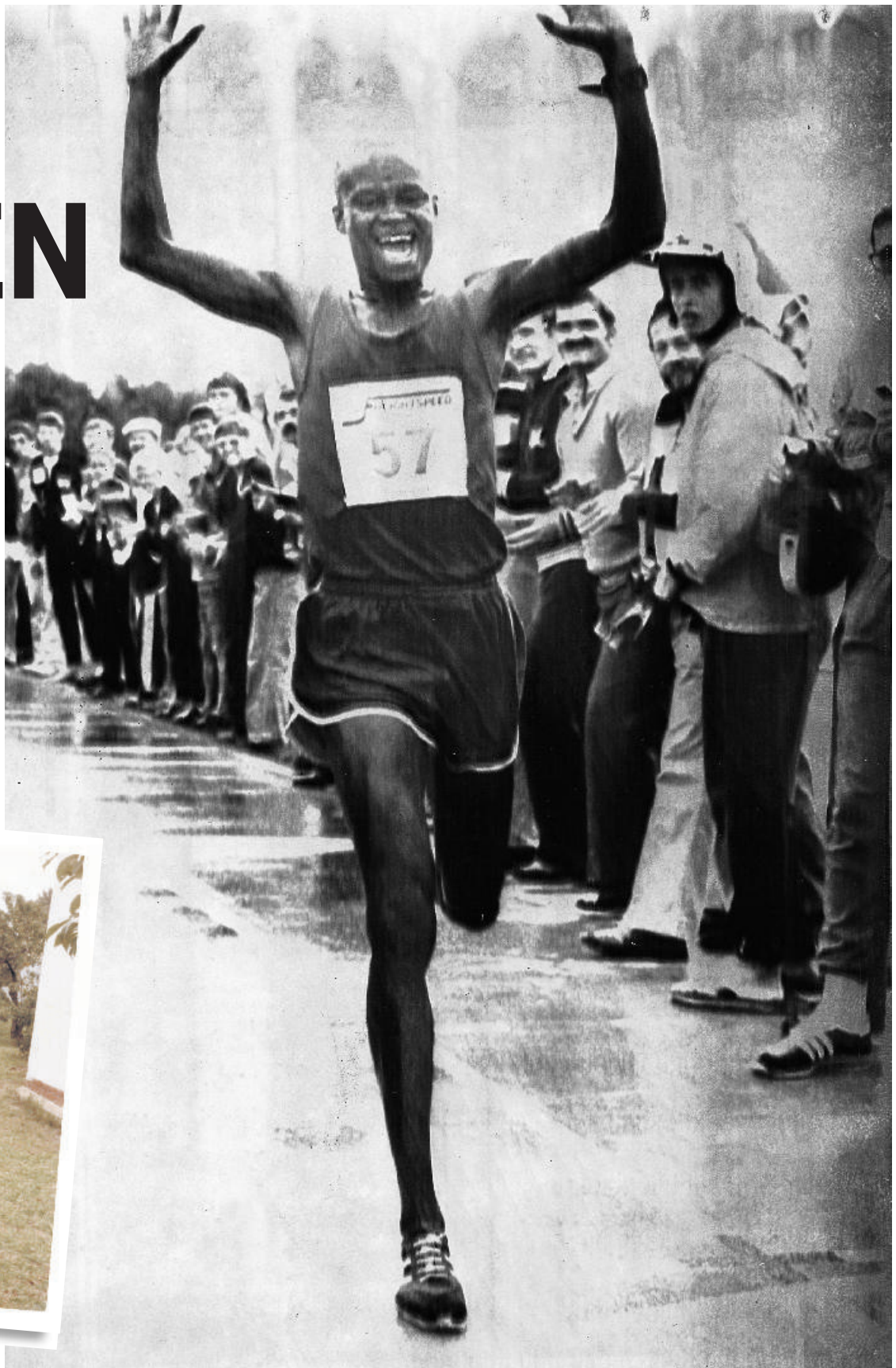


**RUNNING**

# THE FORGOTTEN COMRADE

Long before Sam Tshabalala made history by winning the Comrades marathon, Vincent Rakabaele was blazing a trail for black runners. Thirty years after they met, Duane Heath goes searching for him



**SPRINTED MATTER:** (Above) Vincent Rakabaele holds Warren Heath, and George 'Goodenough' Qokweni puts his hands on four-year-old Duane Heath's shoulders; (above right) Rakabaele during a moment of victory

**A**T 12.27 on the afternoon of May 31 1975, before a virtually all-white Republic Day crowd at Pietermaritzburg's Jan Smuts stadium, a little-known road runner from Lesotho named Gabashane Vincent Rakabaele raised his arms in triumph as he completed the 50th Comrades ultra-marathon.

There was, however, no winner's tape left to break — that job had been taken care of 34 minutes earlier by defending champion Derek Preiss — while the gold medals were long gone by the time the 26-year-old mine employee crossed the finish line in 20th place.

Rakabaele's run, although largely forgotten, remains a defining moment in the history of South African sport: 40 years after Robert Mtshali's finish in 1935 went unrecognised because of his race, and 14 years before Samuel Tshabalala finally closed the circle by taking the title, it was Rakabaele who became the first-ever black runner to officially finish the Comrades — and receive a silver medal to prove it was all real.

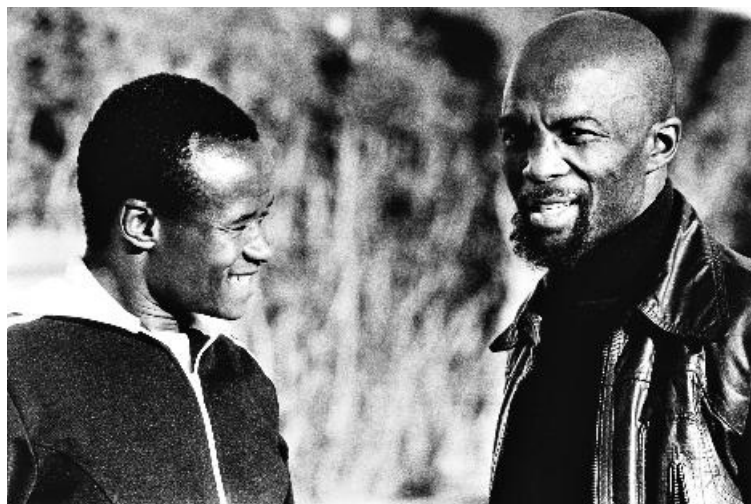
**W**E MET for the first and only time on March 26 1978. I remember that Easter Sunday because of a photograph that lay buried, for 25 years, at the bottom of a silver cake tin crammed with family snaps. Rakabaele, wearing a suede jacket and a broad smile, holds my brother Warren in his arms. Resting his hands on my four-year-old shoulders is George "Goodenough" Qokweni, the first black runner to finish another South African sporting institution, the Two Oceans Marathon.

Rakabaele and Qokweni had arrived at 5a Luther Street, Bloemfontein, together with my uncle, Lionel de Haas, who had driven them back from that year's Two Oceans Marathon in Cape Town. In those years, when a black man and a white man could share the same dark and dirty mine shaft by day, but not a beer in the bar at night, Rakabaele, Qokweni and De Haas (who runs his 35th Comrades today), became friends because they worked together at the President Brand mine in Welkom — and because they loved to run.

The day before Rakabaele and I had shared a peanut-butter sand-

wich in our backyard, he had finished runner-up at the Two Oceans, just 14 seconds off his 1976 record.

The following year, 1979, he again won the race, but never visited us again: Rakabaele had moved to a mine in the old Transvaal, and he and Lionel lost touch.



**MEDAL-MINDED:** Vincent Rakabaele with former trainer Motsapi Moorosi

**A**T THE end of March this year I stand in front of my childhood home, the old photo of Rakabaele in one hand, and a map of Lesotho in the other. Why, 31 years after that Easter Sunday in 1978, do I feel such an urgent need to drive thousands of kilometres, searching for a man I hardly remember? Perhaps the reason has less to do with Rakabaele the person than it does with what he represents: how could such a famous athlete simply disappear into thin air, and be forgotten for decades?

"Yes, I remember Vincent," says

Motsapi Moorosi. "I knew him."

Moorosi is Rakabaele's former trainer. We meet at the Lancer's Inn in downtown Maseru, sifting through the clues that have brought us together and that we hope will lead to Rakabaele.

A few days earlier, before leaving my Cape Town home for the trip to Bloem and, ultimately, Maseru, a call to Lesotho's sports ministry produces Moorosi's contact details. When I ring him, Moorosi admits he hasn't seen Rakabaele in years, but promises to make a few calls before I leave for Maseru.

Outside a truckstop on the N1 between Beaufort West and the Three Sisters, Moorosi sends me an SMS. "Found out Vincent might be dead. I suppose u r fixing 2 come 2 Maseru anyway, just thinking u should know. Motsapi."

Or perhaps it was that Rakabaele, who by now will be 60, is still living in the shantytown of Motimposo, as the Lesotho electoral commission's 2007 online voters' roll suggests? One cannot dismiss the possibility that he may have disappeared back across the SA border, in search of work. Or does Moorosi's SMS come closest to the truth?

On the morning of our conversation at the inn, Moorosi still looks as fit as he did when he ran the 200m at the 1972 Munich Olympics.

These days, he runs a butchery in Seapoint, a non-descript Maseru suburb near the brown banks of the Caledon River. Thirty years ago, without much official support for his efforts, he took it upon himself to scour the mines of South Africa, not for gold but for the migrant worker who could perhaps do what no Basotho athlete had ever done: win an Olympic medal.

Moorosi himself had failed in 1972; what drove him was the desire to unearth the guy who could make it. Anglo, Kinross, Marievale, President Steyn, Western Deep Level, President Brand — if his countrymen worked there, he made sure he knew about it.

Moorosi took Rakabaele to two Olympics, but both ended in disappointment: in Moscow in 1980, he finished 36th; in Los Angeles four years later, 61st. It was a race that changed both men's lives.

"After '84, we met from time to time but things were not the same," says Moorosi. "In Lesotho, we've always had problems to take care of our athletes because of poverty. And around that time, the guys who came in from South Africa started getting second thoughts about competing for Lesotho. So, Vincent and some other guys decided to break off, and after that, it might be a year before I'd see him again. So





GRAVE SENTIMENTS: Vincent's 75-year-old mother, Makhabashane Rakabaele

much so that he slowly drifted away from me."

A few hours before meeting Moorosi, a visit to the local election offices raises my spirits: Gabasheane Vincent Rakabaele is definitely alive, and voted in Motimposo in the 2007 elections.

"I'm pretty sure he's dead," Moorosi repeats when I put my discovery to him, "but it is a mystery because there are maybe a few people with the name Vincent Rakabaele, but not with the first name Gabashane."

It is only then that we notice the tiny discrepancy — a letter 'e' — that changes the course of our search. Gabasheane the Motimposo voter is indeed alive, but he isn't the Gabashane we are looking for.

**N**EXT day our 62km journey from Maseru to the tiny settlement of Ha Rakabaele starts on the deserted, donor-funded Kofi Annan Drive and ends in a series of un-tarred tracks that coil their way toward the distant Maluti mountains, like strands of spaghetti.

The road links Maseru to the new Mohale Dam, built to quench South Africa's growing thirst. Out here, beyond the villages of Ha Matjotjo and Ha Matete, dust and dongas are the common denominators of a parched paradise.

My stomach tightens the further I drive, and I feel, one way or another, that my four-year search for Vincent Rakabaele is about to come to an end. On the passenger seat are the

detailed directions to Vincent's family from a man named Khotso — apparently a distant relative of Rakabaele's — whom I found in a column of Rakabaeles in the Maseru phone book. Khotso has also heard that Rakabaele is dead, but he can't be sure. Deep down, I know both he and Moorosi are probably right. But even as the car crawls around the final bend of a 1300km journey, I find myself hoping everyone has it horribly wrong: that the election official has made a spelling mistake; that Moorosi's sources have Rakabaele mixed up with someone else; that I will find this ghost from my childhood alive and kicking in the middle of nowhere.

**"W**E BURIED him up here, behind my shop," says Michael Rakabaele, as he leads me to a simple grave overlooking a sweeping valley. "I'm responsible here now," he says softly, placing his straw hat near the heart-shaped headstone.

Michael, now 51, is Rakabaele's younger brother. He runs a small supply store — the Rakabaele Café — but has big dreams of turning it into a supermarket. Michael could also run a bit: from 1984-1987, the Rakabaele brothers shared three third-place finishes at the Two Oceans.

Sitting at the grave is Rakabaele's 75-year-old mother, Makhabashane Rakabaele, who still lives alone in a mud rondavel not 20m from this place where, on November 2 2003, Rakabaele was buried. "Before Vincent died, I promised him I would never go anywhere else in the world to work again," says Michael, pointing to his mother. "I promised this

**How could a famous athlete simply disappear into thin air, and be forgotten for decades?**

because I have to look after things here."

I wish I could say I spent many days in Ha Rakabaele, getting to know Vincent's family, finding out why he had come here some time in the mid-'90s (no one could remember exactly when), never to leave; why his wife had left him, never to return; why his only daughter had disappeared to Maseru; and why a man who had won nine major gold medals had no one to

turn to when he fell ill. The truth is that I stood staring at Rakabaele's grave for only a few minutes, lost in that surreal space that comes when mystery is reduced to cold reality. Deep down, I had tried to prepare myself for such a moment, but when it finally came there was none of the excitement of discovery. I felt only numbness, and the calmness that comes with the closing of a chapter.

Perhaps I'll never know the



TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS: Michael Rakabaele at his shop in Lesotho; below, in his younger days, running with Johnny Halberstadt

the radar. "We were both put up at a hotel called the Standard," he recalls. "Vincent wanted to go for a drink at the bar but, as soon as he walked in, they told him to leave. He was refused a drink in the bar, in the hotel in which he had been invited to stay. He never said anything about it, but it must have affected him."

**I**T HAS been two months since I stood on that hillside in Ha Rakabaele, but I still think about Benjamin's words: "Vincent should have been alive today, passing on his knowledge, being a role model for the next generation of road runners," he told me.

"Every year the big races donate a huge amount of money to charity, but this is almost grounds to say that a lot of runners who have done road running proud land up in positions where they're forgotten and need help. It's impossible to stay in touch with everybody but the guys who have made a contribution, stay in touch with them. And when they suddenly get sick and they don't know what to do, donate less to charity, and more to those guys who need it."

The last thing I did before leaving Ha Rakabaele was give Makhabashane the photo of Vincent that I had carried with me for so long. I only found out later that it is the only picture she has of her son.

At the time, I did it perhaps for no other reason than to give a still-grieving mother something back of her son, the happier echoes of long-forgotten encores.

cause of Rakabaele's death: some villagers spoke of debilitating knee-joint pain brought on by years of running; others, of diarrhoea and fever, and of the pills from the local clinic, which they say neither Rakabaele nor his family could afford.

In the end, I realised, it doesn't matter how he died. "Quite simply, Vincent should have been alive today," says Shawn Benjamin, a veteran photographer and former marathoner who befriended Rakabaele in the '70s. "He wasn't old, so hearing that he couldn't afford pills makes me shiver. He should have been able to pick up the telephone and phone the Two Oceans organisers and say, 'Guys, remember me, I'm in trouble, can you please help?' And help should have been there for him."

Harold Berman, the Two Oceans race announcer since 1972, recalls an event prior to the 1979 Foot of Africa race in Bredasdorp, which perhaps illustrates best why Rakabaele lived most of his life under

**WAFFLE?  
NO THANKS, I'M ON A DIET.**