

Month 1 - January: LONGER RUNS ARE ESSENTIAL

It seems that as each week goes by the length of weekend races and indeed, of training runs gets longer and longer. A few days ago Springs Striders hosted their famous Striders 32km and soon we will all be running marathons. And yet it wasn't long ago, that some of us (especially me) were battling through the Dis-Chem 21

With the focus on the Comrades marathon's 90 odd kilometers it makes sense that we train our legs to get used to longer and longer distances. After all if we can't cope with a 42km marathon, how can we hope to run 90 km?

It is important however, that we understand the purpose of the long run. Too many runners use the weekend long run as a means of proving that they are ready to run the Comrades. A new marathon personal best time is their reassurance that the Comrades will come easily. Some runners are convinced that they will run good Comrades because they ran their long club training run at the front of the pack. "I was first back to the clubhouse" is the usual boast.

The converse of that, is that, many runners, especially novices get really depressed when they battle to finish the Loskop or Om-die-Dam 50km races.

"If I can only just stagger to the finish of a 50km, how on earth will I run 90" is one typical response.

The long run is an important part of training to ensure we can run 90km, but its purpose is to get used to running for a long time. At the risk of exaggeration its purpose is to persuade the body that remaining vertical for many hours is possible. It is a sobering thought to realize that, counting the time before the starting gun, 12 hour Comrades runners will be standing, running or walking for up to 13 hours on race day.

The long run has no part in improving speed. It is an endurance training session and that is all.

So, typically, when I set off to run a long training run, I start my watch as I climb out of bed. For the next few hours I make sure I am standing, running or walking. I do not sit down until the run is over. I concentrate on spending time on my legs.

Those runners who are worried about their Comrades prospects after battling through a 50km run like the Loskop, need to understand that as they train slowly and steadily they will build up the endurance to last the Comrades distance. The important thing is not to race to achieve that, but to aim for time on the legs.

The ability to run faster will come from other training sessions and not from the weekly long run.

It is also advisable to alternate medium length long runs with very long runs eg:

Weekend 1	Weekend 2	Weekend 3	Weekend 4	Weekend 5	Weekend 6	Weekend 7
40 km	25 km	50 km	30 km	60 km	30 km	40 km

Bruce Fordyce's Comrades Training Program

Month 2 - February: CONSISTENT TRAINING WILL LEAD TO SUCCESS

We are now at the most important time in our training build-up for the Comrades. Hopefully we have all built a fairly firm foundation of consistent training and are now ready for

the intense training phase. This lasts for eight to 10 weeks and allows us a generous taper, rest and recovery time for the Comrades Marathon in June.

If we are able to train well now, it is almost guaranteed that we will run well in the Comrades. The training in the next two months builds the strength and conditioning to run well in June. Many runners may be contemplating giving up the idea of Comrades because of a poor build-up in February and March, but this is a sad mistake. It really doesn't matter if training for the last few weeks has been interrupted by injuries, illness or general slackness and lack of motivation. If we can train well now on a consistent basis we will be ready for race day.

The training now has to be regular and consistent and it takes a lot of discipline, especially as the nights grow darker and the days shorter and colder. Now we need to explain to our work colleagues and families that we may become boring. We will have to concentrate on training at the expense of a normal social life. We may also find ourselves irritable and constantly tired. Explain to the people around you that this is a short phase and that it ends at the end of May.

Most of the training we should be doing now will consist of LSD (Long Slow Distance running). We must concentrate on stamina and endurance, and on the weekends there will be the must long run. This most important of training sessions helps us to get used to the hours of running that will be required on the race day.

Long runs should be done very slowly, concentrating on the total time on our legs rather than on the speed of the run. It is also important to alternate long runs with shorter long runs so that the legs get some time to recover.

So the pattern of the weekend long runs would look something like this:

Weekend 1	Weekend 2	Weekend 3	Weekend 4	Weekend 5	Weekend 6
50 km	30 km	60 km	30 km	50 km	30 km

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Month 3 - March: CHOOSE HILLY COURSES FOR TRAINING

We may be running a "Down" run this year but experienced Comrades runners know even the "Down" run is full of monstrous hills. In fact, the first half of the "Down" run is particularly hilly. Apart from a couple of steep descents, such as Polly Shorts, most of the first half is a steady uphill pull. Many novice runners are known to get terribly frustrated when the so-called "Down" run proves to be anything but down for a few hours.

At the front end of the field the "Down" run is inevitably won on some of the last short sharp hills and the possibility of silver medals is often dependent on the runner's ability to keep going up the final climbs. I would be willing to bet quite a large number in this year's race will be decided on the climb up 45th Cutting, one of the last major hills on the "Down" run.

So how do we prepare ourselves for these hills? First, we must select hilly routes when training. It is often tempting to run a flat, easy route to make our run as enjoyable as possible. Comrades runners, however, need to look for hills in training. They need to get strong and more confident at running hills by encountering them on as many training runs as possible. There are two types of hills we will meet in the Comrades and we need to get used to tackling both types in training.

1. The first is the long, gradual climb that can drag on for a kilometer or more. On the "Down" run the climb out of Drummond is one. In fact, that hill goes on for three or four kilometers, with short breaks. These long climbs need to be tackled with a slow, steady rhythm. Always run well below maximum. It should be possible to chat a little while running these hills.

2. The second is the short, steep climb. There are dozens of these in the Comrades, mostly anonymous, because they are overshadowed by the bigger, more infamous hills. In the Comrades they can drain runners of their strength and they need to be treated with respect. In training they can be attacked and run at 80-90% effort. Run hard up the hill concentrating on maintaining effort and style.

Remember too, to run over the top of the hill. Too many runners naturally ease up at the crest of a hill. Those who continue to push over the summit build great fitness.

The famous marathon coach, Bill Squires used to advise runners to pull on two imaginary ropes, running alongside their bodies and to lean forward slightly. Running hills like these, produces tremendous strength and cardio-vascular fitness. World-class marathon runners training for flat courses still use hill-training sessions to develop overall running strength.

3. Toward the end of April start to run some specific hill training. Meantime, it helps to build basic strength by running as many hills as possible. Most of us will have to walk sometime in the Comrades, but if we build our hill training strength, we will be able to delay the inevitable. Including one long midweek training run

All runners realize that in order to successfully run marathons they must run many long distance training runs. Because of the time constraints, however, these runs are almost always scheduled for weekends. Only elite, professional and very fortunate runners are able to choose the time and day that they will run these distances.

In the crucial weeks ahead, however, Comrades runners need to try and find the time to do at least one other longish run a week. Ideally this should be midweek, on a Wednesday. In order to find the time it may be necessary to run very early in the morning or in the early evening. I prefer the latter time slot since I am not a good early morning riser.

This midweek long run builds valuable strength and endurance especially when added to the Saturday or Sunday morning long training run. Next to my weekly hill training session I rate the midweek long run as the most important training session of the week.

I first incorporated this training session into my weekly schedule after reading an article on the training methods of the great Australian marathoner Rob "Deek" de Castella. Deek, a Boston, double Commonwealth, and World marathon champion, had a very high regard for this session and swore by it. Now I do too.

Before Comrades runners begin to panic let me emphasize that the distances covered in the midweek training session are nowhere near as demanding as those of the weekend long run.

A midweek long run can be any distance from 15 to 25 kilometres. (Occasionally I was able to stretch the distance to 30 Kilometres, but of course I was a very fortunate full time runner in those days). Now I have to contend with any run from 15 to 20 kilometres. The important thing with this training session is to choose a hilly rolling course and to keep the pace steady and consistent.

Unlike the long weekend run whose purpose is to emphasize endurance and not speed this training session helps to build up speed endurance. Training pace here should be the anticipated Comrades race pace, or slightly faster. This helps to familiarize the legs with race conditions and yet over less than a fifth of the Comrades distance.

It is important to take as few breaks as possible. One water or cool drink stop should suffice. It is also important to run steadily but not to race. Remember there are other training sessions in the week and if these are compromised then the guilty training session was run too quickly.

Also remember to wear light reflective clothing and to run defensively. By necessity these runs can take over an hour and a half and the days are getting shorter while the nights get longer

and darker this time of year. Ideally it helps to run with friends, as shared discipline is a lot easier than individual discipline.

I can guarantee that by June a routine of midweek long runs will prepare runners wonderfully for the Comrades.

Bruce Fordyce's Comrades Training Program

Month 4 - April: BUILDING ENDURANCE IS VIRTUALLY COMPLETE

Weeks of long slow distance running are soon to come to an end. The process of building endurance is virtually complete. It is now time to start doing a little quality work.

Most of us should have run our longest runs last weekend or at the latest this coming weekend. Thereafter the weekend runs should rapidly decline in length.

In the next few weeks we should work on our speed so that we can cruise the Comrades distance a little faster; so that we can cope with some of the steep hills we will encounter. In the final three weeks before Comrades, we cut back drastically on our training load and this, coupled with our speed work and quality work, will help us to have strong rested legs, and to peak for a great run in that week of June 16.

This however, is a very dangerous period. Winter is settling in, months and weeks of hard training may have exposed some potential injury problems, and bodies will be generally fatigued. Increasing the training load by adding faster, harder running is fraught with danger.

We must always monitor total fatigue. If our legs are unduly heavy, or tired, or we have a slight niggle, it is important to be wise enough to rest and to choose to recover rather than to force an over trained body.

We must always warm up thoroughly when starting quality work. 3 or 4 kilometres of steady running, some stretching and a few run "run throughs" or short surges should always precede any quality running.

1. Trackwork. This session includes repeated intervals of 400 metres to 1000 metres of even mile repeats on a standard 400 metre track with a slow job or walk between each session. My favourite session used to be 5 x 1000m with a 200m recover walk between each session. This training however is painful, boring and tough.
2. Speedplay is less rigorous and more fun. Runners can run "lamp posts" or to a different traffic sign or tree. The length and severity of each run is up to the runner. It is important some faster running is achieved.
3. Short distance races such as time trials of 5 - 8km or races up to 15km help to sharpen runners and to give us an idea of how our training is progressing. A fast time at an 8 km time trial at the end of May or in early June is a positive indication we are ready to race.
4. Hillwork. As discussed in an earlier column, hillwork is a useful quality session.

Remember; a couple of slow cool-down kilometres after a hard session also help to aid recovery. Quality running is diverse and there are a number of different sessions we can run.

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Month 5 - May: IT'S ESSENTIAL TO INSPECT COMRADES ROUTE

A few days ago a business trip enabled me to drive over the Comrades course. The drive underlined how important it is to inspect the challenge ahead of the race – if at all possible.

Even though I have run the Comrades 20 times and have run and driven over sections of the course on many more occasions I still believe a drive over the course is an extremely important part of the final preparations for the race. It goes without saying that for novice runners the drive is obligatory.

Every time I drive the route my memory is refreshed and forgotten parts of the course are recalled. It has been two years since even the most experienced runners tackled the 'down' run and so much can be forgotten. The hills are shortened, and the kilometers diminished. The drive hammers the fighting truth home. I now know exactly how long 90 kilometres is and I have a pretty shrewd idea how tough it will be.

I am particularly glad that I now recall that the 'down' part of the down run starts not at Inchanga, not at Botha's Hill, but at the last garage in Hillcrest.

There are also some very nasty hills in the last eight kilometers of the race. Even driving the course is a gruelling experience. It is tiring and requires concentration, and it gets hot and sticky from Pinetown onwards. The drive itself is a great warning of what lies ahead for those who plan to run.

The point is that I am now worried and cautious and that is exactly the correct frame of mind to be in at the start of the Comrades. Cocky, arrogant runners are in for a shock on race day. The correct mental state for Comrades runners is to be cautious, nervous and slightly worried. The best way to instill those concerns is to drive over the Comrades course.

As I line up for my 21st Comrades I am reminded of my first Comrades marathon back in 1977. It has been wonderful to win the Comrades but my first run still has a special place in my heart.

I can remember many details of that magical day – the early sweat (it was a very hot year), the radios broadcasting the race's progress up front (live TV coverage was till six years away then), the packed cheering crowd at Cato Ridge, the incredible slog up Polly Shorts, my black toenails aching, and the tear in my eye when I knew I was about to become a Comrades finisher.

It seems a pity that there will be some novices who spoil their first run by starting too fast and by exhausting themselves. Novices should enjoy their first run. Savour the hours on the road, absorb the memories, treasure the friendships.

There will be other years to race for silver medals and good times. The novice run is the run to gather special memories.