

THE ROCKY ROAD RUNNERS CLUB

**An All-Embracing
Home For All Runners**

By Steven Katzew

With permission from the writer, this extract is from an article penned by Advocate Katzew for the Jewish Affairs

I've always maintained that humankind is at its best when in partnerships that cross the lines of difference in race, religion and nationality.

The Jewish experience in South Africa gives credence to this hypothesis. The giddy heights reached by disparate community members in virtually every arena, be it civic, commercial, scientific, cultural, academic, sporting, religious or political, have been scaled by joint endeavours across every conceivable division in South African society.

An outstanding example of this amalgam is the Rocky Road Runners Club ('Rockies'), whose initial core Jewish membership elevated and evolved the club into a glittering jewel in the crown of the South African Jewish community – and the South African community at large.

Through its atypical policy of inclusivity, Rockies successfully set out to integrate its Jewish and non-Jewish members as a club completely open to any person regardless of colour, ranging from some of the finest long and ultra-distance runners in the country, to physically impaired runners.

From as far back as the early part of the last century, both marathon and ultra-marathon running have been integral to the South African road running scene. The races are gruelling and tough. Over the years, competitors have joined forces in various running clubs to ease the loneliness of training and competing and to derive encouragement, inspiration, and support from united effort and endeavour.

Rockies had a rather inauspicious inauguration as a club in 1976, when some of its founding members: Denis Tabakin, Jeff Fisher, Manfred Hayman, Robin Treger, Lennie (Little Lenny) Myers, Lennie (Big Lennie) Myers, the Finestone brothers Dave and Mike, Dave Ibry, Mike Nathanson, Alan Pollack and Ivan Smith, all who were accomplished long-distance runners with credible performances in various marathon and ultra-marathon events, were out on a group run. The group stopped to rest close to the then named Jan Smuts Airport. Galvanized by the camaraderie of the moment, one of them proposed that their group formalise into a running club. His suggestion was met with the spontaneous response:

"You must have rocks in your head" and thus the naming ceremony of the club was both officiated and concluded.

The organizing of a road race under the auspices of a particular running club forms the mainstay of the funding of many of the clubs that have flourished in South Africa. Races range in distance from 5, 10, 15, 21.1 or 32 km, to 42.2km marathons and ultra-marathons of 50km and longer. Teams of club members wearing their club colours enter these country-wide, multi-distance races or participate in their club's time



Comrades Marathon 1983

trials to test their performance levels and their race readiness.

Although Rockies Road Runners only received official affiliation to the then Southern Transvaal Amateur Athletics Association in August of 1976, the club had already entered a team of runners into the Comrades Marathon that had taken place earlier that year. The oldest veteran of the club, Denis Tabakin, a sprightly 82-year-old who is testament to the benefits of a life-long commitment to exercise in the wide outdoors, has the most wonderful collection of memorabilia of the club, including expertly edited newsletters teeming with names of members, race results, statistics and a plethora of incidental information.

Included in this collection is the very first newsletter of the club, which records the milestone inaugural participation of the club in the 1976 Comrades Marathon, albeit unofficially.

It is worth quoting some extracts from Newsletter No. 1/1976, which was edited by then Chairman of Rockies, Ivor Lazerson:

"... First things first – we are an official Club, known and recognized as 'The Rocky Road Runners Club'. Club colours are red, white, and blue – with badges, running vests, and if desired, track suits, all on the way ...

[T]he Secretary ... wishes to announce and acknowledge an anonymous donation of R100-00. With rocks like that, how can we lose?"

The inclusion in this first newsletter of the race numbers, names, positions and finishing times of all 45 Rockies runners



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Comrades Marathon 1986

who finished the Comrades Marathon (of the 49 who started) is evidence of what has always been, and still remains, the unique credo of Rockies – namely, to assiduously avoid any distinction between highly competitive, top performers in marathons and ultra marathons, rank-and-file or shorter race distance competitors.

The Comrades of the following year (1977) was the first in which Rockies entered members as a formally affiliated running club. The September 1977 newsletter lists an astonishing 87 finishers (out of 102 club entries) and records Ronnie Sender, positioned 40th in a time of 6:44, to Rob Cowling, positioned 1 678th in a time of 10:59. This was also the first Comrades Marathon of the longest-serving club member, Victor Boston. Hot on the heels of 71-year-old Barry Holland's record of 49 consecutive Comrades Marathons and still running, Vic Boston has completed 45 consecutive Comrades Marathons to date. Vic, just 17 at the time of his first Comrades, makes him well-poised at his current youthful 63 (still running in the colours of Rockies) to assume the mantle of the most consecutive Comrades finishes.

Like all Rockies newsletters, the 21-page September 1977 edition is replete with delightful anecdotal material. One such entry, under the heading 'Rookie Of The Month', reveals one of the inner workings of the club, namely, the acquisition by members of the newly introduced club colours and kit:

"I would think that one of the most patient Rockies of us all is our Rookie of the Month, Mike "Armpits" Berkowitz. Patient, because almost every new Rocky has been into his shop to buy their colours ..."and ... "Mike earned his nickname 'armpits' through his very orthodox style of running directly under the left armpit of Senator Lazerson. ... Just pop into his shop ... and if he is not too busy, he might just give you a demonstration of his famous 'armpits' running style!"

Significantly, this newsletter also reinforces the nurturing culture of Rockies under the heading 'Rocky Information':

"We would welcome all members ... especially beginners ...

They will receive assistance in all matters relating to running ...

No matter how slow you are, there are always members who will be able to run with you, assist you and guide you – remember it is not necessary to run the entire course and you can do as much or as little as you please."



Comrades Marathon 1990 : Rockies Brigade!



Denis Tabakin Pilot. JSE 50km 1984

From the late 1970s, the range of marathons/ultra-marathons entered by club members (apart from the Comrades of course) widened from local events to further afield including, amongst others, the Stellenbosch Marathon, the Korkie Marathon, the Iron Man and the Two Oceans Marathon on the Cape Peninsula. Champion members of Rockies, such as multiple Comrades Marathon winner Bruce Fordyce, Theo Rafiri and Hosiah Tjale

were also selected in 1993, to represent the South African team in the World 100km Championships, the latter two as reserves.

The unique, all-embracing ethos of Rockies emerged quintessentially with the introduction of the piloting of blind or sight-impaired runners in marathons and ultra-marathons. One would have thought that road running is an almost impossible undertaking for those with impaired or no vision; however, certain members of Rockies, most notably the late Roy Krowitz, Richie Shakenovsky and the late Gerald Fox, routinely helped visually-impaired runners to overcome their handicaps by 'piloting' them. The visually-impaired runner and the running guide tether their wrists with a short string. The running pilot pushes the arm of the runner or pulls on the tether to move the tethered partner in the right direction.

The logistics of such an exercise are mindboggling, but the never-say-never approach of Rockies' pilot-paired runners became a common sight (pun unintended) at many major running events. This highwater mark of chesed (Hebrew for charity, kindness and benevolence) is the giving to an athlete less physically fortunate than oneself an opportunity to explore, participate in and fulfill a potential hitherto considered unattainable. The best-known blind runner that Rockies has produced is Johnny Demas, who lived in Coronationville to the west of Johannesburg. For whomever it was of Roy Krowitz, Richie Shakenovsky or Gerald Fox (or anyone else for that matter) that was piloting Johnny in a race, he would have needed to wake up around 4am to cross town to pick Johnny up, and then drive to the start of the race.

After the race, the same trip would be done in reverse, getting home early afternoon at best. Johnny Demas was introduced to road running by a chance encounter with one of the founders of Rockies, Denis Tabakin. Johnny had been violently assaulted as a young man, which resulted in him being left unconscious on a ventilator for a month. When he awoke, he was totally blind. The vicissitudes of life dumped Johnny mercilessly onto the streets of Johannesburg as a beggar – his only reprieve from descending into total despair was Services For The Blind. As fate would have it, Denis Tabakin was invited to deliver a talk on road running to Services For The Blind. Listening attentively in the audience, Johnny waited patiently for Denis to finish, and then thrust his hand into the air and bellowed, 'I am keen'.

That was the beginning of a running career for Johnny Demas that started with being pilot-assisted on 5km runs and ended with over 20 Comrades Marathon medals, many other marathon and ultra-marathon finishes, a Spirit Of Comrades Award, being featured on international television, and much more. As if that was not enough, Johnny's fortuitous brush with Rockies held far more in store. He was given a job in his business by fellow Rockies legend, Gerald Fox, where he met and married his wife, with whom he had 2 children and spent the rest of his working life.

Undoubtedly, this is an extreme example of how Rockies has given meaning to the life of one of its members and in this case, a future. The story of Johnny Demas also typifies the boundless energy and generosity of the late Gerald Fox z"l, who tragically himself became a victim of violent crime. His memory is honoured by the club to this day in the annual staging of the Rockies Gerald Fox Memorial Race comprising three distances, 5km, 10km and 21 km. The Rosebank Killarney Gazette of July 14, 2023, reported that the event, which took place last year on June 2, has consistently maintained high standards of organization, regardless of the route or venue. The winners in each age/gender category reflect a cross-section of South Africa's multicultural and multiracial society – indicative of the enormous legacy left by the late Gerald Fox z"l – a legacy that shaped and continues to shape the ever-evolving unity of South African society. Likewise, Denis Tabakin is a founding member who is inextricably interwoven into the rich tapestry of the club. Small wonder that the 'Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris Humanitarian award' was bestowed on Denis at the annual Jewish Achievers function in 2006.

The story of Rockies would be incomplete without making mention of the Ethembeni School for Handicapped Children situated near Inchanga on the route of the Comrades Marathon. Pupils at the school traditionally line the road during the Ultimate Human Race, exuberantly cheering on the runners. Approximately 40 years ago, the school comprised a scattering of huts on a hill lining the route. It attracted the attention of a group of Rockies runners as they climbed the hill. Even amidst the stresses and strains of their arduous hill climb, the runners were deeply affected and earmarked the school for sponsorship. Thanks to expertly administered generosity, levered especially by Denis Tabakin with his customary devotion to worthy causes,

many individual members of Rockies, and the club itself, saw to it that within a relatively short space of time, the huts had been replaced with conventional school buildings. A steady stream of income and support continues to maintain the school to this day. For over 40 years now, the decibels of the cheering learners multiply whenever a runner in the colours of Rockies ascends that hill.



Roy Krowitz z"l piloting Johnny Demas.
Springs Striders 32km race 1994

Speaking to members of Rockies who gave me of their time helped me to grasp the *raison d'être* for the establishment of Rockies. There were several other running clubs in existence in Johannesburg at the time the club was founded. However, it was 1976, a time of cataclysmic rioting in Soweto and the people of South Africa were divided politically and socially which permeated into sport, including road running. Many of the then existing running clubs were also elitist in favour of top performers and somewhat neglected members of a lesser calibre, considered 'also-runners'!

Rockies responded to the call for inclusivity during those dark days of seriously institutionalized division. This message was endorsed by my primary sources, the ipse dixit of legendary founding member Denis Tabakin, Dr. Ivan Schewitz, Vic Boston, Martin Speier (and in the editing of this article, former Rockies and Comrades runner, Desirée Firer), whose careers as long-distance runners fortuitously transcend every era of the club from inauguration in the mid 1970s to today.

I toiled over a suitable conclusion to this inherently South African story. The answer came to me in a recent telephonic discussion with the ultimate source of my mandate and link to the unlocking of the story, Martin Speier. He enthusiastically recalled the Rockies time trials on Saturday mornings on streets with a familiar ring in the heart of suburban Johannesburg. Members in running togs milled about on the sidewalks in social harmony, waiting for their chance to perform over 5 or 8 kms to be expertly measured, recorded and assessed by the invaluable husband-and-wife partnership of Rockies' dedicated, stalwart administrators, Val and Richard Wilkinson. These results helped runners to gain perspective on their readiness to compete in the different events on the annual road running race calendar.

The essence of Rockies finally distilled for me as a haven for all those who hold dear the spirit of all runners from all walks of life. It is a safe space to conquer frailties and fears within a fellowship dedicated to the uplifting, well-being and improvement of all people.

Indeed, if there is meaning to be given to the adage 'A Light Unto The Nations', all Rockies Road Runners transmit that glow.



Steven Katzew has been a practicing advocate for over 30 years. Steven studied law at Rhodes University where he also played Rugby. He is an avid and passionate sports follower. He is a particularly keen observer of Jewish involvement and achievement in all sport.