Brutal Comrades: A Personal Story

Please note that this blog post explains my whereabouts for the past week or so but has nothing to do with economics or investing. It's a personal story about my experience in the 'ultimate human race' last weekend – if that's not something that interests you, I've already wasted too much of your time

At 3:10pm on Sunday, 30 May, I hobbled onto Kingsmead stadium in Durban. I had one lap to run of this famous South African cricket ground to run in order to complete the Comrades Marathon. For the record, I crossed the finish line 9hrs 40 mins after I'd started, but by then all thoughts of pacing myself, achieving a certain time or flying across the line with arms raised had long gone out the window. I just wanted it over with.

We began the day at 4am in Pietermaritzburg, the starting city for Comrades every second year. This is the 85th running of the event, and the 43rd time runners have started in Pietermaritzburg and run to Durban, 89km away. The other 42 times, they've run the other way. (This year's race was a 'down' year, evoking in my mind images of a leisurely downhill stroll. As we drove the course on the Thursday before race day, it quickly dawned on us that this is one very cruel misnomer. Yes, it's net 600m down, but there's 1400m of up and 2000m of down, most of it at the end where jarring downhill running is the last thing you need.)

After a year of training and preparation, we weren't taking any risks on race day. Clothes were already laid out, timing chips attached and breakfast already prepared. Of course, the taxi didn't turn up (this is Africa after all). After waiting 15 mins we had to wake the house keeper where we were staying and sheepishly ask for a lift to town.

The city centre was chaotic. After running more than a kilometre to find the baggage trucks we were confronted with a melee at least 500 people deep. There was no chance of making it to the front of the queue in time for race start. In the chaos I lost my running mate Thomas and, after a year of training together almost every weekend, this was the last we'd see of each other before Durban.

I certainly wasn't going to run the race with a 7kg backpack, so I found some random guy who looked like he wasn't racing and asked him if he was going to the finish. 'Sure' he said, 'why?' 'Would you mind taking my bag, I'll get it off you at the end'. Shane looked at me like I was deranged but said yes and gave me a number that I could only hope was real. I removed money and my phone and handed over the bag – this is going to sound strange but I knew I'd get it back (Shane dropped my bag off to me on his way back to Swaziland the next day, having spent hours looking for me at the finish line after his phone went dead).

To fit the phone and money in my pocket, however, I had to ditch the gels and energy bars I was carrying. Thinking that there'll be plenty at the drink stations was something I would come to regret.

The race start was seeded and my qualifying time got me in group C, which placed me in the first five thousand or so, but the seeding pens were closed by the time I arrived. For once

discarding my proclivity to wait patiently at the back of queues, I followed some fellow runners and jumped the fence with a security guard trying to grab me by the ankle. With five minutes to spare, it was time to soak up the atmosphere.

The second you set foot in this country you can feel history unfolding around you. You're in the middle of an experiment, a country that's changing on a daily basis. And one that's going to be very different in 20 years' time. Hopefully for the better, perhaps for the worse, but it's going to be different (the only other time I've felt this feeling of history unfolding was when I visited my brother in Berlin in 2003, and there's no doubt I was there a decade late).

I wanted the national anthems to last longer than they did. As 18,000 people of all colours, shapes and sizes stood in the dark and sang multiple national anthems with pride, the 24% unemployment rate, rampant corruption and bitter political infighting seemed like easily surmountable problems. Before I knew it, though, the gun fired and, a minute later I crossed the start line and shuffled down the road, with very little idea of what was ahead of me.

There is no limit to how long or how difficult you can make an ultra-marathon. There is a race in Australia from Bega to the top of Mt Kosciusko (more than 200km). Although it's long and ridiculously hilly, Comrades is not special because of the specifications. It's special because of the occasion. For 89km there wasn't one bit of road without supporters on it. In the towns and junctions and on the big hills, the crowds were three and four people deep. All urging you on (every race number has a name on it, so they're actually yelling go Steven, which would have impressed my mum but I do prefer Steve), singing, dancing and playing pop music through specially improvised DJ desks.

The 44km mark is half way. As if we weren't all aware of the fact, there's a big sign over the road saying 'you're half way'. Personally, that didn't fill me with confidence. I had already felt the first cramp twinge in my dodgy left calf. And as the DJ announced that the leader was only 15km from the finish line, I really wished I could swap places. I had passed through about 20 aid stations by this time and had given up on gels or energy bars. Comrades has a tradition of boiled potatoes and salt, and that's what you get (oh if I had just carried the power bar with me!). Every race I've completed, whether it's 10km or 89km, there's a time where you hurt. But hurting when you've still got more than a marathon to run does play a little on your mind.

From that point on, full of salt tablets and pain killers, I didn't run up a hill. My calf was fine downhill but the second I reached the slightest of inclines a cramp would hit me like I'd been shot with an air gun. Before the race everyone was telling me about the Comrades camaraderie. The night before, one experienced runner told me that he was about to pull out of his first Comrades when a bus (a large group of runners sticking together) came past singing. Singing! He couldn't help but pick himself up and join the ride to Durban.

There were no buses where I was and no one was saying a word. Everyone was running or walking his or her own race and shuffling their way towards the distant ocean.

I knew I was going to make it. Most ultra-marathons are run by ultra-marathon runners. Comrades is run by ordinary people. Hundreds of thousands of them have finished the race before and I knew I would be no different. I thought about walking the last 20km. A massive blister had developed on the ball of my right foot and now I couldn't even run on the flat. I calculated that I'd be on the road for another 3hrs 20 if I walked the whole way, though, and

couldn’t bear the thought of it. So on I plodded, passing people down the hills and watching them pass me up the other side.

No matter how many people yelled ‘c’mon SteveN, it’s just around the corner’, I couldn’t run the last few kilometres. I made an attempt to look like I was running once inside the stadium but doubt it fooled anyone. I also tried to pretend I was elated with my arms raised over the line but that, too, was a charade. There was nothing but relief at having finally made it.

I slumped down in the recovery area next to a guy I’d seen around me throughout the day.

‘How you feelin’ man?’, he asked me.
‘Not the best mate, that was tough’.
‘So you comin’ back next year then?’.
‘I don’t think so mate, that’s just too far for this 85kg frame’.
‘Ach c’mon man, you haven’t really done Comrades until you’ve done a down AND an up year!’

I doubt it, but we’ll see. One thing for sure is that I’ll remember my first forever.

If you’re feeling inspired by this little story, you can do your bit by contributing to the charity I supported as part of my run. The Shepherd Centre is a wonderful Sydney based not-for-profit that teaches deaf children to speak. I could spruik the amazing job the staff at the Shepherd Centre do but if a picture paints a thousand words, a video records 10,000. Take a couple of minutes to watch these videos and you’ll understand why it’s a cause worth running 89km for. They’re so good at their job that enrolments have increased by 145% in the past 10 years. Unfortunately, government funding for the Early Intervention Program has only increased by 37%, and that’s why they need our help. Support my run and the Shepherd Centre by donating through the Everyday Hero website.