



# Passion

Caroline Wöstmann

## LIVING HER PASSION

*Winner of the 2015 Comrades Marathon and two-time winner of the Two Oceans Marathon. Mother of two, wife, Chartered Accountant and a legend in the making. South Africa Deluxe chatted to KPMG Running Club's Caroline Wöstmann.*

While most ultramarathon champions and elite runners are natural athletes, competing from an early age, Caroline Wöstmann's interest in running only really started in 2008 on a spring morning with a large pile of too-small clothes at her feet. "I was 25 years old. A year earlier I had given birth to my first daughter and the year had flown by with the stresses of work, motherhood and plenty of convenient trips to the golden arches. Instead of losing my pregnancy weight, I had gained a few kilos putting me at a whopping 17kgs over my pre-pregnancy weight. I was depressed and desperately unhappy when I made the decision that has changed my life – I would start running."

For Wöstmann, hitting the road for that first jog was neither comfortable, nor pretty. "When my alarm went off that morning I literally dragged myself out of bed and into my sweats. I ran, walked and maybe even crawled the three kilometres around my block. It was tough, but for some reason the thought of having to go through the rest of my life overweight was tougher, and so week after week I persisted. Running is a truly amazing thing because to the unfit it can feel like torture but suddenly you cross over this barrier and it feels amazing."

It was during one of her routine jogs that the idea of running the Comrades Marathon became a goal. "It was New Year's Eve and I felt brave enough after a few glasses of champagne to announce to the world that my resolution was to run the Comrades. Two days later, I joined the serious runners for my first club run. I nearly died, but persisted and before I knew it, Comrades 2009 was upon me."

She enthusiastically remembers the thousands of runners, the dark and the lights, the playing of Shosholozza and Chariots of Fire, the cock crowing, the gun firing, and then the slow movement forward, the walk, crossing the start line, the jog and then finally after a few kilometres the field thinning out enough, to begin to run.

"I remember believing in myself, doubting myself and believing again. I remember the tears when I passed the disabled children from the Ethembeni School, tears again when I hobbled down Fields Hill, with my quads already cramping, feeling truly sorry for myself and finally the tears of joy when I crossed the finish line, realising I had just completed the Comrades Marathon. From that moment, I was hooked. I instantly set my sights on the next Comrades – and this time I was aiming for a Bill Rowan medal."

Unfortunately, Comrades 2011 was a far cry from the perfect race Wöstmann imagined. She missed the 2010 marathon because she was pregnant with her second daughter and she put a lot of pressure on herself to obtain that special bronze medal with the silver border. "At the start line, I was deeply concerned that I was being overly optimistic in my goal. I was even more concerned about my husband, Haiko, who had undertaken to support me on route with our three-year-old and 11-month-old daughters. I felt nauseous and was experiencing stomach cramps. I can remember thinking that it was going to be a tough day but I had to get to the finish as quickly as possible to help Haiko with the kids." After 20 kilometres the unimaginable happened, Wöstmann decided to quit. "The stomach cramps were too



severe to continue. I decided I would walk until Haiko and the kids could pick me up. When I reached Arthur's Seat, a friend gave me some medicine and I pushed on, praying that Haiko, who was in fact having breakfast with the girls, would show up shortly. I finally caught up with Haiko in Campersdown and he told me that I could still make the Bill Rowan if I really pushed myself. I crossed the finish line in eight hours and 33 minutes – a proud finish with a Bill Rowan in hand."

But for Wöstmann, the Bill Rowan was neither shiny, nor big enough. Her next medal needed to be silver. "I comfortably finished the 2012 Comrades in seven hours 16 minutes. But as I stared at the silver in my hand, I remember thinking, 'gold would be so much better.'"

Something changed in Wöstmann that day. Before she had never believed she could be a great runner. It was all about enjoyment, self-fulfilment and competing against herself, but suddenly she had this longing to be a top runner. "I could see the top 10 women's names on the same page as mine on the results list and I started to imagine how amazing it would be to get into that top 10, to have a Comrades gold medal. One second the idea seemed crazy and the next second it seemed crazy to not try."

But eight weeks before Comrades 2013, Wöstmann was heartbroken when she was diagnosed with a stress fracture, "I knew I had to train smarter and fix my weaknesses if I were to obtain my goal. I ate, breathed and slept Comrades." Race day 2014 was tough. "My body was screaming 'no!' My mind was screeching 'yes!' And I remembered telling myself 'you will!' When I finally crossed the finish line in sixth position, the commentator announced that I was not only a gold medallist, but also the first South African woman home. When I looked at my gold medal, I there and then decided I wanted the trophy to go with it."

And Wöstmann did win both the Comrades gold medal, and

the trophy the next year. In fact, she also broke a few records by becoming the fifth athlete in history to win both of South Africa's most famous ultramarathons, the Comrades and the Two Oceans, in the same year. Most impressively, by winning the Comrades Marathon in 06:12:22, she brought the title back home again, becoming the first South African winner since Rae Bischoff in 1998.

Wöstmann went into the 2016 Comrades Marathon as the favourite. Rightly so, having done the double in 2015, and having retained her Old Mutual Two Oceans Marathon title a few months earlier. Comrades however, is a totally different monster; it really comes down to what happens on the day. Looking so good for much of the race, Comrades had the final say. But not before Wöstmann courageously fought on, like the true champion she is.

"The first 10 kilometres flew by as I floated up the hills. I was enjoying the vibe, the crowds – and the journey. That is what makes Comrades so special. It is the ultimate human race. This vibe continued until around 60 kilometres into the race. As I started venturing down Fields Hill, my quads started to hurt and tighten. I calmed down by reminding myself that I was 60 kilometres into the race and some pain and discomfort was completely normal at this point. My quads tightened further and I realised that they had started to cramp. I panicked and instead of using logic and slowing down, my adrenaline at the thought of failing surged, and I followed it at an insanely fast pace down the most brutal and unforgiving hill of the race."

Millions of viewers watched the heart-breaking scene unfold. The commentators speculated that she was done. Her legs buckled and she fell to the ground during the last 10 kilometres – more than once, she was involved in a motorcycle accident, and when she was passed by Charné Bosman, who went on to win the race, many thought for sure that she would not even cross the finish line.

"I knew that I couldn't win anymore. The only thought in my mind was 'I won't quit, I won't give up, I will keep moving forward, I will finish'. I felt betrayed by my body, and yet, I have never felt more loved. When I crossed the finish line, I learnt that winning is not about coming first, but rather about challenging yourself to the limit, pushing the boundaries and walking away from the experience a better, stronger person. Failing to achieve my goal on race day, in a strange way, made me realise that I can do anything and that nothing is impossible."

So what is next for Wöstmann? "I will continue living my passion. Of course I will try for Comrades gold again next year. I would love to win it in the KPMG blue. I also recently discovered a thrill for triathlons. Life is so full of opportunity to dream, to experience, to live. Who knows what the future holds." ■



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