

A RITUAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE COMRADES MARATHON

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ABSTRACT

The Comrades Marathon is a dominating event on the annual sport calendar in South Africa. The race challenges its participants in terms of a combination of constraints, such as the spatial, physical, temporal and the psychological. An auto-ethnographical research methodology is applied in combination with literature on ritual and sports, such as distance running, karate, the Olympic Games and triathlon. It is argued that the historical Comrades event is rife with elements of a ritual nature and ritual engagement. Throughout the race, participants in the world's greatest ultra-distance race experience notions of isolation and liminality, emotional and psychological instability, inscription and mental growth, a sense of profound camaraderie, symbolic awareness and the euphoria of the final reward. It is argued that these notions are typical of ritual action and that the Comrades race acts as a vehicle for such ritual transformations.

Key words: Comrades; Distance running; Ritual; Passage; Liminality; Heroes; Cyclical.

INTRODUCTION

'For humanity to survive, it will have to invent a new religion. The religion has been invented, it is the religion of the runner' (Fixx, 1980:6).

In addition to sport science and sport medicine, other sport discourses focussed on a plethora of fields, such as the role of politics (Grundlingh *et al.*, 1995; Walters, 2006; Labuschagne, 2010), the promotion of national and ethnic identities (Goethals, 1996; MacAlloon, 1996) and sport history (Walters, 2006) have been dominant. Sport, play, leisure and games have always interested anthropologists studying 'ethnic' or non-complex communities (Gluckman & Gluckman, 1977; Gutman, 1978; Birrell, 1981; Blanchard, 1995; Klein, 2002). The role of ritual and ceremony in sport featured from time to time in anthropology, yet its role in sport, such as athletics, rose to prominence the last three decades (D'Aquili *et al.*, 1979; Callen, 1983; Carter & Krüger, 1990; Donahue, 1993; Granskog, 1993; Laughlin, 1993; Migliore, 1993; Rowe, 1998; Klein, 2002; Hockey, 2009). Sport and events, such as wrestling, triathlon, karate, the Olympic Games, pistol shooting and distance running received research attention in these contributions. In South Africa literature on distance running received particular impetus with the contributions of Noakes (1992) and Fordyce (1996).

One particular distance running event which has dominated the South African sport scene since the 1980s, is the Comrades Marathon¹. It has become a regular date on the South African sport calendar as a spectacle for the consumption of public television, roadside viewers and helpers and more than 12 000 runners. It draws the admiration of many South Africans and the event has catapulted itself into international fame by becoming the biggest ultra-running² competition in the world in terms of number of athletes, sponsorships and media attention.

Why does the institution of the Comrades drag runners, families and friends and non-runners into this large spectacle and whirlpool of endurance and pain? In order to understand and conceptualise the ritual dimension of the Comrades, one needs to unpack a number of its foundation pillars.

It is firstly necessary to reflect on the origin and popularity of road or distance running, the so-called running boom, on the international scene (Fixx, 1979) and its effect in South Africa. The running boom in South Africa led to many runners aspiring to compete in running distances beyond the standard marathon. This obsession with ultra-running points to the unique origin, history, identity and symbols, which the Comrades represents. This 'package' provides the core ingredients for the urge and compulsion for runners to participate in the Comrades. This quest displays repetitive and cyclical actions and performances which are typical of ritual behaviour. It will be illustrated that the Comrades road race bears the characteristics of a mass ritual for both runner and non-runner within a ritually charged space and place.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: ANTHROPOLOGY OF RITUAL AND RUNNING ON THE INTERSECT

Personal interest in the anthropology of running and ritual is twofold. The first interest originated from my own experience³ as an average or 'non-elite' distance runner (Schomer & Connolly, 2002). Reportage and the fieldwork experience on the topic is self-reflexive and autobiographic to the extent what anthropologists term 'auto-ethnography' (Hockey, 2009), hence the usage of the first-person narrative throughout the text. Running with the studied community who becomes one's research participants provide an ideal setting or locale for the process of participant observation, which is crucial in the qualitative research environment (Granskog, 1993). This interest in ritual research emanates from on-going research on male and female initiation rituals among some of the black communities in South Africa (Van Vuuren & De Jongh, 1999; Van Vuuren, 2012). One is struck by the similarity in a range of dynamics of ritual and ritual engagement in both non-complex and modern societies and these also manifest in the sport of distance running and the Comrades. This similarity stimulated further research.

¹ The term marathon is strictly speaking only reserved for the distance of 42.2km.

² In South Africa, ultra-running is considered to be road running distances above 50km, such as 56km and 64km races, the Comrades (90km) and 100 miler (160km) events such as the Washie 100 miler.

³ Permanent Green numbers were awarded for both the Comrades (in 1991) and Korkie Marathon (56km) (in 1992).

The views of a range of research participants (Comrades and non-Comrades runners), seconds⁴ and supporters (spouses, family members, club members and friends), non-runners, spectators (roadside onlookers and television audiences) and members in the administration of the event are reflected in this article. Many of the insights for this article originate from close interaction with particular runners. Segments of the information were obtained at the actual time of participation in the Comrades and other races (1980-1996), while other interviews were held recently (2000 onwards). Training runs in groups, formal club runs (mid-week time trials, weekend distance runs) are invaluable opportunities for obtaining runners' views on the sport. During training most runners are more relaxed, less competitively minded, and often prepared to reveal the personal and 'hidden' in their running lives.

Pseudonyms are used to protect the true identity of research participants in case studies. The time span (1980s to present) provided a period and chronology whereby patterns of the running-ritual experience over three decades could be scrutinised. It helped in identifying the notion of change in the social construct of the race over the same period.

RITUAL, SPORT AND RUNNING IN ANTHROPOLOGY

Although 19th century anthropologists described 'primitive' religious systems and the rituals which support these, it was Van Gennep (1907[1996]) whose threefold model was influential. This model included rites of separation (the pre-liminal), rites of incorporation (the liminal) and rites of transition (the post-liminal) (Van Gennep, 1996). This was followed by Eliade, who in 1949 [1996] proposed a model of religion which resembles a three-dimensional architectural model. The sacred mountain where heaven and earth meet sits at the centre of the world and whereby every temple, palace or royal residence can be considered as a sacred mountain, which becomes a Centre. The Centre is the zone of reality and the road to the Centre is arduous, difficult and resembles a pilgrimage and a ritual, "Attaining the centre is equivalent to consecration and initiation" (Eliade, 1996:196).

Since the late 1950s, the contributions of Victor W. Turner (1957, 1967, 1979, 1989) were seminal. Turner's fieldwork in Zambia (from 1950 onwards) led him to develop the concept of social drama, during which community disputes are resolved by engaging ritual, theatre (Turner, 1979). Using Turner, Rowe (1998) suggests that what liminal ritual does for non-complex societies, liminoid phenomena does for theatre, entertainment, sport, art and literature. Ancient sport was highly ritualised, while modern sport is more secular; however, secularity is not a tool of distinction for sport ritual.

The academic link between sport and ritual, according to Krüger (1990), rose to significance when Sir Julian Huxley organised the Royal Society in London around the theme 'Ritualisation of behaviour in animals and man' in 1965 to which Turner was a principal contributor. The domains of the biological, psychological and the cultural were scrutinised and defined in terms of a pan-species schema. The ritual emphasis of modern sport can be

⁴ Seconds are roadside helper-drivers who assist runners by providing liquids and temporary medical assistance, or in the case of competitive runners, provide information on the course and on other competitors. In the modern race seconds became faced out or were barred from providing assistance.

identified in the notions of regularity (Miracle & Southard, 1993), emotionality, drama and symbolism. In addition, both modern sport and 'primitive' ritual have mythic themes at the core and share the so-called 'magic circle', which are all bound by symbolic ideas. According to Kiler (Krüger, 1990), the performers (sportspeople in sport events) are 'immersed' in the executions of their difficult tasks. Within the nation state context, national and trans-national identities are coordinated and choreographed in ritual mode (Krüger, 1990). The leitmotifs of ritual are also present in modern sport. Synchronisation is one such landmark theme, which serves to dissolve potential conflicts applying synchronisation (Krüger, 1990). Synchronisation is a core element in the ritual repertoire, yet the notions of resolve and dissolve were suggested by Turner with the idea of communal social drama (Turner, 1957).

Ritual displays prominent cyclical notions. Global sport events are classic cyclical occurrences (Donohue, 1993; Granskog, 1993; MacAloon, 1996), which feed into the above smaller cycle, for instance the quadrennial Olympic (Gluckman & Gluckman, 1977) and Commonwealth Games, Soccer, Rugby and Cricket World Cups and annually the Comrades Marathon and Tri-Nations Rugby event. Krüger (1990) also argues that modern society experiences repetitive cyclical stress and some form of relief comes with seasonal sport. In traditional and non-complex societies (Africa) and medieval Europe, ritual was always closely linked to ecological, seasonal and celestial phenomena, such as harvest time, the position of the moon, circumcision in Africa during winter, and so forth. Canadians cannot wait for the ice hockey season in winter, South Africans associate rugby with winter and cricket with summer and distance runners with 31 May on Comrades day.

The learning experiences of ritual which are gained in sport are integrated into real life. Sportspeople often concede that sport provide them with new thresholds (Turner, 1967, 1989), new moral codes (Donohue, 1993), wisdom (Donohue, 1993; Eliade, 1996), conditioning (Miracle & Southard, 1993), and so forth. A number of studies on sport ritual focussed on the impact of trance (Granskog, 1993) and its role in the neurobiological processes. D'Aquili *et al.* (1979) and Miracle and Southard (1993) provided us with insights into secretions, such as endorphins (Strahich, 1982) and opioids which condition the 'detachment from the physical world' and provide a 'pain-free state' such as experienced in the 'jogging craze' (Krüger, 1990).

National sport have consistently created new heroes and idols whose seemingly invincible winning record, heroism and endurance became powerful inspirations to ordinary people and amateur athletes and sports people. The modern Olympic Games (since 1896) is rife with ritual such as laurels and medals to the victors, specially composed music, the Olympic flame (since 1832, the bell on the last lap (since 1932), and the display of ancient Greek mottos and flags (Walters, 2006). The hero motif in sport ritual (compare Granskog, 1993; Laughlin, 1993; Migliore, 1993; Rowe, 1993; Fordyce, 1996), was central from the beginning when Spiridon Louis won the marathon event in 2:58:50 in 1896. Welcomed by the Greek King George I, he was spontaneously hailed as a national hero. At the closing ceremony 100 000 spectators saw how medals and laurels were awarded, pigeons carrying blue and white streamers released and flower petals thrown in the air. The newly hailed hero Louis led the lap of honour (Walters, 2006). The 1936 Berlin Games was pickled in Nazi ritual symbolism and signage. "The swastika and Olympic rings made easy companions on the crowded Berlin streets" (Walters, 2006:81).

INSTITUTION OF THE COMRADES MARATHON: A BRIEF HISTORY

Background

It is generally accepted that road running was conceived around the Olympic marathon (since 1896), but dates back to 490BC when Pheidippides as a foot courier brought the message of the Athenian victory over the Persian army on the Plain of Marathon. He ran more or less 26 miles the distance between Marathon and Athens to bring the news of the victory. Some sources claim that he actually ran much further to break the news to the Athenians, namely 150 miles in 48 hours (Fixx, 1980). These trained foot couriers (called *hemerodromoi*) ran vast distances and often carried lighted torches. This ancient tradition was revived when Charles Rowell in 1880 ran non-stop for five days. In 1927 Arthur Newton set a new world record over 100 miles in a time of 14 hours 43 minutes (Fixx, 1980). The same Arthur Newton won the Comrades Marathon a record five times and is considered as one of the Big Six in the history of the race. A 56km road race between Hillcrest and Pietermaritzburg was named in his honour. Apart from the original initiative by Vic Clapham, it was possible that Newton had much to offer with the early development of ultra-running and the organisation of the Comrades. For the purpose of this article, a few highlights between 1921 and 2013 are discussed.

Symbolic Comrades race

After returning from East Africa in 1918, World War I veteran Vic Clapham approached the League of Comrades of the Great War for permission to hold a race between Pietermaritzburg and Durban. Permission was only granted in 1921. The 48 men who turned up for the inaugural race on Empire Day on 24 May were mostly ex-infantry men (Alexander, 1985). Bill Rowan won the first race in a time of 8 hours 59 minutes. In 1923 'little Miss' Frances Hayward became the first unofficial female finisher in 11:35 (Alexander, 1985). After the 1925 race, the mercurial fourth-time winner Arthur Newton and a friend measured the entire course for the first time pushing a heavy wood and brass, government tested measuring wheel all the way between Pietermaritzburg and Durban (Alexander, 1985). In 1931 the Gunga Din Shell hole (of the MOTHS⁵) donated a trophy for the best team performance. A tin helmet was mounted on a wooden base for the purpose (Alexander, 1985). So stretched out on the long road were the few runners in the 1935 race that Morris Alexander wrote on his agony during the race: "It (pain) went on for hours. True to his word, perky little Liege Bouille overhauled me, on Cowies Hill. He was the first runner I had seen for twenty miles" (Marais, 1983:28).

The same Alexander also designed the black and gold Comrades blazer and the idea of permanent evergreen numbers for the completion of 10 races. Upon finishing, the athlete is channelled into a separate space or pen placed on a special green number podium and the runner then receives two different sized green numbers which are upon announcement of the name and number of the athlete awarded by a former winner⁶. Under his chairmanship, the first die to strike medals was imported from England. On Monday 24 May 1948 another

⁵ MOTHS=Memorial Order of the Tin Hats.

⁶ The author received his green number from Manie Kuhn who won in the legendary 1967 tussle with a stumbling Tommy Malone.

Comrades tradition started with Max Trimborn's cock crow to signal the start of the race (1985), a tradition which was described by Alexander (1985:140) as follows about the 1953 race: "He then (at the stroke of six) gave his traditional, raucous cock crow which along with the City Hall chimes and the firing of the starter's pistol had heralded Comrades Marathon starts for twenty years".

The award for completing the race in time is of course the medal system, which has become much more diversified since the early 1920s. Even by the early 1990s there were only three categories of medals: gold for the top 10; silver for sub-7.5 hours; and bronze for sub-11 hours. In 2003, the cut-off time was extended to 12 hours followed by a more diversified and meritorious medal system. The categories are: Gold for the first 10 (men and women separately); Wally Hayward medal, silver with a golden edge/ring for the 11th position up to sub-6.5 hours; silver from 6.5 to sub-7.5 hours; Bill Rowan medal; bronze with a silver edge for 7.5 hours to sub-9 hours; bronze for 9 hours to sub-11 hours; and the copper Vic Clapham medal for 11 hours up to sub-12 hours.

The race grew from 104 starters and 80 finishers in 1960 to 1241 runners in the fiftieth race, called the Golden Jubilee, on 31 May 1975 (Alexander, 1985). The race in the 1990s onwards doubled in the size of the field with 14 000 to 15 000 runners. For the 2013 race (89.2 km) of the Comrades, 14 336 runners started on the morning of 31 May and 10 188 finished the race under 12 hours. This vast number of runners was almost 400 times more than the 48 entrants who lined up on the morning of 24 May 1921 (Anonymous, 2013).

THE RACE AND RACE DAY

Weather plays a significant role in the minds and bodies of most runners. While a few runners are all-weather runners, most are not. Obviously extreme cold and hot conditions, wind and humidity have a huge influence on the hydration of the running body and eventually the mind. These variables might be perceived as constraints since they affect most forms of outdoor sports. In addition, I would like to add the constraints of the body, the mind, the temporal and the spatial. The race experience that awaits the down-Comrades runner from Pietermaritzburg to Durban can be illustrated as follows (Fordyce, 1996)

The proverbial bull-ring or arena at the start of the Comrades, are the two City Halls, Durban for the up-run and Pietermaritzburg for the down-run. The entire venue is lit up, a large banner welcomes runners and temporary steel barricades demarcate the various starting categories. The deafening sound of thousands of Indian Myna birds in the surrounding trees inform the runners that the 'time has come'. Runners queue for last-minute stops at portable toilets, loved ones are hugged and receive final orders where to meet their athletes (compare Granskog, 1993). Legs and shoulder muscles are rubbed and the mixed odour of Deep Heat, sweat (compare Van Eeden, 2000) and breath awaits the runner and provides the seasoned runner with a sense of *déjà vu*. Some runners go through routine stretching exercises, others pray silently, more are loud and rowdy and a few are dead silent. The countdown starts and the public address system plays the famous Max Trimborn cockerel recording, the sound of the theme song from 'Chariots of fire' starts. Finally, the mayor fires the gun and the runners are away for an ordeal which lasts between five and half (winners) and 12 hours (final cut off). The Pietermaritzburg start is normally colder than the Durban one and runners are

dressed in additional throw-away apparel ranging from old vests to make-fit plastic rubbish bags.

In both directions the runners deal with the notorious Big Five (hills) of Comrades. On the downhill these are in order Polly Shorts (at 8km, 755m above altitude)⁷, Nchanga (40km, 793m), Botha's (50km, 772m), Fields (65km, 542m) and Cowies (70km, 366m). The order is in reverse on the up run, turning Polly Shorts into the most challenging. About the stretched out Harrison flats (30-40km), Fordyce once remarked that 'it is the only part of the route which is uphill from both sides. On the up run I found the meandering road past the chicken farms to be particularly depressing'.

Running up Nchanga hill (on the down run) runners are met by thousands of cheering and singing local Zulu villager spectators from the nearby Valley of a Thousand Hills (compare Fordyce, 1996). Derek van Eeden's poem, 'Gogo, Gogo why you yo-yo?', (Van Eeden, 2000:61) is captivating:

“After the maddening undulations of Harrison's Flats,
After the Zulus ululating, exhorting at Bayats*
After Inchange's wild, wooded, wattled plunge,
The leaders close on Drummond Town.”
[*a famous landmark store]

Drummond is also the halfway mark where race organisers announce the runners' progress: Wally Hayward once read the time at the halfway mark where cheering crowds, water spray and a large banner greet the halfway runners in dramatic way. For some it is a milestone, a relief, for others it's debilitating, for those who set goals and did not make it, it becomes arduous to re-organise their mind set and proceed. Landmarks in the Comrades often seem more valuable than kilometre markers. One such landmark is the Alverstone radio mast as its sudden appearance tells you that the summit of the ever-winding, grinding and invisible Botha's Hill has finally been reached. Running through Hillcrest village, the school band of Kearsney College becomes a wonderful memory.

Pain and agony normally sets in after Drummond, for others later. Before the era of portable toilets along the roads, runners had to arrange their own 'bush calls' or ablutions, which were inconvenient and most cumbersome since place and the nature of the road called for little choice. Fields Hill is particularly notorious on the down run. Running downhill for 3km after 65km is no mean feat: hamstrings cramp and the muscles above the knee contract severely. There is a common saying that the bottom of Fields is scattered with silver medals, meaning runners whose hopes on a silver medal ended. From Pinetown most runners walk in to get some relief from the murderous pounding on legs and feet and general muscle fatigue. Walking at a steady pace is advisable to not sacrifice precious time. A fellow club mate WRCP once advised novice runners: 'Walk with dignity!'

The race after Cowies Hill becomes less scenic and arboreous. When entering the outskirts of the Durban Metro, most runners are in agony and simply want to get it over. The endless street running is debilitating for many and the many left and right turns and curbing demand

⁷ Polly Shorts hill is a downhill experience towards Durban and not any challenge.

what Fordyce termed 'vasbyt' (Fordyce, 1996). The first signs of arrival at the finish at Kingsmead cricket stadium are the sudden presence of parked vehicles along the road, followed by the sound of the crowds and the public address systems, and finally the towering flood lights. The sensation of lawn under one's feet introduces the end, followed by the narrow tunnel around the field with crowds peeling over the barriers. Some runners try to detect the familiar faces of loved ones and others are overcome with ecstasy, joy, emotion, pain and relief.

Being stopped by officials finally means that the race has come to an end. The medal, the track suit badge and ribbon, which show the year of the race on it, is but a small reward. How Comrades runners deal with the constraints of time, space, the mind and body and weather invites further discussion.

DISCUSSION

Why can the Comrades and other distance road races be viewed as ritual experiences? In terms of the spatial constraint of the marathon runner, one recognises the notions of isolation, separation and estrangement, which so often occur during ritual and rites of passage (Turner 1967). Van Gennepe's (1996 [1907]) classic threefold schema is relevant. The loneliness of the long-distance runner fits the concept of a rite of separation - from the known, house, hotel room, family and friends. Granskog (1993), in competing in the Hawaiian Iron Man, experienced this moment of separation as traumatic.

The Comrades is also a ritual of transition, a transfer into a new order, and simultaneously a rite of incorporation into the order of Comrades medallists, the Comrades legacy and the mythological past. Running the Comrades repetitively comprise a rite of intensification. The notion of territorial passage through real and symbolic portals and gates features prominent during the Comrades passage. The road is bumpy and transformed into a challenging ritual corridor (the narrow and bumpy old road [R103], sidewalks, the halfway funnel, the crowd), which drags and sucks the runner through the halfway mark at Drummond, down Fields Hill (the notorious Wall⁸). Upon entering the stadium runners are literally squeezed along a narrow corridor up to the finish line underneath the banner (Van Gennepe, 1996).

At the core of the psychological constraint for the Comrades runner is the question: Why do you do it? Personal reasons are numerous ranging from a life time wish to peer pressure. The 'self' features prominently and many runners run to prove 'something' to themselves. This 'something' is what Eliade terms the elective Centre, a symbolic *axis mundi* (Eliade, 1996). The journey to the Centre is arduous, painful, dangerous and often likened to pilgrimage. Achieving the end result after 90km enriches the mind and mental capability, inscribes the body (Turner, 1967; Granskog, 1993) and its potential, charges the memory, and serves as part of a quest for the 'essence in life' as a fellow runner once explained. The banner, the medal and the Green Number emerges at the Centre. Sport depends on life goals, both personal and ritual, and provides the ideal incubator (Laughlin, 1993).

⁸ The notorious Wall at 20 miles (32km) for the standard marathon runner (Merrill 1981:43-46) appears much later during Comrades: it may hit the runners at halfway, or at 60km or even much later.

Comrades runners experience a sense of being liminal, betwixt and between, not here and not there, in limbo, 'no longer classified and not yet classified' (Turner, 1967) thus, for the runner being in the race, but not there yet. The moment when the gun is fired the marathon runner steps into this unknown fold, which lasts for 90km. Senses of loneliness, marginality and liminality are experienced. The outside world for the Comrades runner disappears as she/he enters the starting arena and last until the finish line is crossed.

The road is the trajectory towards eventual success which hinges entirely on mind and body being synchronised; it is a sense of indistinguishable 'raw material' (Turner, 1967). Runners often claim to have lost control of body and mind. The notion of trance in ritual is dominant and studies in neurobiological science provided us with insights into secretions, such as endorphins and opioids which condition 'detachment from the physical world' (Callen, 1983; Krüger, 1990). The novice runner in particular has no comprehension of what lies ahead or to what transformations she/he will be exposed. The process of inscription might emerge after each kilometre sign and after each major stage, namely halfway, the Fields Hill, and so forth. The runner will also experience new thresholds of pain and discomfort, which were not there before.

Case study:

AH was a top standard marathoner and among the top five steeplechase runners on the track in the 1980s. He decided to try the Comrades and added the extra mileage on the road after the track season. He was ready on all counts, fearing only the distance and time on foot. Hoping for a place in the top 15, he had a good race until arrival at Pinetown, where he cramped and was forced to walk. This was the most humiliating experience of his life, having never walked in any race before, he was so ashamed in front of the crowds, he decided to pull himself together and ran the rest of the race in great pain, still finishing among the top 20.

The gradual inscription in body and mind steadily fills this void (compare Bronwell, 1993). Ritual liminality equals hardship and discomfort to the runners who endure pain and discomfort. Karate inflicts pain and discomfort, creation of disorientation (Turner, 1967), confusion or 'the inculcation of wonder' (Donohue, 1993).

The growth metaphor is a central theme in ritual. The term for the Ndebele girls' initiation is descriptive, namely *Ukuthombisa* or 'to cause to grow' or 'to germinate'. The runner's mind and body can be compared to a clean page on which the deeper meaning, dogma and didactics are gradually inscribed, they are sacrificed. One becomes an infant again and learns to become natural (D'Aquili *et al.*, 1979; Donohue, 1993). Senses of enlightenment, physical control and spiritual serenity are created and aroused. During running, time stops, you lose sense of routine and breakfast time, tea breaks, midday, 11 to 12 hours on foot for the Big C - compared to nine hours at office. The only time is the ritual clock of the race. With reference to karate-do, Donohue's (1993:121) observation is appropriate: "Karate dojo creates a timeless world, a refuge from the mundane, and a sense of promised liberation". Ritual liminality is a process of growth and the mentioned emotions contribute to these didactics. The initiate runner grows in terms of the awareness of her/his own physical and mental capacity, as well as dealing with fellow runners (Turner, 1967).

Binary categories are rooted in ritual conditions (Turner, 1989), such as hot and cold, wet and dry, ease and pain, uphill and downhill, self and others, tears and laughter, and are constantly part of the runner's world over this stretch of 90km. Amidst these emotions, runners develop invaluable camaraderie, not only among known friends and fellow club members but among strangers. Some of us seldom run with the same companion(s) for the entire race. As the race intensifies after halfway and the gruelling part manifests, new running partnerships are often born out of mutual hardship between two or three runners without a word being spoken or names exchanged; a joint suffering in silence. Yet, at the finish line mutual gratitude is acknowledged and identities are exchanged (compare Granskog, 1993).

The various 'runners busses' provide a solid structure for sharing pain, discomfort, support and knowledge (course info). "This comradeship transcends distinctions of rank, age, ... cultic group, even of sex" argued Turner (1967:100). A ritual has the capacity to dissolve rank, fame and binary oppositions, which are built along grades of privilage. Granskog (1993) refers to the eradication of existing status levels. The bonds which are built might become permanent. The only notions of rank and hierarchy exist inside the ritual structure (Turner, 1967) and it manifests as athlete versus race organisers, marshals and traffic officers, and the horror of facing the official who fires the gun, which signals the final cut-off.

A ritual is charged with symbols which trigger the human senses. Visual symbols of the body include race numbers, running shoes and club colours. For the regular Comrades runner, along the same route, landmarks are crucial mnemotechnic devices which provide both comfort and discomfort. Along the route, the kilometre markers, feeding stations, the halfway and finish banners, the crowds, landmarks on either side of the road are symbols which regularly engulf the runner. The olfactory is stimulated: body odours, muscle gels, etcetera. Symbols during the ritual have the capacity to unify diverse phenomena (Turner, 1967): bodily odours, the music of 'Chariots of Fire', road markers, the medal. They also condense all actions into a single item. Consider the Comrades runner's body: it is a vehicle for club colours, a number, running gear, physiological processes, a mental condition, it is transported over 90km, crosses the finish line and a medal is hung around its neck (Granskog, 1993).

The Comrades race portrays strong roots of the mythological and heroic figures. The logo of the Comrades Marathon Association depicts elements of the historical Moth organisation, the medals, the Greek god Mercury and an Olympic type laurel. After 1972, runners in the USA idolised Frank Shorter. In South Africa, distance runners idolised figures such as Wally Hayward, Ian Jardine, Allan Robb, Bruce Fordyce, Sam Tshabalala and others⁹. These heroes lived up to the Comrades idea and their biographies and lifestyles became consumed and idealised. Charles Laughlin (1993) who elaborated on the epiphanic¹⁰ dimension during ritual mentioned that sport and gaming frequently draw from the cosmos, dreams, enactments and

⁹ Wally Hayward in 1990 returned to and finished his fifth Comrades when he was close to 80-years-old. Ian Jardine was blind and one of the most seasoned ultra-runners in South Africa. A running club for blind runners was established in his honour. Alan Robb completed his 40th race in 2013 and won an unequalled 12 gold medals. Bruce Fordyce won the race for a record and consecutive nine times and still runs. Sam Tshabalala was the first black runner to win the Comrades only to survive miraculously from a car accident months later. He recovered astonishingly and could return to running.

¹⁰ epiphanic= the manifestation of a god or demi-god.

its transpersonal inventory. Totemic animals are examples in clubs and associations: the Chicago Bears (USA grid iron rugby), Moroka Swallows or 'The Birds' (soccer), Harlequin Harriers and Germiston Callies Harriers (marathon) and the Sharks (rugby); national plants (Proteas), heroes, princes and enemies are also popular.

The notions of regularity, cyclicity, rhythm, repetition, synchronised and choreographed bodily movement are pertinent features during ritual (compare Krüger, 1990). Fellow runners admit that after time and experience they behave in non-ratiocinative ways during races, training and even during the pre-race period. Donohue's (1993) inventory of the typical features of karate-do is comparable to ritual behaviour in distance running. These include regular training, practising of a strictly stylised form, abandoning the outside world, special clothing and hierarchical relations. The dedicated Comrades athlete executes to precision race dates, morning and afternoon runs, follows a specific dietary programme, update the running logbook with regularity. The running logbook becomes a sacred script for self-belief and motivation. Its daily entries become inscribed in both memory and body. A well-kept logbook feeds into the motivational system of any runner in her/his preparation even up to the morning of the start of the Big C. 'You have done the mileage, believe in your logbook!', EW once told novice runners at the pre-Comrades race talk at Harlequin Harriers.

The neurological efficacy of ritual is probably less comprehensible to most runners. The mind-over-body matter pervades many conversations among Comrades athletes and how they overcame pain, agony and disappointment.

Case study:

Jeff H is a gifted runner who in 1991 planned a sub-6.5 hour race. He did the mileage and was on all accounts able to achieve this. I was stunned when upon my passage (after 4.5 hours) through Drummond to find Jeff seated in a camping chair, a blanket draped around his shoulders, shoes off and enjoying a cup of soup which was offered by an elderly couple. Even more surprising, he had the couple laughing at his typical wit. I could not help to stop and enquired about his well-being, and weather he bailed, for we both knew what his initial goal was. His remark: 'Don't worry I'm contemplating a new race, I'll be back soon' – which he did and he still finished well under nine hours.

Miracle and Southard (1993) argued that the human brain provides for sustainable bodily rhythm which synchronises the motor subsystem by using 'ritual patterns' (1993). Pre-race drills are sound examples: laying out kit on the night before the race, pasta diets and parties, ablution routine, tying shoe laces, coffee or a full English breakfast. Even the training day of a runner becomes ritualised. Driving home from office various running related decisions are made or anticipated: which distance and route, phoning running partners to confirm and gearing up become routine (compare Hockey, 2009).

Some runners admit that the foundation for ritual-like routine and habit is laid at club level. At Harlequin Harriers in Pretoria on a Thursday evening after the time trial, the aspirant and novice Comrades runner is formally introduced to members and matters, such as membership obligations, club colours, training routines and race schedules. Once on the training run, the do's-and-do-not's of long-distance running is conveyed by seasoned runners up to the penultimate pre-Comrades meeting when the Comrades talk takes place. Club-life is highly

routinized and it prepares the runner for the Comrades and comradeship (Goodger, 1986; Hockey, 2009).

CONCLUSION

Comrades' runners have to cope with pain, dehydration, muscle fatigue, mental toughness, the course, the weather, the time barrier and the consequences of over- or under-training. The ability to transcend these constraints borders on the humanly impossible. Yet the environment within which coping methods are created is almost unknown to most runners. This environment can be compared to an initiation enclosure or lodge, the 90km road between Durban and Pietermaritzburg. The initiates are the runners and the crowd on the outside of the initiation lodge and the officialdom are the instructors who supervise the rules. This is the ritual arena and many initiates stand to be 'kicked out' from participation as early as the halfway mark, while others will not make it to the finish line when the gun is fired at 18:00. Most runners who receive their ritual rewards (medals, trophies, prize money) recognise that the notions of spatial separation and isolation, self-discovery, growth, transcription and transition, rhythm and regularity, symbolism, heroism, mental state and how to deal with pain, and others played a significant role during the Comrades. We still need to investigate how these ritual notions and characteristics balance each other out and what the contribution of each component entails.

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