



My Comrades Journey - Tendani Netshilavulu

Growing up, I was never the athlete in the family. In fact, I was usually the one getting eliminated in the first round of every school sports competition. If there had been a medal for early exits, I probably would have won gold!

In 2017, my husband decided it was time for me to become a runner. He bought me a full running kit and took me on a run from our home in Riverlea to FNB Stadium, about 3km away. I was feeling quite proud of myself until we got to the stadium and he casually said, "You can head back home now." Excuse me? Head back home? Meanwhile, he planned to continue running all the way towards Southgate Mall because, according to him, he was a runner and I was just starting out. I was so offended that he would leave me to run back on my own that I practically retired from running on the spot. The brand-new running kit gathered dust, and so did my running ambitions.

Fast forward to September 2022. At 76kg, I decided it was time to make some lifestyle changes and joined a gym. The only problem was that I had no idea how most of the machines worked. Rather than embarrass myself trying to figure them out, I found comfort in the treadmill and spent most of my sessions running. Before long, I had a revelation: *"Why am I paying a monthly gym membership just to run, when the streets outside are absolutely free?"* And just like that, I took my running outdoors.

I started with 5km runs on my own, slowly building confidence and endurance until one day I realized I could comfortably cover 21km. The girl who once got dropped at FNB Stadium was now running half-marathon distances.

In November 2023, I entered my very first official 21km race, the Soweto Marathon. I completed it in a personal best time of **2:26**, and from that moment, I was hooked. Running had officially become part of my life.

The more races I entered, the more I realized that running without a permanent license was becoming

an expensive hobby. Buying temporary licenses for every race was adding up quickly. That's when everything changed.



In 2025, while preparing for my first marathon, I joined **Johannesburg Harriers Athletics Club**. Training with the club opened up a whole new world for me. In September 2025, I completed the Rand Water Vaal River City Marathon, earning my qualification for Comrades. Ironically, although I had qualified, I had absolutely no interest in running Comrades at the time.

Then November arrived. Comrades race entries opened. Entries started disappearing at an alarming rate. Within hours, sales had already reached 80%, and suddenly I developed a severe case of FOMO. Coupled with a little peer pressure from fellow runners, I found myself registering for the race. My reasoning was simple: *"If I change my mind later, I can always substitute my entry."*

Well, that plan didn't last very long. Before I knew it, I was fully committed and followed the club's Comrades training programme. Training went smoothly until about a month before race day when I developed a painful groin injury. The discomfort became so obvious that some club members noticed I was practically running sideways at times. One of them suggested I see a chiropractor. After just two treatment sessions, I felt a remarkable improvement and, thankfully, arrived at race day completely pain-free.

The night before the race was another story. I barely slept. Not because I wasn't tired, but because I was terrified of missing a race I had spent months preparing for. Every time I closed my eyes, I felt like I needed to check the time again.

Race morning finally arrived. As I made my way to the start, I met Mr. Kagelelo Chamboko and Mr. Tebogo Magonare. We reminded one another to stick to the plan and take it easy, just as we had practiced during training.

A little later, I met my friend Kantse Mkhize and spent time laughing, taking photos and soaking up the atmosphere with her family before heading to our Wave L starting batch. Then came the moment. The national anthem played, then Chariots of Fire echoed through the air. I took a deep breath and quietly told myself: *"This is it, girl. It's finally happening."* Group 2 set off at 5:15am, and the race began.



At 58km, I spotted my entire family cheering for me. That moment filled me with energy and reminded me exactly why I was there. Everything was going according to plan until around the 62km mark. Out of nowhere, I developed knee pain unlike anything I had experienced in training. Running became increasingly difficult. Even the downhills, which are usually supposed to be the reward, felt painful.

Then came Little Polly's. As I climbed, supporters were handing out encouragement alongside snacks. "Take this banana, girl! You'll need it when you get to Polly Shortts!" I looked at them in disbelief. *"Lord, is this not Polly Shortts already?"* They burst out laughing. "No, this is Little Polly's. The big one is still coming!" At that moment, my spirit briefly left my body.

When I finally reached Polly Shortts, practically everyone was walking. Naturally, I joined the walking club and tackled the entire hill on foot. By then, I knew my original race target had disappeared somewhere behind me. My focus shifted to survival mode and protecting my knee. I adopted a run-walk strategy and stopped at almost every aid station to spray my knee before continuing. Finally, after one unforgettable day on the road, I crossed the finish line in **10:17:08**. A **Comrades bronze medal** was hanging around my neck.

As a novice, I hadn't placed enormous pressure on myself. My goal was simply to give everything I had. And I did. Crossing that finish line remains one of the proudest moments of my life. After the race, I felt surprisingly amazing. I couldn't quite believe that I had just covered **86.7km** on foot.



The girl who once wanted to quit after a 3km run had become a Comrades finisher. That's why I always remind myself that ordinary people are capable of extraordinary things when they stay consistent.

Today, I still smile whenever I think about that achievement, and one thing is certain: **I'm definitely going back in 2027 for my back-to-back medal.** After taking three weeks of well-deserved rest, I've returned to training feeling strong. Everything still works, nothing is broken, and if I'm being honest, I may have enjoyed the resting part a little too much!

My advice to the 2027 Novices

Get your qualifier as early as possible. It removes a lot of unnecessary stress and allows you to focus fully on your training. Trust the process, stick to your plan, and don't compare your journey to anyone else's. Most importantly, on race day, take it easy and enjoy every moment. The crowds, the atmosphere, the pain, the laughter, the friendships, and even the hills all become part of a story you'll tell for years to come. Comrades is more than just a race, it's a journey that shows you exactly what you're capable of. 🏆 🏃 🤝 ❤️ ❤️ ❤️

