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Planet



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Valley resident races 140 miles across Sahara

by Sam Petri

Starting in what valley resident Gerald "Jay" Batchen could only describe as "the middle of the desert" and ending in the small village of Merzouga, Morocco, the six-stage seven-day Marathon Des Sables travels some 140 miles across the southern Moroccan Sahara desert.

Batchen, who has been running in the ultramarathon since 2000 and has competed a total of four times, most recently crossed the finish line on March 31, taking 88th out of 767 total racers, the top American in the event.

His best finish was 30th the first time he ran the race, then he placed 61st, and last year he was in the top 80 when he was forced to drop out after he tripped on a rock and fell, re-injuring his shoulder. Although his receding finishes would seem to suggest that Batchen has been slipping, he's made other accomplishments helping to

organize racers that he said makes up for his slower times.

Batchen, 37, and his wife, Lisa Smith-Batchen, 46, who was the top women's racer in 1999, are owners of Dreamchasers Outdoor Adventure Club LLC. Although Lisa was unable to race this year, Jay acted as liaison to the 61 Americans, Canadians, Australians and Kiwis that signed up for the ultramarathon through Dreamchasers.

Jay said this year was difficult because his wife wasn't there, and because he had to organize so many racers without her help.

"People are always looking to you, asking questions, wondering what to bring and how to pack," said Batchen who organized the hotels and flights and helped organize people's packs before the race. "The emails I got this week saying 'thank you' makes it all worth while," said Batchen.

The Marathon Des Sables, or Marathon of the Sands, is most inter-

esting because the route changes every year and is not revealed to racers until the day before the start. Racers also must carry everything they need for seven days, aside from water and shelter, which are provided at each checkpoint.

"It's mentally and physically exhausting," said Batchen, "You don't sleep."

In between each stage area, racers rest in groups of seven in a two-sided open-air tent, with 800 other people camped all around, in the middle of the cold desert, with the wind howling.

"Ear plugs should be mandatory," said Batchen.

During the race, desert temperatures reached up to 115 degrees Fahrenheit during the day and down to the mid-30s at night. When running through the Sahara, Batchen wore Smart Wool socks, a trail shoe by Brooks called the Cascadia, and custom Gators made by Jackson Hole High School teacher Lori Clark Erickson to keep the sand out.

For people who don't have adequate gators, or who choose not to wear them, the sand infiltrates their shoes and causes blisters, which can ruin their race.

"Newbalance, who sponsored the race, gave out free gators," said Batchen, "but they ripped. Lori's are foolproof. They're reliable, durable and breathable."

Batchen says he averages eight-to 10-minute miles on the marathon. To train, he runs in ankle-deep snow, which he claims is a good simulation of Saharan sand. To simulate the heat, he does push-ups and sit-ups in the sauna to "get the heat under his skin." After the race, Batchen went to the nearest city, Ouarzazate, ate two large bowls of pasta, two loafs of bread and two large pizzas.

"They have really good pizza in Ouarzazate," he said.

As they say, you don't know unless you go.