

The Tortoise and the Hare by Jurie Swanepoel

My first recollection of running was when we went to the annual Christmas tree function at my dad's work. I was about 5-years old and remember various fun competitions going for the kids, including a few events like egg and spoon and sack races. But they also had sprints and laps around the field, which interested me more.

At primary school we had sprints and relay events on the menu and I was fortunate enough to always make the relay team for my age group, although never number one. Looking back now I realise that every year I got a little slower compared with my peers and by the time I went to secondary school I was way too slow to make the relay team. Luckily, I could move to other events and I started doing reasonably well at 400 and 800 metres. Turns out I was never a sprinter.

After school I started working as an apprentice at a big iron and steel works which had a running club and so my running journey continued, culminating in me receiving the Victor Ludorum trophy for winning the 400 metre, 800 metre and 400 metre hurdles. That sounds much grander than it was as there was a serious lack of competition.

This "achievement" prompted one of my running buddies to suggest we go run the Comrades Marathon, which I had seen on TV but did not know much else about it. Turns out this is an 89km (55 Miles) ultra-marathon for which you need to qualify by completing a standard marathon in under 4 hours 30 minutes.

So off we went on our 800 metre training to run the Jeppe Quondam marathon in Johannesburg, as our first marathon. It did not go well! I went out at 800 metre pace and by 16Km I was done and started walking.

After a while I heard huffing and puffing behind me and realised that the oldest man I have ever seen was about to pass me. That just did not seem right, so I sprinted off, as one does. The attempt did not last long and about 1 Km further I was walking again. And a few minutes later I was hearing huffing and putting again.

I could not believe what was happening, it was "The Tortoise and the Hare" reality TV. After all, I was the reigning Victor Ludorum! So, another sprint, another walk and another huff and puff further, my marathon was pretty much over. I hobbled home to finish my first marathon in about 4 hours 36 minutes, but my body, mind and ego was duly shattered, and I did not qualify for Comrades Marathon!

Licking my wounds while recovering I realised that road running is not track running and started training with some more experienced road runners, starting with shorter distances and slowly increasing to a point where I could qualify to get to the mighty Comrades Marathon. That did not go well either, but I am out of words. I run because I can.

Jurie Swanepoel, May 2020