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 both 50 miles and 100K. He had run his first 50-miler in Boston in 1979, but it was his fourth running of the now-ING NYC Marathon, twenty-eight years earlier, that Stanley Wagner (then a co-editor of UltraRunning) had interviewed him the evening before that sold-out AmJAM Ultramarathons in which he set the record. Wagner’s interview was published in the US issue for December, 1984. Fordyce’s 50-miler time for that Sunday, October 14, 1984: 4:30:53.

And his marathon time for the most recent NYC event that Saturday, November 6, 2010: 2:35:51.

Not too shabby at 22 years apart, eh? Maybe in a few years, talking with UltraRunning before hand 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 92K, or 56 miles. He’s also won at 100K, and for three years in a row (1991, 1992, 1993) 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’ll never run a 50-miler, Comrades, of course, is longer than 50 miles, but I’ve never run a 50-mile since then. I’ve run a 100K race but not a 50K. 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 100K win, he was clocked at the 50-mile split in 4:50:22, which he and everybody else thought was the world record. However, a time was disallowed as a WR because the course is point-to-point (enabling wind assist) and it’s a split—not a fully dedicated 50-mile race. Since then, Fordyce’s 4:50:22 has been accorded a Noteworthy Performance status, while his 1984 Chicago run remains the world record. (No American had ever run a 100K before his fourth running of the then a co-editor of UltraRunning) “There is the potential for a much faster time for this race,” Wagner wrote. “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 followed 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, you get a TV endorsement that’s worth tens of thousands of dollars, you know, in comparison. So then a whole lot of them realized that ‘Hello, Bruce is making a living at this and he wins Comrades, and then they all got a shock because they all came to Comrades, and they all got a shock because they all came to Comrades! ’

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, in Chicago was the one time I didn’t. I went out from the start, and I paid the price. I died to the last 10 miles.”

That was confirmed by Wagner in the December 1984 US issue 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 so much, and a 50-minute mile was needed for a sub-4:40. Fordyce couldn’t 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 running myself from the year before, because the year I died on 30, the 4:45 world record 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. ‘They 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 UK interview model of 1984—when Fordyce had just graduated Johannes-Burg’s Witwatersrand University with a masters in archeology and hadn’t won much, if any, that year, he was asked about the Comrades. He added, “They thought they could come along and kill it—and they were better qualified than I. ’

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

Steve Roes, ULTRARUNNING’s retired editor-in-chief, was 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 trialing” 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 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 UK, 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, you get a TV endorsement that’s worth tens of thousands of dollars, you know, in comparison. So then a whole lot of them realized that ‘Hello, Bruce is making a living at this and he wins Comrades, and they all got a shock because they all came to Comrades! ’

Fordyce held the Comrades course records in both directions, but he said that now a Russian runner, Leonid Shvetsov, has them with his wins in 2007 and 2008. Still, the Comrades King for his reign in the years 1981-90 (missing only 1984), Salazar was bested in 2009 by Stephen Muusling, who also won in 2001 and 2004 but so far hasn’t bested either Shvetsov record.

Bruce Fordyce, Muusling, and several other 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 quirky comings and goings of this running event. Finisher medals are given periodically by the club and parent organization.