

Ten things science can't teach you about Comrades

Over the years I've helped many runners get ready for the Comrades Marathon. I've helped them through injuries, talked about training and nutrition and designed specific strength classes etc. etc. But now I can count myself among the many brave South African's who have finished this ultimate race. I thought I'd share a few things I learnt along the way, things that science can't teach you...

1. **Have a VERY good and personal reason to run the Comrades:** Just getting to the start of this race is a challenge, the early morning runs, the weekends where you have to hit the road instead of sitting round the fire having a beer, knowing that "going for a run" is no longer just a 30min round the block jog but a 2-hour training session that all counts towards the "big one". For me running the Comrades was something I'd wanted to do since I was about 9 year's old, my dad ran it and I told him then that one day I'd run it too. 22 years later I decided 2012 was my year. If my reasons for wanting to do the Comrades weren't so important and personal to me, I'm sure I'd easily have said, "oh well, my training is not going to plan, there's always next year". As it was, even then I had a few touch and go moments!



2. **Learn about the history of the race:** Comrades is not just a 90km ultra, it comes with so much history and culture. Why does the cock crow signal the start of the race? Who were the medals named after? Who was Arthur of Arthur's seat? Knowing more about the race adds a richness to the experience and makes you feel like you're part of a continuing history of the ultimate race.
3. **Take advice from someone who's done the race:** It will seem as if everyone you talk to about Comrades will have some sort of advice for you. Your family, friends, running club chairman, a random runner on your qualifying marathon, the personal trainer at Ginginglovo gym (4 days before Comrades!), everyone will have something to say and add. Find one person who's done the race, who ideally knows you and your running history and decide together on your training and race day strategy. I spent many phone calls and visits with my dad going over the course, discussing how my training was going and talking about logistics. Of course it's good to read what the 20 times Comrades runner's say, go to the panel discussions etc. You'll pick up a few things you can try or think might work for you. Biokineticists, Physios etc. can teach you about the science of running ultras but only someone with experience of the actual race can tell you what it feels like to be at the start or to descend Fields hill.

4. **Visualisation:** This turned out to be an incredibly valuable tool for me. I once asked my dad how it felt to finish Comrades. He said, “When you run onto the grass it feels like you’re running on air”. Since I was little I’ve wondered what that felt like. During my training, preparation and even during the race I visualised what it would feel like to finish running on air with my family and friends supporting me. It helped me to keep training, keep running and cross the line. And yes, that’s exactly what it felt like. Your pain disappears and you have a spring in your step all the way round the stadium 😊
5. **The night before:** I was incredibly lucky to have friends host me and my supporters in Pietermaritzburg the night before Comrades. The greatest benefit was the distraction from what was happening the next morning! It starts to crowd your mind until it’s the only thing you can think and talk about. Try to surround yourself with people that will joke around, keep things light and talk about something besides the fact you’re running to Durban in the morning! Of course make sure you stick to your plan- tested dinner and early night etc.

6. **Have supporters along the route:** I think this may just be the most important race day tip. It absolutely makes the difference. I didn’t run according to kms to the end but kms to my support. At half way I had 15km to support at Hillcrest, at Hillcrest 12km to support at the bottom of Cowie’s etc. To know that I had people I loved waiting for me at specific points is what got me to the end. That’s not an exaggeration!



7. **Run your own race:** As a novice almost everything is a new experience. The start! The route! A never before done distance! It can become quite daunting, too much to filter. For me it was important to remember my father’s words “just relax” and to run my own race. My experience: early on a bus came through and I hopped on as I thought it a good idea. I could catch some of the spirit, be distracted about what lay ahead and let the experienced leader set the pace. 10km later I had to stop for a pit stop and couldn’t catch up with the bus. The next time a bus came through was just after half way. By this stage I was already quite sore and was running slowly but consistently. It seemed the bus’s strategy was to run for 2min, walk for 2min. For me this was undoable, it took about 2min running after walking just to get a comfortable gait back! I let the bus go, and started back on my own race. Do what you feel is right. Just by getting to Comrades means you have enough experience to understand your body.
8. **Timing:** It was pretty much only with 2km to go that I knew for sure I’d make the finish. I’d gone through “at this pace, I’ll never make it!” to “I have enough time, easy finish!” at least 50 times. I couldn’t do the maths! I remember trying to calculate that, if I’d run for 7.5hrs and had 12hrs to finish how much time did I have left? I think it took me 2 kms just to figure that one out! I’m not sure what the best solution for me would be. Buy a computer

running watch (I just have a start-stop which I've always found simple and easy to use)? Buy the pacing bracelets at expo (I was worried it would stress me out if I wasn't exactly on time and how would they know how I'd run)? Is this normal and what every Comrades runner goes through? This is definitely something I'd investigate before the next one. But no matter what, there's always only 1 thing to do- KEEP GOING!

9. **Pain:** A useful thing for me that I read somewhere (sorry can't remember where) is that "once you're sore, you're sore, it doesn't get any sorer unless you develop an injury". In my case this was true, you go through stages but by the end you can't identify where the pain is and it doesn't matter if it's uphill, downhill or flat. The best thing to do is KEEP GOING even if going is a slow walk (unless you're injured). The pain will disappear but you keep the memories and medal forever.
10. **The finish:** Savour the finish. It's an amazing experience you've been working towards for 89kms. You'll feel like a hero! Take it all in, run it slowly and look out for those ever faithful supporters. You'll feel like you're running on air 😊



I hope sharing my experiences with you will help you on your endeavour to finish the Ultimate Human Race, the Comrades Marathon.

Happy running,

Jeanne- Comrades Finisher (11h29min)