



Once Were Warriors

Are you up for a challenge in 2012? It's time to get physical and set yourself a Goliath of a goal. **Wanita Nicol** did – by successfully completing an annual obstacle trail with a difference.



I was starting to wish that I'd trained. Just a little.

FREE AT LAST
Paul's overwhelming desire after tunneling his way through the prison walls was to find a barber.

Oh, the mud. Oh, the sweat. Oh, the tears.

A clean version of myself arrived at Wiesenhof Farm near Paarl much earlier. With me was my younger brother Brad, who's about as talkative as a mime artist. And with my brain still at home in bed, the conversation left plenty of time for quiet panic.

The Impi Challenge is a 12km trail run with 17 obstacles dotted along at intervals that participants have to swim across, climb, jump off and clamber over, getting progressively muddier along the way. The promo video looked like *Survivor* and *Ninja Warrior* rolled into one. It looked like fun. And I figured it was a sure-fire way to get firm and trim for summer. FTW, baby. I signed up with five weeks of tummy-flattening training to go before Challenge Day. But things didn't go quite according to plan.

As I parked the car, the seatbelt caught on a mound of wobbly stuff where my six pack should have been. I'd swiped my gym card just three times in the five weeks since signing up for Impi and two of those had been to get a smoothie from Kauai. In the pit of my stomach, panic performed an upbeat interpretive dance to the Bee Gees' *Tragedy*.

Since 2009 the Impi Challenge has grown its number of entries nearly sevenfold. Last year a large and colourful crowd assembled at the start line – a group of guys in tutus, a gaggle of girls carrying an inflatable man, a tall, lanky fellow with a box on his head and two guys and a girl in safari suits sharing a bottle of red wine and

calling themselves Jannie, Sannie and Koos. One couple had been married for barely a few days. The one thing they all had in common was a strange look that could only be described as... fitness. At the hooter, eager challengers bounded forward like racehorses in fancy dress. Despite wearing heavy boots, Brad kept pace easily and so did I. For about 20m. Then I wheezed, 'Brad, I need to walk for a bit.'

By the time we reached the first obstacle – a simple leopard crawl – five minutes later, we were close to last. As the others began loping up the steep slope beyond the obstacle, there was no 'close to' about it. Roughly two days later (in my mind) I was starting to wish I had trained. Just a little. I also wished I was somewhere else (at home on the couch would be good) and that I could stop sneezing. My allergy to exercise was playing up big time. In the distance the other challengers were climbing yet another near-vertical slope of death. Most were walking now, I noted with sneezy satisfaction, but they were so far ahead there didn't seem much hope of catching up with them.

It was with joy that I leapt into the Lieland Baptism. I'm a pretty decent swimmer and the 30m swim across a cool, refreshing dam was my time to shine. But with waterlogged tekkies weighing me down, freestyle quickly became breaststroke and then doggy paddle. 'No, I'm not drowning,' I snapped at a concerned marshall paddling a canoe. 'Yes, we are the last two.' Brad passed me in a frenzy of freestyle splashing, offering to wait. I waved him on. By the time I →



I approached the lily pads with the casual air of a Springbok forward scrumming against Japan

BRAIN BOX
"Uh.. how long did you say I should keep this mudpack on for?"



HIGH TIMES
John and Caroline knew that the best way to escape zombies was to climb a tree

staggered onto the bank, he was already emptying water out of his boots. I was starting to suspect my little brother might be Superman.

The third obstacle was unmanned, but as we slithered under low wooden beams, a marshall came strolling back down the track. 'Are you the last two?'

There's something uplifting about being chin-high in muck, I discovered as I crawled through the fourth obstacle, a swampy tunnel, aptly dubbed Toxic Crawl. Also we had finally caught up to the pack. 'Yes, we're last,' I called cheerfully as we brought up the rear in a muddy procession. With my newfound energy, I managed to run another 20m and at the next obstacle – the Leap of Faith off a high board into a dam – Brad and I passed some challengers with a fear of heights. Plus it seemed all uphill slogging was now behind us. Life was good.

A bottleneck at the Vit-T-Go Tank gave us an opportunity to catch our breath before our turn arrived to scale the tall wooden tower and descend the cargo net on the other side. Once again our

impressive obstacle-slaying skills helped us leap ahead in the pack and I approached the lily pads with the casual air of a Springbok forward scrumming against Japan.

'Who wants to go first?' asked the marshall. I strode forward. Made from a string of wooden pallets joined end-to-end, the lily pads formed a partly submerged bridge across the dam. I knew the key to this obstacle from watching Ozzy on *Survivor* – maintain momentum. Steeling myself, I leapt onto the first pad, my left calf muscle cramped and...

Thwack! Water sprays into my eyes and up my nose as I sprawl across the rapidly-sinking wooden pallet. My shorts balloon around my hips, filling with water, dragging me down. My calf muscles are tight knots of pain – I can't move my legs – and my hands are stinging. Beneath my weight the pallet sways violently, threatening to pitch me over the side. I hang on and slowly start to drag myself forward, urging fatigued muscles to keep moving. 'I will complete this challenge,' I tell myself. 'I will not give up.' Halfway across, my shorts catch on a nail and once again the bridge begins to sink.

**BOTTOM DWELLER**

"Hi there. Do you have a moment to talk about your insurance needs?"

'Come on!' I snarl and with a sharp jerk of my leg, the shorts rip free.

By the time I crawl, exhausted, onto the far bank, a small crowd has gathered to clap and cheer. I smile, welcoming their acknowledgement of my ordeal, but they're not cheering me. Turning, I see Brad on the lily pads, arms pumping, knees lifted high in a sprint. Water sprays to either side as his heavy boots thump the wood. When he leaps triumphantly onto the bank, the onlookers erupt into whoops and applause. I stare, open-mouthed. My little brother is Rambo.

By now my muscles are so fatigued that even walking is an effort and we're soon last once more. Bruises are starting to colour my arms and legs and it becomes apparent that I was wrong about leaving the final uphill behind. But with Rambo-Brad's help, I climb over more obstacles, scramble up ravines and make it back to my blistered feet every time I fall. When, 12km and seven years later (in my mind), we finally approach the end, I've completed every obstacle, passed the girls with the inflatable man and I have a new hero.

THIS MEANS WAR

Chantel knew that she needed to keep moving. The Vietcong were remorseless enemies.



At the last bend, I pause for air, gather the last drops of energy into my aching legs and break into a 20m jog for the finish line.

'Are you last?' a marshal calls as we hobble past. 'No!' I shout back, laughing. ■

DO IT!

The Impi Challenge Joburg debuts at the end of March. Watch out for the fourth Cape Impi Challenge in October. For the really hardcore, the Impi Elite Challenge is a 17km course with additional obstacles and a cash prize for the first man and first woman home. Places for all challenges are limited, so book early. Visit impichallenge.co.za for more info.