

One of the toughest ultra marathon's in the world was held in Durban, South Africa over the weekend where athletes come from all over the world to combine muscle and sinew and mental strength to conquer the approx 90 kilometres between the cities of Pietermaritzburg and Durban.

In a surprising and shocking result to both the running fraternity in South Africa and her community, Kashmira Parbhoo struck gold when she finished amongst the top ten female runners in the race, this is over a distance of over two standard marathons (42.2 kilometers) plus an additional five kilometers to give a total distance of ninety kilometers.

The Comrades Marathon is a cherished national treasure in South Africa and attracts thousands of runners, spectators and television viewers every year, the Comrade's marathon is ranked as one of the world's oldest and largest ultramarathon, also hailed as "the ultimate human race". A prestigious race by all accounts, not only because of the huge prize monies on offer but also because of the top runners it attracts as a result.

This is a major achievement and a milestone for Indian female athletes who are typically docile and do not typically partake in any strenuous sports especially running or athletics. Kashmira is a relatively novice to the sport, having run for only nine short years and has suddenly shot to the forefront of the game, she completed the race in an astonishing time of seven hours and sixteens minutes (7:16:13). Kasmira, a Gujarati, is a member of the Lenasia Athletics Club which is based in Johannesburg, in a sign that she was racing towards gold this year was a number one position in a different race in Johannesburg earlier this year and a top twenty finish in the Comrades Marathon last year.

Achieving a gold in the Comrades Marathon is extremely difficult as she was competing against an international field of athletes from Germany, Russia, Kenya etc. She hails from a family of athletes, her father and brothers being top cricket and soccer players. Kashmira is an IT Consultant in Johannesburg who supports SAP applications throughout South Africa.

About the race.....Every run is a new adventure, and every race, like a Rorschach, exists only to expose some piece of us. The greater the race distance, the deeper the unpeeling. This makes South Africa's mountainous 55-mile Comrades Marathon a long and probing quest. I first heard about Comrades' length, hills, and amazing traditions four decades ago. Since then I have considered it the world's greatest footrace. But until last June, I didn't realize how much a race could reveal to me. Of me. Some races are humbling; this one stripped me bare.

The distance alone makes Comrades intimidating. The infamous climbs make it torturous. At midway, the course snakes upward through the Valley of a Thousand Hills, an English appellation as accurate as it is terrifying. This is the heart of KwaZulu-Natal province. The mightiest of these ascents is Inchanga, an unnerving drumroll of a Zulu word. Just beyond lie the Drakensberg Mountains, which gave life to the most famous lines of South African literature--lines that never fail to stun me with their simple beauty. Alan Paton was still director of a reform school when he wrote them on the first page of his masterwork, *Cry, the Beloved Country*: "There is a lovely road that runs from Ixopo into the hills. These hills are grass-covered and rolling, and they are lovely beyond any singing of it."

Comrades has to be the world's greatest race. I mean, it's 55 miles long--the type of

distance that usually lures about, oh, 71 runners. Comrades has enough magnetism to draw 12,000. Plus, it has the most extraordinary traditions. There's the matter of race numbers and their colors, for instance. International runners get blue ones. Runners in their 10th Comrades wear yellow. You complete ten and you get a green number for all future entries. You own this number. In perpetuity. No one but you will wear it again. Ever.

There's also the dramatic course closure that occurs precisely 12 hours after the start--that's a Comrades tradition some runners, for sure, could do without. But perhaps the greatest of Comrades's rituals is the course switcheroo. In odd years the course drops down 2,300 feet from Pietermaritzburg to Durban. The next year it reverses itself, scrambling up into the hills.

Johannesburg, May 29 A South African Gujarati woman is the toast of her community after she became the first Indian woman to finish in the top 10 of the prestigious Comrades Marathon run annually between two cities since 1921.

Against competition from international professional runners, Kashmira Parbhoo, 34, from the huge mainly Indian township of Lenasia, south of here, got a medal and 11,000 rands in prize money after finishing the 89 km race between Pietermaritzburg and Durban.

Parbhoo started off at dawn with 8,600 other runners in the city where Mohandas Gandhi was inspired to his path of becoming the Mahatma after being kicked off a train because he was not white. She reached the finish line at the Sahara Kingsmead Stadium in Durban seven hours and 16 minutes later to thunderous applause.

Kashmira, a petite information technology consultant, said she watched her father Jaydev cross the Comrades finish line in 2000 and said to herself then: "I can also do that!"

Kashmira's father then became her mentor, coach and trainer as she started entering professional races across the country as a member of the Lenasia Athletics Club.

Coming first in several local marathons, Kashmira also competed in another major national race, the Old Mutual Two Oceans Marathon which straddles the Indian and Atlantic Oceans that meet at Cape Point as she set her sights on the arduous Comrades Marathon in her first year as a runner.

"It was a moment that changes you forever," Kashmira said after finishing the race, thanking her family and friends who had stood by her, adding that she had finished almost half an hour earlier than her own predicted time of seven hours 45 minutes.

Kashmira's Race Statistics:

2009 Kashmira Parbhoo Finishing Time 07:16:13 Distance: 90 Kilometers