

At the 1987 Comrades Marathon, Coach Neville Beeton started at the front, a big mistake. Here we show some of the greats of that era (not all in that same race): Hoseah Tjale, Bruce Fordyce, Neville, Sam Tshabalala (who won in 1989), and Dave Anderson.



ILLUSTRATIONS BARRY MAITLAND-STUART

Nine Race Fails

Learn from (and laugh at) **COACH NEVILLE'S** biggest mistakes in his 42-year running career.

Do as I say, not as I do! Even the most learned and experienced runner has let rookie errors ruin their race. In this article, I offer my pride on the altar of learning.

I have running logbooks dating back to 1975, quite tatty with coffee stains (or perhaps blood-stains). They provide a fascinating insight into my running career spanning 42 years, from breaking my ultra-marathon virginity at 15 and first Comrades at 22, to decades of hard training and racing.

These logbooks have been a big help with my coaching for the past 18 years, and not always due to the great training sessions, many of which I still

use for my runners today.

Often they help more *because of* the mishaps and mistakes I made along this journey. I often say that if I can help runners avoid the many mistakes I made, some of them repeatedly (as I'm a slow learner), then that's half the battle won.

Take a trip down memory lane with me and perhaps you will chuckle seeing mistakes I have made, and perhaps you will be forewarned if you have yet to make them.

Gun goes, I go!

More races have been lost from runners starting their race too fast than from any other reason. For

some reason, we seem to think that when the gun goes, we will suddenly be transformed into a runner who can run faster than we trained for. The gun goes and we charge off, our Superman capes billowing.

At the 1987 Comrades I was aiming for a 6:30. It was an Up Run and when the gun went off, I started with my training partner Dave Anderson, who had three Comrades gold medals. That was a mistake. Before I realised it, I was in a group comprising Bruce Fordyce, Ian Emery, Dave Anderson, and Bob de la Motte.

These were my heroes and as a youngster, I was awe-struck and enjoying the crowd frenzy as we passed. Suddenly

I was being cheered for madly and this was intoxicating. It was also a lesson in how Fordyce controlled the race, as at one stage he stopped for a pee, so we all did the same, standing in a line alongside the road, with me pretending to pee.

*It was a bit like Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem *The Charge of The Light Brigade*:*

Half a league half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred
(Although we were running)
'Forward, the Light Brigade!'
Was there a man dismay'd?
(Well I should have been!)
Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
(It was actually:
De La Motte to right of me
Anderson to left of me
Fordyce in front of me)

My party ended at Hillcrest: the group spat me out the back, and I plodded on, my race destroyed. But do I regret it? Hell, no.

No personal kit check
Running is a simple activity. Shoes, shorts, and tops are all that is needed. But without a checklist, even this can go wrong.

Trail running has a lot more gear than road running, with compulsory items for bad weather conditions. The compulsory kit is then checked before and after some races and there is a good reason for this, as some competitive runners try skimping on this to save weight. The best is to have a checklist to ensure you don't try travel all the way to a race and then find you have forgotten something. I have more than once heard the organisers at trail races asking whether someone has a spare hydration pack for a runner who had forgotten theirs.

At the 1987 Comrades I flew down the afternoon before the race, and after checking into my hotel, discovered I only had one running shoe!

I managed to borrow a pair of old shoes, one size too large, from another runner. This curve-ball and messed with my confidence. I survived, but never again. I now wear my running shoes when I travel to a race.

Last minute layers

Weather conditions are part of the challenges we face on trails, ranging from heat, rain, and wind, to snow.

It is wise to have the correct gear for the possible conditions.

However, it is of little help carrying it in your pack and not using it in time. Don't wait for the rain, as putting on a rain jacket over already wet clothing is of little benefit. Put it on before the rain falls.

The same applies to base-layers for the cold. It is no fun stripping down on the top of a mountain in freezing weather, trying to put your base layer on as I did on the 50km Lesotho Ultra-Trail once. Your core temperature will plunge while doing this, and it is wiser to do it earlier.

On longer trails, with many river crossings, it is worth carrying spare dry socks.

At the 2017 Mnweni Marathon the peaks were clad in snow. Not having run in snow before I was as excited as a child going to a picnic.

I was all set with base-layer, mid-layer and rain jacket and gloves, but due to the early river crossing, I figured I wouldn't put on my long ski pants until I felt I needed them. I wanted to keep them dry.

Just after the start of the climb, a snow storm hit us with plunging temperatures. My hands were too frozen to pull out the rainproof pants. I knew I couldn't afford to sit in the snow trying to get my shoes off and pull the pants on as I had to keep moving in that cold.

I spent three cold hours climbing Mnweni in the snow, wearing skimpy running shorts, wishing I had my long tights on.

No post-race plan

Planning the logistics for a trail race make it a great experience... or it can ruin everything. Long ultras such as the Salomon SkyRun, which are run from point-to-point, require you to have accommodation at the start and finish.

You also need to ensure that you have warm clothing waiting for you at the finish. This means making sure your gear is taken to the finish for you.

Don't wing it and hope for a guardian angel to come through.

At the 1991 Comrades, I caught a lift with a running friend and we shared accommodation in Umhlanga. After the race we planned to stay for a few days at his holiday home on the South Coast. We were to be seconded by his girlfriend during the race.

But he bailed at the halfway mark, and instead of driving to the finish to fetch me, simply drove to the South Coast and later told me he had forgotten me.

I spent the entire day at the finish in just my running shorts and vest, cold, hungry, and tired. Eventually it got dark and the stadium emptied. I realised I had no accommodation, money, warm clothes, or transport.

Fortunately I saw a running friend and he put me up for the night, fed me, clothed me, and gave me a lift home to Nelspruit the next day. True story and an experience I never want to repeat.

Train to the last

Peaking and tapering for a race will bring you to the start line fit and feeling fresh.

For weeks you have been churning out the long runs and working hard on hills, and on improving speed. At this point you need to back off and allow your body a chance to recover.

It's a bit like baking bread with all the correct ingredients, and then removing it from the oven *before* it is overdone.

In running, this means cutting back on the mileage while retaining the quality (speed sessions).

A key aspect here is to do the last long run three to four weeks before the race to allow your legs time to recover.

In 1991 I was third at the 56km Long Tom ultra in my build-up to Comrades, but then suddenly developed severe ITB and was unable to train. It miraculously came right two weeks before the Comrades.

Thinking I had to test it on a long run, I did a solo 60km the weekend before the race. Somehow I was surprised that my legs were so sore on the day, resulting in my bailing at 72km.

Keep running!

Go forward by back-tracking. Getting lost from time to time on trails is all part of the experience.

Even on well-marked trails it is easy

to get lost in thick mist.

The golden rule here is to turn around and backtrack on your path until you reach the point where you went wrong.

Don't try to figure out the best direction to meet the route, and then head off into the mountains. Unless you are very lucky, you will probably end up completely lost, cold, and miserable. This will also make it more difficult for any search party trying to find you. Having a GPS track on your watch for the route can be handy, even though it is a marked route.

At the Golden Gate Challenge stage race a few years ago, our entire lead bunch got lost after an hour on the first day.

After some deliberation, a few of us headed down the valley, thinking we would meet up with the path. Instead, an hour later, at the bottom of the valley, we had to turn around and go right back up the mountain, having lost two hours.

This is enough, right?

Carry enough water. Water often forms the heaviest part of your pack, making it tempting to cut back on how much you carry. We have all seen some elite runners managing without water, or on very little at races, but this does not mean it will work for you.

We have different sweat rates and require different amounts of water. It is important to check with the organisers to see how many aid stations there are, and whether the water in streams is safe.

It is handy to have a soft bottle for scooping up water at streams. This is faster and easier than trying to fill your hydration pack's bladder from the stream.

As we get older, our sweat rate increases, something that has sadly happened to me, meaning that I now need more water than when running than 20 or 30 years ago.

At the AfricanX stage race three years ago, I was running as a mixed team with one of my elite young women. Day 2 was extremely hot, and to compound this, the bus taking us to the start was late. We eventually started after 9am in 30°C heat and while I was carrying 2l of water, my partner was only carrying 500ml.

To add insult to injury, I ended up flat



In 1984 at the Lowveld Marathon I was a podium contender and my arch rival and training partner Chris Reyneke (third at 1984 Comrades) told me he always took an Immodium before the race.

I carbo-loaded the three days before the race and the night before took an Immodium before I went to bed. I woke up the next day feeling bloated and a visit to the loo showed the Immodium had worked and I was blocked.

The marathon started just outside Barberton and at the start I was sitting in the bushes alongside the start line,

on my back after three hours with heat exhaustion despite drinking more water than she did, and taking in electrolytes. In hindsight I should simply not have raced so hard in that heat.

Clog yourself up

Stomach issues are one of the most feared problems on trails, especially on a long trail race, when it can destroy your run. Other than the time lost with pitstops, you will feel weak and listless, and may also dehydrate from the fluid loss, leading to cramps. Nobody runs well with an upset stomach!

There are three things to look at: your meals before the race, what you take during the race, and then taking in something before the race such as an Immodium or Smecta if you feel you may have a problem. Carry this in your pack in case you need it later.

desperately trying to get my bowels to work, when Chris shouted "We can't wait for you all day!"

I jumped into the start, had a horrendously uncomfortable race and was lucky to finish fifth, with Chris winning.

When I told him afterwards, he couldn't stop laughing as he had never dreamed I would take it the night before.

Moral of the story: if you do take an Immodium or Smecta, take it after you have been to the loo, and just before the start of the race.

Briefings are for squares

Attend the race briefing. With runners often travelling long distances to races, it is tempting to skip the race briefing. But do so at your peril. Not only will you miss the pre-race vibe, but also lose out on vital information such as the route, aid stations, and weather forecast.

In 1990 at the Spitskop 15km mountain race outside Sabie, I skipped the race briefing just before the start as I was still warming up. I had a great race, sharing the lead with a Two Oceans gold medallist.

At 14km, I put down the hammer down for the last kay and was surprised at how easily I left him, only to be dead on my feet at 15km. I had missed the announcement at the race briefing that the route was now 17km!

I was passed by three runners and had to be content with fourth.

These mistakes are all funny in hindsight, but at the time they all in some way messed up my enjoyment of a race. Eliminating such mistakes can ensure that you get the most out of your runs, doing them in safety, and enjoying them. 🏃

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