

**THE
BRAAI KETTS
LONGEST DAY
HOW IT ALL STARTED**

By
Brian Swart

'If you don't try it, you won't know, will you?'

Those ten words, uttered by the late Theo Millar sometime during 1995, were the catalyst that brought The Longest Day into existence.

During the late 70's, Collegians' Harriers, with Dave Barron at the helm, introduced a 100 kilometre track race to the Natal athletic calendar. It was known as The Vic Clapham 100 and was contested four or five times at the Sax Young Track in Alexandra Park and once at the Collegians' Club Oval. Unfortunately, the concept never really caught on and the event disappeared. Perhaps 100 kilometres in 10 hours – that was all we were allowed then – was too tough for the average runner. I do know, however, having attempted four of those races (and finishing only one) they were great fun despite the problems associated with manual lap-scoring. Its demise was a great pity, but the concept of ultra-distance track racing always lingered in my mind.

It needed to be revived.

In the early 90's, Theo Millar and I spoke about it, on and off, for three or four years. But that's all we did...Spoke about it...But never did anything. We threw a few ideas around, came up with a few suggestions, but that was about all.

Then, in February or March 1995, I was at Comrades House during the build-up to Comrades. Theo and I were having another 'talk about it' during which I casually asked him 'do you think a 12-hour track race will catch on?'

Then, uttered in Theo's typical, laconic, tender sarcasm, out came 'those ten words.'

That's it. No doubt about it now...the race was on.

Henry Reynolds was President of Collegians' Harriers at the time. I approached him with the idea, requesting him to obtain approval from the Collegians' Harriers Executive Committee for the first event to be held on 9 August 1996. Henry came back to me a few weeks later. Collegians' Harriers would apply to Natal Athletics for the date, but the Executive was a little apprehensive that such an event was unlikely to sustain itself.

Natal Athletics placed the race on the 1996 calendar.

So what we had at that stage was a date, a race without a name, no venue, no organising committee, no sponsor and no tangible support likely from Collegians' Harriers...and the race was just nine months away.

My first action was to assemble an organising team. I didn't want a 'committee' elected at an AGM; I wanted reliable people who could always be counted on to do what was required, when it was required...I fell back on friends and family.

Theo would be responsible for setting up and dismantling the track. Dave Barron would look after the refreshment station. Dr. Derek Brockwell organised the medical facility and also found our first, and so far, extremely loyal, only sponsor; Braai Ketts. My wife, Charmaine, would arrange the catering to feed all race officials on race day and my, then 11-year-old son, Brandon, and I would attend to entries and race administration.

The 'Race Organising Committee' met for the first time one evening during October 1995. It has never met since. It doesn't need to.

That first meeting laid down a few basic 'ground rules' for the race which have remained unchanged and the entire event is 'organised' by means of three or four telephone calls each year. The only factor that any member of the team needs to know is the date of the race. Thereafter each one knows precisely what he or she is required to do.

The 'ground rules' identified at that first meeting were, and remain;

- 1 the race must be very easy to organise (keep everything as simple as possible)
- 2 give all entrants value for their entry fee
- 3 set entrants a reasonable target to aim at (if it is too difficult, they will not return)
- 4 reward the finishers well for their efforts (The Longest Day medal is undoubtedly the finest medal on offer at any race, anywhere in South Africa)
- 5 the race will always be a TRACK RACE

The only changes to the organising team occurred some years later when Theo moved to Pretoria. About the same time, Lisa Hawksworth 'inherited' the medical portfolio when Derek Brockwell emigrated. Lisa probably didn't even know that she was a member of the organising team – but she was – and she looked after that aspect for a number of years until she moved to Johannesburg. But before she did so, she groomed Bev Douglas to take over.

So now, we had a date and we had a sponsor...but we didn't have a venue. Collegians' Harriers had, at that time, just re-established its links with the Mother Club. Why not hold the event there? It had all the facilities we could possibly want...a beautiful sports oval, onsite buildings, catering facilities and floodlights. Towards the end of 1995 I approached the Club for permission to stage the race on their premises. Permission was granted and the Natal Road Running Fixture List for 1996, when it was published, recorded the following event:

'Aug 9 Collegians' Harriers Track Race 12/100 08:00 Collegians' Club PMB'

During the first five years the race consisted of two events – a 12-hour and a 100 Kilometre. Unfortunately, a lack of entries for the 100 Kilometre event resulted in it being discontinued.

We still didn't have a suitable name for the event and, with the deadline approaching for printing race fliers, all sorts of names drifted through my mind; but none of them were really ideal.

Then one morning, while driving to work, Radio Port Natal played the soundtrack from the great war movie, The Longest Day.

That's it...That's exactly the name I was searching for. The runners would be running all day...and it would certainly be a very long day for many of them. THE LONGEST DAY. That's the ideal name and the title track from that epic movie has become synonymous with the race. It is played every hour, on the hour, throughout the day.

In my running days, particularly during Comrades, whenever I passed through a refreshment station that provided good music, my pace and my lilted spirit immediately picked up somewhat. So, if runners are going to be running for twelve hours, why not give them good music for the entire duration of the race?

Enter Master DJ, Ron Fanning.

Ron was joined a few years later by Frank Knowles. They have become, without a doubt, one of the main factors for The Longest Day's continued success and their music and good-natured banter has become an integral feature of the race.

About a week before the race fliers were due to go to the printers in 1996, I was having a drink with Colin Hegter at Comrades House. He was busy establishing his ChampionChip system and he suggested that he be engaged to do the lap-scoring and timekeeping for the first Longest Day. I was planning to call on Collegians' Harriers members to assist with scoring the race manually and all the lap score-sheets were already completed. I was hesitant. I didn't really trust these chip things...too unreliable...not yet been properly tested in race conditions. Should I take the chance?

It was the best chance I have ever taken. No question about it. ChampionChip have been with us ever since and, as far as I am concerned, have not missed a single lap. The Longest Day was the first race in South Africa to be timed by ChampionChip and, as a timekeeping exercise, believe it or not, it is two-and-a-half times bigger than Comrades. It is too hideous to even contemplate the chaos that would prevail if the race had to be scored manually. ChampionChip's reliability is beyond question.

And so.....the 9th of August, 1996.

I didn't know what to expect. Forty-eight of the fifth-four entrants arrived at the start. "That's OK, I thought. You can't expect to start big." That first race turned out to be a great success and the whole field promised to return the next year, but come 1997, only forty-one entries arrived. My fears were confirmed. It wasn't going to catch on, but give it one more chance before admitting defeat.

Then came 1998...62 entrants. 1999...76. 2000...92 and 2001...105. Wow!!! A hundred entries. I couldn't believe it.

The 2000 race saw the introduction of a second running lane and the first Permanent Numbers, for five successful finishes, were awarded. At the conclusion of the 2010 event, sixty-four athletes (13 women and 51 men) had earned this honour, but only one has completed all fifteen Longest Days. He is Ray Williams of Pietermaritzburg, (Permanent Number 6.) The first woman to earn her Permanent Number is Michelle Marie (Permanent Number 18) who completed her fifth Longest Day in 2003.

In 2005 The Longest Day Hall of Fame was introduced for athletes who had completed the race on ten occasions. At the conclusion of the 2010 event, 11 athletes (1 woman [Daleen Zaayman] and 10 men) had been inducted. The 2006 race witnessed the introduction of the 100 K Club for runners who complete a distance of 100 kilometres in a single event, as well as the Thousand K Club for those runners who had, over the years, amassed a distance in excess of 1000 kilometres in successful Longest Day finishes. At the conclusion of the 2010 event, The 100K Club comprised 96 members (12 women and 84 men) and The 1000K Club comprised 6 members (all men.)

There is, now, no doubt that race day has developed into a marvelous family outing...a fabulous atmosphere, wonderful surroundings, magical music and.....superb athletes producing superb performances.

And so...with the unfailing support and generosity of Hilary Greenwood and Braai Ketts – who must surely be the most loyal and undemanding sponsor distance running in the Province has ever experienced – The Longest Day has developed into South Africa's premier Track Ultra.

Without Braai Ketts...and ChampionChip...and Collegians' Club...and Ron Fanning...and Frank Knowles...and hundreds of truly wonderful runners and their supporters.....I would probably still be wondering if...a 12-hour track race would really catch on.'