

Jo-Anne Tiedt, 'Contesting Comrades': Writing the Comrades Marathon on the politically charged roads of South Africa, 1980 – 1990. (Honours dissertation, UKZN, 2009).

POLITICIZING THE RACE

The silent protest of 1981

...they accused us through the media... of politicizing the race... they said we were making it into a political issue, and we said in response that “no, the Comrades committee had politicized it by linking [placing it on] it to Republic Day”. Republic Day had enormous, to our way if thinking... political symbolism. Because under this Republic you are celebrating apartheid.¹

The historical narrative of the Comrades Marathon is far more complicated than what is portrayed in those narratives officially endorsed by the Comrades Marathon Association (CMA). The narratives depicted, attempt to portray a road race which is almost completely isolated from the political context during which it was staged. They have endeavoured through such narratives, and they still do, to ignore the effect of apartheid on those living within the borders of South Africa, steadfast in the idealistic belief that sport and politics are two completely separate social endeavours. The official narratives as produced by the CMA, and those history books they endorse, cover the race from its inception until present day. They tell the history of a race considered to be one of the most prestigious ultra-marathons in the world. Yet, such a grand narrative seemingly separates itself from the different contexts in which it finds itself; it portrays the race and its runners as untainted by the racial policies and apartheid legislation which affected the country and infiltrated every aspect of South African society, including sport and therefore the Comrades Marathon. These 'official' narratives can also therefore be seen to reinforce the idea that sport, race and politics can be separated.

Newspapers demonstrate how these official narratives – which are sold as histories of the marathon or distributed at the highly successful Comrades Experience² – are untainted by

¹ Dr. Steven Reid, interview.

² An exhibition for competing athletes and devoted spectators held during the run-up to the race.

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politics, an ideal and not the reality of the race. They show us that the 1980s was to see many changes in the organisation of the event: the creation of the CMA in 1982, the elimination of mobile seconds from the road, the removal of cars from the race route, television was able to take the Comrades Marathon into peoples' homes and, in 1983, the CMA gained the services of a computer to organise the entries of runners.³ The decade was also to be dominated by the running phenomenon 'Wits Blits' - Bruce Fordyce was to dominate the media attention, the winning position as well as break numerous time records on both the up and down run. Yet, 1981 was to be a controversial year for marathon organisers, spectators and participants with the decision taken by race organisers – Pietermaritzburg's Collegians Harriers – to make the race a part of the Republic Day Festival. There is however no mention of this and the subsequent black armband protest that raged both in the print media as well as on the race route, in any historiographies of the Comrades as endorsed by the CMA.

The Republic Day Festival was celebrated on the 31st May and commemorated the day in 1961 that South Africa was made a Republic. This was already a date of great significance. It was on this day that the South African War ended in 1902, it was the date of the Union of South Africa in 1910 and when the South African flag was flown for the first time in 1928.⁴ In 1960, Hendrik Verwoerd announced that during that year, a referendum would be held – one in which only white South Africans would be able to participate – that would decide whether South Africa, like India, would try to become a republic whilst remaining a part of the commonwealth.⁵ The referendum was held on 5th October 1960 and the majority of white South African voters – both English and Afrikaans speakers – voted in favour of South Africa becoming republic. On the 3rd March 1961, Verwoerd went to the Imperial Conference being held in London, where his intentions were to discuss South Africa becoming a republic while still remaining within the Commonwealth.⁶ Verwoerd needed to obtain a statement on South Africa's position that would be acceptable to both the Commonwealth and to those in South Africa which, in the face of South Africa Apartheid policy, would prove to be problematic.

³ "Computer helps run Comrades," 5.

⁴ "The development of the South African Republic: Becoming a Republic and withdrawal from the Commonwealth in 1961.."

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

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It was international opposition to South Africa's apartheid policy that Verwoerd now faced as well as the prospect South Africa being expelled from the Commonwealth. There had been much campaigning in Britain by the anti-apartheid movement for South Africa's expulsion and many countries were in favour of this.⁷ African and Asian countries were especially critical of apartheid, and led the discussions to expel South Africa from the Commonwealth. Canada too was openly critical of South Africa and her racial policies.⁸ Nevertheless, Verwoerd felt that nobody had the right to dictate to South Africa and interfere with her internal policies and decided it would be best for South Africa to leave in the face of more criticism or being expelled. On the 15th March 1961, South Africa resigned its position from the Commonwealth.⁹

Sport had been used as a site of protest by the anti-apartheid movement in their efforts to persuade the international community to isolate South Africa from the international sporting arena. According to Rob Nixon, "Stop the Seventy Tour" was one of the most successful displays of mass action in post World War II British history. It was a collection of political protests carried out under the organization of Dennis Brutus and Peter Hains - just to name a few South Africans living in exile and leading the anti-apartheid movement internationally.¹⁰ One such protest was aptly named "Operation Locust" which entailed David Wilton-Godberford planning to wage biological warfare against those teams hosting the all-white South African cricket team that was scheduled to tour Great Britain in 1970. Wilton-Godberford had imported desert locusts; if his ultimatum was not met – the cancellation of the Springbok tour – he would release half a million starving locusts on to the British playing fields, resulting in their decimation¹¹. Needless to say, the tour was cancelled and resulted in the 1969 touring Springbok Rugby team to be placed under the armed protection of the British police services.¹² In 1981, whilst the Springboks were playing New Zealand in Auckland, the playing field came under aerial attack as anti-apartheid protestors threw sacks of flour and smoke bombs on to the pitch.¹³

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Nixon, "Apartheid on the Run," 68.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 69.

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Reports of Republic Day celebrations had been appearing in *The Natal Mercury* in the weeks preceding the Festival, including an item on the protests against the Republic Day festivities.¹⁴ The marathon, which had always been run on the 31st May (and formerly known as Empire Day) was moved by race organisers to be run on 1st June in conjunction with the Republic Day Festival. Student organisations, running clubs as well as many members of the public were unhappy with the decision taken in making the race a part of such a controversial political issue. Many runners were against Republic Day festivities and to have the marathon made a part of them was politicising the race and forcing participants to be a part of a politicised event. The University of Cape Town's Athletic Club (UCT AC) was the leading group in demonstrating their unhappiness with the enforced connection between the Festival celebrations the marathon. As numerous competitors were not aware of the combining of events, to boycott the Comrades was felt to be a waste of the intensive training completed and the decision was taken by the UCT AC to instead wear black armbands in opposition to the decision taken¹⁵.

This decision nevertheless had not been taken lightly or unanimously as there were many on the UCT AC committee and amongst the UCT student body who insisted that the team make a point by withdrawing¹⁶. There were however other members who pointed out that: firstly, many athletes had put in too many months of training in preparation for the race for them to just withdraw and, secondly, their team member, Isavel Roche-Kelly, stood a great chance of taking the ladies' first prize¹⁷. The compromise reached by the committee, was for those willing athletes to wear a black armband.

Nevertheless, many members of the public were disappointed in what they saw as an act of treason against the Republic. On race day spectators and fellow runners hurled abuse, water bottles and even a tomato at those runners involved in the protest and there were also those who aired their grievances through the print media. Although this was obviously an important public issue, *The Natal Mercury* only produced two articles before the running of the race on the 30th May 1981 and again one article after the race had been run, informing the readership that the

¹⁴ Mercury correspondent.

¹⁵ Dr. Steven Reid, interview.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

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black armbands worn by the runners had been counted¹⁸. According to *The Natal Mercury* – who printed an interview with Comrades organising committee chairman, Mick Winn – the number of runners wearing armbands had been tallied for purely statistical purposes as to who the runners were and where they were from.¹⁹ Although the article reports that no action was to be taken against those recorded, there is seemingly an underlying ominous tone to the fact that such details were recorded and the newspaper made a point to highlight such action had taken place.

In contrast to *The Natal Mercury*, *The Daily News*, as well other newspapers around the country, had started reporting as early as the 13th May 1981. In this particular piece, Mike Cowling provides commentary as to why he and other Natal runners would be running together with black armbands and appealed to other runners to join the protest.²⁰ Another article, which appeared two days later in *The Natal Witness*, provided a response by Winn who claimed there were to be no changes to “the nature of the race” and that the only ‘physical’ change would be the use of the Republic Festival logo.²¹ Winn also revealed that the organising committee had been asked to change the race to a down-run, thus allowing the finish to correspond with a military parade and other Festival celebrations being held on the 1st June. The committee, however, had felt that it was not feasible due to traffic as well as not wanting to change the tradition of the race as this particular year was an up-run.²² Cowling and another runner were also quoted as saying that the Festival was synonymous with the National Party (NP) and thus the organising committee was aligning the race with the apartheid NP government.²³ The article also highlights that those runners participating in the ’81 race were not a homogenous group as the article claims that the ‘protest runners’ came under fire from other runners.²⁴ Importantly, it also included the opinion of former Comrades champion Alan Robb. Robb’s comment is significant as he was actually satisfied with the link between the marathon and the Republic Festival which can be seen in stark contrast to that of other top runners such as Bruce Fordyce and Danny Biggs who competed wearing their armbands.²⁵

¹⁸ Pietermaritzburg Bureau, “Number of black armbands counted.”

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Daily News Reporter, “Anti-Festival runners to wear armbands.”

²¹ Witness Reporter, “Comrades protest slated.”

²² Ibid., 1.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Witness Reporter, “Comrades protest slated.”

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This provides one with a variety of opinions with which to work and shows the differences between many of the athletes who were competing in the same race. Articles displaying Fordyce and Biggs' competing with their black armbands only appeared in the print media after the race. On the 27th May 1981 *The Argus* and the *Rand Daily Mail* featured articles about the UCT AC's team and their appeals to runners to either boycott the race or wear black armbands. The *Rand Daily Mail* featured a copy of the letter written by the chairperson of the athletics club – Steven Reid – to the organising committee of the race. The letter stated the club's disapproval with the partnership between the Comrades Marathon and the Republic Day Festival and wished it to be known that the club disassociated itself from such a decision.²⁶ Reid pointed out that in recent years, the marathon had allowed athletes to compete as equals, free of political pressure but, through the decision to link the two events, they had placed unnecessary pressure on competing athletes – in particular those black athletes participating in the race. In further support of his point, he went on to underscore the fact that majority of South Africans saw no reason to celebrate the occasion.²⁷ Reid also called on all those athletes partaking in the race – and who felt similarly – to don the black armband if the committee did not withdraw its Festival connections.²⁸

On the same day – the 27th May – *The Argus* also carried the news of the black armband protest and published comments made by committee member and media officer, Stephen Granger. Granger's commentary supported the letter written by Reid and which was carried in the *Rand Daily Mail*. Granger stated that a letter had been sent to the Comrades organising committee calling for the withdrawal of the Comrades from co-operation with the Republic Day Festival and if this was not to be adhered to, the UCT committee called on its athletes involved to either boycott the race or to wear the black armband. However, the tail piece of the article includes clarification from Fordyce that he would not be boycotting the race in reply to students asking the Comrades favourite to not take part in the race.²⁹ He stated that although he was sympathetic to the cause, he could not boycott the race as he was unwilling to waste the year's

²⁶ Steven Reid, "Protest at R20 link to race."

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ "UCT Athletics Clubs asks members to boycott Comrades," 3.

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training but strangely makes no mention of any plans to wear the black armband.³⁰ Fordyce's involvement in the 'protest run' had not been mentioned in Reid's article but had an entire article devoted to it in *The Friend* that also appeared on the 27th May. Headlined "Students ask Bruce not to run", the article illustrates that it was students on the University of Witwatersrand campus who had appealed to their fellow university student to not run in the ultra-marathon and makes no mention of whether the star athlete had been approached by either the UCT AC committee or any representatives from the Sporting Union of the University of Natal to participate in the run 'under protest'.³¹

Yet on the following day, *The Natal Witness* ran an article – "Biggs opts for black armband" – which revealed that both Biggs and Fordyce would be running the race whilst sporting an armband.³² The article also contained a statement from the president of the Natal University Sporting Union, Professor Maasdorp, declaring that students were welcome to enter individually but that the University would not be entering a team.³³ The article went on to state that the Sporting Union was joining the UCT AC in distancing itself from the link being made between the Comrades and the Festival and also reiterates Reid's previous statement that in recent years the marathon had been seen to be providing equal opportunities before forging this controversial and contradictory political link.³⁴

The 30th May 1981 saw the black armband protest being carried in several newspapers throughout the country such as *The Natal Witness*, *Rand Daily Mail*, *The Citizen* and the *Weekend Argus*. In many of these publications, the protest had first been featured mid-May but on the 30th May, *The Natal Mercury* published news of the protest for the first time. In the opening pages, three articles appeared, for the first time revealing the black armband protest to their audience. Two appeared on page three and revealed two very different opinions of the protest. The first article "Comrades Men Barred" – like the other articles printed in the other newspapers – printed the statement issued the previous day by Winn explaining the committee's decision to obstruct the UCT athletes from competing in the marathon on the 1st June. Winn

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ "Students ask Bruce not to run," 31.

³² Naidoo, "Biggs opts for black armband," 1.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

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claimed that Reid – in the letter he sent to the committee – threatened “disruption and incitement”.³⁵ Winn stated that both he and his committee had no problem with the UCT athletes wearing the armband whilst running but the defining point was that Reid, and the UCT AC committee, had asked other athletes to join them in their protest. Reid’s response stated he rejected the allegations and could not see the “disruption and incitement” in the call to other dissatisfied runners in what he described as a “passive protest”.³⁶ John Pemberthy, the head of the UCT Sports Centre, told *The Natal Mercury* correspondent that the UCT athletes had already left for Durban at this stage. The article claims that, according to a statement issued by the Comrades Marathon committee, only those UCT AC athletes who disassociated themselves from Reid’s statements in written statements would be allowed to compete officially in the race. Reid responded that the decision to compete would be entirely that of the individual runner.³⁷ The University of Cape Town’s vice-chancellor, Dr Stuart Saunders, denied the allegations made by Winn that the letter from the UCT athletics club threatened “disruption and incitement”.³⁸ At this stage, besides the comments featured in the article which appeared in *The Natal Witness* on the 15th May, there had been no other published responses from the Comrades organising committee in the print media in response to the protest. In an interview conducted with Dr. Steven Reid, Reid indicated that the UCT AC committee had never received any response from the Comrades organising committee but instead the accusations were placed in the media.³⁹

Dr Saunders’ statement was seen again on page three of the same issue of *The Natal Mercury*, headlined “UCT head denies ‘threat’ to Comrades” in an article by Grant Winter. Saunders denied that the letter sent by Reid to the Comrades organising committee in any way threatened “disruption or incitement”. He stated that:

I am amazed to hear the organisers of the Comrades Marathon are quoted as saying that the members of the university’s athletics club, who had been accepted to run in the Comrades, have had their entries withdrawn by the committee allegedly because they had threatened disruption and incitement. If this report is correct, I reject the allegations completely and (sic) view them in a

³⁵ Mercury correspondent, “Comrades Men Barred,” 1.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Winter, “UCT head denies threat to Comrades,” 3.

³⁹ Dr. Steven Reid, interview.

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very serious light. If they have been quoted correctly, it would be in the interests of the organisers of the Comrades Marathon to withdraw their allegations immediately.⁴⁰

The vice-chancellor's criticism came after the committee had released a statement stating that ten UCT AC runners had had their entries withdrawn from the race as the letter sent on by their chairman threatened "disruption and incitement".⁴¹ The committee also stated that if any other club attempted "disruption and incitement" they too would have their athletes barred from competing.⁴² Cowling was quoted in this same article as charging the committee with bringing politics into sport. Cowling connected the Republic Day Festival with the NP government further when he claimed that to participate within a race that is linked to the Festival is to represent participation in the Festival. "It is inhuman to threaten to withdraw the entries of the UCT runners, especially since they have done all that training. Besides, the Comrades Marathon is for the people who run in it; it is not the property of the organising committee".⁴³

On the same page was the article headlined "Martin slams students' black armbands plan" which clearly represents the opposing argument to that of the various student bodies supporting the black armband protest, and in fact accuses the students of politicising the race. Frank Martin was the leader of the Natal Provincial Council who described the action taken by the Wits and UCT students as "disgusting" and claimed that over the years, the Province had worked very hard to ensure the continuation of the race and was exasperated by people using sport as a means of political protest – exactly what Cowling had accused the committee of doing.⁴⁴ Martin continued his tirade claiming that the students were not being forced to run in the race "...and it is all very well for them to shout about rights. What about the right of 4000 other runners to compete in an event that has not been turned into a political rally?"⁴⁵ However, is this not what the Comrades organisers did by linking the Comrades Marathon to the Festival. In doing so, they forced participants – no matter their personal politics – to participate in the Republic Day festivities. Martin quite clearly links the festival to the NP government when he

⁴⁰ Winter, "UCT head denies threat to Comrades," 3.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Mercury reporter, "Martin slams students' black armbands plan," 3.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

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claims that the anti-festival protestors had their opportunity to protest against the government in the country's recently passed general elections. He further accuses the protestors of hypocrisy in that they infer that "...the injustices all began in 1961. Some of the worst legislation on our statute books was introduced between 1950 and 1960 when we were still under the Queen".⁴⁶ Martin is portrayed as having confused the point of the protest. He seems to be under the impression that the protestors were calling for South Africa to relinquish its status as a republic and that, although the Nationalist government's laws were perhaps not as atrocious as those of South Africa while under British rule, it was therefore alright to maintain discriminatory legislation based on race.

The newspapers across the country that ran articles related to the protest all held very similar information; they all carried the statement by Winn explaining the decision taken by the committee, Reid and Saunders' rejection of the exaggerated allegations as well as commentary of third parties from either side of the protest. Reid also made it very clear in these interviews that it was always the prerogative of the individual athletes on how they wished to proceed after hearing the judgement and criteria handed out by the organising committee. Reid's assertion of the responsibility of the individual athletes was repeated by marathon competitor and UCT AC member, Guy Kede, in the *Weekend Argus*. The headline was "UCT to run" but nowhere within the article was there an announcement by any authority that the athletes were being allowed to compete once more. Kede asserted that "...only a few of us knew anything about this before yesterday afternoon. Our club never put any pressure on us individually to disrupt or entice runners from other clubs to wear black armbands".⁴⁷

This lack of coercion was further backed up in a email interview with Dr. Charles Helm, which took place at the end of 2009. Helm was the only UCT AC committee representative to make the trip up to Durban for the race and although Helm thought the committee had been correct in their analysis of the situation, and justified in passing the motion and sending the letter that they did, they however, did not do a good job of communicating this with their competing athletes. Although, in their defence, they never envisaged that the letter would have the

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Argus Correspondent, "UCT to run," 1.

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remarkable effect that it did, and would jeopardize the participation of the UCT runners.⁴⁸ Helm stated that the competing athletes were not a homogenous political force and many – propagating the myth – saw themselves as apolitical, but there was also a “...vociferous, minority, relatively right-wing element present, who did not agree with the sentiments of the letter once they heard about it”⁴⁹.

The news we were greeted with in Durban, of being banned from participating (and having this form the headline news in the regional press) was devastating, and allowed the more conservative of our team to get righteously indignant. I was placed in a very delicate position as the only member of the committee who was on the team. Explaining that one couldn't be apolitical because the race had just become political through its association with the RSA20 celebrations had minimal effect on those who had put in all the training and wanted badly to run.⁵⁰

Also facing mounting pressure, both Biggs and Fordyce were reported by *The Natal Witness* to be reconsidering their positions but at that point, were both still going to wear their armbands and wanted to compete although “...the organisers are making things as difficult as possible”.⁵¹

It was only on the 22nd June that a letter appeared in *The Argus* from the UCT AC media officer wishing to clarify certain points. In it, firstly, the author introduces the reader to the accusation that the UCT athletes were politicising the race by advocating the wearing of armbands in protest of the linking of the marathon to the Festival. This completely misrepresented their calls for an apolitical race that would allow for everyone to participate in the race without compromising their own principles.⁵² The Festival had political connotations and connections that would possibly place different groups of runners in an awkward position. The letter goes to explain how a letter was sent to the Comrades organising committee was misconstrued and represented so in the media. The letter stated the UCT AC's recommendation to its athletes to support the call to wear black armbands and to recommend this to other competing athletes. According to the media officer, it was these peaceful intentions which were misinterpreted by the Comrades committee as threats of 'disruption and incitement'. The media

⁴⁸ Dr. Charles Helm, interview.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Jenkins, “Comrades ban on UCT athletes,” 1.

⁵² Media officer, “UCT explains the use of black armbands,” 14.

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officer commends the Comrades committee's attempt to ensure the race remain safe and non-problematic for its runners and indicates that the team did not partake in disassociating themselves from their club as was suggested in the media but rather withdrew the offending statement from their letter, which had encouraged other marathon competitors to wear the black armband in protest. The letter ends illustrating the irony in that disruptions during the race "...were limited to the behaviour of right-wing groups (through the physical assault and abusive language used against runners wearing armbands).⁵³

Yet, while the published articles may provide a limited view it is in the letters published after the running of the race that one is provided with further insight into the period. The letters were written by members of the public and sent into the different newspaper publications. Only four articles appear after the race, two of them appearing within days, yet letters continue to appear in the national newspapers until early July 1981, demonstrating how this had become an issue which had become a major concern in public consciousness. There are three groups of people who are writing these letters: firstly, there are those who condemned those runners who wore armbands, offering overwhelming support and patriotism for South Africa and happily linking the Republic to the NP. In the middle and similar in the distaste shown towards the runners, are a group that support the Republic and consider it separate to that of the NP and its apartheid policies. Lastly, there are letters of support for the runners who participated and which criticise those denouncing the runners and the lack of camaraderie demonstrated on race day. These letters are not self censored and are from various national newspapers. They come from a range of readers and can be seen to represent the deeper issues prevalent in society during the decade. In an email interview, Stephen Granger – who was part of the UCT AC committee – answered when asked what the response of the public was to the black armband protest, indicated that it was varied, "...as among white South Africans at large, there was anger (and possibly guilt); among UCT students (of all races) there was strong support; of course, black South Africans were right behind us."⁵⁴

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Stephen Granger, interview.

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The first of the letters to appear in the print media was published on 27th May in *The Natal Witness* and was a response to the aforementioned article, “Comrade protest slated”, and was printed in the same publication on 15th May. The author, named only as ‘Cynical’, specifically states that they are writing this letter in response to comments made by former Comrades champion, Alan Robb, in the earlier article. The author of the letter criticises Robb for his “facile” response to the joining of the marathon and the Republic Day festivities as well as his attitude towards those runners who were competing ‘under-protest’ and who had given the significance of the joining of these two events some serious consideration.⁵⁵ ‘Cynical’ agreed with Mike Cowling’s position that the celebration of the Republic Day Festival was merely the celebration of twenty years of NP rule which the author felt was not supported by ‘Natalians’, who would not finance or condone such a partnership.

Nevertheless, the following day, *The Citizen* published a letter that portrayed a completely different view point from the one above. As I have mentioned previously, alongside the build up to the Festival and its linked festivities there had also been mounting tensions and protests against such celebrations of Nationalist rule. This is acknowledged in the letter in that the authors are disgusted in the behaviour of all the anti-Festival campaigners and present the numerous ways in which demonstrators had campaigned against such a celebration

... students burn the South African flag, we have seen churches, university institutions and individuals call for boycotts, we have seen liberal newspapers shrug off what is happening as if hatred and rejection of the Republic can be condoned, can be excused, and be accepted, because the Republic was born in controversy – and because controversy still surrounds it.⁵⁶

The “Witness viewpoint” was a section in *The Natal Witness* and appears to have been a segment in the newspaper where the editors were able to print their own opinions on contemporary issues. The piece which appeared on the 3rd June and headlined “Comrades Lesson” starts off applauding the Comrades Committee for their superb organising and efficiency in supplying refreshments after the barring of mobile seconds from the race.⁵⁷ The article also praises the committee for having “...acted wisely in the run-up to the race by not

⁵⁵ Cynical, “Festival has muscled into events dear to Natal,” 7.

⁵⁶ “Black armbands,” 6.

⁵⁷ “Witness Viewpoint: Comrades Lesson,” 12.

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interfering with or banning runners who were uneasy about the races links with the Republic Festival and elected to register their protest”.⁵⁸ This would demonstrate that although it was probably announced too late for the print media to carry the story, that the committee had withdrawn its previous banning of the UCT athletes that had travelled up from Cape Town and removed its requisite of written proof of disassociation from the club’s action and accepted the removal of the offending clause. The authors continue, stating that they hoped that committee would be cautious in future before allowing the Comrades to be linked to, what may be considered by many, a political cause as the race (like stated previously by Cowling) was traditionally seen to uphold traditional values of sportsmanship and camaraderie. This was something the authors felt was missing in the 1981 event due to those incidents experienced by armband wielding athletes. They went on to argue, in an attempt to avoid these occurring in the future, that the marathon should not be associated with politics and that it was, as a sporting event, celebrated enough to stand on its own.⁵⁹

The sentiments expressed by these editors were shared, and communicated, by P.A Stent who sent in a letter to the *Rand Daily Mail*. The letter was aptly entitled “Comrades bigger than the Festival” and Stent – who also competed in the Comrades that year – described the various controversial aspects of the race which developed from the decision of the organisers to connect the race to the Republic Festival, and what was for the author, the saddest feature of the marathon. This, for Stent, was not even the disgraceful behaviour of certain spectators along the race route (who hurled abuse, both verbal and physical, at competing runners) but rather that of fellow athletes.⁶⁰ The behaviour displayed by these runners, for him, was completely contrary to the spirit of the Comrades where runners are supposed to understand each others’ personal struggles and where each athlete’s political ideology is triumphed over by this camaraderie. Stent congratulates and thanks the Comrades committee on an outstanding job and again, like the editors, articulates how “...it is an event which is bigger than the Republic Festival in stature, and it will surely still be a big event when the Apartheid regime is a thing of the past”.⁶¹ Stent also raises the complicated point of how the protestors were accused of bringing politics into

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Stent, “Comrades bigger than the Festival,” 10.

⁶¹ Ibid.

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sports through their armband but rightly states that this accusation should have been levelled at Winn and the committee as it was their decision to incorporate the race into the Republic Day festivities. Despite this, however, in honour of the men who had run before them and to those running in the future, he encouraged the readership to "...uphold the spirit of comradeship which makes this race the great race that it is" and congratulates Fordyce and Biggs, naming them "true Comrades".⁶² Both these letters illustrate disappointment in that the apparent loss of ideals during this particular Comrades Marathon: camaraderie, sportsmanship and understanding due to the inclusion of politics in the race. So although these two letters may appear to be supporting the black armband protest, they were actually only further propagating the myth of the separation of politics and sport.

In great contrast to Stent's letter is "We owe a debt to our country" written by E. N. Eva from Johannesburg. It was published by *The Citizen* and appeared in the 5th June edition. The author's criticism of the events of the 1981 marathon was not restricted to the protest runners, but included anti-Republic Festival protestors in general. The letter starts off by distinguishing between being the NP, its policies and the Republic of South Africa.⁶³ Eva does not further elaborate on how they are able to make this distinction in that the Republic was founded on the policies of the NP government. They then address the letter to those that they feel "...insult the country and burn the flag, renounce your citizenship... I am sure there are many Marxist countries... (sic) would be only too glad to give you a new home".⁶⁴ As the Republic Festival could not be separated from the NP government and their policies, the author mistakenly identifies those who protested against the celebration of the South African Republic as being Marxist without elaborating, again, on how they have reached such conclusions. The letter then moves on to take in hand those athletes who wore armbands and competed in the Comrades Marathon. Eva again represents these runners as university student without further elaboration; after stating the condemnation of the athletes, they proceed to ponder how people are so willing to accept the privileges that come with living in South Africa, such as subsidised university education, and yet they give nothing in return.⁶⁵ Eva goes as far as to recommend that universities hold a referendum to identify those students who are ashamed of South Africa. They

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Eva, "We owe a debt to our country," 12.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

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again distinguish between South Africa as a country and those government policies governing the State which is eerily similar to those people who would like to separate politics from sport not being unable to understand the one influence upon the other.⁶⁶ The author then suggests that this information be used in relation to future funding of universities as Eva asks the question why taxpayers should subsidise those students who feel they do not owe their country anything. This almost seems to be a confusion of issues: the protestors' issues with the celebration of Republic Day were due to its close links with the NP government and therefore the policies which could not be separated. How could the South African Republic be separated from these policies when it was these same policies that governed, isolated and controlled the lives of millions of people?

The articles post-Comrades Marathon of that year focus on Fordyce and Biggs' running with the black armband. Both make light of their involvement and highlight it as their contribution to the protests, since both did not want to have wasted many months of intense training. The articles also provide the audience with a description of how the race spectators reacted to the runners and how, in turn, the runners reacted to such treatment. Quite noticeably though is that the newspapers carrying these particular articles are all from publications outside of Natal: the *Rand Daily Mail*, *The Citizen* and *The Star* to name a few. The first article appeared on the 2nd June in the *Rand Daily Mail* and titled "Jeers turned to cheers for Fordyce". The focus was on the way Fordyce was treated leading up to and during the race and the change in this treatment after he had won the race in which he set a new 'up' record. The article describes how Fordyce – on his way to the start of the race – was "...accosted by a friend and fellow runner, who threw water at him and threatened to hit him. Race organiser, Winn had to step between the two athletes. A tomato was thrown at him, and during the race he had to endure hostile stares and comments such as 'drop dead'."⁶⁷ As the article points out by the end of the race, "Comrades fans seemed content to admire and honour the runner while disagreeing with his point of view..." to which the author of the article indicates that Fordyce was only standing by his principles and not everyone within the country feels that there reason to celebrate the Republic. Fordyce, in reference to an incident that appeared in an earlier article:

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Adams, "Jeers Turned To Cheers for Fordyce," 1.

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Three weeks ago, Geoff Bacon and Hoseah Tjale couldn't run in West Germany. They were barred, not because the rest of the world puts politics into sport, but because we do. People call this a Republic Festival but I don't see anything to celebrate – not in the sporting sphere.⁶⁸

The Comrades organising committee made a cloaked reference to “outside pressures” and described the protest as simply adding to the already hefty workload in organising the race.⁶⁹

The Star featured an article the day after the marathon whose headline read: “Protest runners ‘sickened’ by insults and abuse”. Fordyce – as was mentioned in the preceding article – was not the only “...protesting athlete to suffer abuse from spectators and fellow athletes, many other runners, who chose to wear the black armbands to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the links being made between the Comrades Marathon and the Republic Festival, found themselves victims of verbal abuse as well as having bottles and water thrown at them.”⁷⁰ Fordyce asserted that: “I ran because I believe the Comrades is a greater event than the other issues which were imposed on it.”⁷¹ As the only article to provide accounts of specific incidents of abuse against protest runners, *The Star*, reported that three Indian college students, who competed in the race wearing armbands, were stopped during the race and told by a race official that they had been disqualified.⁷² A witness to the incident reported that the situation was exacerbated by a passing white runner who threw a water bottle at the three protest runners, striking one runner on the back. The same observer also went on to state that protest runners of all races had to endure verbal abuse along the route.⁷³ Biggs – who was more forthcoming in this article than those that appeared at later dates – stated that he had worn an armband to represent his individual protest and that it was “unpleasant” to be the victim of such abuse whilst running over 80 kilometres and felt a noticeable lack in support from spectators along the route.⁷⁴ According to Granger, those UCT runners who took part in the race confirmed the mixture of support they received along the race route from spectators: “Blerrie komuniste’ from some and

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Sapa, “Protest Runners 'sickened' by insults, abuse.”

⁷¹ Ibid., 11.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

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‘Yay UCT, Viva’ from others’.⁷⁵ Helm recalled that those team members who did wear armbands were subjected to a fair amount of derision during the race, more so, by his estimate, than support.⁷⁶ The article tail piece illustrated that, in response to the black armband, some runners had pinned the colours of the Republic to their vests whilst others ran carrying the South African flag.⁷⁷ With the exception of this article and the letter from the media officer of the UCT AC, there was no media coverage of the response of those runners celebrating the link between the Festival and the marathon or simply to be seen to counter those wearing black armbands.

This abuse leads one to question the treatment of non-white runners on the race route? Another article – unrelated to Comrades – but featured during the same month as this controversial Comrades in 1981, only reinforces this curiosity. Appearing in *The Natal Mercury* the report concerned a sports club, Collegians, and how two of their members had put forward a motion to make the club ‘white only’.⁷⁸ The president of the club, Mr. David Cobalt, stated that although the club had no black members, Collegians was an open club and black applicants were subject to committee approval and members ballots.⁷⁹ This article was followed up shortly after the Comrades had been run and the motion was vehemently rejected.⁸⁰ Granger, when asked how he thought the Comrades Marathon had been portrayed during the 1980s, he responded that before 1981, it had generally been seen in a positive light, promoting the best sporting and social values and also as an opportunity for non-racial competition.⁸¹ “Black runners were strongly supported, as they were seen as the underdogs, less likely to succeed. So while there was an element of paternalism, the Comrades promoted “all shapes and sizes and colours” and certainly benefited integration, tolerance and cross-cultural friendships, if not true-non-racism. But there were contradictions in that after the race, white and black runners could not enjoy the same amenities and facilities”⁸².

⁷⁵ Stephen Granger, interview.

⁷⁶ Dr. Charles Helm, interview.

⁷⁷ Sapa, “Protest Runners 'sickened' by insults, abuse,” 11.

⁷⁸ Pietermaritzburg Bureau, “Club to discuss barring blacks,” *The Natal Mercury*.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Pietermaritzburg Bureau, “Club 'whites-only' motion gets thrown out.”

⁸¹ Stephen Granger, interview.

⁸² Ibid.

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The Citizen published an article on the 3rd June titled “Minister shuns Comrades ceremony because of politics”. The minister referred to was the Minister of National Education, Dr Gerrit Viljoen, who was also president of the Broederbond during this time. Viljoen declined to attend the prize-giving ceremony of the Comrades Marathon as he claimed that politics had been drawn into the event and was less than satisfied with the amount of publicity that the black armband protest had been allowed to generate.⁸³ In Viljoen’s statement, he made known that he had made enquiries with the Comrades organising committee into what measures had been taken against the UCT athletes competing. Viljoen was obviously dissatisfied that no action had been taken against the protestors as he was disappointed that the Comrades had been allowed to be used in such a manner. The misuse had occurred in that the marathon had been used as a site for political demonstration which, according to Viljoen, was contrary “...to the overall consensus between Government and sportsmen that sport should be depoliticised”.⁸⁴

The final article published in a national paper for the 1981 Comrades Marathon appeared in the *Sunday Express*. “My Black Marathon” was written by Bruce Fordyce and is perhaps the most forthcoming that the athlete has been since his run under protest during that particular Comrades Marathon. The article refers to South Africa’s sporting isolation, the effect the sports boycott was having on South African athletes and the role the Comrades Marathon had in maintaining internal sporting competition between athletes.⁸⁵ Fordyce describes the Comrades Marathon as relatively unspoilt by politics until the decision made by the Comrades organising committee to include the race as a part of the Republic Day Festival which he claims was “a major political decision”.⁸⁶ He writes “to the ordinary runner – businessman, doctor, teacher or lawyer – the decision made no difference at all. But for some of us, notably students and some Black runners, the decision left us to face our principles and consciences”.⁸⁷ Fordyce describes the discomfort he felt on the Wits campus as the 1st June grew nearer and tensions rose between those students belonging to either Left or Right organisations, which resulted in confrontations and the presence of riot police on campus. This made Fordyce feel that there was no middle

⁸³ Kloppers, “Minister shuns Comrades ceremony because of politics,” 10.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Fordyce, “My Black Marathon,” 13.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

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ground and that a choice had to be made.⁸⁸ Like many other athletes, Fordyce did not want to waste the opportunity or the time, energy and effort he put into his training and. like the decision eventually made by the UCT AC committee, he compromised and decided to wear a black armband. It was not symbolic of ‘black power’, hatred of South Africa or hatred of the Comrades Marathon, but rather it was to represent Fordyce’s decision to distance himself from the organisers’ decision to affiliate with the Republic Day celebrations.⁸⁹

Fordyce’s description of his experience of the race is very different to that described in the earlier report “Protest runners ‘sickened’ by insults, abuse”. Possibly as the athlete who went on to win the race and spectators were forced to appreciate his race, Fordyce clearly had a very different interpretation of his experience compared to other athletes who wore the armband. He describes this as:

Happily most of the runners and spectators I saw on the day were intelligent enough to realize that and were content to let me know they either agreed or disagreed with me as I ran past. Those who supported me cheered and clapped and those who disagreed booed and shouted. Nobody tried to prevent me from running and I was given drinks at every table...⁹⁰

As can be seen, Fordyce experienced similar reactions from the spectators in that he was verbally abused and was physically accosted by a friend at the start line (which he fails to mention in this article). Although, as he mentions, no one attempted to prevent him from running – like the three Indian students – and remove him from the race, either through disqualification or physically remove him from the race. Thus, possibly like the students, the organising committee too did not want to face the prospect of removing the likely marathon winner from the race. So Fordyce may have faced reactions from spectators akin to that endured by other athletes, conversely, perhaps due to his winning potential, he was allowed to run without much disruption. This self written experience of the Comrades winner also appeared in the *NUX* alongside an interview done with Biggs.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

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Ironically, like Fordyce had done in media interviews, Biggs stated that the incident (running the race while wearing a black armband) had been greatly exaggerated by the news media and it did not warrant the press it received.⁹¹ Akin to Fordyce, this playing down of events weeks later in a different interview presents an altered perspective as opposed to that article which appeared the day after the race as depicted in “Protest runners ‘sickened’ by insults, abuse”. In the article, Biggs confirms – like other runners – that the reason he wore the armband, was to protest the linkage between the Comrades Marathon and the Republic Day Festival nevertheless when asked to comment further on South Africa’s sporting isolation, Biggs declined to comment beyond saying that the ‘Blacklist’ would “limit South African sportsmen’s potential”.⁹² As mentioned earlier, “My Black Marathon” appeared alongside this sedate article by Biggs and provides the reader with a stark contrast. Biggs appears to the audience to be avoiding the difficult questions or appearing to have an opinion that may attract commentary whereas Fordyce was very forthcoming in providing his opinion to the audience.

The historiography of the marathon is far more complicated than that illustrated in the cohesive, historical narratives which are endorsed by the CMA. There is no mention of the black armband protest or the association made between the Comrades Marathon and the Republic Day Festival whilst it was clearly an important issue within the public sphere as is displayed by the various newspaper articles and letters sent in from members of the public. This muting of the protest can be viewed as an attempt by the CMA to perpetuate the myth that sport and politics are disconnected in order to protect the image and camaraderie of the ‘ultimate’ ultra-marathon. Furthermore, as can be seen, it was not only the CMA that was attempting to continue the separation of sports and politics but marathon competitors as well as those people who articulated their opinions in letters to various news publications. However this detailed interrogation reveals the implicit political nature of sport despite the popular suggest of the separation of sports and politics in public discourse.

⁹¹ “Protest runners win Comrades,” 12.

⁹² Ibid.