

Comrades 2010: My Journey, My Race By Joe Galioto

"Joseph"

[Did someone call my name?]

"Joseph, are you ready to get in the car?"

[Huh? Get in the car? What car?

I turned to my right and saw that the race sweep car had pulled up right alongside me]

"Do you want to get in?"

[Why would I do that?]

"Because you have about a half-kilometer to the cut-off and only about 3 minutes to get there. No way you're going to make it! Just figured I'd give you a break."

I was running for about 11:15 and approaching mile 52 of the 2010 Comrades Marathon, a 56 mile race from Pietersmaritzburg to Durban in South Africa. Since mile 16 or so, my body started to crack. Like an old car, it seemed that every few miles brought new issues. My right knee was aching, my quads were throbbing and my foot/ankle/lower leg was swollen and painful to the slightest touch, courtesy of an unhealed strained posterior tibial tendon I injured a few weeks before. I was so dehydrated that my face was dry and crusted with salt and I wasn't sweating too much either despite the heat, and my "output" was a nice shade of dark yellow and not too plentiful either. "Joseph, do you want to get in the car?" I had so many excuses to get into that car and call it a day...

More than three months have passed since the Comrades race and I have struggled greatly to write a race report. Typically after major races, I'd write a "story" of my race, reliving the feeling I had and the events that occurred throughout the race. I know that many friends and family enjoy reading these and was hoping to see something about Comrades so they could vicariously experience the race, yet I couldn't write anything.

Comrades was the race I looked forward to for months and trained harder for than any event I had ever done, and yet when it was over, I was left completely devoid of any interest in running whatsoever. Talking about the race was an after-thought, and was usually limited to statements like: "it was great;" "I enjoyed my time there;" "lots of hills." Gone was the desire to lace up the shoes and run; zero interest in reading the running magazines I received and (shockingly) gone was all interest in checking out the new running shoes – and I love running shoes!

I can't explain it other than to say that "I didn't want to run, and I didn't miss it." Instead, I wanted to ride my bicycle. I was a cyclist before I ran and that's all I wanted to do.

Now, for some reason, even though I'm still not running consistently, I feel ready to put some thoughts together, to relay my experience for others to (hopefully) enjoy and for me to look back on. To

appreciate my Comrades race, to feel what I felt and understood what I was thinking, you have to know the events that led up to it. Following is my attempt to convey this to you.

LEADING UP TO THE RACE

In October 2009, my friend and teammate, Colin Saville proposed the idea of running the 85th Annual Comrades Marathon, an approximate 90 kilometer race between the cities of Pietermaritzburg and Durban in South Africa. Comrades was started in 1921 when 34 determined runners left Pietermaritzburg for Durban to commemorate their comrades who fell during WW1. Through the years, Comrades has grown exponentially and now attracts more than 13000 runners annually. It is a cherished national treasure and is essentially the greatest of all ultra marathons – and I wanted to run it!

The race was scheduled for May 30, 2010. In preparation, I combed the Internet to learn everything I could about the race: its history, terrain, past runners' accounts, etc. In time, I even created a training schedule, something I rarely do. My feeling for doing so was that I am traveling 5000 miles from home and will be without my family for a week; I want to go there knowing that I did the work.

Winter in NJ was rough in that we experienced record snowfalls and cold temperatures. I continued to log road and trail miles, doing my usual routine of a few short runs during the week and long runs on weekends. I also used my snowshoes for runs on the trails and felt myself getting really strong; I was running longer and faster and my recovery was good. My resting heart rate was in the 40's. Everything was going well.

On March 19th, I felt a pain in my lower leg about 3 miles into a run. It wasn't a "typical" pain, so I decided to turn around and go home. The next few runs were fine but about a week later, the pain started again. It hurt on the inside of the lower leg above and below the ankle bone and in the arch. Taking a few days off has never been an issue for me so I did just that. I then got sick and was forced to take even more time off from running. I went for a run on April 3rd and again the foot bothered me. I remember thinking that "this can't be good. After two weeks of not running, it shouldn't be feeling painful – if the injury was minor." I really didn't want to think about it being bad. I started to add more bike workouts and cross-training hoping to maintain cardio fitness, eliminating the pounding of running and enabling whatever it was to heal.

I also searched the Internet for information about my foot. When all the symptoms pointed towards posterior tibial tendonitis (PTT), I felt sick. A brief explanation: *"Posterior tibial tendonitis is an uncommon problem of one of the tendons on the inner side of the ankle. The initial treatment of posterior tibial tendonitis is focused on resting the tendon to allow for healing. Unfortunately, even normal walking may not adequately allow for the tendon to rest sufficiently. In these cases, the ankle must be immobilized to allow for sufficient rest."*

I knew something was up but I didn't want to accept that I had a PTT injury. I subjected my foot to daily ice baths, compression, elevation and light stretching. I pretty much ceased running and incorporated some walking and biking into the schedule for approximately two weeks. Before the two weeks was up, I noticed that the swelling had gone away and I wasn't feeling any pain. April 19th marked the day that Lisa Smith-Batchen was to commence her "Running Hope for America" run starting in NJ. I had planned to join her for months and told myself that I would use that run to dictate my next step. As an added measure of protection, I placed a rigid arch support in my shoe. If my prognosis was correct, then I had

to support the arch. An injury to the PTT can result in fallen arches so my rationale was that the rigid arch support would lessen the distance the arch would compress and reduce the stress on that area of the PT-tendon.

Colin joined me on the 16th and the two of us ran alongside Lisa and new friends. I felt great. My foot was strong and holding up just fine... until mile 16. I promptly walked off the course to my car and looked at my foot. It was really swelled and a little black-and-blue.

Two days later, on April 21st – my birthday - I was in the doctor's office where he confirmed the PTT injury and suggested that I wear a soft cast. "Doctor, I'm going to South Africa in 5 weeks," I started to say. "Oh, you're going to the World Cup?" he responded, "I think you'll need to take it easy for a while, but you should be okay to walk around there." "Not the World Cup, I'm running the Comrades Marathon, it's a 56 mile race. Do you think I'll be able to go?" I asked. "Let's just wait to see how your foot reacts to the cast" followed by "Please don't run." Seriously, my foot was in a cast; how would I run? I couldn't believe it. I hadn't been injured in several years. Why did "my time" have to come now? I was really upset but resolved to do whatever I had to do to get healed. The race wasn't my first priority, but of course I wanted to go. I think I was in shock though.

The cast came off a week later and then I had to wear a walking boot. The walking boot essentially isolates the tendons and prevents them from movement, but provides a bit more freedom than a cast, but it's huge and quite annoying to wear, especially to someone like myself who likes to walk and move freely. On May 6th, the Doctor confirmed that the swelling was gone and I possessed decent strength. I think he was a little surprised by how quickly this progressed. I was encouraged to walk and run about a mile or two every couple of days. I tried this and it felt okay – definitely not perfect.

Another Doctor visit confirmed that "not perfect" means just that, but also to be expected as I had to gain strength. Again he encouraged light activity with caution. We discussed orthotics previously and the topic came up again. A few years back, I thought that I couldn't run without orthotics but after extensive research into my issues, I determined that what I really needed was to strengthen my ankles and feet and work on my imbalances. I understood why orthotics were suggested now but I didn't want to go back that route again. I showed the Doctor the heat-moldable insert I was using and he seemed satisfied that they fit well and would provide support.

Jogs down my driveway caused pain. Yes, I was in re-strengthening mode, but my driveway isn't long nor steep. What's it going to be like in South Africa? I rationalized that if I keep using it versus resting it, I was risking reinjuring it. After learning that I couldn't get a refund on the flight and the entrant's fee could not be carried over to a future year, I decided I would go to Comrades and try. The worst case scenario would be that I couldn't run, and I would turn into a spectator and tourist and be forced to enjoy sightseeing. So, with 24 days to Comrades, I decided not to run, not to power-walk, not to do anything that stressed that area and to let nature heal it. I knew I would be losing fitness but I was willing to accept that if I could strengthen it enough to get me through, I would be alright. When people asked how training was going or how I felt, I simply said "fine." I didn't want to think about it, but to myself, I would say "Please don't let me pull up lame five miles into the event. If I could get to 40 miles, then perhaps I could gut it out."

I arrived in South Africa four days before and immediately I felt welcomed. Colin, who was already there and his brother Brian who resides there, picked me up from the airport and then we drove along the

course. We stopped at various landmarks along the course and took photos. We also pointed out a location about halfway where Brian would meet us.

I was so appreciative to have them show me around but immediately I felt nervous. Here I was in South Africa to run one of the world's toughest ultras and I hadn't run for more than five weeks. I had no idea how I would run and if I would "get that fighting chance." It was the beginning of winter there, but it was not cold, perhaps 40's at night and high 70's during the day, yet I was freezing. During the day, I was wearing a long-sleeved wool shirt on top of a short sleeve t-shirt. At night, I was sleeping with several blankets and even a fleece jacket to stay warm. In hindsight, I was so anxious that I caused this sensation. The night before the race, Colin and I walked to a friend's house. This involved going up several steep hills and I found that I was able to walk up them with speed and power without pain. This was a huge confidence builder!

THE RACE

The start of Comrades was the most beautiful start of any event I have ever taken part in. Standing in darkness surrounded by thousands of runners was amazing. The energy we generated gave me chills. I remember looking up to the heavens and talking to God, thanking him for all he has given me; imagining my wife and children, visualizing her beautiful face and feeling all her encouragement; imagining my sons and their wonderful smiles. To all of them, I promised to celebrate this "ultimate human challenge" (which Comrades is known as) by running with all the strength I could generate, to thank them for their love.

Then the music started. I learned that the music follows a similar schedule each year. First up is a heart-wrenching rendition of a local mining song called Shosolosa which many locals joined in with the singing. This is followed by the beautiful South African National Anthem and finally the classic theme from Chariots of Fire. The last sound heard is the recorded traditional cock crow of a past runner who started the race for many years until his death. Then a moment of eerie silence and finally the gun sounds, causing the more than 20000 runners to shuffle over the line towards their destiny.

Since we were starting in darkness and had to rely on city street lights, I was super cautious. I tried to find my own space and stay safe. Darkness eventually faded to early morning light about an hour into the race. Running down the first major hill - Polly Shorts - I remarked to myself that it wasn't too bad going down, but must be hell in an up year, especially with only 8km to go. An interesting point to note is that rather than having signs displaying the current kilometer, the signs identify the number of kilometers left. So, when running down Polly, the signs said "81 kilometers to go." This would be the start of my mental calculations. I think in "miles" not "kilometers" so every time we passed one of these signs, I would convert the kilometers to miles and then calculate my pace and how much time I had to finish. Early on, it was something interesting to think about; late in the race, it became tortuous as time was dwindling and I didn't want to worry about metric conversions and equations .

The road undulates with ups-and-downs and I was moving along smoothly, enjoying the warm morning sun and the fact that I was running comfortably. In addition to the mental math, I also started thinking about how, when I got back home, I would walk into my Doctor's office and show him my medal. It wasn't so much a "see, I told you I could recuperate faster than you believed I could" attitude; it was really more a reflection of the euphoria I was feeling at running without pain and the strong belief that I would finish on-time.

Somewhere around mile 16 (that dreaded mile again), I started feeling pain in the injured area of my foot. It was a dull pain, but it was persistent. I had taken a few precautions in preparation for this: I wore a figure-8 ankle brace (it's basically an ankle sleeve with two opposing straps. It provides arch support and reduces the inverting movement of the ankle.) and lower-leg compression sleeves (the PTT runs up the length of the lower leg so the compression sleeves would provide support in that way). I also carried some Aleve. When the pain started, I decided not to take the Aleve but to wait until I got to the halfway point. I stepped off the road and pulled up the compression sleeve and tightened the straps on the ankle brace. I also did a minor inspection and didn't see any black-and-blue, but some areas were tender to the touch. I continued my forward progress and felt a little better. The thought of walking off the course and ending my race never entered my mind at this point.

When I entered the 60k to go mark, I saw signs for Cato Ridge. I remembered this section from the "tour" Brian and Colin gave. It was here that I thought I was to meet Brian but I didn't see him. He wasn't holding anything for me so seeing him wasn't that important, but it would have been nice. The road descends and heads towards Harrison Flats (a complete misnomer because the road is definitely not flat). This area was barren, and by now the sun was really beating down.

I was hot but not uncomfortable. I was consistently drinking a water sachet at every opportunity. I was feeling hungry though. In preparation, I had debated about how much to carry. I like gels and planned to carry a few. The race information said that there would be food (like boiled potatoes) along the course so I opted to carry about five gels, enough to fill my pockets without causing bouncing and supplement with the food they provided. What I failed to realize though was that the food-on-course would not be present until after the half-way point. While five gels is typically enough for this distance, the combination of my expecting there to be potatoes and other stuff and the fact that my stomach wasn't enjoying just gels, worked against me. My mind was now going nuts doing math and wondering where the food was.

Leaving Harrison Flats, we head towards Inchanga. At the Ethembeni Home, we encountered a tunnel of cheering children. These children are leaning on crutches or in wheelchairs or had other issues. They were all so enthusiastic, screaming and cheering us on. Those that could held their hands out hoping for a high-five. I have three little boys of my own and seeing these children really causes you to reflect. I was determined to high-five as many hands as possible. Mentally I was charged from this, but when the excitement past, I finally decided to take the Aleve and not wait to halfway.

Going up the Inchanga hill, I met Hilton Galleid. Hilton had 21 Comrade finishes and was not just a wonderful resource of information, he was very friendly, encouraging and a pleasure to run with. We were running and walking the same pace going up Inchanga but then I started to pull away and he shouted encouragement. I turned around a few times on the way up, but couldn't see him anymore. On the way down the descent into Drummond, he came alongside me, wished me well, and then went ahead. This was absolutely crushing. I'm a fast downhill runner and really enjoy going downhill but not today. I needed to last a long time today and didn't want to take any chances - but it was tough seeing people whom I had a several minute lead overtake me on downhills (no disrespect to them, it was just tough knowing that I am capable of much more).

At the halfway mark, the Valley of a Thousand Hills spreads out to the north. I recognized where I was from the "pre-race tour." Amazingly, I spotted Brian standing next to his motorcycle. I ran up to him and said "hello." Finally, I found Brian. We chatted for a few minutes and I advised him that overall, I was feeling okay, but I could tell that my foot injury was starting to bark. He wished me luck and I headed off.

Not long thereafter, I came into an aid station and they were serving various foods including potatoes - yeah! They were being served on a platter being held by one of the volunteers - a nice touch. I took three of them. The first two were wonderful, the third one would spell disaster. I hadn't realized it, but it was practically encased in salt. I took one bite and it was like an instant salt-high. My lips starting burning and I couldn't get the salt taste out of my mouth. I was holding a sachet of water in my hand. As I lifted it to my mouth to tear it open, someone accidentally banged into me knocking the sachet to the ground and it splattered everywhere. I really needed water but I was far enough away from the tables to go back and get another sachet so I had to wait until the next table, approximately 2k away.

At this point, something changed in me. The salt on my lips and in my mouth were making me feel queasy and with the sun blasting me, it accelerated dehydration. I remember I was really thirsty and couldn't wait for water. I'm not sure if the next aid station was a longer distance than the standard, or if somehow I managed to pass it, but I was really struggling at this point. When I finally got to the aid station, I grabbed two water sachets, drank two cups of Coke and another of their "Gatorade-like" product. I still had the salt taste in my mouth. I grabbed another water sachet, broke it opened, and washed my face with it, then drank the other two sachets of water and finally no more salty taste, but my stomach was done as I couldn't eat anything the remainder of the race.

Near the top of Botha's Hill is Kearsney College, where the uniformed students provided a warm welcome. I thought it was kind of cool that students had set up hammocks in the trees and would reach down to high five you. I think I was able to reach one hand, and was encouraged to "jump up" to reach others but I didn't want to take any chances. My race, which up until this point, was a combination of physical and mental strength, was now reduced to pretty much all mental strength. Each footfall felt like a fist-sized rock was under my arch and someone was slapping my leg with a toy baseball bat. (Note: not that I tested this theory out, but I thought that a real baseball bat would have broken my leg whereas the toy bat simply provided enough pain to make me question my resolve.) Down Botha's I ran onward to Hillcrest.

My memory of the next bunch of miles is sparse. I didn't remember much of them the day after the race and the past three months haven't helped the issue.

From what I recall of the Hillcrest section, there were many beautiful homes and the streets were crowded with cheering spectators. One woman saw my name on my race number and said, "Welcome to South Africa Joseph! Open your eyes, the scenery is beautiful here." I waved, said thanks and kept moving, practically crying as I did. But somehow I found humor in the situation - once again, I'm running with my eyes closed.

The remaining two "big hills" were Fields and Cowies. Fields is 3k of punishing downhill. The sides of the road are filled with "physic" stations where runners were getting leg massages. The temptation to stop was there if only to gain a respite from running but I was afraid that if I stopped, I wouldn't be able to regain my momentum. Additionally, while I was in pain, it was primarily from the injury. My quads and calves were really not suffering significantly. Following Fields was the flats of Pinetown, which was mostly flat and enabled me to resume a run-walk routine.

When I got to Cowies Hill, I recalled Hilton's words, "Cowies is a short uphill and then a 1.5k downhill. It's relatively easy." And you know what, he was sort of right. Seriously, every major hill on this course was tough and Cowies, being the last major hill, wasn't so bad considering everything that came before. But the toll of my injury compounded by the fact that I couldn't eat anything after the potato-incident, the hot sun, and the soreness that the cumulative effects of the route caused me, were all working against me. I was continuing to drink coke and water, but I was feeling weak and a little dehydrated.

71 kilometers completed - 18 to go...

There were 11 kilometers to Mayville, the final checkpoint on the course, and I had to get there by 4:50PM or I would be removed from the course. According to what I read, the race officials close the checkpoint and runners are not allowed to continue. Okay brain, let the calculations begin. It was now approximately 3:20PM, so I had about 1:30 to make the cut-off. 11K is about 6.8 miles, so I had to run about a 13:38 pace to beat the cut-off. I'm alternating running with walking and I'm thinking, "is 13:38 possible?" My brain kicks into overdrive; I calculate that I have averaged approximately 13:22 for 71 kilometers. I'm sure I've been progressively slowing and I'm hurting more than ever - it's going to be close.

The kilometers are going by quickly. If I was focused on my situation before, I'm hyper-focused now. I'm fully aware of the pain that each footstep is causing me; that I am dehydrated, hungry and a little sore, but the thought of stepping off the course does not enter my mind. I will not quit, I cannot quit. Comrades will not break me... but it is pushing me to a place I have not been before, but I am not bothered by it - this is why I run ultras; to see what my breaking point is. Oh, but dear God am I in pain. I ask myself why I am actually continuing but I have no answer, I just know that I can keep going forward. I think deep down I believe it will get better. I cling to the belief that I can cross the finish line within the time limits. I see my sons' faces and think about them. Their innocence and joy always inspire me but right now I want to inspire them. I want to be the father that teaches them the lesson that you can't just lay down, that you cannot give up.

And then...

"Joseph, are you getting in?"

[No, I'm fine.]

"Are you sure?"

[Yes.]

"See you at the cut-off."

[I'll wave to you as I run by.]

"Good luck."

[Thank you.]

...and then Mr. Race Sweeper drove ahead. In the short distance, I can see two runners getting into the car. I'm thinking that there are more people lining the road here and their screams are penetrating - go, go, hurry up, hurry. Without thinking, I start to pick up my pace. I'm passing runners. The road then slants downward and that's my cue. Without even thinking, I burst into a sprint. I'm passing everyone in

front of me. As I past the cut-off point, I screamed at a couple crossing the road because I couldn't slow down and thought I was going to run right into them.

I look back at the clock - I did it, I beat the cut-off by 34 seconds! I run under the overpass and make the left-hand turn, but the road now slants uphill and there is no way I can keep up the sprinting, I don't even know if I can run anymore. I start walking and come even with a runner who is walking and he turns to me and says, "I saw you sprinting; why did you do that? You know, we're never going to make the final time. Do you think it was worth it?" I turned to him and said, "In running, there is winning and there is honor, and I believe I just accomplished both. Yes, it was worth it."

7 kilometers to go (about 4.4 miles) and about 40 minutes left. And the mental calculator kicks in again - that's about 9:20 per mile pace. It still never occurred to me that I wasn't going to make it. I knew I had to run more than walk - maybe it's possible? A little more than half of the remaining kilometers are on the highway and most is downhill. I thought this was a good thing because I can run downhill faster.

Crowded sweep vehicles were passing by me in bulk. I don't know how far I was from the Stadium when 12 hours was up; I just remember that it *finally* hit me that I wasn't going to make it. Many, many runners were sitting on the highway divider waiting for the next sweep vehicle. I also stopped running and leaned up against the divider. I asked someone, "Do you think they will let us finish?" (I recall reading that in years past, once the time-limit expired, they closed the stadium gates and you weren't allowed in.) No one knew the answer.

I wasn't going to sit on the side and wait to be picked up. I started my run-walk routine again and told myself I was going to cross the finish line. The sun had about set and it was starting to get dark. I exited the highway and started the last three kilometers through the city. With a kilometer to go, a sweep vehicle drove up alongside me and asked if I wanted to get in. I responded, "Why?" The driver gave me a thumbs-up sign and continued on her way.

I finally reached the Stadium and I faced a new challenge: I didn't know where the entrance was. Since it was late, they had already disassembled the barricades that led to the entrance. There were runners milling around and I asked them how to get in. I guess they didn't realize that I was still running because I was directed up stairs or in other directions that made no sense. After several minutes of investigation, I finally figured it out.

I entered the Stadium and it was incredible. The lights were so bright and there were still many people around. As I made my way around the stadium, several people ran from the infield to the wall surrounding the track and either clapped for me or offered a congratulatory handshake. As I got within a few feet of the finish line, an official with a Comrades Blazer directed me where to cross. He then came over to me and said, "Well done. Hope to see you again."

Another official then helped me out, asking what I needed. I said I was very thirsty and she directed someone to get me a bottle of sports drink - it was frozen solid. I couldn't help but laugh at this. They got me another bottle and helped me find my way to the international tent, where I met up with Colin, Dawn and Elaine. Everyone was concerned, but offered support and encouragement (they also got me some food and beverage - thanks guys). Everyone was sharing stories and comparing the different medals they received. I was excited for them. I even posed for a few photos with some.

Physically, however, I was not feeling too well at that moment. I was thirsty, sore, in pain and hungry. But on a different level, I was proud of myself because Comrades did not beat me. The following morning, Colin presented me with his Comrades patch, which I thought was the ultimate display of sportsmanship and camaraderie - characteristics that make Comrades what it is, "the ultimate human race."

This last section addresses some of the most popular questions I received about Comrades and my experience there.

The Course

The Comrades is comprised of five major hills: Polly Shortts, Inchanga, Bothas Hill, Fields Hill, and Cowies Hill. Each presents the runner with a unique challenge regardless of whether it is an uphill or downhill year. But seriously, the entire course is hilly; these are just the major ones.

Will I Go Back

I've been asked several times whether I will go back to run the uphill course or to try to finish officially. I've thought about this question a lot. I typically don't like to run the same course multiple times (I know, I've run the JFK 50 Miler 9 consecutive years but that race has different meaning).

I think it would be nice to run the uphill version. It's a great race and would be great to experience it again, to get the complete picture.

With regards to finishing officially and "getting that Comrades medal," (to quote a few people), I don't really care. Life threw many hardballs at me leading up to the race, which made it very difficult. But I dealt with it. I like to run ultras because they offer the environment to challenge me mentally and physically. The longer the distance, the more obstacles you will encounter. For me, it's always about how will I handle these obstacles? What can I push myself through? What will break me? To have an official medal would be nice, but I don't know that it changes anything. I didn't break, I didn't give in, I didn't quit. I don't need a medal to be a winner... and I did finish.

Photos

Following are some photos of me.











