

Hello to Australian friends

Many thanks for your e-mails. To my Oz friends, sorry about the hassle you had trying to send a message via the internet and the Comrades web site. Not sure what went wrong. I may have misled you. Messaging was certainly a feature of the web site last year as I followed my cousin whilst in Brisbane. This e-mail was sent at the first opportunity that my now "*Bambi the new born deer*"-like legs gave me to climb up the stairs of the local Internet café.

The day started at 5.30 am in Pietermaritzburg . Thousands of runners on the off to the Chariots of Fire film theme song. Through the dark African night for about 90 mins before a spectacular sunrise. The old jumpers we wore as temporary cover until the sun did its job were thrown to the side of the road. Barely had they landed when a small child would scurry away with what he/she regarded as a precious freebie... whatever the fit.

I ran the first 70 Km with an experienced runner who was designated to me, as I am a comparative novice to make sure I did not burn out too early. Essentially, his job was to make sure I kept to a sensible pace early on so as to last the course. His name was Yusof Vahed and he has a big black beard that made him look the spiting image of a young Bin Laden.

I had a rough spell round about the 50km mark which Bin Laden pulled me through by just giving me a load of verbal. I've heard of this happening before but didn't really believe it could cure an aching pair of legs but it worked. Corny as it might sound, as I pounded away at the kilometers, I kept looking at my watch and did mental calculations about what time it was back in Oz, imagining that you guys might be tracking my progress. Just could not countenance the thought of folks back home looking at a computer screen with "failed to complete" against my name. If I had been going back to the U.K it would have been different. The Brits are used to making a virtue out of being gallant losers. Probably explains why U.K vs Australia is a no contest in almost anything. Anyway, got my wind back at about the 70 km mark and had to leave Bin Laden behind as he developed a possible calf tear. I was pleased to finish the 89 km in 9 hours 52 mins as I was aiming for a sub 10-hour time.

By the way, now that I've mentioned the syllables Bin Laden twice in the above paragraph, this should be enough to get the security forces to search your hard discs as possible known accomplices.

Running through this part of Africa is a moving experience. The supporters cheering you on encompass every social and racial background from shack dwellers to owners of multi million dollar mansions as the route winds through the spectacularly beautiful and once racially divided areas of apartheid South Africa. It's easy to see why the country is now called "The Rainbow Nation" as the hue

of the faces are more varied than the Vita Shade guides we have in the surgery. The runner's names are printed on our shirts and you are cajoled, fed, lubricated, and wafted along by strangers who shout out your name as if they were personal friends. A far cry from the days prior to 1975 when the race was only for those of European ancestry and more over men only. The race is now more aptly nick named the "Ultimate Human Race". Having said that, this year, the Russians cleared the board with a men's first and a pair of Russian twins coming first and second in the ladies and filling most of the other top woman's positions. The male Russian beat the long held record in just over 5 hours 20 mins. Communist Russia and apartheid South Africa were once sworn enemies with no movement of peoples between the two countries allowed. How things change.

Just to put my run in context, a British double amputee finished the race just after me. Yup, you got it, he ran on two prosthetic legs. He had previously run several marathons worldwide and this was his first ultra marathon. Another totally blind runner was also in my cohort of sub 10 runners and was tethered to a sighted companion throughout. He wanted people to chat around him so he could appreciate the atmosphere.

Tragically, two runners died. Michael Gordon, a 34-year-old died after suffering a suspected heart attack just before the finish line for his first Comrades.

The newspapers reported on Monday that he was a father of two and might have been already dead when he crossed the finishing line.

He collapsed about 100m from the line and other athletes carried him the rest of the way. He beat the deadline for a bronze medal by three minutes. In the Comrades it is allowable for fellow runners to carry you over the line. As I had come in about an hour earlier we watched in the terraces of the stadium and cheered on the four runners who actually lifted his limp body over the electronic devices to register his time as sub 11 thereby allowing him to get a "better medal" than the sub 12 hour one. Little did we know that we were watching a man die. An emergency medical team was able to treat him within seconds, but was unable to resuscitate him.



According to the newspapers, Gordon's wife Lisa said she last saw him at 10am.

"He said he had been in pain since 21km," "His feet had blisters. I had to put plaster on his feet and then he continued running. I did not know it was the last time I would see him alive."

As she waited at the finishing line for her

husband, someone called to tell her he had passed out.

According to other newspaper reports, Carsten Frischmuth one of the runners who helped carry him across the line couldn't believe how quickly his condition worsened.

"He ran past us with two kilometres to go encouraging all of us to come along. When we got to one kilometre to go he started wandering all over the road and then collapsed inside the stadium. We had to make a call on whether we should leave him and call the medics or go on. We decided to help carry him through and make the 11 hour cut off," he lamented.

Media liaison Katia Jones said it was "a very sad day for the Comrades Marathon, especially after his fellow runners went to such lengths to carry him across the line"

At 5.30pm the mans wife received a call from a doctor, informing her that her husband was dead.

"I just don't know if he knows he finished the race," is what she was reported to have said. .

Per the Jewish faith, he was buried within hours of his death. This would be the same in the event of a Moslem death as many of our rituals are similar.

Willem Malapi, a 48-year-old was taken into the medical tent where his condition deteriorated rapidly. He was transferred to Hospital. He died during the course of the night.

His death resulted from cardiac arrest after he suffered an electrolyte imbalance. He had completed 14 Comrades marathons.

A friend of mine had to bail out when because of a worry that his heart rate was too easily reaching 200.

Angie... Didn't you say "don't die" as you last words on that Thursday? I do listen sometimes.

Would I do this a third time? Absolutely, the experience of the sheer humanity of thousands of faces urging and helping you on and the comradeship (Australians read mate-ship) shown by the runners as they sacrifice the achievement of their own personal goal to help someone else has to be felt to be appreciated. Furthermore, I just don't have the sort of personality that would allow me to carry on till I drop dead. In my case, more likely is one of those loose ligaments which are most noticeable in my double jointed fingers would go "twang" and my race would be over before there was a cardiac event.

Forgot to bring the lead that downloads pics from the camera to the computer. Yusuf, ( my unbearded 18 year old, not the one on the race) lands in Durban tomorrow and will have it. Will send pics then.

Leave South Africa on the 28<sup>th</sup> June. Arrive Oz 29<sup>th</sup>. See you shortly thereafter.

Anver