

## Conquering the Midmar Mile

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I guess I've always wanted to do it. The Midmar Mile is an institution in South Africa, just like Comrades and visiting the Voortrekker Monument.

In my case, it took a long time before I got around to it. Life happens, and I found myself over-committed on several fronts throughout my twenties, thirties and forties. Every year, around New Year, I would think about my schedule and my commitments, and decide that the time hadn't come yet. I even made an effort to talk my daughter and a few friends into joining me, to provide some form of motivation. Unfortunately, none of them shared my enthusiasm.

In October 2011, I had a sudden change of circumstances. The tensions of these circumstances made me think that I would have to carefully manage my exercise regime, both as a distraction and as a means of fortifying my psyche. The changes also suddenly made a lot of time available. When I realised during November that the change was likely to last for some time, I immediately started wondering if my time had finally come to tackle the Midmar Mile in 2012.

I suggested a joint project to two colleagues, who had both run Comrades and were fitness conscious. The response was immediate: They would do the Midmar Mile with me, if I would do Comrades with them.

I didn't think trading an hour of swimming with two months of preparation for 12 hours of running with seven months of preparation was a fair trade. My objections made no impression. I had some serious thinking to do. After literally several minutes, I called their bluff. I entered for Comrades and sent them the receipt.

One of my colleagues actually rose to the challenge. Being philosophical, I guess a 50% return is better than nothing at all.

It was the middle of November, and I suddenly faced a dual challenge. I had to learn to swim within about 10 weeks and run within about seven months. My colleague Laurens Cloete and I immediately started swimming three mornings a week, and I started running a few evenings a week.

The running was tough, but the swimming was impossible. All the training programmes on the Internet start with 400 m for warmup, followed by impressive distances in the form of intervals and various other niceties. I could not even manage the warmup. In fact, even with generous doses of rest in between, I could not complete 400 m of swimming in a single session.

A coach recommended a variety of plastic toys: short fins, a pull buoy and a kick board. The plastic toys created an illusion of progress, and soon I was swimming the prescribed 400 m per session with liberal use of rest pauses and plastic toys. Laurens was consistently doing better than I was; he was much less reliant on the pauses and the toys. I attributed this fact to his being much taller than I was. He could practically reach from one end of the pool to the other. Almost.

The final realisation that I was barking up the wrong tree came when I bought myself a heart monitor just after mid-December. After just 100 m of swimming, my heart rate was over 160, despite the fact that my fitness was improving and my resting pulse continued to decrease. It was suddenly painfully obvious that my technique was so flawed that a drastic un-learning process was required.

Laurens shared my concern, and some intense Internet research unearthed a viable option. A swimming coach in Centurion, not far from here, offered near-miraculous improvement using techniques from Total

Immersion. TI is an American organisation, founded and run by Terry Laughlin. Terry is a distance swimmer, but lacks the classic inverted triangular physique shared by all Olympic swimmers and Johnny Bravo. Here was some hope: a normal-looking guy who claims to be able to swim long distances. We set up a lesson with Pam as soon as we could.

Another source of inspiration came from an unexpected source. I bumped into a colleague at the CSIR who mentioned that he was a regular Midmar swimmer, and that he had tackled the challenge in his early fifties. Dirk Conradie had written a piece titled “My eerste Myl” (My first Mile), in which he set out to describe his own journey towards swimming this event. Perhaps the most inspiring part of the story was probably not the part that he intended as inspiration. It was the revelation that he had initially struggled to complete two lengths of a 20 m pool. Here was a guy who clearly lacked talent to the same extent I did, and yet managed to complete more than one Midmar Mile. There really was hope!

The much-anticipated swimming lesson happened on 8 January 2012. In a session that spanned most of the day, Pam convinced Laurens and me that our style was hopelessly inefficient. At least there was hope that a substantial improvement could result. I threw myself headlong into the process. However, the immediate effect was that I was no longer able to swim. My ingrained pseudo-doggie-freestyle had been terminally wounded, and I was left without a style I could call my own.

A few radical insights resulted from this session. Firstly, it was possible to float flat in the water, without having to kick furiously to keep one’s legs afloat. In fact, kicking is strictly optional. Secondly, it was possible to glide between strokes, gaining considerable distance from every stroke. Thirdly, plastic toys are counterproductive. They produce a stance in the water that bears no relation to one’s actual swimming style.

For the next two weeks, I religiously practiced the drills Terry prescribed on his video. These drills involved standing in shallow water and doing movements that must surely make bystanders doubt one’s sanity. For hours. It took a full two weeks before I could actually swim again.

Laurens had taken a less drastic approach. He started swimming almost immediately, while doing some of the drills on the side. Soon he was actually traversing the pool with some facility. Less than four weeks after our lesson, he swam his first mile in four instalments.

The good news is that, when I finally managed to start swimming using the New! Improved! style, I was able to swim several lengths of the Hillcrest 50 m pool without stopping. I was definitely reaping the rewards!

By now, we had three weeks before Midmar. Laurens’s situation looked more hopeful than mine. He was swimming with some facility. Early in February, he completed his first mile in four instalments. The next day, he also completed an uninterrupted mile.

I was definitely not that strong, but at least I was now able to complete more than half an hour’s concentrated training, and swim hundreds of metres.

I had a delightful session in a pool in Uganda in this period. I happened to be stuck in a hotel right on Lake Victoria, and I used their pristine pool to do some distance. I also went for a swim in the lake. Finally, I was able to swim relatively effortlessly, and was actually enjoying it.

A recommendation from Dirk’s article was that one had to tackle an open water swim to get exposed to the difficult conditions, before tackling the Midmar Mile itself. The most convenient event on the calendar appeared to be the Roode 1000. Although the 1000 m swim appeared too daunting, they also advertised a 500 m “fun” swim. At this stage, the irony of the term was hard to miss.

To me, a key ingredient to my willingness to tackle this event was my secret back door. Long ago, while I was involved in astronaut selection, I had learned about treading water for extended periods. I had learned to turn on my back and breathe deeply. This ability would now stand me in good stead. I was uncertain whether I would be able to finish, but I knew that I would not drown. I would simply turn on my back and breathe deeply until I could continue. Or be picked up.

We duly appeared at the Roode 1000 fun swim, exactly two weeks before Midmar. I personally felt cheated, as the actual distance was well over 600 m. This wasn't what I had let myself in for! Nevertheless, we both managed to complete the event and had our first exposure to the mass of churning bodies that makes up open-water swimming. It wasn't a walk in the park, but we both completed the swim in under half an hour.

It was painfully slow, but never mind: There was hope, and we had another two weeks to go.

During this period, Laurens mail-ordered himself another plastic toy. This time, it was a sensible one. The tiny metronome fitted into one's swimming cap and emitted adjustable beeps. Using this metronome, one could adjust one's style to the optimal cadence and keep it there. The overwhelming desire to flail frantically could now be controlled. I could see the sudden improvement. Within days, Laurens was swimming in an elegant and sustainable manner.

My own style was hardly elegant or sustainable. However, I was able to swim 1000 m in the pool in the last week, and would have managed a mile if I'd had another two days before the mandatory taper started. I decided to forego the attempt to swim a mile in the interests of being well-rested.

We drove down to Pietermaritzburg on Saturday afternoon. Our swim would take place on Sunday morning. I didn't have a very restful night, but felt reasonable in the morning. Things were a little rushed, as we had to drive to the dam and enter for the event. In the queue for entries, I had an amazing discussion with a woman who was recovering from cancer, and was aiming to do the Mile in 2013. She was there to help a protégé enter. I found her story inspirational. I told her of my attempts to enter the Mile and Comrades in my late forties, after a history of spinal injuries. I was gratified that she found my story inspirational too. By the end of our chat, she seemed to have dispelled all doubt about her intentions to do the 2013 Mile.

We obtained our white novice caps, had ourselves marked and lined up for the start. A mile looks impossibly far to swim in a straight line. I would be lying if I didn't admit to some anxiety while staring at the far bank, but I knew I could always flip onto my back and rest if I had to.

A more substantial concern was the cutoff time. If I overdid the resting bit, I would not arrive at the halfway mark before the cutoff. There was some contradictory information on the Web site; both 30 and 32 minutes were mentioned as cutoff times at the halfway mark. The idea, then, was to minimise rest in the first half. If I needed to, I could always rest in the second half. There did not appear to be any cutoff after half way.

When I started, I felt rather weak. I certainly wasn't swimming as strongly as I'd been swimming in the pool earlier that week. Although I was making steady progress, I knew that I was relatively slow. Things weren't being made any more pleasant by regular collisions with other swimmers, and especially the waves generated by a 17-year old showoff in the lifeboat. I swallowed water several times, as the huge swell generated by the lifeboat made my life a misery. I wondered whether he was being paid for the number of swimmers rescued. I couldn't think of another reason why he would deliberately attempt to drown them!

As I approached the half way mark, I wondered whether I was going to make the cutoff. I couldn't read my stopwatch. The water was too turbid to read it underwater, and my midlife vision wasn't up to the

task of focusing close enough to read it above water through wet goggle lenses. As the buoys approached slowly but surely, I thought about being cut off. Would I resist? Would I welcome it? I was actually indifferent. If I was allowed to continue, I would be happy that I could actually finish this thing. But if I was cut off, at least I wouldn't have to endure another half hour of this ordeal.

In the event, I missed the cutoff by just under a minute. I was unceremoniously dumped into the Boat of Disgrace. It was very quiet in that boat. A few dozen weary-looking individuals stared straight ahead and said very little. Most had bloody cuts on their stomachs, where they had been dragged across the edge of the boat. The boat stayed on the water for a long time, to pick up the last stragglers, before moving on to the banks near the finish. There, we were subjected to a cashiering-like ceremony in which our electronic tags were removed and swiped on a reader labelled "Failed Miserably" or some such. I may be mistaken about the exact wording.

Strangely enough, I made it to the finish in time to welcome Laurens, who had arrived there on his own steam (*sic*). I was very disappointed, but also very relieved that at least there had been no mishap with either of us. Laurens felt disappointed by his own performance, as the rough conditions had caused him to revert to breast stroke too often. He hadn't trained for this stroke.

The drive home was a long one, and much of the conversation centred around Comrades and next year's Midmar. Comrades remains a story for another day, but let's fast-forward some months, to November 2012.

I regarded Midmar as unfinished business. I was keen to redeem myself, but wasn't keen to spend as much time on it as I had the previous year. It was therefore with some trepidation that I entered yet another hotel pool while stuck in Harare on a work assignment. I was delighted to discover that the incessant drills had worked, and had banished the style of my youth permanently. I was able to swim sustainably, despite the break of more than half a year.

We started training again in December, three days a week. This time, I was actually able to swim 400 m on my first try. No plastic toys were involved either, except that I borrowed Laurens's metronome twice. It really helped me to slow things down.

I had some niggles with my left shoulder, in the form of a repetitive-strain injury. My shoulder was complaining about over-use. However, with some insightful guidance from my physiotherapist Toy and more interminable exercises, I was able to manage that injury and keep going.

By mid-January, I was able to swim 800 m in the pool. When the Roode 1000 came around, I was able to shun the "fun" swim, and complete the main event in well under half an hour. I think I'd started too fast, as I had to lie on my back and rest several times. Perhaps it was difficult to judge one's cadence in the absence of visual cues.

Laurens had a sudden crisis to deal with, and wasn't able to participate. However, had completed a two-mile swim shortly after the previous year's Midmar, and had swum fairly regularly throughout the year. He was consistently doing a mile in the pool without apparent effort, and there was little doubt that he could complete Midmar.

The day after Roode 1000, the Monday, I swam 1600 m in the pool. The Wednesday, I swam 1000 m in very leisurely fashion. On Friday, I tested my theory that I could swim for hours, by swimming for an hour and emerging from the pool with a heart rate of less than 130. In this hour, I covered 2125 m. I had finally exceeded the dreaded Mile, comfortably.

The following week would be one of consolidation. On Monday, I did some short distances and practiced my emergencies: recovering from water in my goggles, breathing irregularly if required, swimming rudimentary backstroke and a few other non-routine actions. On Wednesday, I was going to swim another

mile. However, I had mild sniffles. I decided to rest, hoping to get the sniffles under control. The sniffles didn't let up until Saturday, by which time it was too late to train.

For better or for worse, my preparation was over!

We managed to get to Pietermaritzburg fairly early on Saturday, having left well before lunch. We spent a bit of time with my sister Ingrid and my mother in Mooi River. They had driven to friends' farm, where we were able to celebrate my sister's birthday together. We arrived in 'Maritzburg early, had a decent restaurant meal, got ourselves stores for breakfast and settled in for an early night. Both of us awoke naturally, and felt refreshed. After a decent breakfast, we headed to the dam.

Pre-entries are definitely recommended; the process was much simpler than the previous year. Laurens was pre-seeded in the Green bunch because of his previous successful finish. I was again in the Novice bunch, wearing a white cap.

Now is a good time to talk about the events at Midmar. There are eight; four on Saturday and four on Sunday. Saturday's events include company relays, families, handicapped and other special events. Sunday's four events are for mainstream men and women, and "other" men and women. The main events are for ages 14 to 30. The "other" events are for those under 13 and over 31. The latter category provides a strong incentive for someone of a "certain" age to finish. There is something very motivating about competing directly against a nine-year old. One finds oneself filled with a steely resolve...

White caps leave last. We stood watching the orange, gold, blue, green and yellow waves leave at three minute intervals. Finally, we were off.



I worked hard to keep my rate down, remembering my lesson from the Roode 1000. I found the water smoother than last year. Maybe the rescue boat was out of action. Either way, I had little in the way of collisions and little in the way of water ingestion. I was able to maintain my freestyle at a constant rate without reaching exhaustion, and never had to turn onto my back to rest. I only stopped about half a dozen times to check my bearings. Ironically, the part where it was hardest to maintain direction was when a life saver cruised next to me to tell

me that I was swimming skew. As a result, I could not see my landmarks on the shore. I was unable to explain to him that I would do better if he could just leave me alone!

There were some major waves around the 1000 m mark, and again around 1500 m. However, by this time I was certain that the challenge was in the bag, and I just kept going. I actually sped up towards the end, once I realised that there was no further need to preserve myself. I really did consume my reserves, and my legs were actually quite wobbly when I emerged from the water. Finding the right lane for my age group required extreme concentration. I had finished in just under 50 minutes. Slow, to be sure, but I was elated that I had finally managed to learn to swim.



*Laurens and Chris testing their medals shortly after the finish.*

Apart from Laurens, who had finished about five minutes faster than I had, my sister and her hosts were also there, probably to delight in my misery. This, the 40th Midmar Mile, had apparently broken its own world record for the most entrants in an open-water swim, with over 15 000 entrants. At least I was a finisher this time! The best part of it was not having had to ride in the Boat of Disgrace.



Will I do it again? I'm not sure. Perhaps in future I'll just stick to events closer to home. However, tackling the Midmar Mile was a major milestone (*sic*) for me. I'd had to learn to swim properly as an adult, and I can probably swim for several hours on end if I had to. Maybe I'll do it again when I can do a decent time. Like something starting with a 3.

It's been hard work. It's required a bit of tenacity. I've had to laboriously un-learn things I'd learned as a child. And, truth be told, it was a lot less effort than Comrades, and a lot more fun than visiting the Voortrekker Monument!

*Start photo courtesy of the aQuelle Web site.*