

## **MOTIVATION AND BEHAVIOUR OF SERIOUS LEISURE PARTICIPANTS: THE CASE OF THE COMRADES MARATHON**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The Comrades Marathon is a major sporting event on the South African calendar with little research on the motivation and behaviour of serious leisure participants who participate in this event. Following on previous research of Stebbins (1982) where six characteristics of distance athletes/runners were identified and further explored by Shipway and Jones (2007), these characteristics were investigated in relation to the Needs Theory of Personality, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and the Symbolic Interactionist Approach within the context of the Comrades Marathon and the phenomenon of distance running. A qualitative explorative study was done to understand the motivation and behaviour of serious leisure participants employing non-probability purposive sampling to select 20 respondents who had participated in the Comrades Marathon in at least 10 years' races (including the 2011 Comrades Marathon). The findings indicate a strong identification with the activity, as well as social ethos and sub-culture influence in social identity. This research attempted to confirm theory and link the characteristics with Maslow's (1954) 'hierarchy of needs', Murray's (1938) 'list of needs' and the 'symbolic interactionist' approach of Mead and Blumer (1969). Due to the inherent limitations of the research future investigation in this field is imperative.*

**Key words:** Marathon athletes; Motivation; Behaviour; Serious leisure participation.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Leisure studies as a field of research is associated with terms such as relaxation, triviality and freedom from responsibility, and referred to as 'casual' leisure; whereas 'serious' leisure is "the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist or volunteer activity sufficiently substantial and interesting in nature for the participant to find a career there acquiring and expressing a combination of special skills, knowledge and experience" (Stebbins, 1982:254). However, despite Stebbins' (1982) classification of these forms of serious leisure participation, limited systematic research into the motivation behind serious leisure participation exists (Roberts, 1999; Gibson, 2005, 2008) within the South African context that this article proposes to report.

To travel to participate in serious leisure is regarded as serious sport tourism by Gibson (2005), however, the concept of serious leisure will be used in preference to serious sport

tourism in this case, with both Hall (1992) and Gibson (2005) being of the view that serious leisure can be used as an appropriate framework to understand the behaviour of the committed sport tourist. Clearly research into clarifying the meaning of these concepts is necessary but will not be pursued in this instance.

Various literature sources exploring the needs, motives and behavioural characteristics underlying long distance runners have been identified (Masters & Lambert, 1989; Stebbins, 1992; Funk & James, 2001; Ogles & Masters, 2003; Gillet & Kelly, 2006; Kotze, 2006; Shipway & Jones, 2007), and have been found to be overlapping, with concepts used interchangeably, such as psychological needs and motives (identity, self-esteem, self-actualisation, social interaction, perseverance, affiliation), and physiological needs and motives (unique ethos, specialist skills, competition, durable benefits, rewards, career development). In terms of the above-mentioned motives and behavioural characteristics specific to serious leisure participants (long distance athletes), the characteristics developed by Stebbins (1982) are used as the basis and tested on participants in the *Comrades Marathon* of 2011. Within the serious leisure context this research also attempts to relate these characteristics to Murray's (1938) 'needs theory of personality' as motivators of behaviour, the 'needs hierarchy' of Maslow (1954) and the 'symbolic interactionism' approach developed by Mead (1934) and refined by Blumer (1969). The potential contribution in the field of the sociology of sport regarding the latter has remained relatively undeveloped (Weiss, 2001).

The world over, more than 70 000 people are motivated to annually run gruelling distance races such as ultra-marathons. In Africa, a number of ultra-distance events are held with the *Comrades Marathon* in South Africa being the world's oldest (since 1921) and largest (based on number of participants), 1-day ultra-marathon of approximately 89km. In Morocco, the *Marathon des Sables* is a six-day stage race, which covers 250km through the Sahara desert, while Namibia hosts a marathon across the Namib Desert of 250km. On Reunion Island the *Grand Raid de la Reunion* is an ultra-marathon crossing the island over 163km with an altitude gain of over 9 000 metres attracting 2 350 competitors of which half are from abroad.

In 2010 the *Comrades Marathon*, also known as the "ultimate human race", received recognition as a Guinness World Record, as the event with 'the most runners in an ultra-marathon' with more than 23 500 entries and 14 343 finishing before the 12-hour cut-off time. In 2011 there were only 19 591 entries, 12 600 starters and 11 070 finishers, with the drop in entries over the two years ascribed to the FIFA Soccer World Cup 2010 that enlarged the international category of runners (as serious sport tourists) in the 2010 event that may have taken the opportunity to also attend soccer matches, or vice versa (*Comrades Marathon*, 2011a).

The *Comrades Marathon* (see the illustration of the route at the end of the article), is run between Durban and Pietermaritzburg (alternated annually) over a distance of approximately 89km that has to be completed in less than 12 hours. For the 2011 marathon on which this research is based, the 'up-run' from Durban to Pietermaritzburg took place on Sunday 29 May.

This research sets out to explore the motives and behaviour of serious leisure participants to partake in the phenomenon of distance running, incorporating the six distinctive characteristics proposed by Stebbins (1982). It also aims to assess whether the needs hierarchy of Maslow and needs of Murray form the base of the motives and behaviour of such participants. The focus is specifically on participants of the *Comrades Marathon 2011* to determine:

- the sense of identity participants have with distance running;
- the unique ethos and sub-culture of the participants within the distance running community;
- the need to persevere and master the skill (through effort) of running the *Comrades Marathon*; and
- the durable benefits and career development of participating in distance running.

Finally, a possible link between motives and behaviour of participating athletes and the theories and approaches of Maslow, Murray and Mead (Blumer) is explored.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Serious leisure versus casual leisure

Serious leisure as concept describes activities that are interesting and substantial in terms of allowing participants to find careers that acquire a combination of knowledge, special skills and experience (Stebbins, 1982). Serious leisure participants may often identify strongly with the sub-culture of their chosen activity, as with long distance running in this case. Within this context, sport tourism can provide serious leisure participants with ways to confirm or construct their leisure identity, provide a time and place to interact with like-minded persons sharing the ethos of the activity, to celebrate their social identity and provide a way to benchmark their leisure 'careers' (Green & Jones, 2005).

Serious leisure is often contrasted with casual leisure in that the latter can be described as an immediate or relatively short-lived pleasurable activity that requires little or no special training that is intrinsically rewarding. Casual leisure is regarded as all leisure falling outside the basic types of serious leisure. Serious leisure is further distinguished from casual leisure by six unique qualities or characteristics developed by Stebbins (1982), and can be summarised as: the need to persevere; finding a career; significant personal effort based on specially acquired knowledge, training or skill; certain durable benefits; a unique ethos; and a strong identity with the chosen pursuit.

In terms of travel behaviour, Gibson (2005:2) defines leisure-based travel as: "... travel that takes individuals temporarily outside of their home communities to participate in physical activities (active sport tourism), to watch physical activities (event sport tourism)...". Therefore, athletes that participate in the *Comrades Marathon* may be classified as serious leisure participants (tourists) as they strive for the six characteristics/qualities mentioned above and, because the majority travel to Durban/Pietermaritzburg, which is outside of their home environment to participate in the running of the *Comrades Marathon* that can be classified as a sport tourism event.

## Motivation and behaviour of serious leisure participants

Fundamental to all behaviour are needs and motivations based on the intrinsic physiological and sociological wants (and needs) of human beings. Classic theories of motivation applied to understanding leisure, sport and tourism behaviour are, amongst others, Murray's (1938), needs theory of personality and Maslow's needs hierarchy (1954). Murray's (1938) most important contribution to theory in personality is his use of the concept of needs to explain the motivation and reason for behaviour, stating that motivation is the core that refers to something from within (the human being), and especially his/her needs of achievement, affiliation and exhibition (that will be related to the current study). Maslow's (1954) needs hierarchy, as one of the most well-known theories of motivation, can be associated with Murray's approach, where he proposed that human behaviour is driven by both physiological and psychological needs, and developed a hierarchical order to depict needs from the most basic (physiological) need to the highest need of self-actualisation (psychological).

Studies in leisure, sport and tourism have used either the theories of Murray or Maslow, or a combination of the two. Other social theories that have been used in the field of sport are, amongst others, the optimal level of stimulation (Berlyne, 1960), the functional, conflict, critical and feminist theories (Coakley, 2007), whereas this research only explores the theories of Maslow, Murray and the interactionist theory (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969), within the context of serious leisure participation.

Motivation is concerned with why people do certain things, the benefits they seek and the experiences they pursue to satisfy their needs and desires (Cooper *et al.*, 1993; Higham, 2005). Motivation is a function of self-perceived needs of the participant/athlete, which drives the decision-making process and the purchase of related products. The motivational profile of the (marathon) athlete is a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors that have been described in terms of the push (psychological) and pull (cultural) factors. The push factors are intrinsic and unique to each athlete as they are determined by the personality and attitude of the individual.

In the context of sport specifically, push factors may extend to the desire to achieve serious leisure objectives or a 'career' that cannot be achieved at home; whereas pull factors include the interplay of a significant sport event (*Comrades Marathon*), people and place that a distinctive (tourism) destination may offer. Specifically in terms of sport experiences, pull factors may relate to the search for desired competition of the achievement of sporting experiences that are unique to particular places (Hinch & Higham, 2011), such as the physical space (route) and race of the *Comrades Marathon*.

The six distinctive characteristics of serious leisure developed by Stebbins (1982), and also researched by other authors (Green & Jones, 2005; Shipway & Jones, 2007), were tested amongst the respondents who were selected for the empirical fieldwork and participated in the *Comrades Marathon, 2011* to better understand their behaviour of and motives for running and brought into relation with the needs of Maslow's hierarchy, Murray's personality needs and the interactionist approach. The interactionist approach is regarded as a useful framework in the context of this study, as it considers both individual needs and the social

need of belonging to a group, such as belonging to a running club (Coakley, 2007; Shipway, 2010).

In terms of the six unique characteristics, the characteristic ‘sense of identity’, which refers to the human need for identity reinforcement, is satisfied by top-level sport. This motivation is based on external satisfaction associated mainly with displaying special skills in sport and receiving approval, status or rewards for performing well. In modern society there is no other social sub-culture that gives so many people, regardless of their gender, age, social or educational level or religion, access to a system of social validation and acknowledgement by others (Weiss, 2001). “To be socially accepted” was a main finding of Shipway and Jones (2007:373), and plays a major role in the lives of distance runners (Masters & Lambert, 1989; Kotze, 2006). The identity theory is approached from the individual and the group by Shipway (2010), in the sense that it enables one to develop identity, a sense of who one is and how one is connected to the social world, which can be related to the interactionist approach (Coakley, 2007), as this approach again focuses on issues related to meaning, identity, social relationships and sub-cultures in sport. Sport, therefore, provides the ideal environment for different sub-cultures to form, each with their own set of beliefs and value systems (Green, 2001).

The characteristic of ‘unique ethos’ of distance runners relates closely to social identity that is created when becoming part of a sub-culture through participating in an activity. Social identity is where participants have the desire to affiliate with other runners and to receive recognition or approval from them (Masters & Lambert, 1989). Homogeneity was evident amongst runners at a major International Marathon (*Cyprus International Four-day Challenge*), according to Shipway and Jones (2007), and even when the runners were not competing, they were wearing clothes that clearly identified them as runners. This type of behaviour can occur for two reasons: firstly, is to gain the approval of other members within the group or secondly, to avoid negative evaluation (Shipway, 2010). In terms of the interactionist approach, language is also very important as a set of shared meaning that arises out of social interactions with language being the vehicle. The interactionist approach is also more concerned with higher needs and does not address the lower psychological needs of Maslow’s hierarchy, but is applicable to the three higher levels as indicated by Maslow’s hierarchy.

The ‘need to persevere’ as characteristic, can be described as the personal effort of an athlete based on his/her specialist skills, knowledge or ability. These are aspects, such as time spent training, understanding different techniques or strategies, money saved months in advance to cover costs involved in participating in the event and time taken to go to the event (Shipway, 2010). Perseverance is a sense or form of endurance, persisting through difficult and possibly painful times. It is how athletes deal with any failures or difficulties that come across their path in preparation of and during the event (Shipway, 2010). Distance runners need to persevere in the process of developing their careers in distance running by gathering and testing information on training methods, eating methods and organising the trip to the destination where the event will be taking place. A reciprocal relationship appears evident between effort and social identity as participants might feel that if an activity requires a large amount of effort a valued identity is developed, and a large amount of effort is then put into maintaining this identity (Shipway, 2010).

'Durable benefits' as characteristic are benefits that last beyond the event, such as self-esteem, self-actualisation (Maslow's highest level of need), and social interaction months prior to the event during training and even health benefits (Jones & Green, 2005). The esteem need is to recognise and achieve one's own goals and be recognised by others. In the literature (Shipway & Jones, 2007; Shipway & Holloway, 2010), participants identified with the activity of distance running and saw it as a lifelong (durable) activity.

The field of sport and tourism lacks integration in terms of, amongst others, research (Glyptis, 1991; Gibson, 1998); whereas Weed (2008) is of the opinion that research in the field of sport tourism lacks epistemological diversity with the majority of empirical research using quantitative methods with positivist assumptions rather than following more interpretivism epistemologies (the relationship between reality and research seeking to understand specific context) (Costa & Chalip, 2005), that focus on individuals and their experiences of sport tourism as derived from the interaction of the activity, such as in this case, the *Comrades Marathon*, the people (the other athletes) and the place (route between Pietermaritzburg and Durban) of the occurrence.

## METHODOLOGY

The apparent lack of qualitative research (Weed, 2008) is addressed in this study by following a quasi-ethnographic (non-random representation of people and their interaction), and quasi-experimental (respondents are not assigned randomly and involves their perception of their interaction), method of research (Keyton, 2010). This method is primarily participant observation where the researchers are "directly involved in community life, observing and talking with people as you learn from them their view of reality" (Agar, 1996:163). Data is collected through interviewing, qualitative open ended-questions where the analysis is done inductively and the focus is on the participants' perspectives (Creswell, 1998).

This method also involves the use of the dialect or language used by the respondents, long-term immersion in a context (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994), and understanding the cultural and symbolic meanings and 'local rules' of the participants (Hochschild, 1979). As one is immersed in the serious leisure sub-culture of distance running with close family and friends being long distance runners, it allows for investigator triangulation (Keyton, 2010), so this researcher was able to obtain additional rich data from respondents that served in bringing more credibility to the findings.

### Sampling

The main aim of the data collection was to access and understand the meanings that participants give to their cultural environment through observation and first-hand experience. Non-probability purposive sampling was used with the focus on choosing respondents based on their knowledge and experience in long distance running (Babbie, 2010).

The research took place in 2 stages; the first was observation prior to the *Comrades Marathon 2011*, at the *Bonitas Comrades Expo* at the Durban Exhibition Centre (Friday/Saturday 27/28 May), as well as en-route, and at the finish on race day on Sunday 29 May. During the period

of the race (27-29 May), no personal interviews were held with athletes. The second stage involved individual in-depth interviews (September-October 2011) with athletes who had completed 10 or more *Comrades Marathons* (including the 2011 race). The rationale was that these athletes were truly immersed in the social culture of the world of distance running and would be 'information rich' individuals able to provide accurate information on the motivation and behaviour evident in serious leisure participation.

The target population was male and female adults aged 18 years and older. The unit of analysis was individual male and female adults who had completed 10 or more *Comrades Marathons* and were members of one of the most active and oldest running clubs in Gauteng, the Benoni Northerns Athletics Club (BNAC). The reasoning behind this was that athletes who had run 10 or more *Comrades Marathons* were truly immersed in long distance running and had a definite identity within the distance running world, although none of them were professional career athletes.

Twenty (20) individual in-depth interviews were held with respondents to elicit insight into their thinking and explore their motives and behaviour in terms of distance running, specifically the *Comrades Marathon*; and thereby collect reliable and accurate data (Cooper & Schindler, 2011). The sampling units were athletes selected from the Benoni Northerns Athletics Club (BNAC), based on the number of *Comrades Marathons* completed by club members over the past 3 decades. This club is oriented around non-professional training for the *Comrades Marathon* and has a strong social dimension. Additional reasons for using the BNAC were that:

- A large number of the BNAC club members annually participate in the *Comrades Marathon*;
- The BNAC organises a sufficient number of club runs for members to train together, enhancing the social aspect of running. (Training days are Tuesday mornings, Wednesday evenings after which a social gathering takes place in the club pub, Friday mornings and Saturday mornings. Closer to the *Comrades Marathon*, the club has runs in Bedfordview as part of hill training where refreshments are provided.);
- BNAC club members together attend different road races throughout South Africa during their training season and out of season. (At the finish of each race there is a club tent where all the runners get together and socialise, once again enhancing the social aspect of participating in running.)

For the 2011 *Comrades Marathon* 19 591 athletes entered the race of which 15 211 were male and 4 380 were female. From BNAC a total of 27 athletes finished the 2011 *Comrades Marathon*, who were doing their 10<sup>th</sup> or more *Comrades Marathons*. Of this amount there were 7 woman and 16 men of which 6 women and 14 men were interviewed. All of these respondents had completed the 2011 *Comrades Marathon*, as well as at least 9 previous races, not necessarily consecutively (*Comrades Marathon*, 2011b, 2011c).

### **Data collection**

As stated above the data collection took place in 2 stages: the first was exclusively field observation during the race; and at the finish. The second stage of data collection involved

post-race individual in-depth interviews with athletes who had completed 10 or more *Comrades Marathons*, including the 2011 race.

Pre-testing of the data collection instrument for stage 2 involved individual in-depth interviews with two experienced distance runners to improve the reliability of the outcome of the data and to ensure that more in-depth knowledge could be obtained about the needs and behaviour implicit in distance running. The discussion schedule used for the in-depth interviews consisted of 2 general question sections and 6 themed questions in accordance with the 6 characteristics of serious leisure (Stebbins, 1982), as well as questions related to Murray's needs, Maslow's hierarchy and the interactionist approach (Blumer, 1969).

Examples of types of interview questions asked were:

Do you feel the need to persevere against all odds? Explain the meaning of rewards? Do you feel that you have achieved something each time you finish the marathon? Can you comfortably interact socially with other runners? Do *Comrades* runners have a distinctive way of dressing? Do you as runners have your own jargon? How would you explain the value of the *Comrades Marathon* in terms of your own life?

In terms of aspects of the race questions were asked, such as:

Does the start of the race affect you in any way? Did the Expo influence you before the race? Do the spectators along the route affect you?

In one or two instances the data were quantified, however, the aim was to explore the 'how' and 'why' of the psyche of distance athletes. For this research the actual 'voices' of the participants were 'heard', categorised, coded and interpreted. The post-race interviews took place during September-October 2011. Of the 20 runners interviewed, a total of 292 *Comrades Marathons* had been run between them with an average of 14.6 marathons per runner.

### **Analysis of data**

The data were documented using a discussion schedule for the in-depth interviews that covered the 6 themes in accordance with the characteristics of Stebbins (1982), defining the qualities of serious leisure as set out in the literature review. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the transcribed texts as a method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

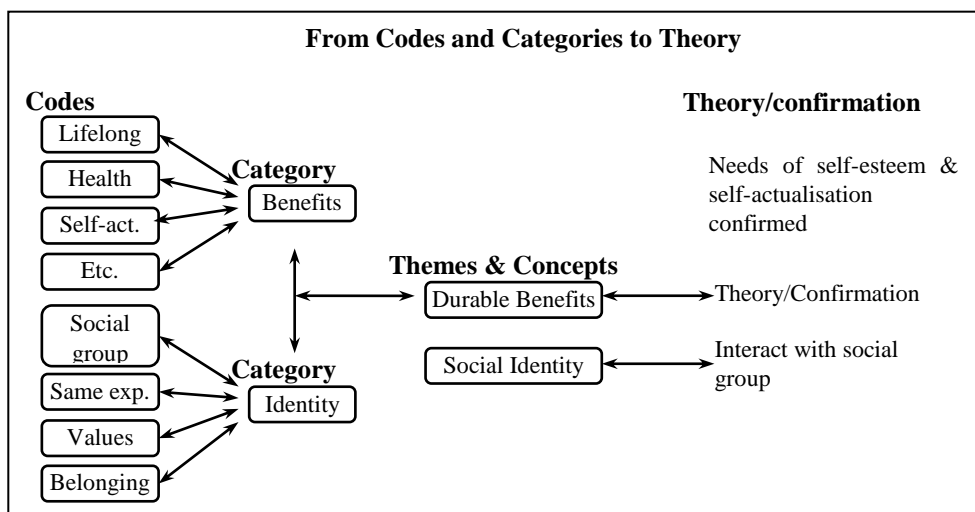
Content analysis is a qualitative data reduction technique that attempts to identify core consistencies and meaning (Patton, 2002). It emphasises an integrated view of speech/texts and their specific context (participants of the *Comrades Marathon*). Qualitative content analysis is more than merely counting words or extracting objective content from texts to examine meanings, themes and patterns that may be latent in a particular text, as it allows for the understanding of social reality (distance running as serious leisure participation) in a subjective but scientific manner (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Qualitative content analysis is mainly inductive, grounding the examination of themes, as well as the inferences drawn from them in the data. In some cases, qualitative content analysis attempts to generate, or at least confirm existing theory (as in this case).



The content analysis was divided into:

- 1) Preparing the data: In this case analysing interview transcripts (literally transcribed) in order to reveal athletes' motives and behaviour in terms of distance running.
- 2) Defining the unit of analysis that refers to the basic unit of text to be classified during content analysis, in this case it was the 6 basic themes (based on Stebbins' characteristics). A theme may be expressed in a single word, a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph, as for example in this case, "durable benefits of participating in long distance, non-professional, career development". Thus, you may assign a code to a text chunk of any size, as long as that chunk represents a single theme of relevance to the research under question. The actual 'voices' of the participants must be 'heard', themed and interpreted.
- 3) Developing categories and a coding scheme (manual) that are derived from the data (transcribed texts of the interviews), previous studies (Stebbins, 1982), and theories (Murray, Maslow and Blumer) on which to base the inquiry, namely the motivation and behaviour of serious leisure participants.
- 4) Testing the coding scheme on a sample of text, for example, *I had very little self-worth, but after completing the marathon I felt better...*, coded as Category 1 - Benefits, with Sub-category 1.1 - Durable Benefits, and Codes - lifelong, health, self-esteem.
- 5) Coding all the text and checking the coding repeatedly as new themes may emerge and must be added to the coding manual.
- 6) Assessing the consistency of the coding after the entire data set has been coded to recheck the consistency of the coding especially if more than one coder was used, as in this case.
- 7) Drawing conclusions from the coded data that involves making sense of the themes or categories identified. Since Stebbins's characteristics were used as the basis of the themes, the aim was to identify relationships between categories, between the needs theories of Maslow and Murray and the interactionist approach, and to uncover underlying patterns between them.
- 8) Monitoring and reporting the methods and findings that is imperative for a qualitative study, such as trustworthy and replicable. Qualitative content analysis does not produce counts and statistical significance, but uncovers patterns, themes and categories important to a social reality, namely the reality of serious leisure participants participating in distance running (*Comrades Marathon*).

As the sample was small it was decided to analyse the data manually and not to use a software programme such as Atlas TI or Nvivo, although in retrospect such a programme would have assisted the researchers in text editing, text retrieval and category manipulation and is recommended for future research. A brief example of the codes and categories to theory is presented in Figure 1.



**FIGURE 1: AN EXAMPLE OF HOW CODES AND CATEGORIES WERE DEVELOPED TO CONFIRM THEORY**

Limitations of the research are that since only athletes of one club were used as respondents, the results may be biased (one-sided) that excludes the possibility to generalise or present meaningful suggestions.

## RESULTS AND DESCRIPTIVE FINDINGS

In terms of the categories identified in the content analysis the category, *sense of identity* (one of Stebbins' unique characteristics), and how it relates to the activity of distance running (*Comrades Marathon*), is interpreted as follows: the respondents as athletes have been participating in the activity of distance running for 10 or more years and have been part of this particular long distance running sub-culture for many years, which has subsequently influenced their sense of identity with this activity. As they are closely related to this sub-culture, it has become part of their value and belief system. Social identity is defined by Tajfel (1972:292) as "the individual's knowledge that he/she belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him/her of the group membership." A respondent mentioned that he went back after the first *Comrades* because he had now made friends, and these friends formed this runner's social identity to a certain extent. Social interaction is clearly evident in the running community, as people have common ground on which they can strike up conversations and interact socially. The reason for this social interaction is as one respondent said: *We all experience the same things, we do the same things and you can get caught up in it and, I mean, some people just live it.* This ties in with Murray's need for affiliation, as well as the interactionist approach of the social need of belonging.

All the respondents felt that the *Comrades Marathon* had a high emotional value for them with 75% of them not able to see themselves separate from distance running, they felt it as being *a part of myself*. Due to their long distance running careers and immersion within the sub-culture, this had become part of their identity. Curry and Weiss (1989:258) interpret sport motivation from a symbolic interactionist position and define sport motivation as “the reasons that people give for participation in sport” and empirically demonstrate that there is a link between sport motivation and “self” or social identity (Curry & Weiss, 1989). However, Weiss (2001) states that social recognition and/or the reinforcement of identity can only be maintained on the basis of controlling the value and norm system of the surrounding social group (sub-culture). For example, in the *Comrades Marathon* there is a sense of identification that the runners share amongst themselves, such as achievement, knowledge, perseverance, self-control, that are valued in their particular social environment or sub-culture and relates to a controlling value and norm system of this group.

The *need for belonging* (Maslow’s 3<sup>rd</sup> level), links with social identification and personal effort as these athletes put in tremendous effort to develop and sustain an identity they have created through distance running. In Shipway (2010:71) one respondent said: *Where else can you finish 27 532<sup>th</sup> and still feel as if you were in an Olympic final?* From this statement it can be said that this runner felt like she belonged at this event. When *Comrades Marathon* athletes stand at the start of the race, they are standing amongst 12 000 to 15 000 other athletes who have the same goal - to finish the race. This creates a sense of belonging with regard to the event (*Comrades Marathon*) and the activity (distance running).

In terms of the interactionist approach, ‘meaning’ is attributed to something, in this case to the *Comrades Marathon*, and how one responds to it (to interact with a certain social group and identify with it). Runners feel a sense of belonging because of the camaraderie, as one respondent said: *When you’re on the road everybody’s on the same level. If you’re a CEO of a company or a gardener, you’re on the same level. The BNAC goes out of its way to make new members feel welcome; more so than other clubs and, therefore, it is easier to feel a sense of belonging.* The need for belonging (as proposed by the interactionist approach) is surpassed by the *self-actualisation* need (Maslow’s 5<sup>th</sup> and highest level of need), that is satisfied when you become self-fulfilled and feel completely content with who you are as an individual, but also what you are doing as a distance runner. However, according to Maslow *et al.* (1987), feelings of dissatisfaction and agitation can arise if an individual is not doing what he or she is interested in (distance running). Morgan (in Shipway & Holloway, 2010:271), suggests that runners experience a sense of withdrawal when not able to run, supporting Maslow’s theory. As with Murray’s need of ‘infaivodance’ that refers to humiliation of an athlete, as when the marathon was not completed successfully.

The category *unique ethos* (one of Stebbins’ characteristics) of the responding participants and the ethos of distance running as a sport activity, relates to the participants’ behaviour, their dress code and overall norms and values found within the distance running community (Jones & Green, 2005). With regard to a specific dress code, all the respondents replied that they occasionally (at leisure) wore *Comrades* t-shirts, and even during the interviews, it was observed that some respondents (50%), had their *Comrades* photos and previous race numbers on their office walls. However, before, after and during the *Comrades* weekend, 75% of the respondents acknowledged wearing watches and shirts from previous years, the

current year's *Comrades Marathon* or gear from other prestigious running events. This can be related to Murray's need of 'exhibition', to show (exhibit) oneself off in terms of others in the same sub-culture. Observations were made that during the *Comrades Marathon 2011* weekend, people travelling between Durban and Johannesburg and making rest stops, were wearing previous races' shirts, the previous year's Comrades shirts or even their specific club colours. These findings are consistent with Shipway's (2010) observations that homogeneity was evident at the International Marathon in terms of dress.

At the *Comrades Marathon* Expo held in Durban, it was observed that most runners in general terms (not necessarily those later interviewed), were wearing their running shoes and Comrades t-shirts. At the Expo's clothing section queue, two athletes were observed with their 'green number' clothes (dedicated 'green number' shirts, sweaters and caps) buying exclusive 'green number' merchandise. 'Green number' status is when a runner has completed 10 Comrades Marathons, and is regarded as the most prestigious of the runner groups. This behaviour indicated serious identification with the *Comrades Marathon*.

The differences between runners who finished well (silver) and those that finished at lower levels (bronze) were not noted, and the aspect of competitiveness of athletes could be explored further. Only runners who had completed the race (10 times or more) were interviewed and did not include those that did not finish. The latter could also be addressed in future research, namely to determine the differences between runners and their performances, in terms of those athletes that finish a race and those that do not.

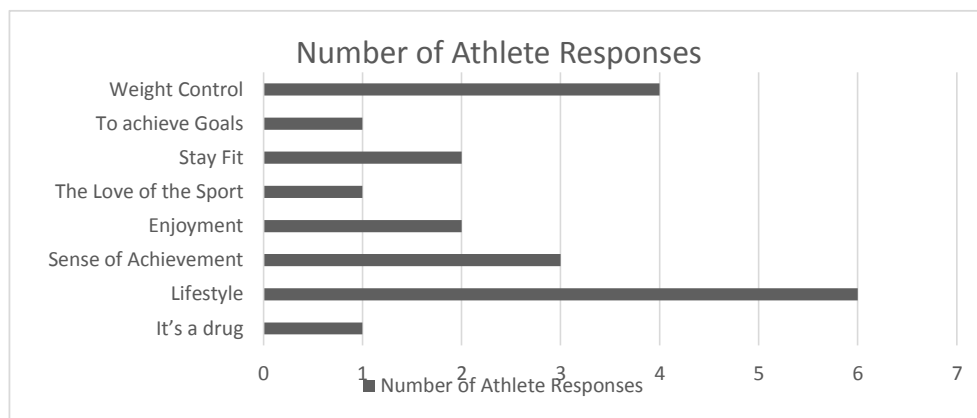
Under the content analysis category of unique ethos, the codes for language usage and use of jargon amongst runners became apparent, especially as most respondents (90%) agreed to using 'runner language', with phrases such as *running in a bus*, *silver*, *Bill Rowen*, *bronze*, *hills* and *hitting the wall*, being used during the interviews. In Shipway and Jones (2007) competitors spoke of *blowing up*, *hitting the wall*, and *miles in your legs*, also that they became a person to *stay away from* in the months leading up to the event; which supported that there was a certain dialect or jargon runners use within this fraternity. In terms of the interactionist approach, language is very important as a set of shared meaning, which arises out of social interactions with language as the vehicle.

Language and communication between participants and in the club/bar after a run, reinforces the feeling of belonging that can be related to Maslow's need of belonging/friendship. The wisecracks, friendly horseplay and joint singing all serve this purpose (Weiss, 2001). However, one of the respondent's expressed the initial need to break away from the running club, as she felt some people lived it day-in and day-out and that it became too much. While others said that their partners did not want to interact socially with other runners as they did not feel a sense of belonging because of not understanding the sport, however, *after getting involved with it, they all loved it as they then felt a sense of belonging and knew what everyone was talking about*. The social behaviour of runners seemed a common denominator amongst the entire running community and it was the individual's choice whether they wanted to attend the social activities of the club.

In terms of the content analysis category, need to persevere (this includes two characteristics of Stebbins, need to persevere and significant personal effort based on specialised skills), of

the responding participants and their mastery of the skill of distance running, it became evident that *Comrades Marathon* athletes put in a lot of personal effort to enable them to participate in the event. On the *Comrades Marathon* website ([www.comrades.com](http://www.comrades.com)), the link, 'ask the coach', is a forum for athletes to ask advice on any aspect of preparing for the race.

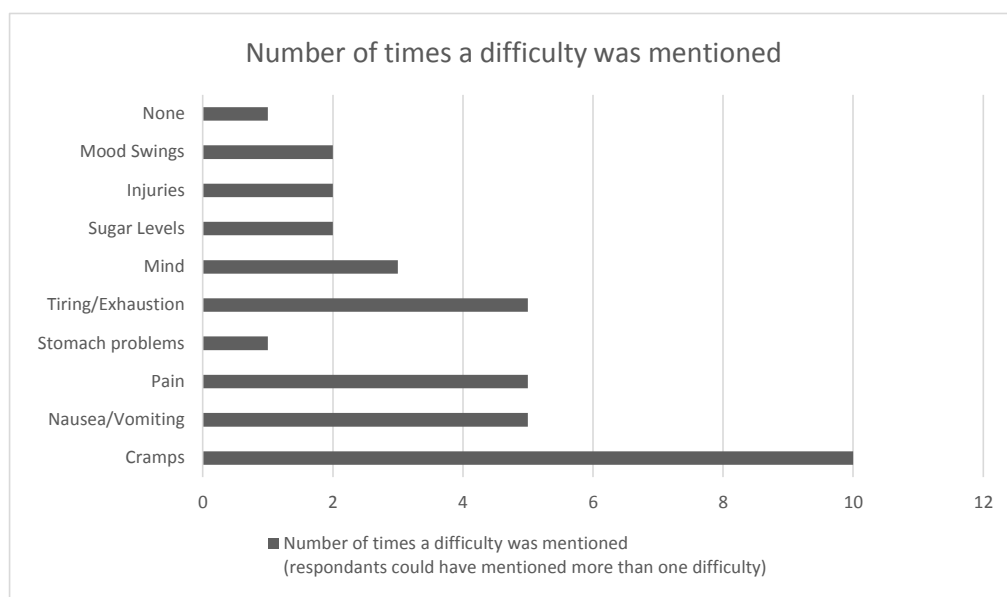
Another link refers to different training programs that are worked out for runners, depending on the goal(s) they want to reach. The training programmes start in the December before the year of the race and are worked out right up to the race, showing the amount of effort that goes into preparing for this event. These programmes with a map of the route can be found on the website (Comrades Marathon, 2011d). Extreme physical effort and perseverance go into training for the *Comrades Marathon* and these runners train between four and six times a week for the six months leading up to the event. As one respondent clearly stated, you have got to do your homework. To finish comfortably within the 12-hour deadline, between 1 000 to 1 200km is needed, and to run a silver medal (to run under seven-and-a-half hours) between 2 000 to 2 500km training is needed. This indicates the need to persevere, as well as the realisation that a certain mileage within a certain timeframe ensures that proper preparation is done for the event. As one respondent stated, mentally you have to also convince your body to get out of bed on those cold winter mornings, and when your body is drained you have to convince it that it can still go on and go for the run, indicating the strenuous mental preparation required.



**FIGURE 2: REASONS FOR PERSEVERING IN THE COMRADES MARATHON**

The respondents were all (100%) of the opinion that as they progress as runners and gain experience over the years, they also gain knowledge in terms of what physically works for them, how to train and what is a sufficient level of training. Most respondents (80%) mentioned the fact that it had become a lifestyle and that was why they kept on running. Other reasons were that it kept them healthy and kept their weight under control. Most respondents said that they would run until their bodies did not allow them to run anymore. One respondent noted: *I think it's a way of (lifelong) fitness...because I believe it's a good lifestyle*. Figure 2 above indicates eight reasons why respondents had persevered with running over the years and how many times these reasons for persevering were mentioned during the

interviews. From the data it was evident that there is a strong need to persevere against all odds when participating in the *Comrades Marathon*. It is seen as a challenge and a goal that these runners set for themselves. Responses from the runners were: *We all experience and do the same things, we just live for it; I don't think I will easily be able to give up; Never, ever did it occur to me that I'm not going to make it or [that] I'm going to give up; I will do it, I will finish.* A respondent, who has completed 21 *Comrades Marathons* of which 11 medals were silver, said that at the BNAC there is a saying: *The men in Benoni Northerns [Athletic Club] don't bail*". Another respondent even mentioned that he had put his marathon races on his curriculum vitae to get a job, to emphasise his level of personal perseverance.



**FIGURE 3: TYPES AND NUMBER OF DIFFICULTIES ON COMRADES DAY**

Runners experience difficulties during the training that leads up to the Comrades day as well as on the day (Figure 3). On Comrades day cramps, nausea and exhaustion/tiredness are the three main causes of difficulty during the day, with cramps/pain mentioned by 50% of the respondents, and nausea and exhaustion by 25% for each. A few runners in addition mentioned that it is a mind thing on the day to get to the end: *it is just mind against body*. All respondents said the only way to get through these difficulties was to run through them, to keep on moving forward, that it would go away. One respondent who had done 21 consecutive *Comrades Marathons* said: *Somebody gave me advice once that if you do have a problem just walk for an hour or so and it will go away and that is true*. In Shipway and Jones (2007) one runner mentioned that he was sick and might struggle but *I just don't want to fail after training so hard, I just don't want to let my family and friends down*. Similar responses were made by the runners of Benoni Northerns, saying they had trained hard and given up a lot and could not fail, could not give up and not finish the race.

Interpreting the category *durable benefits* (two characteristics of Stebbins, durable benefits and finding a career), of participating in long distances for (non-professional) *career development*, are benefits that last beyond the event and are related to self-esteem, self-actualisation (Maslow's highest level of need), and to the social interaction months prior to the event during training, as well as health benefits (Jones & Green, 2005). The esteem need is to recognise and achieve one's own goals and be recognised by others. An example of this would be setting a goal for yourself to finish the *Comrades Marathon*, and when achieving the goal being recognised by others, who may be fellow runners, family and friends. Self-esteem and durable benefits of distance running are thus interlinked.

In Shipway and Jones (2007: 381) a runner commented: *Despite being in horrific pain for the last couple of miles, my feet actually felt they were on fire; I loved every single minute of it and have never been so proud of myself.* The need for self-esteem and self-actualisation go hand in hand due to self-esteem being the satisfaction of achieving a specific goal. As one respondent stated, *it is one of the most rewarding things you can ever do because of the incredible degree of difficulty of the race, so anyone that finished the Comrades is just simply in sport, I believe, of the best.* Another respondent remarked that *you are invincible*, which boosts self-esteem. Self-actualisation is about fulfilling ones true potential when related to Maslow's needs hierarchy. An example is a respondent who did not finish his first attempt at a *Comrades Marathon*, but he went back to finish it the next year improving his time and eventually progressing to run silver medals thus reaching his full potential after experiencing failure at first. Most respondents (95%) feel they have achieved something every time they finish the *Comrades*, and all agree that *each run is special*. This sense of achievement and fulfilment of personal potential (self-actualisation) can be seen as a durable benefit of feeling good about oneself.

In the literature (Shipway & Jones, 2007; Shipway & Holloway, 2010), participants identified with the activity of distance running and saw it as a lifelong (durable) activity that correlated with the respondents. The respondents, however, added that they would stop running should it become detrimental to their health, for example, serious knee or back injuries. Some respondents (50%) said should they be compelled to stop running the *Comrades* due to health reasons, they would continue with shorter races, such as the *Two Oceans Marathon* (56km) (Kruger & Saayman, 2012), and the *Loskop Marathon* (50km). Others (20%) started running due to medical reasons, as they had severe back problems and doctors recommended them to be super fit, they chose running as the activity to accomplish that goal.

A respondent who was suffering from depression said: *I had very little self-worth, but after completing the marathon I felt much better. I'm still on the road to recovery, but the doctors seem to think that the running is playing a major positive part in my recovery.* This statement links the benefits of health and self-esteem. However, during the research another aspect of distance running came to light, that it could have negative impacts on runners, as it did on the following respondent: *I had to drop out of a marathon at halfway. All my family and friends knew I was running, and I was raising money for charity, and I had to spend the next few weeks explaining how and why I didn't finish. I haven't entered a marathon since, and find it hard to consider doing another one, knowing that I failed to finish.* Another respondent had serious personal problems to face and running provided that perfect escape, *Comrades gave me my life back*, which is the reward running had. Therefore, in terms of durable benefits of

distance running, the need for self-esteem and self-actualisation are apparent amongst the behaviour of distance runners, and applied to Maslow's hierarchy amongst distance runners' experiences, as well as to the interactionist approach where meaning is given to life through interaction with others.

The code to develop a career in distance running (under the content analysis category 'durable benefits'), respondents all had different reasons for why and how they started running. Many runners (75%) started running through friends, relatives or work colleagues. Two of the respondents started running because they were part of the event as children, both had lived on the route and had always supported the runners along the way, and it became a goal or a (nostalgic) dream for them to participate in this race they knew as children. All the respondents started running the race to see whether they would be able to finish the notorious *Comrades Marathon*. After they had proved to themselves they could do 89km, they went back for various reasons with some runners trying and succeeding in running silver medals, while others attempting a Bill Rowen medal (between 7½ hours and 9 hours). Respondents were asked if the level of achievement was of significance and responses were mixed as some said that no matter the time they did, being good or bad, they felt they had achieved something major every time they crossed the finishing line, *My Bill Rowens's aren't more special than my bronze ones*.

Athletes who participate in the *Comrades Marathon*, who have completed 10 or more races have developed their 'careers' to a certain extent. They have developed from being "fun" runners who started out on minimum mileage, trained to run their first *Comrades* and then continued to run to develop to an intermediate level, gained experience and knowledge over time and are now at a master level of the activity. This correlates with Stebbins' characteristic of significant personal effort based on specialised knowledge, training and skill, indicating the inherent interplay and interrelationships between the characteristics.

Taking the above findings into account, an attempt was made to apply Murray's motivators of behaviour, Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the interactionist approach, to the *Comrades Marathon* participants. Murray (1938) listed various needs that underlay the motivation of behaviour, of which three have been applied to this research. The need for *achievement* includes accomplishing something difficult, mastering and manipulating to overcome obstacles and attain a high standard; to rival and surpass others can be directly related to athletes of the *Comrades Marathon*. The *need for affiliation* that includes drawing near and enjoyably cooperating with an allied other who resembles one is also applicable to athletes of the *Comrades Marathon*. Finally, the *need of exhibition*, like to make an impression, to excite, amaze others, can also be seen as applicable to *Comrades Marathon* athletes.

Although many of Murray's (1938) other needs may also be relevant to the respondents, the above-mentioned are regarded as the most applicable. The needs of Murray (1938) are divided into groupings, many overlapping with those of Maslow, with the latter developing a hierarchy that categorises the needs from the most basic need level such as the physiological need for food, water, shelter and sex (this need for sex is also mentioned by Murray, but is explained in terms of relationships rather than procreation as Maslow views it), but may comprise of different needs depending on the circumstances (Maslow *et al.*, 1987). When compared to distance running these basic needs would be the level of physical health and



ability to participate in such an activity. A *Comrades Marathon* runner has to be sufficiently healthy for the long distances required and in addition sufficient food and water are required during training and on the day of the event to ensure that runners are hydrated and maintain normal sugar levels to enable them to physically participate in the event (Maslow's 1<sup>st</sup> level).

**Safety needs** (Maslow's 2<sup>nd</sup> level of need), such as security includes law and order and would entail safety on the roads when training and participating in an event. Within the context of motivation theory, the physiological needs still hold but are less dominant at this level as they have been satisfied. Therefore, once the first level need is satisfied the next level need takes over in terms of the importance that Maslow describes as the need for safety (Maslow *et al.*, 1987). For example, in October 2011 five road runners preparing for the *Soweto Marathon* were killed by a 'drunk driver' (SAPA, 2011) - this type of behaviour is unacceptable as it discourages current and potential participants to take part in the sport. This supports the need to be safe when training and participating in events. It also shows the risk of the sport due to motorists not acting in a safe and responsible manner. Benoni Northerns Athletic Club (BNAC), have their club runs not only for the social aspect of running with people but also consider the safety aspect, for when running in larger groups this takes up more space on the roads and forces motorists to notice the runners.

However, the **social aspect** can also be related to the need for self-esteem and self-actualisation that are apparent amongst the behaviour of distance runners and applied to Maslow's hierarchy amongst distance runners' experiences, as well as to the interactionist approach where meaning is given to life through interaction with others. Finally, in terms of the interactionist approach, language and communication between respondents is also regarded as very important as it involves a set of shared meaning that arises out of social interactions, such as respondents socialising after a run that reinforces the feeling of belonging and can again be related to Maslow's need of friendship and belonging. The interactionist approach is more concerned with higher needs and does not address the lower psychological needs of Maslow's hierarchy, but is applicable to Maslow's three higher levels of belonging and self-actualisation.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In the previous discussion, the characteristics of serious leisure (Stebbins 1982), Maslow's (1954) needs hierarchy, Murray's (1938) needs and the interaction approach (Blumer, 1969), are potentially linked to develop a better understanding of the running needs and behaviour of serious leisure participants in the *Comrades Marathon*. Clearly respondents in both this study and that of Shipway and Jones (2007), strongly identify with distance running as a lifelong activity with 75% of runners from BNAC stating that they could not see themselves separate from distance running. The *Comrades Marathon* had a very high emotional value for these runners, due to the sub-culture in which they find themselves. Social ethos was also evident within distance running, as the respondents (as athletes) have a definite need to persevere against all odds and finish the race they started with a large amount of effort going into the preparation for the event both physically and mentally. As these athletes developed a (non-professional) 'career' in distance running, they needed to persevere through the stages of development from being a novice runner to a level of mastery. Benefits, such as self-esteem

and self-actualisation, sense of belonging and social interaction were evident and link with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Murray's needs and the interactionist approach and indicate that these perspectives can be used to further explain the needs and behaviour of serious leisure participants. Although this research has not brought much innovation to the fore, its value can be seen as confirming existing theory.

The limitations of this study refer to only BNAC runners being interviewed and the data being from a one-sided biased perspective in terms of running clubs. BNAC is a club that focuses on the *Comrades Marathon* and prides itself in the social aspect of running, which could increase the bias towards social identification with the activity. Runners from this club may think that the social side of running is common within the whole running fraternity whereas this may not be the case. Due to these limitations, the results of this study do not allow making suggestions in terms of the implications for management and the organisers of long distance running events in general.

The study aimed to investigate a possible link between the needs theories (Murray, 1938; Maslow, 1954), the symbolic interactionist approach (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969), and the motivations and behaviour of a select group of serious leisure participants in a particular event, the *Comrades Marathon*. In spite of the fact that the study was empirically limited in scope, an attempt to reaffirm previous research findings in the field of serious leisure participation was possible.

### Acknowledgement

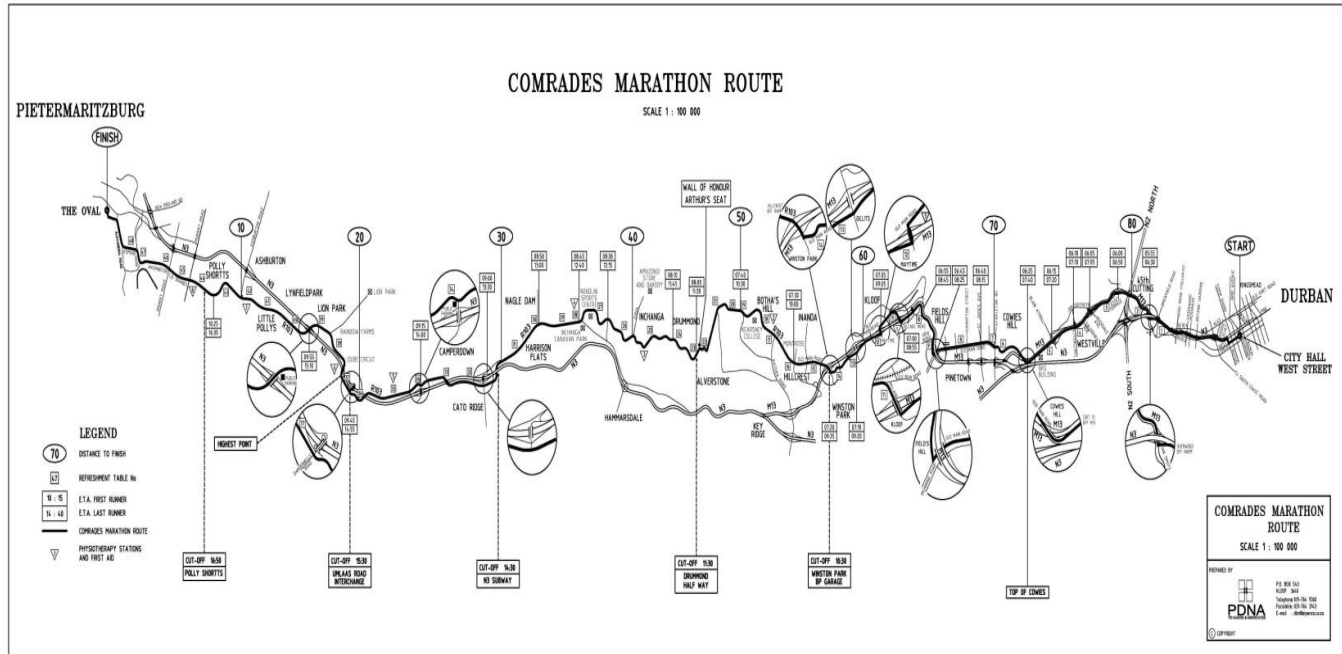
The author wishes to acknowledge Kanya Jordaan, past honours student in the Department of Tourism Management, for assisting with the collection of the data.

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**COMRADES MARATHON ROUTE**

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