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MONDAY • April 16, 2001

MARATHON OF THE SANDS

Adventurer Paul Hewitson of Decatur ran 152 miles across the unforgiving Sahara in the toughest race in the world . . .

Michelle Hiskey - Staff
Monday, April 16, 2001

Paul Hewitson's every step sunk into the sands of the Sahara Desert, sometimes up to his calves. A coating of what looked like white pollen covered his body and backpack, salt that had evaporated from his skin in the course of running almost 50 miles across a desolate area of Morocco.

Back home in Decatur, Hewitson thrives in the heat. He roofs houses in the heart of the summer and drives a car without air-conditioning. But the triple-digit African temperatures made his fists swell up like balls at the end of his arms. The sun warmed his water bottle so much that a few squirts instantly cooked Ramen noodles for his lunch.

He had been running for almost 12 hours, and day turned into night on this, the fourth day of the 152-mile Marathon des Sables, considered the hardest footrace in the world. In his 20-pound backpack, Hewitson carried everything he needed to survive: emergency flares, an anti-venom kit in case of snake bites, dried food, his last ration of water for the day --- and a rock to give to his son Gavin, 5.

Ahead of him, fellow runners with glowsticks bobbed like fireflies. In a deep zone of exhaustion, fighting delusions not unlike those of altitude-sick climbers near the top of Mount Everest, Hewitson's most lucid thought centered on why in the world he had spent \$5,000 to go to this extreme, when he could have simply taken his family to watch him run in today's Boston Marathon. He thought of his wife, Cheryl Corrado, and the baby they expect in July.

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"Life is so short," Corrado said in support of her husband. "People should pursue what they want."

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Hewitson, disoriented, kept telling himself he was close to the finish. As long as he stayed ahead of the camels at the rear of the field, he wouldn't be disqualified.

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He gulped his remaining water and tried to keep going.

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A mix of danger and legend

THURSDAY
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Hewitson, 37, can pinch an inch easily around his gut, courtesy of his affection for good ales. At 5-foot-8 and 155 pounds, his deep-set eyes and dark hair suggest a young Dudley Moore, an extrovert with a deprecating sense of humor and lots of friends.

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As a teenager in New Zealand, Hewitson discovered his natural ability to run long distances, often traveling the 16 miles home from his high school on foot. He crossed the globe partying at World Cup soccer matches before settling in Atlanta in 1993.

SATURDAY
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His friends lionize his iron constitution. After one bachelor party that ended at 5 a.m., Hewitson slept for an hour then rose for a 15-mile jaunt. When insomnia strikes, he gets up and runs to Buckhead and back. Three years ago, he started running marathons and almost broke 3 hours in his first attempt, a 7-minute-per-mile pace.

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"I don't think he has a pain threshold at all," said fellow marathoner Karen Dixon.

"Some people have got to get motivated to get out there," Hewitson said. "I have to get motivated to stop."

communities

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Pushing his body doesn't seem as difficult to him as weathering family crises, including his wife's breast cancer, his son's medical problems stemming from being born with three kidneys, and his own malignant skin cancer removed from his arm last fall.

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The same month as his surgery, he searched for a new test, "something most people would find inconceivable," he said. That's when he saw an ad for the April 2-8 Marathon des Sables.

French for "Marathon of the Sands," the Marathon des Sables offered true endurance tests and personal dramas 15 years before "Survivor" captured prime-time viewers. Runners must submit an EKG to enter the weeklong set of races across dunes, some rising as high as a 22-story building. Each runner is limited to 2 gallons of water a day, most of it dispensed at night for cooking and bathing. No rain has fallen there for several years.

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One runner got lost in a sandstorm and turned up nine days later, and 44 pounds lighter, in Algeria. After the Persian Gulf War almost canceled the 1991 race, organizers made it clear that the route would be changed in case of "armed conflict (or) invasion of any form." Their insurance policy guarantees funeral expenses and the return of any runner's body to the home country.

To attract media attention and help the less fortunate, the race raises money

to help the desert people with water supplies. Runners often choose other charities, too. Hewitson decided to enter and run to raise money for an AIDS hospice in Puerto Rico.

Trying to train for a race he had never seen, he set a goal of finishing in the top 30.

Blasting heat and bare feet

In November, Hewitson began running up to 120 miles a week, most of it with a weighted pack. He carried it the entire Atlanta Marathon. His friends laughed when he pulled bricks or pieces of steel out of it.

His training also included running on a treadmill 2 1/2 hours a day, wearing heavy clothing, with three heaters and his furnace cranking the heat up to 100 degrees. He wore no shoes to callus his feet, and six toenails fell off. worked out on a stair stepper to build his quads for the sand.

He collected his gear: trail running shoes 1 1/2 sizes too big to allow for his feet to swell, and at his wife's insistence, a long-sleeved shirt and sunscreen. For his head, a flapped cap and sunglasses. To save weight, his only cooking utensil was a fork.

Hewitson raised almost \$8,000 for the hospice. But he was less sure of what he would get out of this extreme adventure. The only thing he knew for certain was that he needed to return with a souvenir for his son Gavin. "I promise to bring you something from the desert," Hewitson told him before he left.

Sand, blisters and beauty

The marathon's route is a secret until just before the race, and this year's was the longest ever: 152.3 miles over dunes that sometimes felt like quicksand.

Hewitson could barely cover a mile in 12 minutes. At times he felt as if he were running in place. But he kept going. Typically, one out of every six entrants quits. Only the Moroccans glide over this terrain, and win every year.

Hewitson looked everywhere for footholds, and for a cactus or something he might lop off to show his son. Anything but sand as a souvenir.

On the second day, in the midst of running 21.2 miles, he spied a rust-colored, triangular rock, sharp as a cookie cutter and with a bottom that looked melted. Gavin loves rocks. The fist-sized stone weighed half a pound, but it was so cool Hewitson stuck it in his pack and tossed out some powdered Gatorade, PowerBars and sunblock.

Because of the heat, he felt so sick to his stomach that he had to force himself to eat the 2,000 minimum calories a day required to stay in the race. And the sun lotion made his skin so clammy he wasted water wiping himself off.

At night, the runners slept in huge tents. Hewitson, the only runner without a thin air mattress, made his bed on a flattened cardboard box and tried to stay warm in the sub-50 degree temperatures. His hips were sore but his

feet held up. On other runners, he saw blisters so raw and deep that a white shadow of bone showed through. One runner dressed his blisters with duct tape. Dehydration affected many, but as long as a runner took only one IV he could stay in the race.

Hewitson saw other things he'll never forget. After the tents were removed at daybreak, the runners rose from the desolate landscape like survivors of a nuclear holocaust. The stunning light across the desert glowed a magnificent orange at sundown. He marveled at the team of 16 people pushing two children in special wheelchairs across the sand, to raise awareness of their disability. The deep poverty of the desert people also moved him.

The runners bonded. From a variety of professions, they sought escape, entertainment, soul-searching. They were kindred spirits for Hewitson, who recalled the ease with which his new friends talked about trekking to the North Pole or their next frontier. "I didn't think that there were that many nutty people," he said later.

As the race went on, it was no longer everyone for themselves. As more people dropped out, it was everyone against the elements.

Water from a stranger

The cruelest stage is midweek, where runners have 40 hours to cover 50 miles. Near the end of that was when Hewitson found himself in a daze, without a drop to drink and no clue as to the distance to the finish. His mood turned from frustration to desperation. He started walking, but wasn't sure he could continue without more water.

A British runner passed Hewitson, who begged him for water. Risking a penalty, the Briton gave him a cup full. They walked the remaining two miles together.

After a long rest, Hewitson burst into the lead in the next-to-last stage, a typical marathon distance of 26.2 miles. He ended up finishing 10th, his best segment of the week.

But race organizers said he failed to leave a water bottle at the designated check point. They assessed him a one-hour penalty, crushing his joy and hopes of finishing in the top 30.

Discouraged, he finished the Marathon des Sables in 48th place and filed a protest, saying he didn't intentionally abandon the water. But it is doubtful that will go anywhere.

Back home

Over a cold Samuel Adams beer and numerous refills of ice water last Hewitson said he mostly feels relieved to return from Morocco in reasonable health, save for blisters on his mouth and feet and shoulder pain from his pack. He's five pounds lighter, but can still grip a love handle and laugh.

His friends who have run multiple marathons greeted him as a returning god. "I get enjoyment out of people asking me how I get enjoyment out of it," he said. "Fun is not the word. It's really the most enriching experience outside of having a family and the turmoil of surviving cancer, the most

unforgettable experience of my life so far."

He's already planning on a 100-mile race in June and aims to enter the Eco-Challenge, a multistage adventure race, in the next few years. He may hook up with some of his desert companions. The Marathon des Sables "cemented for me the direction I want to go in, to experience something like this again," Hewitson said. "To face another challenge, not something just in normal life."

And the rock he gave to Gavin, who liked it so much he took it to school the next day for show and tell.

His dad got back up on a roof, dreaming of his next adventure.

> ON THE WEB: Two sites that cover the race: www.darbaroud.com

www.sandmarathon.com

"There is the sand. It might look like a fairy tale (and) make you think of Aladdin's lamp and magic carpet rides. From a safe distance the dunes are your friends, like a supple body of a woman with beautiful golden skin. But up close and personal, she's less friendly. You sink into her skin and she buries you. It is soft and dry and flying, as ubiquitous as the air. It fills your nose and fills your socks and you are breathing glass and walking on sandpaper."

--- From coverage of this year's race on www.sandmarathon.com

2001 MARATHON DES SABLES

Location: Southern Sahara Desert near Ouazazate, Morocco.

Stage 1, April 2, 15.6 miles: The "toughest footrace in the world" starts with 635 competitors from 30 countries, 36 of them American. Temperatures are already over 100 degrees. Paul Hewitson of Decatur stands 29th after this relatively easy day.

Stage 2, April 3, 21.25 miles: "Dune Day." Even the hardest-core runners manage barely a 12-minute mile over the Mezzuqa dunes, the largest in Morocco, some 220 feet high. Seven runners drop out, most because of extreme fatigue. Fighting cramps, Hewitson vomits at a checkpoint but keeps going.

Stage 3, April 4, 23.75 miles: Sandstorms force runners to wear turbans and sunglasses or goggles. Lack of water and exhaustion are two reasons almost every runner, including Hewitson, suffers diarrhea.

Stage 4, April 5-6, 51.25 miles: Runners have 40 hours to finish, and some cross the finish line in the dark, crying. This is Hewitson's moment of greatest desperation. By this point, 33 more runners drop out, making 57 withdrawals.

Stage 5, April 7, 26.2 miles: A marathon on the hottest day. Black flies swarm. Hewitson leads for the first 1.5 miles, ends up finishing 10th in his best stage. But he is crushed by a one-hour penalty.

Stage 6, April 8, 13.1 miles: Moroccan Lahcen Ahansal wins with a total time of 18 hours, 42 minutes and 10 seconds. A discouraged Hewitson runs his worst leg and finishes 48th in a time of 30 hours, 45 minutes, 51 seconds.

Total mileage: 152.3 miles.

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