

## Hal Higdon: On The Run

# Ultramarathon Training

### 24 Weeks to a 54-Mile Race

The Comrades Marathon is 54 miles between Durban and Pietermaritzburg in South Africa. With 14,000 competitors, it not only is the African continent's largest marathon, but it is the world's most prestigious ultramarathon. The distance seems daunting, but most marathoners can train for and finish the Comrades Marathon. Or you can use the following schedules to train for other ultramarathons of similar distances, specifically 50-miler or 100-K races.



The secret in running ultramarathons is to *restructure* your training, not merely add more miles. The following schedule peaks at 75 miles a week. The longest runs are four to five hours in length. Bill Fitzgerald, co-leader of the training class for The LaSalle Banks Chicago Marathon, ran and finished Comrades in 1996 with somewhat less mileage. He considers Comrades (and other ultramarathons) "doable" by most experienced marathoners.

How talented do you need to be? The qualifying standard to enter the Comrades Marathon usually is 4:30 for a standard marathon. Although the Comrades organizers do not seem to enforce that standard as strictly as does the Boston Athletic Association for its race, they feel that you need the ability to run that fast to have a chance to better 11:00 in their race (the cutoff time for earning a bronze medal).

The following 24-week program has been modified from the ultramarathon training program developed by Coach George Parrott that appears in [Hal Higdon's How To Train](#) (Chapter 12, pp. 85-91). Parrott is a professor of psychology at California State University at Sacramento. In his spare time, he coaches the Buffalo Chips, considered by some the strongest ultramarathon club in the United States, if not the world. Central to Parrott's theories in preparing runners for long ultras is the "sandwich" approach that features two long runs on the weekend (Saturday-Sunday) with rest days before and after (Friday-Monday). The middle days of the week (Tuesday-Wednesday-Thursday) feature easier running at relatively shorter distances, although he does suggest doing 1-mile repeats at 10-K pace once a week for ultramarathoners interested in improving their performances.

Here is how to train for the Comrades Marathon, or any other ultramarathon of about the same distance. Please be aware that odd-numbered years (2003, 2005, etc.) are "Down" years with the course going from Pietermaritzburg to Durban. Because of this you should do some training (specifically repeats) on downhill stretches so that you can prepare your legs for the extra muscle stress. In doing strength training, place extra emphasis on the quads. The even-numbered years (2004, 2006, etc.) are "Up" years with the race going from Pietermaritzburg to Durban. Regardless of whether it is an "Up" or "Down" year, there are plenty of downhills and uphill, so train accordingly.

To access the 24-week training schedule, click on the appropriate month. The months (and weeks on the schedule are numbered in reverse, as we countdown to the race.) Please note that the Comrades Marathon is always run on June 16, a holiday in South Africa, meaning the day of the week varies from year to year. These schedules originally were designed for a year in which the race was run on a Wednesday. For years in which the race is run on a different day of the week, you will need to make some small modifications to the taper period. When in doubt, add more rest.

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