records at various times. He raced in the United States as a professional (1929–1931) and is considered to have revolutionised long distance running. The Americans gave him the Helms Foundation Award for Outstanding Sportsman of the African Continent in 1926. He retired from running in 1935. The winner of the London-Brighton race still receives the Arthur Newton trophy and there is a memorial to him at Harding.
4. T. Noakes, *Lore of running*, (Cape Town, OUP, 1985), p. 90.
5. *Natal Mercury*, 27 May 1927, editorial [hereafter *NM*].
6. *Natal Advertiser*, 25 May 1927 [hereafter *NA*].
7. *NA*, 25 May 1922.
8. *South African runner* 4(7) August 1981, editorial.
9. *NW*, 30 May 1981 and 1 June 1981; *NM*, 30 May 1981.
10. *NW*, 2 June 1981.
11. *NW*, 3 June 1981, editorial.
12. *NM*, 30 May 1981.
13. Letters by J. Oosthuizen, Rietjie from Durbs and H. W. de Kock in *South African runner* 4(7) August 1981, p.25. The correspondence was closed after one issue.
14. M. Alexander, *The Comrades Marathon story*, pp. 408–409.
15. D. Brailsford, *British sport: a social history* (Cambridge, Lutterworth, 1992), p. 122.
16. This never materialised, but may be seen as a forerunner of the British Empire (later Commonwealth) Games, first held in 1930.
17. K. Moore, The pan-Britannic festival: a tangible but forlorn expression of imperial unity. In: J. A. Mangan (ed.), *Pleasure, profit, proselytism: British culture and sport at home and abroad, 1700–1914* (London, Cass, 1988), p. 151; J. A. Cooper, The British imperial spirit of sport and the war. *United empire* 7(9) September 1916, pp. 581–596; D. Brailsford, *British sport*, p. 122; M.C.C. Adams, *The great adventure: male desire and the coming of World War I* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 103.
18. T. Mason, *Sport in Britain: a social history* (Cambridge, CUP, 1989), p. 323.
19. They were not the first soldiers to run between Pietermaritzburg and Durban. In 1914, Private Atwell of the South Staffordshire Regiment had completed this route (11:30) (M. Alexander, *The Comrades Marathon story*, p.11). There is also reference to similar races, 'events held hereabouts prior to the war', and to a particularly noteworthy runner called Ramos (*NM*, 24 May 1921).
20. *Municipal yearbook*, 1921. The municipal grant equalled this again only in 1964. Throughout the 1930s it amounted to £8 per annum.

21. C.M. Kelly, *The Comrades Marathon* (Pretoria, Retief, 1990), p. 7.
22. *NW*, 24 May 1927.
23. *NW*, 22 May 1929.
24. *NW*, 23 May 1929.
25. M. Alexander, *The Comrades Marathon story*, p. 172.
26. J.A. Mangan, 'Ethics and ethnocentricity: imperial education in tropical Africa'. In: W.J. Baker and J.A. Mangan, (eds.), *Sport in Africa: essays in social history* (New York, Africana, 1987), p. 140.
27. J.A. Mangan, 'The grit of our forefathers': invented traditions, propaganda and imperialism, p. 121–133; J.M. Mackenzie, 'In touch with the infinite': the BBC and empire, 1923–53, pp. 168–173. Both in: J.M. Mackenzie (ed.), *Imperialism and popular culture* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1986).
28. *NW*, 25 May 1921.
29. *NW*, 22 May 1926.
30. *NW*, 28 May 1921 (my italics).
31. *NW*, 25 May 1925.
32. *NW*, 25 May 1932; 24 May 1934.
33. *NW*, 26 May 1933.
34. *NW*, 24 May 1934.
35. *NW*, 25 May 1936.
36. *NW*, 26 May 1936, reporting on the message of the Mayor of Durban, Fleming Johnston.
37. *NW*, 24 May 1939.
38. T. Noakes, *Lore of running*, p. 476.
39. J. Riordan, The social emancipation of women through sport. *British Journal of Sports History* 2(1) 1985, p. 57; A. Guttmann, *The Olympics: a history of the modern games* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1992), p. 47; The women's marathon was first run at the Olympic Games in 1984.
40. J. Crump, Athletics. In: T. Mason, *Sport in Britain*, pp. 59–63; C. Dyhouse, Social Darwinistic ideas and the development of women's education in England, 1880–1920. *History of Education* 5(1) 1976, pp. 44–45, 47, 55; H. King, The sexual politics of sport: an Australian perspective. In: R. Cashman and M. McKernan (eds.), *Sport in history: the making of modern sporting history* (St. Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1979), p. 73.
41. J.A. Hargreaves, Playing like gentlemen while behaving like ladies: contradictory features of the formative years of women's sport. *British Journal of Sports History* 2(1) 1985, p. 49.
42. *NM*, 25 May 1923. This was reminiscent of the exclusion of a Greek woman called Melpomene, who had already covered the distance in training, from the Athens Olympic marathon in 1896 (S. Treadwell, *The world of marathons* (London, Columbus, 1987), p. 21).
43. *NW*, 23 May, 25 May and 26 May 1923.
44. *NA*, 25 May 1923.
45. *NA*, 26 May 1923.
46. S. Treadwell, *The world of marathons*, pp. 18–19.
47. J.A. Hargreaves, 'The Victorian cult of the family and the early years of female sport'. In: E. Dunning, J.A. Maguire and R.E. Pearton (eds.), *The sports process: a comparative and development approach*. (Champaign, Ill, Human Kinetics, 1993), p. 73.
48. *NW*, 26 May 1925 and 22 May 1926.
49. *NW*, 23 May 1927.
50. *NW*, 26 May 1931.
51. *NW*, 25 May 1932.
52. M. Alexander, *The Comrades Marathon story*, pp. 101–102.
53. *NW*, 25 May 1935.
54. Mavis Hutchinson went on to run the 100 miles in just under 22h15 and 106 miles 736 yards in 24 hours.
55. *NW*, 24 May 1946.
56. *NW*, 23 May 1950.
57. M. Alexander, *The Comrades Marathon story*, p. 229.
58. *Daily News*, 1 June 1973 (hereafter *DN*). Her picture appears in this issue.
59. *DN*, 31 May 1974.
60. *NW*, 1 June 1974.
61. M. Alexander, *The Comrades Marathon story*, p. 255. The girl had failed by 2 minutes to finish the race in 1973 (*DN*, 2 June 1973).
62. *DN*, 30 May 1974, editorial.

63. M. Alexander, *The Comrades Marathon*, p.271. Lettie van Zyl won the women's race in 1976 (9h05).
64. *Mayor's minute*, 1896–1897.
65. A. Guttmann, *Games and empires: modern sports and cultural imperialism* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1994), pp.126–127.
66. M. Alexander, *The Comrades Marathon story*, p.25.
67. A. Grundlingh, *Fighting their own war: South African blacks and the First World War* (Johannesburg, Ravan, 1987).
68. W. E. Stanford and P. S. Beves, *Reports dealing with the subject of returned soldiers . . .* (Cape Town, Cape Times, 1920 (UG 1920:22); A. Grundlingh, *The impact of the First World War on South African blacks*. In: M. E. Page, *Africa and the First World War* (London, Macmillan, 1987), pp.61, 75.
69. C. Merrett, 'Sport, racism and urban policy in South Africa: Pietermaritzburg, a case study'. *Sporting Traditions: Journal of the Australian Society for Sports History* 10(2) 1994, p.101.
70. M. Alexander, *The Comrades Marathon story*, p.59.
71. *NW*, 25 May 1931.
72. M. Alexander, *The Comrades Marathon story*, p.95.
73. *NW*, 26 May 1930.
74. *NW*, 25 May 1935.
75. M. Alexander, *The Comrades Marathon story*, p.107.
76. *NW*, 27 May 1938.
77. M. Alexander, *The Comrades Marathon story*, pp.34, 118.
78. *NW*, 25 May 1946.
79. M. Alexander, *The Comrades Marathon story*, p.165.
80. M. Alexander, *The Comrades Marathon story*, p.34.
81. M. Alexander, *The Comrades Marathon story*, pp.245, 247.
82. *Survey of Race Relations* 1973, p.365.
83. *Survey of Race Relations* 1974, pp.395, 401.
84. *NM*, 1 June 1973.
85. *DN*, 2 June 1973.
86. *DN*, 4 June 1973, editorial.
87. *DN*, 31 May 1974.
88. *DN*, 2 June 1975, editorial.
89. *NW*, 30 May 1975.
90. *DN*, 2 June 1975, editorial.
91. *Survey of Race Relations* 1975, p.280.
92. *DN*, 1 June 1975, editorial.
93. *NW*, 3 June 1975.
94. *NW*, 1 June 1976.
95. J. Hargreaves, *Sport, power and culture: a social and historical analysis of popular sports in Britain* (Cambridge, Polity, 1986).
96. J-M. Brohm, *Sport: a prison of measured time* (London, Ink Links, 1978), p.78.

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