

A medal sure beats a ring

Yusuf Omar finished the Comrades Marathon on his knees – and found his comrade for life

‘ALLAHU AKBAR,’ (God is great) calls a Muezzin struggling to be heard above the *Chariots of Fire* anthem from a speaker. Among the 13 667 Comrades ultra-marathon runners at the Pietermaritzburg start line a group of 50 Muslims congregate for Fajr salah (morning prayer).

The race is in honour of fallen soldiers in World War I and it feels like you're going into battle. Your running shoes are your sword.

“Some part of you actually thinks you might die that day,” laughs my dad and coach, Anver, running his seventh consecutive race. Two men died on his second run.

A rooster crows, but the sound is quickly killed by the bang of a cannon, as it has done for 77 previous races. At 5.30am an army of runners shuffle down Chief Albert Luthuli Road and past the enormous red brick Pietermaritzburg City Hall. The eldest runner is 83 and the youngest 21, two years younger than me. The pack is dense; the last runner takes approximately 15 minutes to cross the start line.

Goosebumps race down naked arms, legs and bandaged nipples (to avoid them bleeding against your T-shirt from friction). It could be all the nerves from nine months of training coming down to one day. Or from the cold south-easterly wind and heavy clouds from the Indian Ocean. Perfect running weather.

The first 20km is a gradual climb, a mixture of excitement and darkness hides the ascent. Using moonlight breaking through the clouds we stream down a steep 2km downhill called Polly Shorts, shouting “passing through”, despite what the running manuals advise about conserving energy.

At 77km to the finish we begin climbing into Ashburton, drop to Tumble Inn and pull ourselves up a huge hill into Lions Park. Then we hit the highest point of the run, Umlaas Road junction, at 860m above sea level. We win a small psychological battle in a long war.

At 65km from home we begin to taste the scale of the Comrades support as we enter Camperdown. Thousands of strangers clap and



Journalist Yusuf Omar, wearing his proudly South African running shorts, battles through the pain to complete his first Comrades with the help of his father, Anver, left.

reading for us like we are rock stars, screaming the names on our race numbers.

We also hit the first of five hotspots. Chips fastened to our shoes send GPS signals and messages to family and friends following the race online around the world. But there are cut-off times.

The whole way a kombie labelled “Runner Rescue,” crawls beside the runners. Like the grim reaper, the leather seats and air-conditioning lures many runners’ hearts.

“I’m only dropping out if I’m in a body bag,” I swear to my dad.

Cato Ridge, at 59km from Durban, is a small village with a big roar. By now the runners are significantly quieter, recognising the truth

and significance of the challenge as we head towards Harrison Flats. This barren desert of support is not as flat as the name suggests. It is a series of deceiving hills.

The next few kilometres are lonely.

“This is no one’s favourite part of the route,” says my dad.

At five hours into the race we meet Inchange, a quad crippling hill.

Moaning and groaning we approach Drummond and the halfway point. A long cosy row of crowds, music, and a mistaken belief that it’s only a case of “same again”, lulls runners into a false sense of security. Shortly after, over the loud speakers we hear that Ludwick

Mamabolo crossed the finish line in five hours and 31 minutes, making him SA’s first Comrades winner since 2005. The runners cheer.

We raise our backs proudly and stand strong, but as soon as we turn the corner away from the supporters’ helpless stares, we slowly walk towards Arthur’s Seat and the Comrades wall.

On the side of the road a seat is carved out in the rock. Legend says five-time winner Arthur Newton used to rest on the rocks. Now it’s tradition to pick up a flower and throw it into the seat. “Morning Arthur,” shout runners as they pass. They say it gives you luck for the rest of the race.

For the next few kilometres we

approach Alverstone Tower, slowly. We see this tower from the time we leave Inchange. It feels like it will never come, like a mirage in the desert.

Botha’s Hill is a seemingly vertical ascent that my father forgot to tell me about. The reward is music to our ears. Bagpipes and the polite clapping of Kearsney College rugby players welcome us below lush trees overhanging the tarmac.

At Hillcrest we catch a glimpse of the sea in the distance. We can smell home, but this is also where many throw in the towel. Arms feel heavy, knees weak and ankles as agile as spaghetti.

Now the race really begins, it’s all mental strength from here.

There are as many spectators as braais along this part of the route, but our kidneys have pretty much shut down and our stomachs feel as if they are eating themselves.

On Fields Hill and with 25km to go, I am in trouble as my calf muscles freeze to a halt when cramps set in. I down a handful of salt and receive a quick ice-rubdown by a student physiotherapist and shuffle on.

It’s downhill into Pinetown, but at this stage our knees are swearing at us. With 64km under our belts we stumble up Cowies Hill, poking us where it hurts; everywhere. We are motivated by chasing landmarks.

“Run to that tree, then walk to that stop sign,” says Dad. We sing *Father and Son*, by Cat

Stevens, and I let my dad in on a secret plan at the end of the race.

“No, no Yusuf. You’re dehydrated; you don’t know what you’re saying. We will talk about this next week,” he counsels.

I tell him I have been planning this for years and he gives me his blessings.

It is a taxing ascent into 45th Cutting and with 9km to go we catch some momentum running down the M13. The “Sub-11 hour” bus is just behind us and we still believe we can make it in less than 11 hours.

We hear them coming in their hundreds, like a herd of wildebeest. But panic gets the better of us as the bus passes.

We struggle to calculate our times. We are tired and confused.

“Keep calm. Keep to your strategy,” says my dad, pushing forward.

Faint-hearted spectators should turn back now, it’s all blood, vomit and tears.

At the toll gate, with 5km to go, my dad trips on a cat’s eye reflector on the highway and tumbles to the ground. I dust him off and we struggle on, nibbling at the more easily digestible single-digit kilometres.

I don’t know how long the run-in is from the gate of Kingsmead Stadium to the finish line. It is a blur of flashes, soft grass, and people screaming from the rafters. But we take our time. We savour it.

Now I’m sitting with my feet in a bucket of ice and have Bambi (the new born deer)-like legs. I realise the day is a celebration and culmination of a year-long training programme.

The race epitomises everything great about SA – the camaraderie, and support for one another. Strangers cheer you like an Olympic athlete. It’s your day as a hero.

My dad and I crossed the finish line hand in hand at 11 hours and 11 minutes – 11 894 runners made it to Durban.

And the Bollywood ending and big secret? I got down on one knee and proposed to my childhood sweetheart, Sumaiya Seedat, at the finish line.

Running 89km to give her a Comrades medal beats a ring.

An old man laughs. “You just finished one marathon. And you are about to start another.”

‘Waity Katy’ Charles can’t resist unwanted meddling

John Walsh

LONDON: For a mild-mannered, well-bred man in his 60s Prince Charles inspires extreme reactions. And when Britain’s fond and liquefying eyes are trained on his mother as she celebrates her 60-year reign, many people will entertain mixed feelings as to whether he should be her successor.

According to a ComRes poll conducted by The Independent, 42 percent of the British public think he should step aside when the queen dies and leave the succession to his son, the Duke of Cambridge.

Forty-four percent disagreed with the idea. This is marginally better news for Charles since the last such poll in 2010, when the figures were 42/41, with more people undecided. But the findings suggest that the public just hasn’t found anything much to attract them to its putative monarch.

People may have learned to forgive his alleged treatment of Prin-

cess Diana; they may approve of his evidently happy marriage to the Duchess of Cornwall and his warm relationship with his sons. But Charles still divides British opinion on the question of whether they want him to reign over them.

Why? Is it the long face, the intensely sad eyes, the side-of-the-mouth delivery, the air of whimsy partnered by an iron will? Is it his habit, on royal visits, of having a tentative go at the dance and the national costume? Is it that we’ve come to regard him as mostly a figure of pathos and sympathy, a lifelong Nearly Man, an apprentice who never got the job, the senior royals’ very own Waity Katy? Or is it the persistent rumours that he tries to wield far too much influence for a powerless monarch-to-be?

Edward VII was 59 when he finally ascended the throne after the death of his mother, Queen Victoria, in 1901. Edward was 55 at his mother’s diamond jubilee; he had to wait only another four years to become

king. Charles is now 63. The queen appears to be in excellent health and could, like the Queen Mother, live another 15 years.

By that time, Charles will be 78 – a woefully advanced age at which to assume power. It’s hardly surprising, under the circumstances, that Charles has in recent years begun throwing his weight around as if he were already king, making direct representations – in a way the queen would never do – to politicians, businessmen, architects and fellow royals.

The Downing Street memoirs of Alastair Campbell record numerous episodes when then-prime minister Tony Blair reeled from the prince’s attempts to influence government policy, either in long, hand-written letters (complete with inky underlinings) or in conversation: complaints about the fox hunting bill, about the government’s help

for farmers during the 2001 foot-and-mouth crisis, in standing up for the principle of hereditary peers in the House of Lords, in speaking out over GM foods, in snubbing a visit by the Chinese.

Blair once complained that the Prince was “screwing us” – ie, the Labour administration. One Campbell entry, in October 1999, reads: “TB said Charles had to understand there were limits to the extent to which (Prince Charles) could play politics with him.”

He’s been doing it for 30 years. Nothing, however, drew more criticism than his intervention in the Chelsea Barracks development plan in 2009. The 5.3 hectare site in the heart of London was ultimately owned by the property-investment arm of the Qatari royal family.

The company was considering approving a steel-and-glass design created by Lord Rogers’s partner-

ship. Prince Charles didn’t like it and stepped in, just before the design was to go before planning chiefs. He wrote to the chairman, urging him to consider other alternatives – and the Qataris dropped Rogers’s plans.

It’s been noticed that the prince tends to use the many charities that bear his name as tools in persuading people to do what he wants.

The Prince’s Foundation for the Built Environment, for example, is used to showcase what the prince considers acceptable design or architectural schemes.

He likes to offer its research facilities and advisers to property developers (such as the Qatari royal family), or to government bodies involved in renovation projects.

The Prince’s Foundation for Integrated Health was an advisory body which urged the Health Department to invest in homeopathic remedies.

(The foundation has now closed down, after investigation by the Charities Commission.)



PRINCE CHARLES

Rosé is the wine

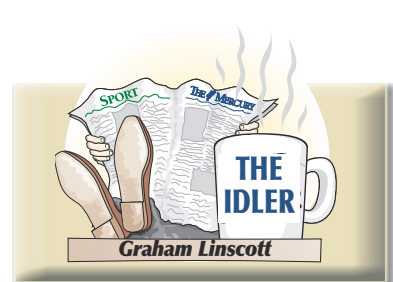
I’VE ALWAYS felt that rosé wine sets out with a marketing disadvantage because it looks so much like the stuff you use to wash your mouth out in the dentist’s chair.

But it’s going great guns – at least in Britain – according to the fellow who made the rosé which Queen Elizabeth II sipped as she sailed down the Thames last weekend. Sales have increased by 200 percent, he says.

He only just made the delivery. When the caterers approached him with the order he at first turned it down because the bottles had not yet been labelled.

When he found out who it was for, he scrambled. He and other rosé producers are likely to keep scrambling after this royal endorsement.

He produces from a vineyard of only five acres. How things have changed. There was a time when it was believed wine could be produced only in places like France



E-mail Mercidler@inl.co.za
Letters PO Box 47549, Durban, 4000
Fax 031 308 2333

and Germany, or the Western Cape and parts of Australia and South America.

Today wine is produced in England and it seems to have nothing to do with global warming. It’s also made in the KZN Midlands, the opposite extreme.

Go to any old Catholic mission station or monastery in KZN – even on the coast – and you will find a winepress.

Those old monks knew what

they were about. It’s not so much climatic conditions as skill and determination.

Slainte!

Roundheads

A STIFF breeze blew up as the jubilee pageant on the Thames drew to a close. Rain came down. The finale of a flypast by aircraft had to be cancelled. Hardly anyone seemed to notice.

Yet The Guardian – a Fleet Street newspaper that is not enthusiastic about the monarchy – contrived to get into its front-page banner headline the words: “Diamond jubilee – it’s a royal washout...”

The headline did not reflect the report beneath it. And the rest of the headline did concede that a million people had paid tribute to the queen. In theory all terribly well balanced.

But a washout? Wishful thinking. Yes, Britain does have its humourless Roundheads.



A boy at a rally in Kathmandu, organised to mark World Environment Day yesterday holds a globe depicting the effects of global warming.

PICTURE: REUTERS

Stuck on throne?

DESI Halse was tickled by the comment of her seven-year-old granddaughter, Emma, on the diamond jubilee.

Told that Queen Elizabeth had been on the throne for 60 years, she asked: “Couldn’t she get off?”

Desi compiled a limerick for Emma:

You ask ‘Could she not get off?’
Well, that might make us laugh;
But being stuck with a will
To rule us all still
For 60 long years is quite rough.

Rugby lunch

AS RUGBY fever mounts, the fraternity are gearing for a lunch at Riverside Sports Club (formerly Glenwood Old Boys) on Friday in

honour of Frans de Beer, the chairman of Duikers Rugby Club. De Beer has been in the engine room of rugby in this province for a long time.

He played for and coached Glenwood Old Boys. He was a Natal selector and coach. He coached Maritzburg Collegians, Maritzburg University and Cedara, as well as the Duikers.

MC will be Natal, Western Province and Springbok three-quarter Dick Muir; who De Beer discovered while he was playing for Cedara. The lunch revives a Duikers tradition, which was always to hold a dinner on the eve of a Test match. It costs R100, payable at the door. There are no bookings.

Tax pain

IAN GIBSON, poet laureate of Hillcrest, predicts that the Mdluli case is going to cost taxpayers a packet.

A tainted top cop called Mdluli,
Exhibits behaviour unruly;
He manipulates the law,
And opens the door;
To more pain for taxpayers like yours truly.

Tailpiece

A COUPLE are puzzled by a girl who wanders about the beach with a travel bag. She approaches people lying on the beach, speaks briefly to them then usually wanders on. But sometimes she takes something out of the bag and money changes hands.

What is she up to? Selling drugs? But then they notice that the people she approaches all have with them boom boxes and other electronic music devices.

They decide the husband should lie on the beach with a big radio and see what happens. Sure enough, the girl approaches him.

Later, he meets his wife. “What happened? Is she selling drugs?”

“No, she sells batteries. She sells C Cells on the seashore!”

Last word

EXPERIENCE is that marvellous thing that enables you to recognise a mistake when you make it again. – Franklin P Jones