

Comrades: It takes all of you

At the moment of taking the departure of the Comrades it is a strange mixture of feelings which invade me. On the one hand, the excitement of being at the start of the most prestigious ultra marathon race in the world. And on the other, the worry of knowing that I am embarking on one of the toughest road races, without being prepared for it.

Flashback and explanations

The Marathon Comrades in South Africa, contrary to what its name seems to indicate, is not a marathon. It's called the ultimate human race. And this denomination is very appropriate. This event consists of connecting the cities of Durban and Pietermaritzburg, a little over 90 kilometers including 3400m of cumulative elevation. Every year the race changes direction. In 2018, it's the down version. It is so called because the general profile is downhill but still has more than 1300 m of elevation gain. In fact, the course is a perpetual succession of climbs and descents, which makes it extremely demanding in terms of both the distance, the heat conditions in South Africa and the time barriers all along the route. .

This event has a history that has its roots in that of his country. It commemorates the victims of the world premiere and thus creates a very strong link, the day it unfolds, between South Africans, regardless of their skin color or social background.

It makes me dream for almost 20 years, when I had the privilege to be invited with Pascal Fétizon, then 100km world champion that I coached. But alas, my work, did not allow me to be able to free myself.

Since 2010, at the end of my international career, I have not done any tests beyond the marathon. So I decide, 3 months from the goal to start a specific preparation that will be based on long and slow exits to control the speed of racing and improve my efficiency. I also plan sequences of ascent and descent, for muscle preparation, including eccentric work. In fact the Comrades is a kind of 100km of Millau power 3 at the altitude level. So I know, theoretically, perfectly how to prepare for it.

But in fact, a calf pain that will prove to be a tear (which I still have not understood how I could, contract it because the intensity of my training intensity) will prevent me from doing the preparation that such a race requires. Worse, at 15 days, I still have not run more than an hour and a half ...

One of the other slogans of the race is: "There's no turning back". No question actually to turn around and give up. So I'll take the start whatever happens ...

The emotion of departure

The start of the race is at 5:30. Get up at 1:30 to get ready and take the shuttle to the buses that will take us to Pietermaritzburg. There, it swarms with people in the streets and already thousands of attendants and spectators are massed around the starting area. No excessive excitement, as can sometimes be seen on certain events. One feels that it floats in the air a special perfume. People are calm, focused, determined but not excessively. With hindsight, I now understand that they know they will spend a "very special" day as they say. And that makes them relaxed.

A few minutes from the pistol, it is the ritual of the hymns. It is terribly moving to see this people who have experienced the worst horrors of apartheid sing with one voice at once moved and determined. First, the hymn in English and then in Zulu, terribly moving with regard to the social and historical context. And then, to finish the chariots of fire. These songs make me draw the hairs of the skin, spin me goosebumps and raise tears. All this ceremonial is extremely upsetting. A whole people with origins, cultures, lifestyles, even different languages, singing with one voice is impressive and it shows the scope as well as the symbolic value of this race. The day of the Comrades, this people still torn (do not be fooled) is the sacred union around running, this sport that knows so well erase, the time of a test, the differences. When you are on a starting line with your shorts and your jersey, there is no difference. We all have the same goal.

First kilometers

The peloton rushes into the streets. It's still dark. I focus on my speed so I do not get carried away by the mass that doubles me. During 10km, I will not stop being overtaken. At the edge of the course, the public is numerous and en masse despite the early hour. I have had a lot of starts at dawn in my career. They were calm and anonymous. Here is a real hedge of honor that greets us all along the

road. Soon, the day comes up. It's time to discover the crowd stretching out of sight on the asphalt tape stretching in front. It's really impressive. The road is however wide but there is not a space of free over kilometers.

Camarades

During the race, the other riders see, thanks to the jersey, that I am French. First, they start by gently approaching me with "You come from France?" If we answer nicely (which goes without saying), they welcome you to South Africa, ask you if you "enjoy the race", encourage you, wish you to have "A Nice Race" and "A Beautiful Day" ". This sense of welcome and sharing is rare, if not unique. They see on your bib that you are novice because it is the custom with the Comrades to have registered his number of participations. It's great because, suddenly, you can discover the profiles of those who accompany you. And you feel tiny in front of these runners who have 10, 20, 25 participations to their credit. The question that often comes up is: "It's your first? ". "Yes! ". And they end up telling you this incredible sentence, with a disconcerting certainty: "You'll be back!" The links between runners are moving, I understand now what means "comrades" at "Comrades". The organization announces half a million by the side of the road. For the 90 kilometers it is a human barrier almost uninterrupted. Comparable to the tour de France Thousands of "Vive la France! "With a delicious and adorable Anglo-Saxon accent, " Go France! ", or " Go the blues! "The World Cup has left some good marks in the end despite Knysna. It's magic and also: " You looking good! "to encourage you, it's so touching and unique in the world, perhaps comparable to some parts of the New York marathon except that it lasts for hours, it's indescribable, magical. spend the day there, tending food, others are comfortably settled for picnics, many stands are set up with capitals, I do not know if they are clubs, stores, sponsors, but it's is colorful, colorful, joyful, festive. The supplies are numerous, 45 in total for the entire race. No dehydration with such frequency

Play with the cut-off

The race has many time barriers. They are based on 12 hours. -dire exactly when the stadium will close and that the time limit is over, to finish the race. No competitor will be allowed to cross the finish line. This is how Comrades. The goal is to have a sufficient margin in case the calf wakes up. Or if my muscles, impacted by the repetition of the hours of racing that my body has forgotten and especially by the downhill shocks refuse to make me run. 45 'in advance at kilometer 15. Well done. The lead will grow in the 30th and 45th to reach 1:15 to 60th. The calf is mute. The thighs harder and harder but the margin that I built allows me to be optimistic.

I have lost my memory

This meaning is supposed to be "down" but as Laurent says that caught up with me at the 40th kilometer: "It is only the South Africans to do a down test which only goes up ! ". It's true that it does not stop. It's corrugated iron. A succession of climbs and descents that follow each other perpetually. I feel that my thighs are more and more painful and that I turn off little by little. Like a battery that slowly but inexorably discharges, I'm losing my energy. I decided to take the time to stop at the refueling to break this mechanism that I impose on my stride to relax and relax the muscles to preserve them a little. Without training or almost and almost 10 years after my last race beyond the marathon, I see that my body has forgotten a lot. It has almost lost the memory of which one speaks so much for the runners having an important experience. At least this experience will have allowed me to test and verify that.

Race and Walk

The race profile announces the last 40 kilometers downhill. Except that it keeps going up very often. Downhill, my thighs are charred, destroyed. I knew it. There could be no other way out without the essential rib / downhill training sessions that I have just imagined and conceptualized to answer this problem of hilly courses. I had this click especially after running and winning Millau. I had applied this method and I had concrete legs on D-Day! Climbing is the physical exhaustion that is felt and makes me run just faster than I will advance by walking quickly. In summary, downhill I have no muscles and mount climb, I have no strength. And there, the idea of the march begins to be instilled more and more precisely in my brain. First to supplies to ... refuel, then when it goes down too long to relieve my quads, finally when it goes up because "it's useless to run as slowly as we walk." Basically, it ends up becoming an obsession. Walking to end what hurts and tortures each stride. I also feel that I'm hot

and I take advantage of the many supplies to immerse myself abundantly with the plastic pockets, very practical for the rest, they tend us in abundance.

Gold medal: the carrot

It is at this moment, towards the 75th kilometer, that Manue with the brilliant and luminous idea to stir under my nose the possibility to go to get the bronze medal, a final time lower than 11 hours, if we do not relax too much effort. It must be said that it is she who manages the supplies since I dropped (very early) my can. At that moment, it took me 2 seconds, when I tried to stop in order to try to recover it, to understand that in a platoon of such a density, I risked especially to be trampled. It is also she who lavishes all kinds of care and attention to me to maintain as she can. She figured that if she woke up the competitor who had fallen asleep, she had a small chance to drag me out for a shorter time. It takes time for the competitor to react. After all, we had just planned to finish on time! And then, the brain had to be reached in the right place, I tell myself that she deserves this medal and it is not fair that I am a ball that prevents him from conquering it. So, with my eyes on the watch, I start making calculations and setting myself to stop or stop. Our small stack of margin minutes remains stable or even expands, we will have this bronze medal.

The end

The arrival in the stadium is indescribable. I have never seen that ! It is necessary to imagine a sports enclosure dedicated to the world cup hosting a long distance running competition. It's unique here again. And this crowd we hear growling continuously. It takes my guts, especially after completing a demanding course that pushed me to go deep into me. I had completely forgotten that. But what I had not forgotten is the importance of savoring these moments. I take the time to look around, to immerse myself in this moment, this incredible atmosphere. I am an Olympic champion who enters the stadium to pick my victory. At the beginning of the turn we hear the speaker howling in his microphone. However, it is almost 5 hours since competitors arrive in an uninterrupted stream but the atmosphere looks like a winner. That's when I hear the sound of spitting a good old AC / DC. Do they know I'm coming? The last meters are exceptional. I felt the same things as when I won in Millau. This desire to scream and to express furiously this mixture of joy and satisfaction to have arrived there. From the line crossed, I take out the phone to film these moments, the stadium, this atmosphere. I absolutely want to keep track of those special moments. I do not feel like going out. The end of the race is overwhelming. They close after 12 hours of racing. There is a countdown on the giant stadium screen. A pistol shot (as at the start of a race) but that, there, marks the end of the time allotted to the riders. Absolutely incredible. A dramaturgy of crazy. I cried when I saw the last ones arrive.

The spirit of Comrades

The way they welcome and retain people is just exceptional. I just love it. It's unique in the world. Everything is done so that you come back. When you ran once you can do the "back to back" meaning a down direction after making sense up (and vice versa) And you have something special for that: 2 medals. Then there are the Green numbers, those who finished 10 Comrades On each bib, you have the number of Comrades finished. Different bib colors that identify riders. A model of organization and professionalism unique in the world for me and God knows that I saw some races.

Epilogue

What makes an exceptional race?

- The number of participants?
- The difficulty of his career?
- The beauty of his career?
- The difficulty of finishing it on time?
- The organization?
- The public?
- A unique proof format?

The Comrades is all that at once.

"It takes all of you"