

COLLEGIANS HARRIERS

By Mike Bath

Collegians Harriers is one of the oldest athletic clubs in South Africa, and in its 70 year history has made a huge and lasting contribution to athletics in the country.

Collegians Harriers began its existence on 24th January 1933 as the Maritzburg Harriers Athletic Club, when the inaugural meeting of the small group of founders was presided over by the President of the Natal Amateur Athletic Association C.E.Sax Young with other members being Bert Bendzulla (first captain and secretary), B.du Toit, (vice-captain), F.van Vuuren, O.Mattison, H. McLeary, F.M. van Loenen, and D.J.Botha (Treasurer). Several prominent citizens of Pietermaritzburg supported the newly formed club.

The club produced numerous athletic stars, to name but a few – Bert Bendzulla, for many years Natal 880 yards champion and record holder, SA champion and Empire Games finalist; Skonk Nicholson of Maritzburg College fame, SA 1000 yards record holder and S.A. Varsities champion, and many others who brought honour and glory to the club.

In later years as Collegians Harriers, there emerged such greats as Piet van der Leeuw Springbok and SA .record holder, Dave Piper and Gordon Baker who performed and excelled at distances from the mile to the Comrades Marathon.

As organisers of Comrades Marathon, perhaps the club's crowning glory came in 1979 when the popular Collegians Harriers athlete Piet Vorster won the Comrades Marathon, in a time of 5:45:02, establishing a new record time for the up run.

The club, over the years has organized numerous road races in the province. The Magic Trophy, founded in 1921 and originally organised by the Maritzburg United Athletic and Cycling Club, was taken over by Collegians Harriers until the event was dropped from the athletic calendar in 1988.

Other races were the Imperial, a three lap course around Pietermaritzburg, starting from the Imperial Hotel. The Richmond Marathon, once extremely popular as a Comrades qualifier (though now defunct having been replaced by the Umgeni Water Marathon) was originally known as the Richmond – Maritzburg 25 Mile Open Handicap Race. There was also a Richmond Relay with 5 or 6 runners per team, and a relay race between Durban and Maritzburg (alternating direction in line with Comrades) with 11 runners per team and known as the 20th Century Relay. Both these events used to draw teams from the old Transvaal. Other races initiated by Collegians Harriers were the Duke of York (still in existence), the Taylor Thomas, the Greytown-Muden, the Bulwer Mountain Race and the still currently popular "Longest Day" track race founded in 1996 by Brian Swart and Theo Millar.

Herman's Delight is probably the oldest weekly time trial in the country, having been founded in July 1960 and has never missed a week (except between Christmas and New Year). The race is named after Herman Delvin, one of Collegians Harriers stalwart committee members, who was struck by a truck and trailer in 1958 while out on a training run, as a result of which he lost a leg which put paid to his running career. A firm believer in the inclusion of speed sessions in training, Herman persuaded the club committee to stage a flat-out weekly 4-miler which gave him much "delight" in watching his club mates suffer. He was Secretary of the Comrades Marathon organizing committee for many years, founder of Herman's Delight and became an Honorary Life Member of Collegians Harriers. He passed away in 1996 at the age of 84, having left a lasting legacy to athletics.

Perhaps the greatest contribution by Collegians Harriers to athletics, in particular road running, is the club's organization of the Comrades Marathon. Morris Alexander in his book "The Comrades Marathon Story" arguably the most definitive history of the Comrades Marathon, records that, "since 1948 when the Collegians rescued the almost moribund race from its previous organizers it was carefully built up by them to the present mammoth, highly successful event". This was in reference to a decision taken in 1981 to form the Comrades Marathon Association to assume the future responsibility of organizing the Comrades Marathon.

During the period of over 30 years, when Collegians Harriers organized the race, the club experienced numerous obstacles and highly controversial episodes, met with competence, integrity and forthrightness. The fifties, for example, saw the first emergence of the problem of race date and finish venue, with the abolition of 24th May Empire Day as a public holiday, resulting in the 1952 race being run on 14 July, the Queen's birthday. The fluctuating venue problem was eventually largely laid to rest, at least with regard to the "up run" with the development of the Collegians Club Grounds in 1958, with subsequent "up runs" finishing there through to the late 1970's.

Perhaps the most trying period for the organisers was the 1970's. Older generation runners might recall the intense political climate of the time, especially with regard to race and colour, resulting in the total sporting isolation of South Africa from the rest of the world. The apartheid laws were extremely damaging to sporting endeavours within the country as well, none more so than the Comrades Marathon in which persons of colour were excluded from participation. It should not be forgotten that women were also ineligible to run. Political and emotional tensions ran so high in the early 70's that the independent Borough of Kloof refused permission for the Comrades to pass through its jurisdiction, at a time when permission had to be obtained from every local authority along the route for the Comrades to pass through its borders. An intense media campaign was waged, both for and against, the running of the Comrades to such an extent that there were threats of a blockade of the route and spikes being placed on the road. So serious was the threat to the continued existence of the Comrades Marathon, that in 1974 Mick Winn, then Chairman of the organizing committee was summoned by the South African Amateur Athletic Union to Pretoria to meet with Prof Hannes Botha, President of SAAAU.

Intense negotiations by the organisers saw a breakthrough come in 1975 when the Comrades Marathon became the first major sporting event in South Africa which was opened to all races and genders. The SAAAU eventually capitulated under pressure, with the farcical ploy of declaring the race a so-called “international” event, permitting black athletes to participate, however requiring them to display “ethnic tags” which of course proved most unpopular and was only in force for the one year. The start of the 1975 race was charged with tension, with the presence of law enforcement agencies such as the Bureau of State Security, bomb squad etc. The breaking of the racial barrier by the organisers of Comrades in the 70’s can be seen as a major breakthrough, paving the way for the future transformation of sport..

Collegians Harriers could not rest on its laurels however, for concomitant with this was another major problem related to the perceived possibility of traffic congestion by local authorities, with Pinetown in particular, threatening to refuse permission for the race to pass through its boundaries. It was in this that the late Frank Martin – MEC for Transport, and the late Ian Wyllie – editor of the Sunday Tribune came to the rescue of the organisers and indeed the race, in organizing in conjunction with Collegians Harriers, the highly successful Sunday Tribune Comrades Marathon Symposiums which drew all role players together to come to amicable and mutually acceptable solutions for this and many other problems.

The Comrades Marathon owes a great deal to Collegians Harriers and the many individuals who served in the organization of this great event over the period of 34 years it was staged by Collegians Harriers. By 1981 however general consensus was that the magnitude of the Comrades Marathon required its own special and separate organization. Dave Barron, at that time Chairman of Collegians Harriers, was quoted as saying, “We have barely enough members and support to run club affairs and Comrades is too important for us to allow selfish pride to interfere with the future of the race.”

A final word from Morris Alexander who wrote in his book, “Collegians has once again risen to the occasion. The Comrades was the better for their efforts and the contributions over the years of their committee men, Bert Bendzulla, Morris Alexander, Terry McCullagh, Don Allison, Don Spencer, Herman Delvin, Derek Palframan, Topsy Fanner, and now Mick Winn and Adrian “Bullet” Alexander who as new Chairman and Secretary respectively were to take the big race into its new ambit. The Comrades was to remain in safe hands.”