

A Personal Account of my Running Career to Date

By Gareth Evans

How it all began

At the tender age of just 18 years, in 1976, I found myself playing for the Wits University U20 rugby team as left centre at the hallowed Loftus Versveld ground in Pretoria. I had been selected for Transvaal U20 trials, as the Transvaal players at the club, specifically the Transvaal and South African scrumhalf Paul Bayvel, saw great potential in me. I could “read” the game of rugby fantastically well, and once I had used my Welsh flair and “taken the break”, would pass the ball away to the speedsters to score try upon try. I also was known to throw myself into the tackle time and time again even if I was obviously hurt.

I had a lot to live up to, both parents being internationals, my Dad having played Welsh schoolboy rugby, and my Mom hockey for Northern Rhodesia. My two brothers and I were also tussling it out to see who was the best athlete, my elder brother Nigel winning on natural flair in virtually all sports, and my younger brother Colin beating our 400m records at school by running the 400m for Transvaal schools and training with the South African women’s record holder at the famous Wanderers Club in Johannesburg..

It was at the aforementioned rugby match that my competitive sporting future came to an abrupt end. Being a small man, on throwing myself into a tackle against a huge Afrikaner, something like Catt against Jomo Lomu in the 1995 Rugby World Cup, I bounced back and was stretchered off. My left kneecap had been smashed, and I was in pain in hospital for two weeks recovering. My speed never came back.

The following season I tried again, and was so disappointed. Playing rugby on those hard grounds with a limp leg was not very wise as I soon developed hip and knee pains, and torn hamstrings.

I had always run for rugby training and for fun (imagining myself to be the incarnation of Alf Tupper from the Victor comics for boys). So when the Macro company and the SABC got together in 1977 sponsoring fun runs and the first broadcast half marathon, I was there, enjoying myself. Soon I joined the Wits Cross Country and Marathon Club and took part in their after University runs through Braamfontein and up gold mine dumps doing hill training, developing a camaraderie with a great bunch of people. All were destined for fantastic things, Lawyers, Doctors, and Accountants. The most famous amongst this small band of runners was Bruce Fordyce, The Comrades King, and perennial London to Brighton winner. A light 50kg, Bruce pioneered adaptations to the Arthur Liddiard LSD method of training, nutrition both before (carbo loading) and during the race, and learning from ones running logbook. Others included the originators of the Sweat Shop chain of running stores, Jax Snyman and Tony Dearling. What I enjoyed most was the weekly long runs from one of our houses into the countryside, now fully built up, and braai afterwards. We enjoyed annual Easter breaks away to the Jock of the Bushveld ultramarathon in Barberton. At the time it also had the world’s tallest rugby posts. I say enjoy, but one year I ended up on a stretcher on a drip at the end of the race having become dehydrated in the heat.

On one holiday I met, while going for my morning constitutional run, a remarkable man, Charlie Chase, who had run the most ever Comrades marathons at the time, over 30, and who had no kneecaps after a car accident. He was inspirational to me, as if he could do it so could I. I upped my running to about 80 km per week, and started plotting my running times, making the mistake of looking at distance to time being a constant instead of more exponential. Nevertheless my times improved and I was then finishing in the top 10% of all the races I entered. All except for the dreaded Cross Country where I always found myself near the back of the field at intervarsities, with the last runners dropping out, while I carried on in the hope I wouldn't be last. These memories have put me in good stead to survive my near last positions I normally now run.

South African marathons and ultramarathons that stand out for me

Many stand out for me, however the two favourite are my fastest marathon at 2 hours 53 minutes, being the Buffalo marathon at East London, and my Silver Comrades 7 hours 23 minutes. I remember running dead on 4 minutes a kilometre for the first 40 kilometres, and then blowing for the last 2.2 kilometres in my fastest marathon. Comrades was great too, as for a long time I was in the top 100 in the race (out of about 15,000) as I ran two sub-three hours back to back, thereafter my lightweight Nike shoes gave in and I limped the remainder with a seriously pulled calf muscle. I later found out that I had been running with torn cartilages as well due to rugby days, and after an unsuccessful series of treatment of cortisone to the knee, instead of leaving the cartilages in, the doctors took them out. So today I have half a kneecap in my left knee and no cartilages in either.

Other quirky marathons include my mucking around and running the Bergville to Ladysmith marathon fully along the yellow line at the side of the road as much as possible. I remember concentrating so much with a floppy sun hat over my ears and eyes that I did not take in the scenery where possibly some of my forebears had fought Boers and Zulus. My least proud marathon was one where I came 11th and was the first Rhodes University runner to finish. It was 60km from Port Alfred on the coast to Grahamstown, the site of the university. I am not proud of myself as I took a concoction of liquid designed to allow students to stay up all night and study, and found myself the highest physiologically and by way of position I had ever been in a marathon, until near the end I was sick and the wheels came off. I remember Professor Surtees, my tax lecturer, at the finish line, ecstatic at my performance, there to greet me, and my saying "Sorry Prof, if I were you I wouldn't stand in front of me right now". Also at Rhodes University the Eastern Province marathon runner Brian Bosch was studying VO2 max and other things, and put me on a treadmill to run a sub three hour marathon whilst being wired up, with a face mask on, and listening the whole time to Chariots of Fire.

Soon after all of this I seem to have inspired my brother Nigel to take up distance running. My Dad also later took up running and stopped smoking. Somehow both thank me to this day for the positive effect I seem to have had on their lives. Nigel went on to win many marathons and ultramarathons and run for Western Province in the marathon.

SA runners I've met

I remember introducing my brother Nigel to runners such as Bruce Fordyce, Mark Plaatjies (another Witsie, who got a running scholarship to the USA and eventually won the world marathon championships) and Dr Lindsay Weight, while years later Bruce and Dr Tim Noakes became Nigel's friends.

More than just a runner

While I was doing my accountancy articles at Coopers & Lybrand, now PWC, I met up with a "hard man" in the SA Parachute Team. Charles decided that I would be a great partner to do the Duzi Canoe marathon with, three days of canoeing down the fast flowing and strong Umzimkulu and Umzimduzi rivers between Pietermaritzburg and Durban. He realised that I would be a good person to do portages with, being at the time a fast runner. Learning to canoe in the middle of Winter, and falling into the freezing water, was good preparatory training for Winter fellrunning on the IOM in later years. Our canoe became known as the "yellow submarine" for obvious reasons. I thoroughly enjoyed my canoeing years, and linked this in to the Midmar Dam mile swim and the Comrades run to do the original South African Ironman competition. Nowadays the disciplines are of course done one after the other on the same day.

The IOM has enticed me to take part in race walking as a further challenge. So it is that I have completed the Parish Walk twice and due to the wonderful encouragement of the special people in the IOMVAC club and of the Isle of Man, I am a Centurion as well.

Building a career and emigration from SA to IOM

No sport was competitively undertaken with any gusto by myself in the mid80's to about year 2002 as I was trying to grow my career. This period involved me doing an MBA from Wits University, getting married, having children, emigrating to the IOM in July 1995 and settling in. My wife to be, Jackie, insisted premarriage that we would only have two children, I wanted more. So my counter precondition was that I could go running whenever I liked. We've stuck to the former, however I do get a lot of flack for spending hours on end with my friends on the fells and for going out training when I get the chance.

Contrasts in running

I have experienced a big difference in the SA conditions to that found on the IOM being the dry and dusty slippery grass during cross countries, and heat and humidity in Natal. I would often train in Winter in a vest and shorts or even without the vest and be warm enough. Cross country in the IOM is on soggy muddy grass, while fellrunning conditions are invariably cold, wet and windy, with gloves, tracksters and three layers of clothing being needed.

The equivalent of weekly timetrials in SA are the IOM's fireman's runs.

British marathons and ultramarathons that stand out for me

Two stand out for me, being our own Manx Mountain Marathon (MMM), and the Marathon of Britain (MOB).

The Marathon of Britain is a 175 mile orienteering stage race (see Bethany's article in the last newsletter) starting near Wales and finishing at Nottingham. It satisfied a

dream of mine as I had always wanted to start the Washie, a 100 mile roadrace between East London and Port Elizabeth over undulating hills in wet and windy conditions with 24 hours to complete it in, and never had. Doing the MOB this last September I discovered the limit of my legs in their present state.

My IOM running friends

Everyone in my adopted home has been very kind and friendly. Two people however stand out head and shoulders in my own personal experience. I hope they forgive me if I mention them. Training for the MMM 2006, David Quine and Lorraine Stigant and I formed a bond doing our weekly, middle of winter, training runs over the fells and sometimes under the snow, ice and in the marshy bits, and shared experiences that make us laugh to this day. Thank you both for giving me so much.

50 Marathons by 50

I first thought about rounding off my total of marathons to 50 by the age of 50 at the end of 2006 during a few reflective moments. As I then blurted it out to David and Lorraine on a Greeba training run, I had to keep to my goal. I was planning to run the 50 miler Thames Path Ultra race on my 50th birthday in February 2008 to total 50, but they changed the date. Instead I applied myself this last year and topped off my 50th marathon with the MOB. To put this achievement into context, I met a man who had run over 600 marathons, so my 50 is nothing (but its made me happy).

What do I want to achieve next?

In order to get the time to train and run all those races this last year, I had to assure Jackie, my long suffering wife, that on finishing I'd help out around the house for a change. Any change to this plan shall need her permission. My right knee is a hindrance in carrying on running marathons, as I do need orthopaedic care. The wags who suggest doubling up on my marathons to 100 are being optimistic. Those days are gone. I also have a busy job as an auditor at Deloitte so I will not find the time. However, Deloitte are the financial advisors to the 2012 London Olympics and need Deloitte people to work on it, so I may try combine my job with my love of sport. Watch this space.

Christine Barwell also gave me a few ideas today that sound interesting for the next year or two. The offroad, softer surface I can manage, and I would like to continue with my love of fellrunning and continue aiming for the ultimate "play time for adults" day out, the MMM.

Qed