



The Roads of Msawana: A Marathon Tale for 2005

You and I know this place to be 'Soweto', but according to the signboards dotted all along the course of the run, locals call it *Msawana*. The marathon I did there on Sunday November 6th was unlike any other I had done before.

It was the first organised run I've done on the African continent and enveloped in the sounds of an orchestra of South African languages: from SiPedi to isiXhosa, Sesotho to isiZulu, isiNdebele to Setswana & SiSwati...to my foreign ears, all seemingly punctuated by a multitude of periodic clicking sounds flying literally and figuratively above my head!

As at the start of all 'mass' runs, the atmosphere is electric as runners huddle together some few hundred metres away from the start-line. The elite runners line up first, separated by a ribbon from the eager, twitching mass of bodies, pumped and ready to spring into action. The elites will dart like lightning across the start-line, followed by uber fit amateurs, chased in turn by foolhardy show offs...

The rest of us take deep breaths, hit the start buttons on our timers and watches and shuffle our way over the line. Shoulder to shoulder, step by step, a magnificent flurry of well-attired (and soon to be very tired) feet: addidas side-stepping asics, chasing newbalance, jolted by nike, sometimes overtaken by no more than the pounding of dust-encrusted, concrete-hardened bare feet...

And so we began. Some in a state of euphoria: exultant and marvelling at the fact that they are here. *Really doing a marathon!* Others marvelling at a side of themselves they did not know existed until that moment: the sadist within. Because believe me, it can often seem like an act of madness, deep self-loathing, sadomasochism, or all three, when you cross the line at the start of a 42km run. FORTY -TWO KILOMETRES!!! WHY oh WHY would anyone want to RUN that kind of distance...on roads...under a hot glaring sun...and NOT on a flat course....WHY, I ask you, WHY?! WHY?! WHY?!

Sorry, I was reliving the moment.

Ahem, if you ask me, the 'fun' lies in the fact that it is a mental as well physical challenge. Your legs will only carry you the distance to the finish line if your mind tells them to...and er, yes, it IS fun to do the training and then live out this mind over matter theory on the day; they say the proof is in the eating of the pudding, innit. (Besides, I had told practically everyone I know, and even perfect strangers, that I would be doing this run, so there was no getting away from it!).

Back on the roads of Msawana...

Water stations every two/three kilometres saved us all from certain death by dehydration. Cheerful young men and women shouted words of encouragement as we slowed down to grab the small plastic bags of water they handed out in handfuls: "Water! Water! Take water, it's good for you!" "Keep going, you're nearly there!" (You know they're lying because you've only just run past the 2km sign...but you've only been running for ten minutes, so you smile and laugh good naturedly. By km 27, you're fighting the urge to glare at their non-aching legs which don't still have 15km to run. By km 40 you wish they would just put you out of your misery....).

Imagine my surprise when four or five kilometres into the run, the benevolent souls at the water station were shouting: "Whisky! Get your JB here! No need to push, there's plenty for all!" I was flabbergasted! How on earth were people going to manage this run if they were going to be knocking back shots of whisky every few kilometres?!!

Yes, you've guessed it: gullible madeleine struck again: a kindly woman chuckled indulgently at my incredulous *"Are they REALLY offering us Whisky?!!!"* and explained that I would hear all manner of enticements at each water station, used to encourage runners to take the water they were being offered!

We continued on our way. It was clear to me by km 10 that I would not run the time I had been aiming for: the course was mainly up and downhill, with very few flat stretches. We ran through and all around Soweto, including the road on which both Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu had once lived. The signboards us informed us that it's the only road in the whole world to have housed two Nobel Prize laureates. I admit though, that my main thought at that point was: why couldn't they have found a flat road to live on?! By km 20, each slope, no matter how slight the incline, felt like a mountain. At km 37, there WAS a mountain, (ok, ok, a very steep hill), which was the undoing of very many of us. And no, none of us were much convinced by the "You're looking good!" signs posted at the end of each uphill stretch. Can't nobody be lookin' good with sweat drippin' down your face, and your achy legs wobblin' like they're about to drop off. We were looking anything but 'good'.

Hills and valleys notwithstanding, there were many laughs along the way. I'm sure I missed all of the very good jokes people were making, but hey, everything is not communicated through language alone.

Will I run the Soweto marathon again? If they flatten the course yes...for now, I am back on the roads closer to home, plotting my next 42km exploit ...anyone for a jog?

PS If you sponsored me, a million thank-yous, I will be collecting when I get back to London for the festive period. If you're not going to be around, please let me know so we can arrange something else - I need to get the funds to SLWT before the year ends....If you didn't sponsor me...it's never too late ;)