THE RACE OF HIS LIFE

He started running to heal himself. But 33 years later, when BART YASSO chose one of the most brutal races on the planet for his final competition, something even greater had been gained

By Steve Friedman
Photographs By Jon Ivins

INTO AFRICA
Yasso sweats out Comrades, "the one race that haunts my dreams."

A few limpers are nearly done.

Several walkers are approaching the finish line, as is a pregnant woman, and a man clutching his knee. Now a blind runner is coming down out of Utah's Wasatch Mountains on a day so clear, so shiny, so piercingly clean, that even the most profoundly out-of-shape might be inspired to run. But the man known as "the Mayor of Running" doesn't need inspiration. He gives motivational talks to others. For him—even with a body savaged by illness, and doctor's orders to stop running—a starting line is inspiration enough. Besides, today's race is a necessary warmup—the final contest before he attempts the event that has enthralled him for decades. If he can finish that event, it will cap his unlikely and blessed and cursed racing career.

But first he has to complete this race, and it's not certain he will. It's four hours and fifteen minutes since the Ogden Marathon began, Saturday, May 15, and the middle-aged and the chubby are smiling and raising their hands as they cross the finish line. The grieving and joyous weep. A redheaded woman in her 30s does a cartwheel. A team of middle-aged women with "Running Angels" emblazoned on their shirts finish together, holding hands. Wincers and grimacers come, too, and they finish, and still there is no sign of the man who has endured more than almost any runner, whose travails have stirred so many.

Yes, what drove him at first was a misery he barely understood. That, and an intense determination to escape it. But he became a fleet champion, and though he delivered inspirational speeches and patted the backs of the slow and the unsteady, they weren't his people—not really. He was an elite runner, a 2:40 marathoner, an early conqueror of one of the world's most notoriously difficult long-distance races. He was featured in *Sports Illustrated*, feted by race directors, invited to Antarctica and India to lend his fame to fledgling competitions. How could he possibly empathize with the waddlers and the lopers?

Now they're his favorites. Now, at the beginning of every marathon he enters, he arrives at the starting line at least an hour early and seeks out those hapless athletes who have fastened numbers to the backs of their shirts. They might as well be wearing neon signs that say "First Timer." He smiles at them and helps them move their bibs, and tells them they're in a marathon, not a rodeo. He tells them if anyone asks, they should say they're going for a PR, and they chuckle. That brings him pleasure. He still respects winners, but he loves the stragglers.

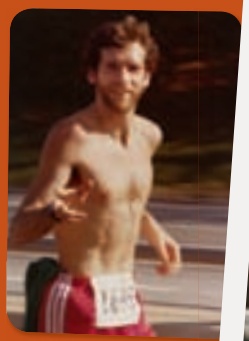
Four hours, 20 minutes now and he is finally out of the mountains. He is lean at six feet, 170 pounds, with chiseled cheekbones and short grey hair, a long aquiline nose and gray, deep-set eyes. He runs with neither grace nor obvious joy. He is dragging his right leg, almost dragging the entire right side of his body. In his professional appearances, he exhorts crowds to never, ever quit. He says later that if he saw someone running with his stride, he would advise them to find another sport.

At 4:24:56, he shuffles across the finish line.

"You look fast," he says to every child under 14, and every one of them beams. "I don't have to tell you to have fun," he says to the pregnant runners he encounters. "God, this is a beautiful course!" he says to no one in particular. "I love this course."

People approach him for autographs. "I want to introduce you

COURTESY BART YASSO (5)



THE STARTING LINE
Breaking out of the blocks in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania (clockwise from top left): The clean-cut fifth-grader; with his father on the way home from the 1982 Boston Marathon; at the 1981 Long Island Marathon; St. Patty's Race in Allentown, 1988; with his brother George (left) in 1975, five years before his first race.

to a legend," says one middle-aged man to another. "Are you Bart Yasso?" asks yet another man, and when Yasso says yes, the man says, "You're my hero."

As he limps toward the VIP tent—along with a small stipend, access to the VIP tent is usually part of the package when race directors hire Yasso to motivate their entrants—a 36-year-old woman from Salt Lake City named Carri Lyons stops him.

"Are you Bart Yasso?" she asks him, and he allows that yes, he is, and he asks, isn't this an incredible course, and isn't this an incredible day, and didn't she have a great time on the course? He asks these same questions at every race, and judging by the look in his eyes and the way he leans into his questions and almost quivers as he awaits a response, he's either a great performer or a true believer, or both. Her eyes fill with tears.

"I was diagnosed with cancer a year ago," she says, "and I told myself, I am going to run a marathon today, and that got me through it."

Yasso says that's great, that's really great, and she cries more.

"Two years ago," she says, "we lost our baby son, and when I crossed the finish line, I knew he was in heaven, looking down, saying 'Go, mommy, go.'" She sobs and Bart pats her on the back.

"Seeing you makes my day," she says. "You have made my day."

When she leaves, still sobbing, Yasso settles down with some fruit in the VIP tent, then shakes his head.

"How the hell can I have made her day?" he says. "A woman who's been through so much? How can I have made her day?"

BART AND HIS WIFE, LAURA, ARE SITTING IN A CAR chugging through the hills of Southeastern South Africa. Driving is a stout Australian with a red-gray beard named Bruce "Digger" Hargreaves, who is talking about pain and death and failure with a great deal of hilarity and passion, much the way a connoisseur of mayhem might reflect on the work of Jack the Ripper.

"I know a lot of people who started the race and have never finished," Hargreaves says, with evident pleasure, to the man who is worried about starting the race and not finishing. "They're gutted, absolutely gutted. They said it's the worst thing that ever happened in their lives."

"Oh," the Yassos say in unison.

It is May 28, just two weeks after the Ogden Marathon. Yasso has not run a step since. In his speeches and writing, he preaches regular workouts and sensible training. He knows he's incapable of that now. In the past year, he has dragged himself through 10 marathons and has not otherwise moved a single step at anything faster than a walk. No morning jogs, no weekend loosening-up, nothing. He ran the marathons because although these days he can have difficulty walking, he knows he needed to do *something* to prepare for the race in South Africa. It is an event that piqued his curiosity when he was young and healthy, and, as his speed declined and his health deteriorated and his wisdom grew, one that grew into a grand obsession.

There are older and more famous races. There are races hotter, and colder, more mountainous and more crowded, and Yasso has run more of them than nearly any other human. But among runners and running fans, South Africa's Comrades Marathon (which at about 56 miles is more than twice the distance of other marathons) occupies a place among races in the same way that Godzilla occupies a place among flesh-eating dinosaurs.

"The world's greatest footrace," *Runner's World*'s Amby Burfoot called it in 2007. "The Boston Marathon, the Super Bowl, and the Fourth of July all rolled into one, on acid," says one of the 176 Americans running in the 2010 event. (Apparently that quote has legs; other variations of it making the rounds involve Disney World, the Tour de France, and steroids.) To Yasso it is "the one race that still haunts my dreams."

It was 1982 when someone in the Boston Marathon—he can't remember who—told him that Comrades tested the human

BUILT TO LAST
Highlights of an enduring career (clockwise from top left): "Badwater Bart," 1989; hiking up Mt. Kilimanjaro in 1997; the 2001 Rome Marathon; Arctic Circle Marathon, 2006; the 2010 Oklahoma City Memorial Marathon; the Pikes Peak "Golden Nugget" champion, 1991.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: GORDON WILTSIE; COURTESY BART YASSO (2); COURTESY JAN KUNZ; COURTESY BRIGHTROOM; COURTESY BART YASSO

LOVE ON THE RUN
In South Africa with his wife, Laura, an accomplished distance runner whom he met in 1993.

spirit in ways that no other race in the world did. Yasso was fit, and just 26 years old, and the notion of testing his spirit was interesting in a theoretical way—in the way that growing old and accepting your limitations might be interesting to a 13-year-old boy. Back then, he thought he'd be able to run Comrades any time he wanted. Years later, much older but still fit, he saw images of wealthy white businessmen helping poor black runners, and black onlookers helping exhausted white runners, and he thought that was moving, especially since Comrades integrated in 1975, and apartheid didn't end until 1994. He had wanted to be part of an event with such a proud historical legacy—but he had other races to run, then, other things to do.

So this is his last chance. He thinks he has one final official race in him. And it will be Comrades.

The Yassos arrived in South Africa four days ago, and Bart thought two or three miles jogging in Cape Town—just to loosen up—would be okay. He couldn't even make it a block.

That was Monday, and now it's Friday. The race is on Sunday.

Hargreaves shifts into low gear as he and the Yassos snake up—and up and up—a hill. Hargreaves tells the Yassos that about 50 percent of the entrants in the race finish at between 11 and 12 hours. He says that at 12 hours (the cutoff time was extended from 11 to 12 hours in 2003) a gun goes off at the stadium where the finish line is located, the runners' entrance is closed, security guards are posted, and inevitably there is much gnashing and wailing and often altercations as individuals desperate to have their names entered in the logs of Comrades finishers try to claw their way in. (Over 12 hours, and it's as if you didn't even run the thing.) That perfervid desire wars with an equally strong impulse to help other runners. In fact, it has long been a custom that if a runner collapses near the stadium, the nearest runners stop, pick her up, and, if need be, carry her over the line.

"That's really cool," says Yasso. "People helping each other."

"They made it an offense in 2003," Hargreaves says.

"Why?" Yasso asks. He thinks it sounds like a nice custom.

"The bloke was laying there," Hargreaves says, with a chuckle, "and four other blokes stopped, and each took a limb and they carried him across the finish line. Turns out he was dead."

"Dead?" Laura asks in a soft voice. She has run 115 marathons and more than 60 ultramarathons, more than her husband, and doesn't scare easily. She was the top master in the 100-mile Western States Endurance Run in 2000, and finished third among women in that event the following year. "Really?"

"That's right," says Hargreaves, with an almost unseemly amount of relish. "So they changed the rules, because they worried that in their eagerness to help, some bloke might kill another bloke by moving him."

"Oh," Laura says.

The Yassos and Hargreaves discuss the glories and fearsomeness of the race—how it weaves and plunges and soars between Durban and Pietermaritzburg, past the Valley of a Thousand Hills. They talk about how the course switches directions almost every year. (This year the course starts in Pietermaritzburg so is a "down" year, though many say the "down" course is more horrifying than the up, and besides, still offers plenty of up.)

The trio is silent as the car ascends and descends another monster incline, then levels off, for a view of the course. "Look at those hills!" Yasso says, looking out at long, winding climbs. He sounds awed, excited, and nervous. "What are their names?"

"Those little things?" Hargreaves says, with another, almost cruel laugh. "They're not big enough to have names."

"Oh," says Laura.

But Hargreaves is just getting warmed up. If Comrades is a fierce and terrible war between the human spirit and Earth's punishing terrain, then Hargreaves is that conflict's Homer, except more perversely cheerful. "You might be fit," he says. "You might be able to run a 100-K, but if you smash your legs the first part of the course, you won't make it."

This seems to excite Yasso. "There is nothing like it!" he almost shouts. "It's the ultimate race of the human spirit."

Once, when he couldn't even name the source of his anguish, he ran as fast and as hard as he could, and that helped, but not enough. Then he ran smarter, and farther, and that helped, too, but still it wasn't enough. Now he thinks he knows the secret. Now he thinks he understands the key to happiness.

It doesn't involve speed.

BART YASSO GREW UP IN BETHLEHEM, PENNSYLVANIA, the middle child of seven born to George Yasso, a Slovakian immigrant who worked as a foreman at the steel mill and his wife, Rose Marie. Bart's oldest sister, Anna Marie, earned straight A's. The next child, George Jr., received a football scholarship to Hofstra University. Bart was short and skinny "with arms as thin as bamboo reeds." He was cut from his sixth-grade basketball team and, two years later, kicked out of St. Ursula's Catholic school for smoking marijuana. He was, he writes in *My Life on the Run: The Wit, Wisdom, and Insights of a Road Racing Icon* (Rodale, 2008), "in the eyes of my hardworking Slovakian father, a failure."

COURTESY BRIAN SABIN/RUNNER'S WORLD

In his book, Yasso mentions his little brother who died at 2 years old, and how "I don't remember much from those years, just spending a lot of time in the playroom at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia." As for his inner life and whatever internal agony led him to a troubled and troubling adolescence, he writes: "As best as I can surmise, I was rebelling against my detached father, who mustered affection only for his sons who excelled on the athletic fields...I felt invisible."

He was an indifferent student, with shoulder-length hair. By the time he was 14, he was drinking every day. At 18, he was a community-college dropout, a deliveryman, hauling soap and shampoo to area drug stores, drinking a half case of Pabst Blue Ribbon every night and sucking marijuana smoke from a bong. He wouldn't fall asleep until long after midnight.

When he was arrested for trying to buy marijuana from a man who turned out to be an undercover agent, Yasso's father, who hadn't called him by name for years—he referred to Bart as "Alice Cooper"—stopped speaking to him altogether. "My status as the black sheep of the family was secure," he writes. He stopped smoking pot because he was frightened of going to jail, but "to compensate I ...drank more. Much more."

He woke up with hangovers, and kept drinking. He passed out, and kept drinking. When he was 22, a close friend stumbled out of a bar and was hit by a car. At the hospital, Yasso looked at his friend, in a coma, then considered his life. He kept drinking.

He drank to ease the pain of a disapproving father, and to lower the volume of the yammering voice inside his skull, the one that said he wasn't an athlete, he wasn't worthy, he would *never* be worthy. He drank because the voice hissed that he was a failure, and because he hated being a failure. Eventually, he drank because that's who he was: a drinker.

In his PowerPoint presentations and numerous interviews, Yasso is quick with a laugh line and an inspiring platitude concerning the varied pleasures of exercise. His stories invariably contain rising action, climaxes dramatic and funny, lessons that resonate far beyond the literal tales he tells. When it comes to explaining his own motivation, though, the yammering voice and the ways he has tried to quiet it, he's not as deft.

Here is how he describes his transformation from teenage drunk to nascent running legend: "I stopped binge drinking and let a dog called Brandy...be my savior."

Brandy belonged to Yasso's girlfriend at the time, and when Yasso walked the dog, he noticed the dog seemed happy running. "One day I decided to try it myself. I ran a half mile to a local bar called the Zoo before collapsing on a stool. I downed two beers to celebrate, then walked home."

Soon he was running three miles every morning before work. Pumping his legs was putting distance between the black sheep he had been and the man he wanted to become. But he didn't see that at the time. At the time, he simply ran. He had no interest in competing—he was Alice Cooper, he was the "runt," he was the nonathletic Yasso—but his big brother George challenged him. Little brother thought he was a runner? Then why didn't he test himself against some real runners? No? Was he scared? Was he too slow? Finally, Bart relented and joined George at the Moore Township 10-K in 1980. When the gun went off, the Yassos shot to the front of the pack. Bart finished the first mile in 5:20. Maybe he wasn't such a runt after all. At mile two, he almost puked. He finished far behind George, "thinking I had failed. I was humiliated, humbled, and hurting." The voice again.

He signed up for another race three weeks later. He did it because he wanted to beat his big brother. He did it because he wanted to stop hurting. Only later did he suspect that he might have done it to win his father's love, to quiet the voice inside.

The aimless, invisible deliveryman picked up a copy of *The Complete Book of Running.* The community-college dropout studied articles about pacing and interval training and stretching. The boozer went on the wagon. Three weeks later, at a 10-K in Easton, Pennsylvania, he defeated his brother.

"I had purpose, and I embraced it," he writes.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: COURTESY RUNNER'S WORLD; DOUG GOODMAN; STEVE BOYLE; DOUG GOODMAN; COURTESY GASPARILLA DISTANCE CLASSIC ASSOCIATION/DAVID LUBIN

MAN OF THE PEOPLE
The "Mayor of Running" at work (clockwise from top left): Inspiring a DC Road Runners group, 2009; signing autographs at the 2009 NYC Marathon Expo; giving a pep talk at the start of a local Pennsylvania 5-K in 2010; rocking the mic for a New York City crowd; greeting a wounded warrior at the 2010 Gasparilla Distance Classic Marathon.

THE LAST CHALLENGE
Comrades, 2010. The 1,000-plus pace group aimed to finish in 11 hours, and Bart wanted to catch that "bus."

What he didn't understand was that the pain of running was beginning to replace the pain of being ignored and unloved. What he didn't understand was that he had developed an enormous capacity for enduring emotional distress, and that somehow that had translated to an equally capacious tolerance for grueling corporeal hardship. What he didn't understand was that he would spend the next decades seeking out more and more punishing physical challenges, and that those challenges would change him in ways he could never imagine—and still doesn't totally comprehend.

In 1981, the year after he first ran a 10-K, he finished a marathon in 3:13. Two months later, he ran a 3:07. At 25, he decided he would test himself at the most famous marathon he had ever heard of—the Boston Marathon. He would need to shave 17 minutes off his fastest effort to qualify. The runt started lifting weights. He increased his weekly mileage—60 by then—to 90 and added 20-mile Saturday runs. In the fall of 1981, at the Philadelphia Marathon, needing to run 2:50, he finished at 2:50:56.

His father was at the finish line. "You can do better," he said. "You're going to have to step it up."

At the Boston Marathon, he ran as fast as he could, as smart as he could, and he finished in 2:59. His parents were waiting for him at the finish line. His mother hugged him. "Where the hell were you?" his father said. "We didn't see you."

"I gave it my best effort," Yasso said. "Sometimes you have to be happy with that."

"I thought I told you, step it up," his father said.

Did his father think that would break his son? Did he think it would *help* him? It didn't matter. Bart was already a black belt in the art of enduring assaults to his body and soul. He could take it. He *would* take it.

The next year he ran Boston again, a full 19 minutes faster than he had the year before, and he called his father afterward.

"Did you win?" his father asked.

No, Bart said.

"You need to train harder."

He did. He trained and he trained. Agony wasn't to be feared. Anguish wasn't an entirely bad thing. Pain was a tool. He didn't say that then. He might not have thought it. But he ran harder, and faster, and he sought out longer and tougher events.

He added bicycling to his training, and he won the 1987 U.S. National Biathlon Association Long Course Championship. *Sports Illustrated* called. His father told Bart he was proud, and that was nice, but it didn't change his childhood, didn't change the reality of his life, didn't silence the yammering voice inside. "My father and I never really got along," he says now. "George was more of a father to me."

When he was 31, in 1987, he started working at *Runner's World* as a liaison between the magazine and race directors, and by 1989, he had run 40 marathons. In 1989, he ran the Badwater Ultramarathon, a 146-mile slog across Death Valley and up Mount Whitney, five times farther than he had ever raced.

He had used drugs and alcohol to ease his pain, and then he had replaced his emotional suffering with the physical challenges of long-distance competition. He could take it all.

It was terrible, and brutal, and wonderful. He wanted more.

He became known as Badwater Bart. Overcoming a fear of public speaking, he became an in-demand celebrity performer. But it wasn't just race directors around the country calling him, it was race directors around the world. He ran in India and Africa. He considered the race in South Africa again—the one that

made mere marathons seem like childish larks, and he thought, someday, when he wasn't so busy. He had all the time in the world. He ran at a nudist camp and he organized a race for recovering drug addicts. Neither their rough backgrounds nor the yammering voices in their heads had stopped them from working toward meaningful lives. He felt a bond with them.

Life had thrown a lot of things at him, too, but he had endured them all, had used them to grow faster and stronger. And then, there was something he couldn't beat with sheer willpower. In 1991, after the Lake Waramaug 50-miler in Connecticut, he could barely get out of bed. He thought it was the flu. He went to a doctor who told him to rest up. Weeks later, he went back and the doctor performed some tests and told him he had Lyme disease, and put him on a course of oral antibiotics.

Yasso stepped it up. He organized races; he raced 10-Ks, and marathons, and ultras. Those were his glory years, from 1991 to 1997. He rode his bike 25 miles to work, and 25 miles back, except on Thursdays. That's when he covered the same course on foot. "Running is good," he says, referring to that period of his life. "Life is good. Job is good. It's all good."

He knew—and knows—that part of his good fortune was luck. "By some genetic twist," he writes, "I had been given a body that was indefatigable."

It was exactly that apparent invulnerability to exhaustion that almost proved his undoing.

IT WAS JUNE 1997, AND HE WAS SIX MILES FROM THE TOP of Mount Kilimanjaro, on the third day of a four-day group trek up the mountain. The previous week he had flown 12 hours from New York City to Cairo with a friend, and while in that city had awakened in his hotel room sweating profusely and shaking with chills. "I did what I always do when I'm feeling out of sorts," he writes. "I went for a run."

He felt better afterward—he always did—and after flying to Nairobi, then riding a bus for eight hours into Tanzania, he started hiking. The morning of the second day, he had a hard time breathing, and his legs burned. He blamed the altitude—9,000 feet. The next morning, his legs hurt worse, and he had developed a rash on his arms and chest. He kept going. The third day, the vision in his right eye was blurry, and then he couldn't close it. When he got out of bed, he pitched over. The right side of his face was paralyzed. After a nine-mile trudge to the bottom of the mountain, and a cab ride to a one-room concrete outpost where steel bars covered the pharmacy, and another eight-hour bus ride, he ended up in a Nairobi hospital. His fever was back, "one eyelid was frozen open, and the right side of my face drooped. The glands in my throat were so swollen that I hadn't eaten anything for three days."

A doctor at the hospital told Yasso that he had Bell's palsy, which causes facial paralysis, but the doctor had no idea what had caused it. He recommended that the runner return to the United States "as soon as possible." At the Nairobi Airport, an ophthalmologist in the ticket line suggested Yasso tape his eye shut, so, with Scotch tape covering much of his face, Yasso flew eight hours to Cairo, then 12 to New York City. He put on his headphones and listened to Bruce Springsteen most of the way.

After a quick stop at the New York City satellite offices of *Runner's World* and a 90-minute bus ride home, Bart was met by his brother George, who drove him to a hospital. There, he learned the truth. It was Lyme again, and it "had advanced...because I had waited too long before receiving medical attention. My high pain threshold was the culprit."

He returned home the next day. Surely he would slow down now. Surely he would ponder life at a less driven pace. Three days after leaving the hospital, he rode his bike 25 miles to work.

The next year, at age 43, he won his first marathon, Tennessee's Smoky Mountain. The same year, he ran a 2:42 at the California International Marathon. Life was good.

The first decade of the new century has been great, and terrible. He met Laura in 1993, at a meeting of the Road Runners Club of America. They stayed in touch, until 2000 when he e-mailed her that it had been a goal of his to set the master's record at the Western States, but of late he had changed it. Now, he wrote, "I want to sleep with the master's winner."

She e-mailed back, "I like your goals." They started dating, and

THE FINISH LINE
With fellow survivors in the stadium at the end of Comrades, his last official race.

were married a year later. But around the same time, George told his younger brother that he had been diagnosed with prostate cancer. In 2003, at age 51, George was dead. "He gave me the tools," Bart says. "He put me on the right path." In 2006, Bart had another bout of Lyme, worse than ever. His knees swelled up "bigger than softballs." A doctor ordered an MRI, and it showed damage in the right knee, the result of so many years of Lyme disease, as well as his brutal regimen.

"Your running days are over," the doctor said.

They weren't, of course. He didn't run as far, or as hard, but he ran. He ran through his father's death in 2006, and his induction into the Running USA Hall of Champions in 2007. He ran through his mother's death in 2008. He ran through six months of intravenous antibiotics with a shunt taped to his arm.

He has managed to complete a few marathons in the last four years, but they have been hard and they hurt, and no amount of stepping it up, or taking it, has changed that. He doesn't dwell on the pain, or his body's degeneration, but he mentions the Lyme disease in the talks he gives at the races that hire him.

And a funny thing has happened since he started doing that.

As much as people had always loved him, as much as they responded to his message of working through difficulties and facing challenges head on, and beating them, of never backing down, of *taking it,* of *stepping it up*...they responded even more when they heard a man talk about accepting his limitations, a man, who, when he realized he couldn't run fast anymore, ran slow and found joy in that. He had always been the guy who could beat anything. It never occurred to him that the part of him that *couldn't* take it—the part of him that was most human—was the best part of all.

Yasso is not one to indulge regrets, but even he admits that he sometimes wishes he had run Comrades right after his last Lyme diagnosis, when he was hurting but still enjoying the occasional easy four- and five-mile runs. Another part of him wishes he had run Comrades before his first bout of Lyme disease, back in the heyday of Badwater Bart. But the battered part of him, the wise part, knows that he has another opportunity, and it's now.

He and Laura pay the Comrades entry fee in December 2009.

A FAN IN FULL
After finishing in 11:33:38, watching and cheering as others struggle to get in before the race is shut down.

IT IS SUNDAY, MAY 30, 4:30 A.M., DARK AND CHILLY, AND a full moon hangs in the winter sky as more than 23,000 runners mass in the center of Pietermaritzburg, high in the hills of South Africa, in the heart of KwaZulu-Natal Province. There are greetings, and shuffling, and among many runners, thousand-yard stares that seem equal parts determination and terror. Yasso spent last night in the dorm of a boarding school a half-mile away, along with other members of the running team sponsored by World Vision, a global Christian organization that combats hunger and poverty and provides relief in the aftermath of natural disasters. All the runners, including Bart, are raising money for local children.

The race has attracted elite runners from all over the world, including last year's winner, Stephen Muzhingi, from Zimbabwe, and the female Russian identical twins, Elena and Olesya Nurgalieva, who between them have won the race six times. There are other celebrities, too. Among the World Vision team is Josh Cox, the U.S. 50-K record holder and a favorite here. Also running for World Vision is U.S. Navy doctor Andy Baldwin, who starred on ABC's *The Bachelor* (weirdly, Cox had a part on *The Bachelorette* a few years earlier), and Paul Martin, running with a prosthetic leg, who has competed in 10 Ironman Triathlons and holds a world record in that event for leg amputees.

But it is Yasso who is interviewed over the loudspeaker at the starting line. It is Yasso who, at a dinner two nights earlier, was introduced as "the Nelson Mandela of American running." At the starting line he doesn't talk about pain, or how he has spent a life stepping it up and is now readying himself to step down. He talks about what an honor it is to be here, about how the race is a triumph of the human spirit, about how happy he is—finally—to be part of this great event. Then he sings. He joins what starts as a handful of voices, then more, until it fills the entire square, the entire sky. The melody is called "Shosholoza," and it was originally sung by laborers from Zimbabwe coming home from the mines of South Africa. Its beat and lyrics mimic the gentle and insistent rhythm of a passenger car, and many South Africans refer to it as "the train song." It is a melody of longing and hope, a piercing, keening, almost unbearably melancholic and determined anthem. When sung by 23,000 runners, black and white, fleet and slow, under a pale moon, the awe people express for this race makes perfect sense.

Many of the runners tear up; whether thinking of this country's terrible past and its wrenching *(continued on page 122)*

THE RACE OF HIS LIFE

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changes, or of how much pain they are about to endure as individuals, or at their profound pleasure at sharing such a challenge, it's hard to say. All of the World Vision runners cry, including Bart.

At 5:30 a.m., the race begins.

He is sure that he won't need to bear down until he is well into the race; he is confident that the crowd, and the spirit of Comrades, will carry him for at least 10 miles before he'll have to deal with the pain.

Four miles into the race, though, he is hurting. He is forced to walk up an unnamed hill. He knows that if he gives in, he won't finish. He also knows that if he doesn't listen to the pain, if he ignores it as he has so often in the past, he might not finish, either. He needs to find the place between stepping up and giving up. He has hurt worse. He had been freezing and shaking in Cairo. He had been nearly blind in Africa. He can do this. He doesn't need Digger Hargreaves to tell him how crushing a DNF would be.

At five miles, near Polly Shortts hill, the first named descent of the down year, he starts running again. He runs past waving farmers and cows and horses grazing in the fields. He runs past huge crowds along the road, and huger crowds in the village of Camperdown. He runs, still hurting, along Cato Ridge and through undulating grasslands and through the barren stretch of Harrison Flats, until he is almost at the second hill, the murderous climb called Inchanga.

Other runners are hurting, too, and seeing them struggle helps Yasso put his struggles in perspective. What are his problems, compared to the problems of the people watching the race, the poor South African children who live in villages where clean water is a luxury, where a pair of shoes is precious?

He thinks of Paul Martin and his prosthetic leg. He thinks of Carri Lyons in Utah and her son she had heard from heaven, and of all the people who have approached him at this and other races and that makes his pain lessen, and it makes him wonder, yet again, how *they* could be inspired by *him*?

And then he sees the children, scores of them, many on crutches and in wheelchairs. They are the residents of the Ethembeni School for Handicapped Children, a landmark on the course, a place where Comrades participants often break down and weep. That's what Yasso does.

Runners appear alongside him, pose for photographs. Others—who have no idea who he is, how fast he used to be, how he missed the chance at this race when he could have actually *run* it, how much of his life he has spent *taking it*—comment how lucky he is, how lucky they are, how magical the event is. They thank him for coming, all the way from the United States!

People pass him, and the hills that aren't even hills get steeper and more punishing, and Yasso remembers the days he ran loose, and healthy, and free, and he thinks of himself now. He thinks of his 2:40 marathons, and his Badwater exploits, and his place now, surrounded by plodders, "at the back end of a career, surrounded by fat rugby players." He can't remember ever being happier.

At mile 20, Yasso isn't paying much attention to how he's feeling. He's busy chatting with other racers, people who are just grateful to be here, who are focused on more important things than speed or finishing times.

At 25 miles, shortly after he marvels at the misty Valley of a Thousand Hills to his north, he checks his watch and he sees the

folly of too much gratitude. He's only 35 minutes ahead of the cutoff time. That's not nearly a large enough margin of safety. He needs to pick up his pace.

Somehow, he does. He descends to the village called Drummond, then climbs out of it to ascend Botha's Hill, and he's confident he'll finish in time, and he might even beat 11 hours, "a dream of mine." At the top of Botha's Hill, he sees the pace group—the "bus"—which aims to finish under 11 hours. It is massive, more than 1,000 people, and he thinks how great it would be to end his final race with an hour to spare. All he has to do is get to the bus. He can do it. He's done more difficult things. He just has to step it up. He pushes himself, and immediately his leg buckles. He can't do it. He can't take it.

Laura has finished, and she waits in the International Tent and watches every runner cross—most stumble across—the finish line. Eleven hours, and no Bart. Eleven-ten, and no Bart. Eleven-thirty, and still no Bart. At 11:33:38, she sees him. She stares at her husband, who is hurting, dragging his foot, about to give up what he loves most. She knows he would have liked to come in under 11 hours, in this, his dream so long deferred. Yet when she looks at his face again, he is smiling. Such a radiant smile.

Afterward, they limp together from the stadium through the warm Durban evening to their hotel, which is teeming with runners, crying, laughing, passing tales of the Fourth of July and steroids and Disney World and the Super Bowl on acid. They skip the World Vision Team Dinner—all the members finished, and take turns drinking beer from Paul Martin's prosthetic leg, while the waiters sing "Shosholoza"—but spend a few hours celebrating at the hotel bar. Eventually they limp to the elevator, and as they do, a woman from Johannesburg asks the couple how they did in the big race. "My wife beat me by an hour and eight minutes,'" Bart says.

"True," Laura says, "but I have cartilage in my knees, and they still bend."

IT IS THE MORNING AFTER AND YASSO has limped to the elevator again, and up to the hotel rooftop. Everyone in the hotel is limping. He sits in the sunlight, the ocean behind him, his Moby-Dick of an ultramarathon captured, if not killed.

Running saved him. It gave him a path out of despair. It brought him his father's love, and it taught him how to love his father back. He says all of this on the rooftop of the hotel, in the warm South African winter morning. And the pain? "Oh, yeah, I was hurting," he says of the time his right eye was paralyzed open on the slopes of Mt. Kilimanjaro. "I thought it was the 24-hour flu," he says of the time he woke burning in Cairo, then couldn't stop his teeth from chattering, then was burning again. "I was sure it would pass," he says of the first month he felt the odd, crushing fatigue of Lyme.

When Yasso's at home (he travels 200 days a year), most nights he and Laura take a Jacuzzi, have a glass of wine (after 20 years of abstinence, Bart drinks occasionally), watch Letterman until Bart falls asleep on the couch. Then Laura will wake him and they'll go upstairs. Their cat, Mojave, won't ascend the steps until Bart has done so. It often takes him two minutes to get up the single flight.

His joints—particularly his right knee—ache fairly constantly, sometimes worse than other times. He wakes up singing, every day. "A different song every morning," Laura says. How can he be anything but happy? He ran farther, and faster, than he ever imagined he could. He ran *(continued on page 126)*

THE RACE OF HIS LIFE

Continued from page 123

on other continents and won medals everywhere. In his living room he has a life-size wooden Masai sculpture bedecked with medals, but even more are scattered far and wide, in the hands and on the thatched walls of children and teenagers to whom he gave them. The young man who was afraid to talk in front of groups became a gregarious traveler who met so many people, touched so many people, and that has been the greatest gift of all. He is starting to understand that.

Over the years, thousands have shared with him their private pain. "I became the running whisperer," he says. The halting and the shy, the sick and the blind, the grieving and the anxious, they all unburdened themselves to Bart, and he gladly accepted the weight. They gave him their pain not in spite of his struggles but *because* of them. His enormous tolerance of physical hardship evolved into a psychic capacity to absorb other people's sadness and loss. He's beginning to understand that. And he's beginning to understand that those people weren't just making themselves lighter and freer, they were making *him* lighter and freer, too.

Yasso is asked what his life would be like had he never started running. Uncharacteristically, the professional enthusiast pauses. Then: "I don't know, and I don't wanna know. But it wouldn't be good, I guarantee that."

After an hour of chatting, Yasso limps back to the elevator, back to his room. He'll stay in Africa another week to take it easy, to sightsee. To watch him drag his leg is to witness a man in a great deal of pain, but one who has finally learned that he doesn't need to step it up anymore, who is beginning to understand that the yammering voice was loud and relentless, but never right.

A man at rest. A man who doesn't have to take it anymore. RW

Video of Bart Yasso's 2010 Comrades Marathon adventure can be found at **runnersworld.com/bartcomrades.**

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