

Mission possible

How Cliff McKinley conquered his toughest journey on the other side of the world

It can't have been easy. Three weeks after the birth of their first child, Cliff McKinley kissed his wife Christine and baby Sophie goodbye. Far removed from the celebrations of first-time parenthood and the comfort of his Kew home, McKinley boarded a plane for Morocco to compete in the Marathon Se Sables, a 255km race across the Sahara desert.

When *Melbourne Weekly Magazine* spoke to McKinley in January, the 43-year-old referred to the six-day race as "an adventure" and his preparation seemed second to none.

Since returning, McKinley has had cause to reflect on the race that took more of a physical and mental toll than he anticipated.

McKinley knew that blisters and losing toenails would be par for the

course, but the understanding and the reality can be two different things. After the first day, McKinley likened his toes to aliens and had some of the biggest blisters he'd seen. On day three of his online diary he wrote, "I felt incredible pain and wetness in my left foot. I stopped, took off the shoe and my little toe resembled an overcooked sausage! I took out my razor blade and cut into the blister below

the toe and the one on top of the nail. As I did this the toe nail fell off. Not happy! I wiped away the ooze and sat on a sand dune for 40 minutes before I could walk again. Unfortunately this allowed over 60 people to pass me."

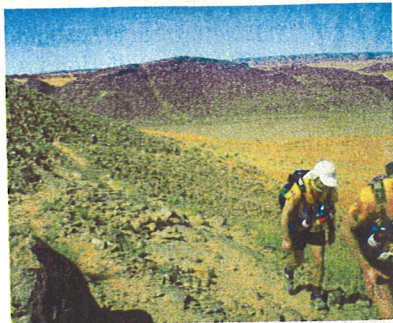
By day five, he had to walk 50 kilometres of the 70-kilometre leg and likened it to walking on glass. More toenails dropped off and he broke a toe after kicking a rock.

Then there was the sand. McKinley says the wind embedded sand into the skin, a major setback for some athletes. For McKinley, it produced a new appreciation for baby wipes. "You had sand in your ears, your eyes, and your nose," he says. "Every time you ate food you ate sand, so the only time you got clean was to go to the toilet and use the baby wipes."

The psychological aspect of such a race cannot be underestimated. McKinley, who carried a photograph of Christine and Sophie throughout the race, says he had never cried so much in his life. "Running along, you go from laughing to crying and back to laughing so quickly," he says. "I cried more in that race than I did when Sophie was born, but those were tears of happiness."

McKinley says hour after hour of running towards sand dunes that never seemed to come any closer played with his mind. But he says the nights were the hardest. "The black is so black," he says. "If you're running by yourself and you can't see, you start to reflect, 'Am I a good person? Am I a good father? Am I a good husband?'"

The death of a French runner (from a heart attack) on day three also affected many of the 700-odd participants. "It really affected me because he was (a man) in my age group who'd run many marathons," says McKinley.



Above: The endless sand dunes and rocky terrain of the Sahara Desert. Cliff rests his bleeding feet.

Left: Cliff recovers in Melbourne with his wife Christine and baby Sophie.

He began to feel like a bit of a whinger. "Everything was about me for the first couple of days – my feet, my toes. I couldn't run. I started getting a bit despondent about making it."

McKinley used the run as an opportunity to raise money for cancer charities OvCa (ovarian cancer) and CanTeen (young people living with cancer). When emails (participants had limited internet access each night) from women suffering from ovarian cancer began arriving, they helped put things back in perspective. He said to himself: "What am I whinging about? My feet are going to heal. I can walk every step of this marathon. I can take 15 hours to do the marathon if I want, I can finish. That (French) guy is never going to finish." The emails from the

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ladies, the guy dying, the time spent by myself put everything back in perspective, everything."

McKinley achieved his goal of completing the race, ranking about 340th at the finish line. Feet aside, other factors also slowed McKinley down. "I was really barrelling along, so focused, and came across this French guy, sitting on the ground in tears. He was wailing, bawling his eyes out in so much pain." McKinley gave him his walking poles to help him hobble along and walked with him for several hours. "He spoke very little English, I spoke no French, but we got by," he says. The encounter was a highlight for McKinley. "Helping the French guy was really important. It made me realise what this race is about."

Since returning home, McKinley has been spending time with Christine and Sophie and giving his feet time to heal. He has been gorging on fruit and bread and is finally sleeping better.

In retrospect, he reckons he should have spent more time pre-race with a podiatrist and a sports psychologist to mentally prepare. He says he's feeling a bit weak, a bit skinny, but also proud. "I've done this, not only for myself, but two organisations are getting money out of it." He'll don his runners again to compete in June's Run to the G – a civilised 21 kilometres. And beyond that? "I would one day love to complete another run for charity." **mwm**