



# BLOOD, SWEAT & ARREARS

*As hundreds of Australians gear up to join 20,000 runners in the world's toughest ultra-marathon in South Africa, Perth accountant Bob de la Motte relives the most amazing race of his life.*

*Story Wendy Caccetta Photography Richard Halherly*

**B**ob de la Motte, a tall, lanky, 61-year-old, drops the vintage '80s Adidas runners on the table. They are little more than flat bottoms, tops and laces. None of the fancy lightweight, gel-cushioned technology of today. Still they are in good nick and don't look as if they've run 90km through some of the toughest country in South Africa.

In 1986 de la Motte was running the race of his life, carrying the hopes of weekend runners everywhere. He was leading the field in one of the world's greatest ultra-marathons, the Comrades, and looking like doing the unthinkable, beating the then five-time champion, a professional runner, to the finish line. The spectators lining the side of the road included a khaki-clad farmer watching on, side by side with his tame baboon. Supporters pumped their fists in the air.

"The only things that would have made me go faster that day were cooler weather and slightly different shoes," de la Motte reflects.

He eyes one of the shoes in front of him.

"It was like a Havaiana," he decides. "I could have done with better shoes."

As hundreds of Australians gear up to join 20,000 runners at the 2015 Comrades next month, de la Motte, who went on to become a successful investment banker and funds manager in Perth, has published a book of his "other" life. It details his accidental entree into top running circles and his David and Goliath battle with professional runner Bruce Fordyce for the Comrades crown in the '80s.

He is using the money from the sale of *Runaway Comrade* to set up a pension fund for some of South Africa's forgotten black running champions who he says were as important as Nelson Mandela in fighting apartheid.

Robert Aristide Lenferna de la Motte discovered his enormous talent for distance running by chance.

He was a newly minted chartered accountant busy establishing his career in Johannesburg when he was recruited into running with his colleagues.

Blessed with a remarkable lung capacity (almost twice that of the average person) and a huge stride, it wasn't long before he and the rest of South Africa discovered to their surprise that he could run a long way, very fast.

To put his lungs into perspective, most people have an average capacity of about six litres. De la Motte's whopping 10-litre capacity has a peak expiratory flow of 12.1 litres a second or 726 litres a minute – greater even than the five times winner of the Tour de France, Spaniard Miguel Indurain, who has a lung capacity of 7.8 litres.

"You have to find a distance you are good at and I went longer, longer, longer, longer. It surprised me," de la Motte says.

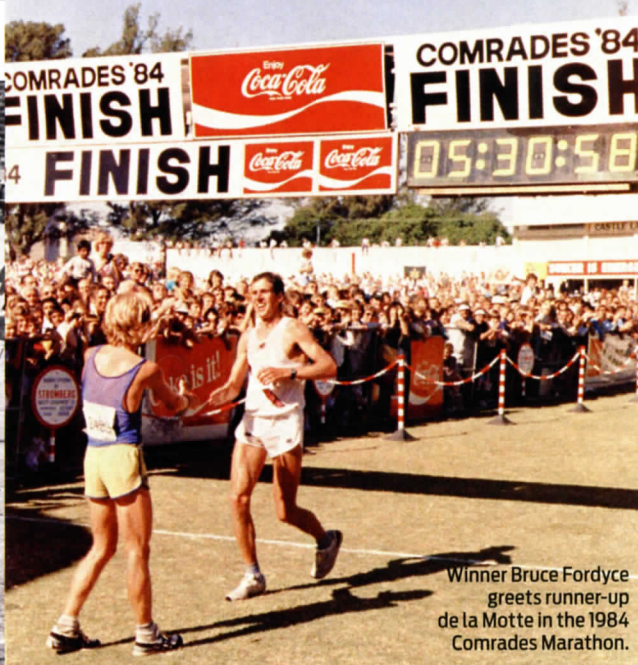
In running circles, he was a virtual unknown when he first did the unthinkable in 1984 and came within a whisker of toppling Fordyce, the world record holder over 50 miles (80.5km) and former world record holder over 100km, at Comrades, the world's oldest and biggest ultra-marathon. When the dust cleared that day and De la Motte crossed the finish line, only minutes separated him from Fordyce.

"It was a bit like I was a young Ricciardo straight from Barbagallo racetrack racing the big guys and, guess what, nearly won the duck's nuts of grand prix," de la Motte recalls. "People were thinking, 'What's going on here? Who is this guy?'"

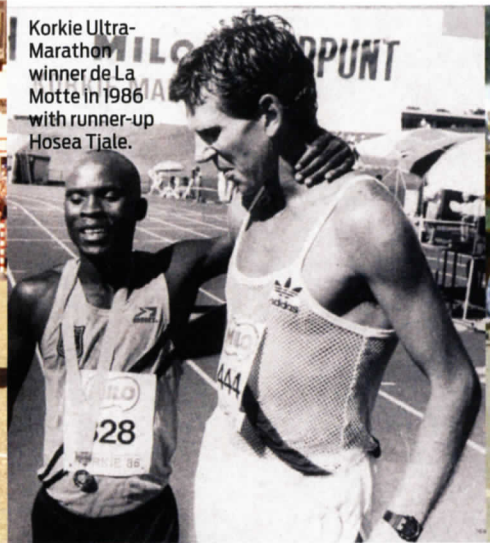
At 32, he suddenly found himself a sporting »



Bob de la Motte, the 1970 U16 Boys 800m champion.



Winner Bruce Fordyce greets runner-up de la Motte in the 1984 Comrades Marathon.



Korkie Ultra-Marathon winner de la Motte in 1986 with runner-up Hosea Tjale.

hero in South Africa. Overnight, magazines wanted him on their covers, footwear giants such as Adidas wanted him in their shoes and newspapers and TV reporters called regularly for interviews and updates on his training.

“Everyone knew me in a pin-striped suit with a silk tie and blue and white striped shirt. The chartered accountant,” he says. “Then suddenly, bang, there was this other profile which popped out.”

The following year de la Motte missed Comrades due to illness but won a prestigious 50km race in Johannesburg, the Johannesburg Stock Exchange Marathon. If people hadn’t noticed him before, they took note now.

“Once I beat the world-class marathon runners, one was the world-record holder over 50km, once again people went, ‘Oh, maybe it’s just another lucky run,’” he says. “But I knew then I was still on the ascendency. I was suddenly hitting my straps and worked out ‘Gee whiz, I think I can actually run with these guys. I think I’m as strong as they are.’”

In March, 1986, de la Motte won another race, the Korkie, a 56km course in Pretoria, in the second-fastest time in the history of that event. The scene was set for a huge showdown with Fordyce at Comrades in ’86.

In the lead-up to the race, de la Motte’s daily routine would typically involve leaving home at 4.45am for a 12km run to the gym, followed by a 20-minute work-out and a 2km run home.

He’d then load up his three young daughters and drop them at school, which started at 7.30am, and make it to his desk at KPMG, where he was a partner, by 8am.

Twice a week he’d try to squeeze in a lunchtime run, and there would be a Wednesday night run of about 21km. Closer to the event he would increase his running from a base of 120km a week to 200km.

“I’d take a couple of days annual leave and go and run Comrades,” he says. “One year I drove

800km home after the race and was at work the next morning. It was no big deal. Just stiff legs. Life was pretty simple.”

The almighty 1986 showdown with Fordyce began with the theme from *Chariots of Fire*. The crowd applauded fiercely as de la Motte ran along the gruelling course between Pietermaritzburg and Durban. With 14km to go, de la Motte, in the lead, concentrated on blocking out all the distractions. The moment Fordyce passed him was one that will forever define that race.

After closing the gap, his nemesis pulled up alongside him, shook his hand and gave him a bear hug before crossing the line just two minutes ahead of him. Fordyce’s time of 5:24:07

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was a new record that would stand for 21 years. De la Motte, in second, had also beaten the record, coming in at 5:26:12. The pair would again slug it out in 1987, with Fordyce again the victor (he’d go on to win Comrades a record nine times), only by minutes.

It was the last time the pair would meet on the Comrades course.

At the height of his professional and running career, de la Motte and his family moved to Perth in protest against apartheid. A year after the move, in September 1988, he made light work of the state’s only ultra-marathon, the Mundaring to York 64.37km course. His 3:52:52 was the fourth fastest in the world over that distance at that time and an incredible eight minutes inside the then Australian record.

There were other WA wins, too, such as the Perth Marathon in 1991 that he led from the start to finish in 2:24:16.

“I still treasure the memory of my daughter Nicole, then 13, cycling alongside me for 5km,” he says.

It was also on Australian soil that de la Motte finally beat his arch rival, Fordyce. Thirteen years after the men had last come face to face at Comrades, they met again at the Rottneest Marathon.

Now an Australian citizen, de la Motte settled the score by lapping Fordyce, who he says had turned into a “little Christmas pudding,” and beat him by an hour.

“That karma wheel had gone full circle again,” he says.

De la Motte, who lives in Peppermint Grove, says he was never interested in becoming a professional runner, despite his success, and was dedicated to his career in finance, which saw him hold positions such as treasurer at Challenge Bank (where he managed a balance sheet of \$5 billion) before moving into equity markets and becoming involved in ventures such as the \$30 million float of iiNet in 1999.

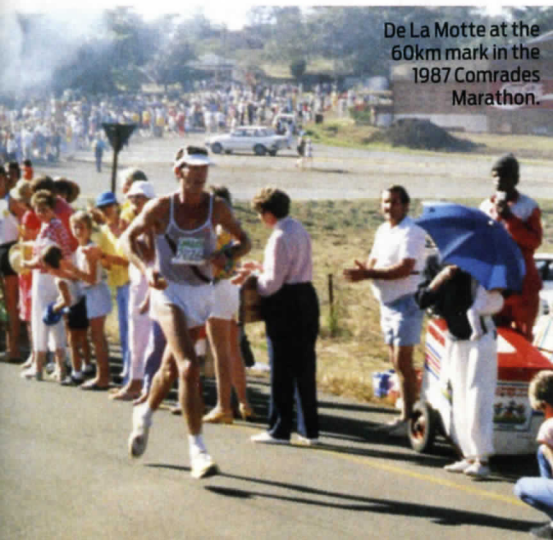
There was also an unsettling period when, as a previous partner of Arthur Andersen, he became ensnared in a \$1 billion claim against the firm by the liquidators of Alan Bond’s company. In his book de la Motte recalls receiving the news in 1994.

“Holy s\*\*\*! I grabbed a calculator. Hmmm ... potentially a personal liability in the order of \$21 million. I was facing utter financial ruin for no deed or recklessness on my part. In business this is called ‘partnership.’”

De la Motte, who had made enough money by the age of 55 to retire, says running helped him succeed in finance and vice versa.

“Anyone who does the Comrades marathon will end up acquiring a level of mental fortitude that will greatly assist in breaking

De La Motte at the 60km mark in the 1987 Comrades Marathon.



down life's biggest challenges," he says. "Every time I've had to win a new mandate or secure a pitch (at work) it was fiercely gladiatorial.

"You are up against the other investment banks, you've got to display your capacity and ability to do the work. It's as naked as running."

De la Motte says he has set up the Runaway Comrade endowment fund for some of South Africa's forgotten black champions because he's upset at the hand they've been dealt.

"They were like the Gandhi equivalent of Mandela. These guys could represent the struggle outside of the prison and they did it passively," he says.

"They didn't have to say anything. All they had to do was run. There was never an incident. They never bumped a white official. It was just, 'Mate, we're going to win. If you can catch us, do your best?'"

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Runaway Comrade (*CreateSpace*, \$44) is out now. It's also in Kindle format from [amazon.com.au](http://amazon.com.au) for \$16.54.

## BOB DE LA MOTTE'S TOP JOGGING TIPS

**1. Footwear** The most critical piece of equipment regardless of whether you walk, jog slowly, run or run very fast. A visit to a specialty running store to be properly assessed and fitted will potentially help you avoid unnecessary injuries and medical bills.

**2. Fuel** Avoid eating solids before you jog and go to the loo before you head out. A little-advertised benefit of jogging relates to the inducement of bowel movements. So if you haven't managed to go before your jog you may well be heading home, prematurely, for an urgent loo stop. Hydrate at least 20 minutes before you jog by drinking your usual morning "fix" like tea, coffee, water or another non-dairy product.

**3. Distance and frequency** You need only jog for 20 minutes three times a week. Start slowly. Warm up for the first 10 minutes before trying to find a little rhythm on the 10-minute return to the start point. Distance does not matter – the 20 minutes worth of cardio and weight-bearing exercises are what matters. Disciplined consistency of three outings a week will produce results.

**4. Make a diary note after every run** Write a modest diary entry, without using social media or unnecessary gizmos, about your weight after your first run (before rehydrating) and the time spent jogging. A crude estimate of distance is an added bonus. You can figure this out using Google Maps almost anywhere you run.

**5. Equipment beyond running shoes** Run with nothing more than a simple stopwatch on your wrist – no need for GPS, heart-rate monitor, earphones or other equipment. Tune into nature.

**6. Witness the magic of dawn** Try to run at first light ahead of the distractions of busy daily demands and see the magic of early mornings. You will start your day with endorphin-fuelled joy and "money in the

bank" – having achieved a jog of sorts, regardless of speed and distance.

**7. Personal safety** If you're not jogging with a buddy, inform someone of your route and expected return time. Avoid running alone in areas that are isolated and devoid of other pedestrians or cyclists. Run in the brightest, high-visibility colours, never black (unless you're in a closed race!).

**8. Sun protection** Even if you run pre-dawn or at first light ensure you apply adequate sun protection to your face and other exposed parts. Vitamin D is essential but skin cancer is a killer.

**9. Sleep** If you've not enjoyed eight hours of sleep your lethargic body will reluctantly wake up and take longer to get into a rhythm. A morning jog is an honest barometer of your own health.

**10. Find a jogging buddy and smile** This will halve the effort and double the fun. Share the joy of being alive.

