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I Have To Run 'the Toughest Foot Race on the Planet'

Field Notes



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For the Journal

These days, it's not uncommon to be asked to sign a waiver acknowledging a long list of the risks involved before indulging in everything from drinking a cup of hot coffee to bungee jumping. Rarely do we read these waivers in depth, but every once in a while, one pops up that gives us pause.

For example, any event that

requires a snakebite kit, flares, a signal mirror and a survival blanket might be worth further investigation. When a more careful read of the waiver reveals a requirement of insurance for funeral expenses, you know you're in trouble — which I am. I just registered for the 2008 Marathon des Sables.

Considered one of the world's first modern adventure races, the MDS was

founded in 1986 by Frenchman Patrick Bauer and has become an annual event, covering a total of roughly 145 miles. It begins in Ouarzazate, Morocco, and covers some of the Sahara Desert's harshest terrain. Racers carry all their own gear, food and water, sleep in two-sided Berber tents with seven other people, and endure temperatures as high as 120 degrees during the day and as low as 30 degrees

at night.

Jay Batchen and Lisa Smith-Batchen, the U.S. representatives for the MDS since 2003, met during the MDS in 1999. Batchen was filming the MDS for the Discovery Channel, while Smith-Batchen went on to victory, becoming the first American woman to win the race.

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A renowned runner and personal trainer, Smith-Batchen has run the MDS four times; Batchen has competed three times. Together, they coordinate all Americans participating in the MDS, guiding them through the training process and consulting with them daily via e-mail and phone regarding gear and clothing. But their most important task is encouraging the mental preparation of participants.

"You want to err on the side of being a little frightened because that way you respect it more," Batchen said. "Are you going to suffer?"

Definitely. If you want to go and do your best and push yourself, then yes, you're really going to suffer — but that will happen in any race you do, as much in a marathon as in a 100-kilometer race. There are different levels of how you can approach the race."

Temperature extremes and terrain that includes salt flats, rocks, steep climbs and sand dunes combine with serious sandstorms to create "the toughest foot race on the planet," as the MDS is fondly known. Each day's course is different, covering approximately 20 miles (sometimes more, sometimes less depending on last-minute course changes due to extreme sandstorms and low visibility), but the clincher comes on the fourth day, which is a double-marathon stage. More than 50 miles of desert must be covered.

Batchen cites the heat as one of the toughest factors in the race.

"The heat is something that I



COURTESY PHOTO

Camaraderie among participants makes the Marathon des Sables — a 145-mile adventure race across some of the Sahara Desert's harshest terrain — a special event.

can't control, and everyone has to deal with it. So I try to block it out," he said. "It's especially hard if there's a hot wind blowing right at you. The heat feels like it's going to crush you, but when that happens, I just say, 'Hey, the person next to me is in the same environment, it's 120 degrees and there's nothing I can do about it.' The things I can control are my water, salt pills and speed, so I focus on those."

Something else to focus on while shuffling blindly across the burning desert in a gait that accommodates severe blisters might be the \$2,900 entry fee, which does not include airfare.

Listening to Batchen and Smith-Batchen talk about the race over enchiladas at the Guadalupe Café a few weeks ago, it became clear that this is not a race purely for the insane. It's a race for those

seeking adventure and meaning; some, they say, call it totally transforming. They go home and pare everything down, changing the way they live and think. The sparseness of the desert and the grueling conditions, as well as the stripped-down amenities and close quarters participants experience at night while huddled with their team members, can lead to a period of redefinition. The severity of the experience offers a new reference point for what the human mind and body is capable of.

Only one person has ever perished during the MDS, a Frenchman in his early twenties who suffered a massive heart attack on the sand in 1988. In 1993, a Sicilian man got lost in a sandstorm for nine days before being rescued; he lost 30 pounds and was on the verge of liver failure. But he raced again in

1997.

As Batchen notes, it's more about accumulating the experience of longer runs.

"This is a race you want to ramp up for," he said. "You can do back-to-back long runs — maybe six hours one day and four the next; that is very good preparation for this race. It's about getting your body used to it. In December, my training schedule every week included one day off, maybe two, so it's all personal and about how much time you're willing to commit."

Highly trained, specialized medical teams stand by at all hours, water is rationed at checkpoints throughout the course, and food and gear are monitored closely. Carrying too few calories per day, wandering off course, littering or losing any of the required gear can result in time penalties. Most people wear the same outfit the entire week, there are no showers available and bathrooms are primitive at best. But e-mail and phones are available at a cost each evening in camp.

"When I first ran it, I was frightened," Batchen said. "I tried not to look at the big picture, so I just went aid station to aid station. That's something I do now in any race, even the shortest."

I can think of more comfortable ways to spend money and time, but, just like the more than 700 other people who make the pilgrimage of pain to the Sahara, the MDS is just something I have to do.

To learn more about Batchen and Smith-Batchen, including information on coaching, camps and other ultra races, visit their Web site at www.dreamchaserevents.com.