



Go To Hell...

Would a sane person plunge into the blistering desert for a footrace? Well, yeah

by Cal Fussman

XTREME

DAY 1: Let the Music Begin I ask why they've come to run a race across 142 miles of Sahara Desert lugging backpacks in heat that would make the Devil look for shade. And you know what kind of response I get? "Because that's all I could fit into my vacation." 🌐 Now, I'm a guy who thought it perfectly normal to swim with an 18-foot tiger shark. I'm a guy who willingly stepped into the ring to spar then-world champion Julio Cesar Chavez. I'm a guy who went into an Amazonian gold rush to prospect for his fiancée's wedding ring. But you know how I feel looking at the 495 people who paid thousands of dollars to stand at the starting line of the Marathon des Sables, the toughest footrace in the history of feet? Sane. Certifiably sane. 🌐 There's a man who trained by pedaling a stationary bicycle in a sauna. And a French yogi who's ready to confront heat after conquering cold by standing for an hour every morning in ice. One Italian runner who, while lost for days

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and run 142 miles with a pack on your back

without water in the desert, says he survived by twisting the head off a bat and sucking out its blood. Yet another Italian claims that “behind the sand dunes you can meet wonderful girls.” The Ahansal brothers of Morocco need only *Beep! Beep!* to resemble a Road Runner cartoon. And that German woman: She once outlasted a Triple Ironman. But that 220-pound beer barrel of an Englishman has never even run a marathon. The oldest participant, 75, hopes to complete the race for the fourth time. The youngest, 16, from England, is a virgin to the Marathon of the Sands. There’s a guy from New Mexico who, not sufficiently challenged by the distance or the backpack or the heat, feels compelled to juggle three balls as he runs. There is an ultramarathoner from New Jersey who is convinced she can spend the better part of seven days running on the stress fracture in her right ankle. There is a South Dakotan who has no right ankle. He lost the bottom of the leg to a land mine in Vietnam. And there is the 61-year-old man from Spokane, the one listening carefully for clues about the terrain. He’s blind.

Natives in white robes and turbans pound drums, clang tiny cymbals and clash swords as the Moroccan flag rises and falls over the starting line and the runners stride into a biblical wilderness for the first of six stages, what amounts to a 15-mile warmup. Absolutely daft? Something tells me to keep an open mind.

DAY 2: Utopia

Is it insane to imagine a place where laziness, sloth, bitterness, petty jealousy and a million other crimes against the soul do not exist? Is



The cast drawn to Morocco for the Marathon of the Sands spans the spectrum from ridiculous to sublime—the blue man, the juggler, the yogi, the Vietnam vet. But McKinley (below) is perhaps the most inspiring of them all. He is blind.

it crazy to imagine yourself amid 495 people filled with heart, spirit, vigor, compassion and the will to achieve? It might be absolutely rational, even utter utopia, if the runners were not sandwiched eight to a tent, fanning flies from their freeze-dried macaroni.

Is it sense or nonsense to watch Bryant McKinley, the blind man, running with his outstretched cane grasped by a partner who’s a step ahead, shouting the size of upcoming rocks that will turn his next step into either a miracle or a nightmare? I see New Jerseyan Lisa Smith running through the stones with her stress fracture and call: “How’s your ankle?” “What ankle?” she responds, and it hits me: She has turned these stones from hindrance to liberation. She must focus so completely on the next step that the stones have become freedom from boredom, freedom from pain.

This has nothing to do with money. It can’t be cash that compels the runners to trudge through the 100°-plus heat burdened by their sleeping bags,

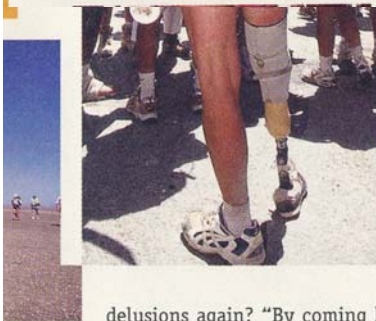
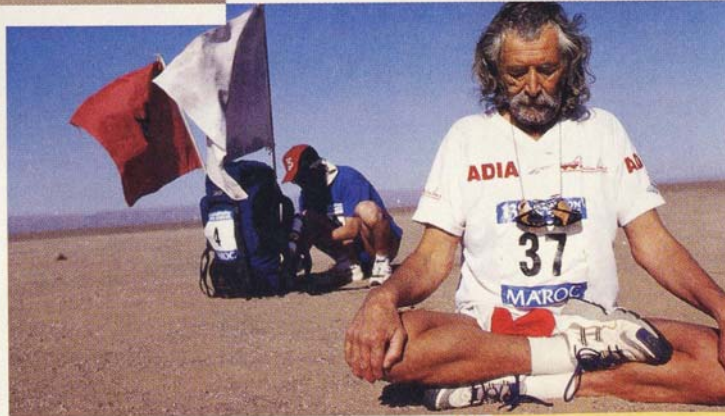


clothing, at least 2,000 calories of food per day, a snakebite kit, a flare and a compass. They receive a daily ration of water. The \$4,955 top prize for men and \$2,478 for women barely cover the entry fee.

You know how it makes you feel to watch ordinary people—people who live next door—doing the extraordinary? I'll tell you: lower than camel dung. Makes you feel you should be out there too.

DAY 3: Lost

No, I will never understand the man now grimacing up two miles of Mount Tibert at a 30° incline with a stubbed toe. But I will not judge him either. Four years ago, in this very race, Mauro Prosperi was overwhelmed by a violent sandstorm that nearly buried him alive and left him wandering for days without water. Can Prosperi have forgotten the thirst that he says drove him to trap a bat, twist its head off and suck out its blood? Can he have forgotten his hunger—and the giant “Help Me” he’d written with powdered food in the sand that was suddenly gone with the wind? Does he not remember burning his sleeping bag and nearly everything in his backpack in a futile attempt to attract the rescue plane that flew over him? Or how he used remnants of that fire to write a dying man’s final note to his wife? The story of his survival is so unbelievable that race



director Patrick Bauer cannot believe it; yet there is no denying that the Sicilian policeman got lost in that sandstorm, nor that he was found 44 pounds lighter and 10 days later in an Algerian hospital. Even if the heat did create delusions of bat blood, what kind of a man with a wife and three children would even consider enduring such

delusions again? “By coming here, I have been through things that others have not,” he says. “I consider myself a very lucky man.” To go through that and call it luck. I should be so out of my mind.

DAYS 4 & 5: The Healer

Was Moses crazy? Was Christ? Mohammed? They all went into the desert and were transformed. Maybe ordinary men can become holy in the desert if they dig deep enough to discover their own wells. This is what I think when I see Gregory Baker’s right cheek.

He had Romberg’s Syndrome, a condition that caused tissue in his face to

atrophy, the vision in his right eye to go cloudy and his right cheek to sink. In 26 hours of surgery, doctors from an organization called Operation Smile made him look normal. Now he is in the desert, running for donations so that doctors can change the lives of 150 deformed kids in Morocco.

After three days and 60 miles of running, something inexplicable is happening to Greg. The first water checkpoint—only seven miles into today's 47-mile course—looks like a war zone. Other runners, many of whom have trained for this as if it were a science, are breaking down. Other runners stop to have the medical team slice and carve away bloody, blistered skin from their heels, arches and toes. Other runners lean against a tree and wrench up their guts. They grimace with crotch rot, blotches on inner thighs the color of overripe raspberries and the size of cantaloupes.

Yet Greg is not buckling, but beginning to soar. He runs 500 meters off the course to take photographs of a camel for his children. He pushes a runner through a painful



The grand final

stretch and the guy makes a \$3,000 donation. He stops to marvel at the beautiful faces of the Moroccan boys and girls, a constant joy to a man born with only one ear canal. Greg Baker finishes the 47-mile stage after midnight, after 15 hours, smiling. He slaps my palm and I am not the same.

DAY 6: The Dream

Stare at the stars in the Sahara long enough and you realize that you can live an entire life and not once see God's sky. Even on the most beautiful night in Carolina or California, what you get is polluted and diminished. So I awaken every 3 a.m. to look up and worship. And I think of the Ahansal brothers.

Had this race not come through their city in 1992, Mohamed, 24, and Lahcen, 27, would have gone through life known only as the fastest runners in Zagora. But that year, shocked race officials watched Lahcen, unentered but inspired, streak after the participants without a number on his chest and finish in second place. A Moroccan company put up his entry fee the following year, and Lahcen won in 1997. Now it is Mohamed, a mountain guide with skin the color of baked earth, who blazes in the lead. While Lisa Smith trudges through today's 26 miles vomiting with heat stroke and a 102° temperature, while some runners are leashed to IVs and others have simply surrendered, Mohamed wonders how his legs compare to the best in the world. He wonders if a sponsor will see his potential and finance training for Sydney 2000. "It would," he says, "be nice to try."

Two brothers, who were once urged by friends to pluck pieces of fruit from stalls and run because no vendor would be able to catch them. Two brothers with a gift as pure as the desert sky. Is it crazy for them to dream of competing in the Olympic Games?

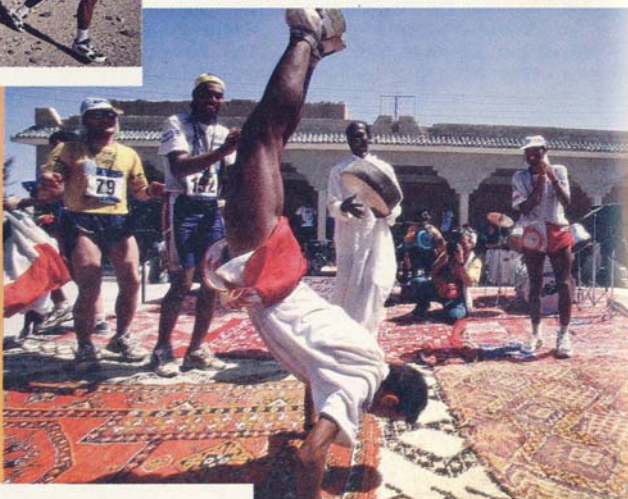
DAY 7: The Last Leg

It is not a race anymore. For some, it's survival. Only eight miles left on a path that turns to asphalt and shoots past palm trees, donkeys and waving villagers, through a Moorish arch and into the market of a city called Rissani, where a crowd forms along barricades and claps as musicians who could charm snakes fill the air with jubilation. I can't help it, but my mind's eye sees Cal Ripken Jr. the night he broke baseball's endurance record. I see the fans standing and roaring as Cal slaps palms on his victory lap. What was that compared to this? Just a guy who got out of bed and went to work every day for 13 years. Would he have left the dugout if the skin were peeled off his heels, if he'd been forced to use IVs to keep from passing out? Would he have come out of that dugout if he looked like Lisa Smith right now, head

burning, eyes seeing double, blisters under her toenails, belly so distended she can barely keep her pack strapped around her? She weaves side-to-side on sun-drunken steps, afraid to pick up her ration of water for fear the docs will make her stop. She once told me the words that guide



The grand finale: the Ahansal brothers, Lahcen (above, right) and Mohamed (right) finished second and first—hence, the handstand. For Smith (left), who overcame heat-stroke, fever and a stress fracture, just to finish was a victory.



her: "The body does what the mind permits." Meanwhile, Mohamed Ahansal sprints to the finish. He celebrates his victory by doing flips—flips!—and walks on his hands. Runners with feet bandaged like mummies somehow find the strength to click their heels as they near the finish line. Men and women clasp hands—human chains

down the final stretch, singing and crying. Greg Baker strides toward the line smiling under his Operation Smile hat. A parched Japanese man halts a step before the finish, turns and slowly bows to the desert. The 432 finishers share a knowledge few on earth will ever know.

The barricades begin to be dismantled. Some of the Americans start to worry. No one has seen Lisa Smith. Twenty minutes later, she wobbles into sight on rubber legs, her lips trembling, nothing more inside her to produce even a tear drop. She cannot speak as she's led to the medical tent, so it's foolish for me or any of the journalists who crowd around to ask her if the Marathon des Sables is worth everything she has just given it.

If you have to ask, you will never understand.

