

WHEN you go running with a marathon champion, something inexplicable happens to time and space.

Not only do you become hyper-aware of how two moving objects can separate from each other as if one of them — the one seeming to exert more energy — is standing still, your mind also begins to ask questions involving the passing of minutes and seconds.

Is their length relative to speed and distance covered? And, on the same field, on the same day, is it possible that a minute can really be shorter for one than for another?

These are subjects I ponder breathlessly, a dry fire crackling in my lungs, as I attempt to keep up with Hendrick Ramaala during a training session at Wits University.

Ramaala, 2004 New York Marathon winner and a respected veteran of the world marathon circuit, is doing some speed work in preparation for the London Marathon, which takes place today.

I have been preparing for this session at Wits University for weeks. Though I have been running consistently for 12 years and have a best 10km time of 37:50 (Ramaala's is, erm, 28:02), I have heightened the intensity of my training, been paying greater attention to my diet, and drinking lots of water.

It's not as if I'm expecting to stay with the pace though — I know I'm going to go down hard, but I don't want it to be in a messy collapse of loose saliva and nausea. That's the reason I opted to run with Ramaala on a track rather than on the road; I figure that when he laps me it will appear, for a moment at least, that I'm keeping up.

Things begin positively when I join the 37-year-old Ramaala on his warm-up laps.

I'm able to chat with the man, who, like the early pace, is amiable, humble and relaxed. It's 5.30pm and the low sun has made giants of us all; Ramaala's legs are almost as long as the ones of his shadow, and they crinkle and gleam in the circular glow.

"Ja, for sure I'm going to London to win," he replies, almost shocked that I dared think otherwise.

This will be Ramaala's eighth London Marathon; he has finished in the top 10 each time he's run it. He's also done New York seven times, won the Mumbai Marathon and the Great North Run, has two silver medals from the IAAF World Half Marathon Championships, competed in six World Cup marathons and attended four Olympic Games. And he still wants to win the Comrades.

A qualified lawyer, Ramaala grew up in the Limpopo village of GaMolopo with five brothers and two sisters. He dreamed of

THE TIME MACHINE

In attempting to win today's London Marathon, Hendrick Ramaala will do unexpected things with time, space and relativity. To understand the physics of Ramaala's world-class pace, Oliver Roberts joins him on a training run



WHITE MEN CAN'T RUN: Or so it feels when you find yourself in the company of marathon men. Here the writer is still keeping up with running ace Hendrick Ramaala (centre). Or is he being lapped . . . again?

becoming a professional soccer player throughout his boyhood and it wasn't until he was in his early 20s that he discovered that running was his real talent.

"I started running at Wits when I was 22 and competed in my first international race

three years later," he says. "I started late; I think that's why I'm still so hungry. I want to compete at a high level for a long time still."

Fittingly, the runners he most admires are Kenya's Paul Tergat and Ethiopia's Haile Gebrselassie — old hands who are still at the

top of the sport.

As if to substantiate his intentions to stick around for a while yet, Ramaala trains, and keeps up with, guys in their early 20s. Some of them are here with us today; silent, sinewy and flinty-eyed, they're the running partners

of your sweatiest nightmares. They are Ramaala's terrifying yardstick, but he is their mentor. The youngsters who pound the streets in unison with Ramaala have the desire and ability to become world-class runners, but some cannot afford three meals a day, let alone to join a running club.

"I was involved in establishing a running group at Zoo Lake some time ago," Ramaala says. "Now we have a training programme in place and we organise transport for some of the guys. People know that if they come to Zoo Lake on Tuesday afternoon, they will have company; if they come on Sunday morning, there will be someone there to take them for a long run."

When Ramaala retires from competitive running, he wants to get further involved in the development of runners from the junior ranks all the way up. He says this is the only way South Africa will ever be able to compete consistently on the world stage.

The training camps and level of support available at the moment are just not enough, and it's a source of frustration for Ramaala, as are badly organised local races in which the pros are forced to start with everyone else, resulting in near stampedes.

The warm-up is now over and my confidence is quickly quelled at the sight of some of the runners replacing their "warm-up" shoes with flashy trainers in preparation

for the main event. They also begin to stretch in all sorts of wriggly ways.

I am filled with anxious excitement because, like any runner, I enjoy a bit of pain, and feel a bizarre thrill at being on the verge of unknown misery, and the challenge of having to put up with it. It's another reason it's called "endurance running".

"You have to teach your body to feel pain, to become used to suffering," says Ramaala. "During a marathon, you are in pain most of the way; you are running so hard and the other guys are not giving. You have to handle it; you know that the guy next to you has the same pain — you are hoping he has more — and you just have to swallow it. You know it's going to finish eventually; it's two hours and whatever. Then you hope you'll win and get all the glory."

And you can forget about your fellow runners being gentlemen. Ramaala says "accidental" toe-stomping is the norm in a competitive pack, and that some runners go for the water table and knock all the cups off.

However, two-hour pain fests and meddling opponents do nothing to quell Ramaala's love of running. Behind all the pressures, the accolades and the obligations, running, for Ramaala, is still about the rubbery clip-clap of feet on sunrisen streets, the intoxicating rhythm of his rejoicing heart and the surge of hot blood.

"Running is a way of life. When you go for a run, you feel different," says Ramaala. "It can be 5pm, pouring with rain, lightning, and I'll be thinking 'It's time to run — when is this rain going to stop?' I even drive in that rain to the stadium where we do our sessions and wait in the car thinking 'Come on, stop raining; we need to run.'"

Ramaala's training schedule allows time for little else, and almost all his friends are fellow runners and training partners. Good thing, then, that his wife, Rodica Morolanu, is a French international runner. "She is aware of the pressures and also does a lot of training and marathons, so there is no problem." The furiously healthy couple live in Joburg with their two children, Alex, 8, and Sarah, 1.

Fifteen years' experience has not tempered the nerves Ramaala feels before a big race — he gets just as anxious as he did before his first marathon.

"The night before . . . yoh." He whistles warily. "If you sleep, you have nightmares; if you don't sleep, you wake up tired. You sweat, you're scared, you can't eat — you want to run away. You ask yourself 'Why am I doing this?' and you wish you were at home."

"But there's no way out — it's too late; you've signed a contract so you have to compete. Then you do the warm-up and you feel so tired and you worry; but then the gun goes off and all that fear disappears and you're like: 'Oh! But I'm fine!'"

After a few sprints in the in-field, which I manage with an ease that continues to startle my dangerous self-belief, the group gathers at the start line for the first of the three 2 000m spurts we'll be running today.

The sun is lower in the sky now and pokes through a gap in the stadium, warming my back and burning right through into my ready heart.

Before I'm able to contemplate what's about to happen, Ramaala sets off, surrounded by his stringy demon spawn. It's immediately like a sprint, or the way any normal person would start a 400m race. Halfway around the first lap — about 200m — the humiliation, the cruelty, is already complete.

Suddenly I am just a piece of hot chewing gum, trampled underfoot, stuck to the ground as the shoe that squashed and then discarded

me disappears from sight.

On lap four of five, Ramaala and his group are behind me, about to eat up relativity. And here's the thing: I do not hear them approach; there is no charge of feet or sharpness of breath; no, they close in on me and then pass me like wind — swift, silent and untouchable. I look at their legs — they seem to be moving at the same speed as mine, but they have stretched half a kilometre on me in just a few minutes. It's utterly astonishing. And they're all black. Is it genetics?

"In many cases, running is the only way out of poverty," Ramaala says. "Kenyan runners have said to me, 'You South Africans, you're too comfortable; you have TVs and food on the table.'"

Ramaala's approach to running is refreshingly simple. He doesn't use a heart-rate monitor, nor does he follow a specific eating plan, and he certainly doesn't sleep in altitude tents.

"I'm not technical about running. I learnt this from the Kenyans; it's all about training hard and knowing when to rest. I eat well — rice, potatoes, pap, nuts, fruit — and I drink lots of water."

"And when I rest, I rest. After a marathon I take, like, a week off."

With the next two sprints, things don't get

any better. Though I am running a steady and fairly respectable pace (around 8:20 over 2 000m), the others just get faster. Halfway through the second run (I am lapped earlier this time) I look to my iPod for inspiration, selecting the "running" playlist I created that morning. Not even the pacey *The Bitter End* by Placebo gets me going any faster. Towards the finish of the last sprint of the day (lapped twice this time), I become convinced that the people watching on the sidelines are aware of what's happening and are heckling me as I appear to circulate at a standstill.

By the time I stop running and return to Ramaala, he has been at rest for about nine minutes. So, although we ran the same distance, his minutes were shorter than mine. Or were they? This condensing of time is the mysterious gift of the world-class runner. You just cannot reach them. The structure of time does not allow it.

As well as victory in the London Marathon, the other thing that has so far evaded Ramaala is an Olympic medal, but he is hoping to rectify this in 2012.

"Good things come to those who wait," he says, "and I think I've waited long enough."

So, you see — Ramaala will not let time run away from him.

RAMAALA'S TRAINING SCHEDULE:	
MONDAY	Morning: 20km; Evening: 6 x 1 000m
TUESDAY	Morning: 20km; Evening: 7km tempo run
WEDNESDAY	Morning: 20km; Evening: 3 x 2 000m
THURSDAY	28km
FRIDAY	Morning: 20km; Evening: 3.5km tempo run
SATURDAY	20km
SUNDAY	40km

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