Few people change lives, even fewer manage to change countries and a handful change the world. Madiba, as Nelson Mandela is fondly referred to in South Africa, is one of those world icons.

At the age of 95, the father of the nation was spending his 78th day in the Medihelp hospital in Pretoria as over 4000 runners lined up in the Mandela Day Marathon to remember, commemorate and celebrate his 67 years’ service to South Africa. The marathon links two key landmarks in his fight to free South Africa from the bondage of apartheid.

The start is in a suburb of the Edendale township, called Imbali, outside the Manayi Hall, where Mandela made a surprise appearance to give his last speech as a free man at the All In Africa conference on 26 March 1961. The man the security forces referred to as the ‘Black Pimpernel’ was then whisked out of the area.

He eluded state security until 5 August 1962, when he was stopped on the Tweedie Road just past the massive Midmar Dam. His arrest signalled the start of an incarceration that would last 27 years, during which appeals for his release came from all over the world.

The Marathon journey between these two points begins at an elevation of just less than 700m but climbs over 470 metres in 10km, epitomizing the great man’s life. The first 7km climb is affectionately known as ‘Struggle Hill’ followed, after a one kilometre reprieve, by a short steeper ascent called “Challenge Climb”.

On race day Cape-based Sityhilo Diko led the 2100 marathoners, up the mighty incline to pass through the first hot spot at 14km in 51:33, for which he collected a US$1000 bonus. The course tops out at 18km with the ‘World’s View’ aerial mast close by.

If Struggle Hill identifies with Mandela’s period as a prisoner, Challenge Climb is the period of change in South Africa that saw him become the country’s first black President and a symbol of all that is good and moral in humanity. By the end of his presidential term Madiba had taken his country in many ways to the top of the World.

Although runners leave the cheek by jowl homes of Edendale after the first eight kilometres, the local community line the route, encouraging runners over the gruelling ascent. The call of ‘Amandla’ (power to the people) was first coined in Manayi Hall in 1961, and on race day it is used to urge and inspire runners on their continual uphill battle over mind and body.
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On the initial descent from World’s View, Zimbabwean Kudakwashe Kanduna took over the lead to hurtle through half way in 1:16:54 only a few seconds ahead of the lead group of 10, but sufficient to win the US$1500 hotspot prize.

Although the course becomes easier after the two major climbs, there are considerable scenic undulations in the remaining 34km, run within the shadow of the Drakensburg Mountains.

The steep, quad-hamme ring, drop through the picturesque ‘English’ village of Hilton leads runners through the Midlands to the Howick Stadium, where two monoliths commemorate another South African struggle: the Anglo-Boer War at the turn of the 20th century.

Earlier, 2000 runners competed over the 10km version of the Mandela race. The slowest of these was caught by Henry Kipsang, who led the field through the stadium and under the Midmar Dam wall before Ethiopian Getachew Bekele, and David Rasefeko, took control of the race.

In almost ideal running conditions Bekele led the field on to the point where the ‘Black Pimpernel’ was eventually pulled over and arrested by the Pietermaritzburg police. The Ethiopian surged up the final 300m past the sculpture of Madiba to the finish line in 2:29:48, missing Brighten Chipere’s inaugural course record set last year by over a minute.

The capture site has become a major landmark of South African history. Fifty sculpted steel columns, between six to nine metres high individually appear random, but viewed together create an imposing image of Mandela’s face. Marco Gianfanelli’s sculpture was unveiled 50 years after the capture on Sunday 5 August 1962, and encapsulates the principle that solidarity brings greater power than the sum of individuals.

Every marathon has a character of its own; every city and every course is special; but few combine such rewards with the history of one unique leader who delivered the tolerance, reconciliation, democracy and peace sought in so many corners of the globe.

The Mandela Marathon celebrates the ‘Triumph of the Human Spirit’, and the discipline that saw Madiba spend 27 years in prison without losing focus on what he wanted to accomplish in the end.

Each finisher at the Capture Site Museum receives a medal with the image of Mandela, with fist aloft in an ‘amadla’ pose. The best qualities of humanity are embodied on the medal, which will undoubtedly adorn desks and walls around the world as a marker of one of those races that everyone aspires to do.

Catherine Skosana dominated the ladies race for most of the way. The South African looked to have it in the bag, until Zimbabwean sisters Chiyedza and Lizih Chokore, who had been content to languish over three minutes off the pace at half way, made their move with 4km to go. Chiyedza proved to be the stronger breaking the tape in a new course record, with Lizih trailing by 250m.

The drama continued to the very end for Patience Khumalo who collapsed metres before the finish, but in the spirit of the race, crawled over the line in 3:12:57 for seventh position.

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