

COMRADES KING – BRUCE FORDYCE

by Rich Limacher

The winner of more Comrades Marathons than anybody, South Africa's Bruce Fordyce also just so happens to hold the still-current world record for 50 miles, which he set 28 years ago half-way around the world in Chicago, Illinois.

And here's news: It was the *one and only* 50-mile race that Fordyce ever ran!

He admitted that during an interview just this past November in New York City on the evening before his fourth running of the now-ING NYC Marathon. Twenty-eight years earlier, Stan Wagon (then a co-editor of *UltraRunning*) had interviewed him the evening before that now-defunct AMJA Ultramarathons in which he set the record. Wagon's interview was published in the UR issue for December, 1984. Fordyce's 50-mile time for that Sunday, October 14, 1984: 4:50:51.

And his marathon time for the most recent NYC event that Sunday, November 6, 2011: 2:58:51.

Not too shabby at 27 years apart, eh? Maybe in both cases, talking with *UltraRunning* beforehand brought him luck.

Fordyce made his reputation, however, by winning at distances longer than 50 miles. The Comrades Marathon isn't a "marathon" at all. It's an ultramarathon of 89K, or 56 miles. He's also won at 100K, and for three years in a row (1981, 1982, 1983) he won the famous London-to-Brighton race in England, which varies yearly between 52 and 56 miles, depending on the route—which, we're told, usually depends on road construction.

Prior to his American debut at Chicago's AMJA—which included both a 50-mile and a 100K—Fordyce said, "I'd never run a 50-mile. Comrades, of course, is longer than 50 miles, but I've never run a 50-miler since then. I've run a 100K race but not a 50-miler. In fact, that's the only 50-miler I've run."

And there is some controversy about that world record he set in Chicago, because during Fordyce's 1983 London-to-Brighton, he was clocked at the 50-mile split in 4:50:21, which he and everybody else thought was the world record then. However, that time was disallowed as a WR because the course is point-to-point (enabling wind assist) with possible overall downhill (gravity assist) and it's a split—not a fully dedicated 50-mile race. Since then, Fordyce's 4:50:21 has been accorded "Noteworthy Performance" status, while his 1984 Chicago run remains the world record. (No American had ever come close to that except Barney Klecker and Allan Kirik in 1980, and none since.)

In that *UltraRunning* interview on October 13, 1984, Stan Wagon (assuming, as did everyone, that Fordyce's 4:50:21 was the world record on a hilly course) asked him: "As you know, tomorrow's course is pretty flat. How would a time here compare to one run on the first 50 miles of London-to-Brighton?"

"There is the potential for a much faster time here," Fordyce replied, "as long as the wind doesn't blow. But in order to set a time like that you need the competition. I'm hoping there



Bruce Fordyce (center), with George Monyemangene (L) and Mayor Tau (R)

will be guys who will go at sub-six-minute miles from the gun. And keep it up for 20 to 25 miles."

Since then, Fordyce has stated that he'd thought he could beat his London-to-Brighton time at Chicago and, 27 years later, we just *had* to ask about that.

Agreeing that his reputation (at least for all his Comrades victories) has always been to "hang back" and then speed up at about halfway, Fordyce noted: "Except, funny enough, at Chicago was the one time I *didn't*. I went flat out from the start, and I paid the price. I died in the last 10 miles."

That was confirmed by Wagon in the December 1984 UR when he reported that "at 30 miles [Fordyce] was on pace for a 4:45:00 50-mile time. He began to slow in the fourth loop, though not by much, and a 60-minute 10-mile was needed for a sub-4:50. Fordyce couldn't quite manage it..."

"I went too fast in the beginning," Fordyce said last November. "What I was doing was racing the clock. In fact, I was racing myself. I was racing myself from the year before, because the year before I did that 4:50-whatever in Brighton." He noted that the first half of London-to-Brighton is flat, but then in Sussex at the South Downs it gets very hilly. "It should be called the South Ups," he said. "I thought that at Chicago I'd take another five minutes off on a flat course!"

There were at least two memorable circumstances about Chicago that delight Fordyce to the present day. One was Michael Jackson.

"My hosts, Noel and Karina Nequin, took me to see Michael Jackson's Victory Tour concert in Wrigley Field. I mean, can you believe it? In the morning I ran 50 miles in 4:50 and that evening with very sore legs—I remember my legs were toast—I went to a concert. That was Michael Jack-

son when he was really at his peak—with the hair and the one glove...all that stuff." Apparently what really burnt the "toast" was the Nequins expecting Bruce to stand up and *dance*!

The second memorable thing was Ray Krolewicz. "He's a maniac," said Fordyce. To hear Bruce tell it, Ray (who's still running ultras today) was crazily insisting that Fordyce continue after the 50-mile finish and go on to win the 100K as well. Since the course was basically a 10-mile, out-and-back "loop," runners would pass each other in both directions.

"So I'm going this way towards the finish of 50 miles," Bruce said, "Ray's going that way... He turns round, runs with me now at my pace which was much faster than he was running, and spends a mile running in the wrong direction trying to persuade me to do the 100K. He said, 'You can take both titles. You can win both races!' I said, 'Ray, my mind [is made up]—you know when you program your brain and when you start that last lap, it's like you go out and tell those people with one mile to go, 'Sorry, there's another mile.' They'll kill you!—so there was no way on earth. I said, 'Ray, when I cross the line, I'm finished!' And he said to me, 'Ah, you're a wimp,' and then he turned around and carried on going!"

Following the UR interview model of 1984—when Fordyce had just graduated Johannesburg's Witwatersrand University with a masters in archeology and hadn't yet won much, if any, racing prize money—we asked Bruce what he actually does for a living these days.

His wife, Gill, who was within earshot, said, "As little as possible!"

Actually, Fordyce is able to enjoy a living as a professional runner, sometime coach and clinic leader, sponsored spokesman and motivational

speaker, as well as a writer for *Runner's World South Africa*.

Another athletic activity, although non-profit, with which both Bruce and Gill are currently involved is called "Park Runs" [parkrun.org.uk/delta/home]. It's actually a volunteer running "movement" that's gaining worldwide popularity. It was founded in 2004 in England by Paul Sinton-Hewitt. It amounts to a local running club being permitted to use a local park each and every Saturday morning for free "time trials" of the 5K distance. Expenses are met by commercial sponsors in exchange for marketing, and records are kept of every participant's weekly time with various achievement awards being given periodically by the club and parent organization.

Fordyce is convinced the concept is "going to explode." He believes it could easily take hold in the U.S. as well.

"Paul estimates that by the end of 2012 he'll have a million Park Runners signed up," he said, "It's spreading that quickly."

His nine victories at Comrades didn't net him any prize money, and he tells how Alberto Salazar was the last Comrades winner (in 1994) not to win a single rand. Prize money was first awarded at Comrades the following year.

"But," he said, "the spinoffs from winning a Comrades are great. My friends, my running rivals—some of them—who didn't run Comrades but focused on the marathon might pick up a couple of thousand here for winning a marathon and a couple of thousand there; but if you win Comrades and you win it again and then you win it again, you get a TV endorsement that's worth tens of thousands of rands, you know, in comparison. So then a whole lot of them realized that 'Hello, Bruce is making a living at that' and boom! They all came along to Comrades, and then they all got a shock because it's not that easy!"

He added, "They thought they could come along and kill it—and they were better quality runners—but no, it's a huge step up from a marathon to Comrades."

At one time, Fordyce held the Comrades course records in both directions, but he said that now a Russian runner, Leonid Shvetsove, has them with his wins in 2007 and 2008. Still, with nine victories, Fordyce claims the record for most wins. He's still called "Comrades King" for his reign in the years 1981-90 (missing only 1989). Shvetsove was beaten in 2009 by Stephen Muzhingi, who also won in 2010 and 2011 but so far hasn't bested either Shvetsove record.

The night before his interview, Fordyce, Muzhingi, and several South African visiting dignitaries gave a presentation on Comrades to several hundred invited guests who were in town for the NYC marathon. Bruce covered the history and explained all the medals—different finishing times earn differently metaled medals. ■

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