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FITNESS

Outside magazine, July 1998

Where Have All the Wise Men Gone?

Certainly not into the Sahara, not to race 142 miles in seven days, not to broil beneath a 120-degree sky, not to seek glory in the Marathon des Sables, the world's most brutal run. Which leaves us a question: Just who are these fools?

By Hampton Sides

Here they come now, the quitters. Hobbling into camp in the desert twilight, wincing, tears pooling in their eyes. Moving forward, just barely, in a solemn, arthritic procession. The bandaged. The damned. The quitters.

Some walk sideways, others backward, others on the toe-tips of their Nikes — searching for gaits that won't aggravate the blisters deep inside their gauzed feet. One runner from Spain is in so much agony that a friend has to carry him into camp. Another, a blind racer, his red-tipped cane tapping the ground, is led by a badly limping friend. A soldier from England staggers by: "I couldn't stop crying all night, mate. It was bloody awful!"

The sun plinks out as abruptly as a heat lamp as it disappears behind a bulwark of dunes, and in the sweet, sanguinary light, they keep coming, this dirty straggle of gimps: The weak carrying the halt, the lame leading the blind.

On the announcement board in the center of camp, the French racing commissionaire has stapled a list of all the runners who've dropped out of the Marathon des Sables as of late afternoon, on

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the fourth day of this grim scramble across 142 miles of the Moroccan Sahara. The roster has now bloomed to more than three dozen after today's 47-mile slog, the longest and most infernal of the race's six stages. These casualties come courtesy of heat exhaustion, severe dehydration, or that Saharan specialty, personal psychodrama. The singularly Gallic penchant for tragic diction deepens the humiliation: ABANDONS, the official list proclaims for all to see, and then, in Nixonian English: QUITTERS.

Organizers of the annual Marathon des Sables (Marathon of the Sands) tout it as "the world's toughest footrace," and who's to argue? Founded in 1986, it was the brainchild of Patrick Bauer, a former concert promoter from Troyes, France, who two years earlier had gone on an epic walkabout across 200 miles of the Algerian Sahara. Afterward, in a brilliant stroke of sadocommercialism, he decided to share the pain with others. Considered one of the first modern adventure races, the Marathon des Sables requires running more than five marathons in a single week, in 120-degree heat. It's seven days of sand devils and wheeling vultures, an event so frankly ominous that the entry form tacks on what it calls a "corpse repatriation fee." (Miraculously, only one participant has perished in the race's 13-year history, a Frenchman in his early twenties who expired on the sands in 1988 after suffering a massive heart attack.)

As you run, then march, then crawl, and finally hallucinate your way across the bleached solitudes, you're required to carry all of your own supplies: food, flashlight, sleeping bag, compass, knife, snakebite kit, distress flare, salt tablets, whistle, and inexplicably, ten safety pins. Only water is provided, at the miserly rate of nine liters per day. Outside assistance of any kind is forbidden. Unless you're lucky enough to collapse from sunstroke, in which case you're treated to a complimentary IV and chopper ride back to camp — only to find your name then pitilessly displayed with those of the other malingerers and dropouts.

In the Marathon des Sables, however, malingering has its virtues, and foremost among them is fine dining. In an effort to keep their pack weight down, the racers eat extremely low on the hog: military MREs, ramen noodles, boeuf de Mountain House. At night, they sullenly spoon their freeze-dried gruel and nod off, sleeping nine to a tent in a dark, tattered encampment reminiscent of *Spartacus*.

But once they elect to withdraw, the runners are allowed to crawl under the checkered tape that separates their squalid township from the more genteel wing of camp and break bread with the rest of us — marathon officials, journalists, medics, and other prosperous followers of the race. For us, the dining has been sublime. Desert? What desert? Each evening we've lounged on

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Berber carpets in billowy dining tents, listening to jazz and supping on foie gras, ratatouille, chocolate mousse, lamb tagine, paella, even crˆme br“l‰e, and always with our choice of cold lager or a decent cabernet. At times, when the wind is blowing in a certain direction, the savory smells of our dinner waft over to the Spartacans, cruelly teasing their nostrils.

The racers who dropped out after today's 47-mile crucible are soon to join our happy crew. But wait, not so fast — before they can reach the steaming smorgasbord, they first must shamble past us as we lounge like emperors at our low tables. It's a dreadful promenade to have to make, a walk of shame, and as I watch them lurching into our midst, I almost feel a stab of pity. Then, as I dig into my crˆme br“l‰e, I remind myself of a salient fact: These people paid upward of $3,000 to come out here, on their vacations no less, to suffer like this. An ordeal is what they wanted. An ordeal is what they got. And in their agony, I feel certain, they're enjoying the time of their lives.

AT DAWN ON THE OPENING DAY OF THE RACE, as the sun pops up bright but not yet brutal over the ruler-straight horizon, a crew of Berber hired hands collects trash and dismantles camp, stopping at one point to kneel in the direction of Mecca. A baby scorpion skitters out from a bedroll. Tied to a nearby tent is a bleating lamb, soon to be kabob. We're encamped near a little sand flea of a village called Timganine, a nine-hour Land Rover trip across the snowy Atlas Mountains from Marrakech. The start of the race is still a few hours away, but the runners are already stretching, checking their hydration systems, taking sober last inventories of their backpacks to see what else can be jettisoned. Walking up and down the long rows of black burlap tents is a little like skimming the dial of a shortwave radio — a snippet of German, a little Swedish, a few lines of Chinese, some Irish brogue. But primarily Fran‡ais. Most of the race officials and about a third of the 495 participants are French. From top to bottom the event has a heavy Gallic flavor, with a certain high romanticism about the "meaning" of the desert that's at once quaint and insufferable.

As the runners continue their nervous fussing — downing salt tablets, attaching race numbers, taping up their backs and nipples to lessen chafing — I'm drawn to an oasis of serenity. Maurice Daubard, a 68-year-old Frenchman of fiercely proud bearing, is folded in the lotus position, meditating. A tall, wizened figure with cold gray eyes, Daubard hails from Moulins, where he's a famous ascetic, a practitioner of sundry martial arts, and a yogi. For years he's been plunging himself into freezing rivers or sitting in a tub of ice for hours, breathing deeply, inuring his will. Extreme cold, you might say, is his medium.

So what's he doing here, I ask him, in the furnace of the Earth?

He scrutinizes me. "I have learned to master the cold," he says. "Now I must master the heat." Daubard is ready for a change of

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But why? What's the point of this suffering? Daubard makes a tiny purse-lipped exhalation."Suffering," he says, "is everywhere. It is the human condition. Yet suffering has much to teach. I am not a runner. I am missing one lung, from boyhood tuberculosis. But I will make it to the finish line. You will see. Every cell of my body has been conditioned for this race."

Daubard is unique in his clarity of purpose. Not many contestants are willing to admit they've come to the Sahara expressly to torture themselves down to the cellular level. Asked on their entry forms, "Why do you participate," the racers assembled here convey motivations that range from the strange to the salacious.

"Because this is the mother of all events."

"The longest way is the shortest one."

"Because this is the desert."

"I'm looking for myself."

"To fly my soul."

A Frenchman: "Bread is the food of body, adventure is the food of mind." An Italian: "Behind the sand dunes, you can meet wonderful girls." An Englishman: "Because I am mad."

Indeed, this race is a kind of gauntlet for those who possess the flagellant gene. We have a blind man from France who likes to box. We have a group of seven American runners who've hatched a plan for later this year to run seven marathons on seven continents in seven days, riding to each on a masseuse-equipped Learjet. There's the guy from Britain who's been conditioning himself by running on a treadmill in a sauna. There's the Sicilian cop, Mauro Prosperi, an Olympic gold medalist in modern pentathlon who got seriously lost in a sandstorm while running the Marathon des Sables four years ago. For nine days, Prosperi wandered the desert eating raw bats and sucking wet-wipes. Eventually he turned up, 200 kilometers off course, 30 pounds lighter, and on the verge of liver failure.

"It was a very bad and terrible experience," Prosperi tells me, fingering the gold chain on his bare chest. "And yet it was a great one."So now he's going to try again. "I am a competitor," he proclaims, "and I love the desert."

With the start approaching, the runners turn to their race maps. Only yesterday were they handed these all-important "Road Books," detailing each day's route. (The course of the Marathon des Sables is altered every year.) According to the Road Book, today's run will be short, a mere warm-up jaunt of 15 miles. It won't be without its hardships, however. "In the event of a serious sandstorm," the Road Book says, "do not panic. Don't use your flare gun. NO HEROICS PLEASE."

Perhaps it was this portentous language that pushed Alan Syder, a British runner from Norwich, over the edge. Before the starter's gun even went off this year, Syder became the event's first quitter. "This race just gets the better of you," was all he could say before hitching a ride back to Marrakech. He should know: Syder dropped out of the 1996 race, too, though he at least ran four days then. For him, the Marathon des Sables is a cruel chimera, a thing he can neither seize nor entirely let go of.

The gothic atmospherics don't affect everyone, however. American Keith Baker looks downright blithe. A computer technician from New Mexico, Baker is affixing a pair of gaiters to his shoes to keep the sand out, while a set of white balls nestles in the sand at his side. "For me, running for days gets to be too dull," he says. "So I like to jog and juggle at the same time. I'm a joggler."

Everywhere, the skinny marathoners and ultrarunners stretch. But there also are schlubs in our midst — stout volkwalkers curious to see if they can just survive this thing. "I'm three or four bowling balls overweight," Bob Benorden, a big, pale NASA computer programmer from Houston tells me cheerfully. "I haven't trained for this. I have no idea what to bring in my backpack. I'm kind of winging it, if you want to know the truth." He shrugs. "So I'll just walk the whole way."

Shouldering his elephantine pack, he strides purposefully to the start gate, which is now thronged with racers. A few Tuareg musicians are playing flutes and goatskin fiddles while two hired nomads stage a mock swordfight with ornamental sabers.

Patrick Bauer hops to the roof of a Land Rover, brandishes a microphone, and begins the long countdown. The Spaniards start singing football songs. The Italians perform Hail Marys. The Japanese become silent and grave.

Bauer yells, "Trois...deux...un...allez!" Then they're off, screaming hordes in Supplex sunblock shirts and Foreign Legion

hats, stumbling into the heat-shimmer and out across the mighty ergs and oueds of the Sahara.

Somewhere in the middle of the pack, just above the dusty stampede, three balls dance in the air.

WHATEVER THE MARATHON DES SABLES is, it's not a spectator sport. The Saharan backdrops can be striking, to be sure, but mostly this is an internalized event, the story of wills overriding the vetoes of feet. Yet it draws journalists from around the world — the BBC, French news crews, even Soldier of Fortune magazine. We dutifully follow the race in Land Rovers, gawking at the runners, admiring their constitutions, grateful that it's them out there and not us. At times we feel like voyeurs, watching a very slow and tedious car wreck.

For hours and days, the great exodus carries on, moving with mirthless conviction under the not-so-sheltering sky. The race is making a jagged easterly crease across the brow of the Sahara, passing close to the disputed border with Algeria. Along the way, the runners march over ridges the size of battleships and down indistinguishable corrugated dunes. If you look at a map, you can see that there are a few villages scattered about here, hidden in shaded oases or along the occasional green wadi. But we never seem to encounter them. Since our first night's bivouac, we haven't had contact with any locals, except for an old Berber man who wandered by on a mangy burro and blinked at us in disbelief. In a sense, this race is so insulated from Saharan culture, it could be run anywhere that's hot and spare and isolated — on 495 treadmills, say, in 495 saunas.

On the third day, while we're waiting for the racers to arrive at our checkpoint, I climb to the top of Mount Tibert, a thousand-foot spine of black granite that erupts from the sand about 45 miles into the course. It's the race's first real obstacle. Somehow the runners will have to get themselves up and over this brutally steep escarpment, following a narrow, sandy path that leads through a pass. From Tibert's rocky summit, I can look back for miles and see the remnants of our tabernacle city. A curl of black smoke rises from a pyre of camp garbage.

Now I also can see the column of runners heading this way, a long, steady march of fire ants stretching out over 15 miles or more. It's a vista at once comical and profound, all these grunting, numbered forms inching across the void, following splotches of fluorescent paint slopped onto the rocks.

From this vantage, it becomes at least a little easier to appreciate the race's aesthetic, to begin to see why the runners use words like "purifying" and "cathartic." Of all the hostile climes in which to race, I can't imagine any that reduce everything to such stark fundamentals. The epic blond monotony of the terrain drives the mind back on itself. There's nothing to distract. Everything is stripped, essential. And what does a person think about when his interior and exterior landscapes are so reduced? Over the past few days I've been asking the runners this, and the answer has been always the same: "I think about the next step." They seem to take comfort in such simplicity. For most of them, reaching the finish line is less an act of athleticism than of faith — faith in the ritual of marching, faith that completion will redeem all hardships along the way.

As the line of racers draws nearer, the silence of the desert is punctured by the steady kwoish-kwoish of water bottles sloshing. Mauro Prosperi, the Sicilian cop, eventually limps by, in obvious pain. He's stubbed a toe so severely that he's torn off the nail. At the next checkpoint, he'll have to drop out. But others press steadfastly on. I spot Bob Benorden, the mule from Houston, his eyes fixed on his feet. Behind him, among the stragglers, I hear someone singing: "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see."

ON THE FOURTH DAY COMES THE KILLER: the diabolical double-marathon stage that will produce so many abandons. When we drive over the route in the glare of forenoon, my impression of the race shifts from "this is nuts" to "surely people will die." The distances between checkpoints seem chasmic, and somewhere along the way, the mood of the landscape appears to change from austere indifference to out-and-out menace.

It seems almost impossible that people could run in this great convection oven, but the heat isn't fazing the race leaders. In the vanguard are a pack of dauntless Italians, two Moroccans, and a Russian named Andrei Derksen who trains in the blazing heat of Siberia and has won the Marathon des Sables three times. All lope along easily.

About ten miles into the route, however, travail begins. I spot Maurice Daubard, the ice-water mystic, and he's in sorry shape, barefoot, limping, his shoes slung over his shoulders. Stoic that he is, he tries not to let on. "I feel stronger with every step," he assures me. "I am one with the earth. The desert is my teacher now."

We stop at a checkpoint that, with a rare nod toward mercy, has been set up in a shady grove of tamarisk trees. The race, especially today's stage, is taking its toll, and the casualties are streaming into the MASH unit. A Frenchman is delirious. A guy from Hong Kong has a gruesome case of crotch burn. Others are being treated for sprained ankles, exhaustion, a fractured wrist, and an all-too-common condition that might be described as "heel tartare."

Bauer drives up, wearing Ray-Bans and a natty vest proclaiming him Directeur de Course. He mixes amiably with the runners, grimacing at the IVs and the lanced blisters, but he's an affable torturer: He doesn't have the stomach for their suffering. He gives the runners a thumbs up, says "Bon chance!" and drives off in a cloud of dust.

We head on to the next bivouac site, not expecting the leaders to come in for hours, not expecting too many runners to come in at all. I swing by the bulletin board, where the race officials have tacked up dozens of E-mail messages from the runners' friends and family members. "You are an awesome piece of machinery. You must actually like this stuff!" "Next time choose something a little shorter. Love, Debra."

Repairing to my tent, I am just beginning to doze off when there's an unexpected eruption of shouting and applause. Dashing outside, I behold an amazing sight: Mohamed and Lahcen Ahansal, two brothers from Morocco, are sprinting — *sprinting!* — into camp, weeping with joy, holding hands as they cross the day's finish line. The Ahansals have just done something almost eerie. They've covered 47 desert miles in six hours and ten minutes, in 120-degree heat, with rucksacks on their backs. The mood around camp is one of stunned awe. It seems we've witnessed the birth of some new athletic creature, a mutant with a different sort of wiring, different feet, Prestone coursing through its veins. The Ahansals, who were born and raised in Zagora, a Berber desert town of 15,000 people not far from here, are now 35 minutes ahead of their nearest competition for the day, and about 30 minutes ahead overall.

While the Ahansals accept congratulations and sip their water ration, other runners trickle in, a lonely procession that drags on well into the night. The racers have until nightfall tomorrow to finish this stage before they're disqualified. But the longer they're out there, the slower they go, and the slower they go, the more they bake.

Around midafternoon on the race's only rest day, I walk over to meet the Ahansals, who are in a tent on the far side of the bivouac. Conditions in the runners' encampment have deteriorated by now from bad to deplorable. Flies swarm over bandaged feet. Runners claw through their rucksacks, ditching tomorrow's food, trading an empty stomach for a lighter pack. "Give you a mac-and-cheese for a Marlboro," somebody says.

Against this backdrop, the Ahansals look like boulevardiers, carefree and rested. Mohamed even went out on a little joy run this morning, taking in the scenery. Lahcen somehow has found the energy for courtship. He's putting the moves on Anke Molkenthin, a statuesque German runner who's in fifth place among the women — despite a fractured arm. As in any tiny village, the rumors are flying. Death camp amour!

The brothers' success wasn't unanticipated, but no one expected them to be quite so dominant. Lahcen, at 28, is returning champion, having last year dethroned Russia's Andrei Derksen. (Derksen dropped out only yesterday, overcome by exhaustion.) During most of the year, Lahcen works in his family's palm groves, shinnying up trees, collecting dates. His rucksack is full of the things, the Berber equivalent of the PowerBar. But it's younger brother Mohamed, 25, who's in the lead, with a cumulative time of 12:48:46, about three minutes ahead of Lahcen. A soft-spoken man who makes a living leading tourists into the Atlas Mountains, Mohamed hopes to use this event as a springboard to greater racing glory: He'd like to represent Morocco in the marathon at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney. But finding sponsorship and a first-rate coach will be tough. There's no tradition of running in Berber culture; there is, if anything, an anti-tradition. Around here, running is considered just about the stupidest thing you can do. "When we were little boys," Mohamed says, "we used to take off running across the sand. People would laugh. They would say, 'There they go, the crazy brothers.'"

On the other hand, the crazy brothers are within two days of reaping almost unimaginable rewards. The first-place purse here is about $5,000, second place, $2,500, in a land where the average person earns maybe $1,200 a year. The Ahansals, I realize — perhaps alone among the racers — have no doubt whatsoever about what this race means for them. "At the souk," Mohamed tells me when I ask why he and his brother started to run at all, "our friends would try to persuade us to steal pieces of fruit. They knew no one could catch us. It is good, you see, to be fast."

THE FINISH LINE HAS BEEN ERECTED IN the town square of Rissani, a warren of mud and concrete pitched on the edge of the world's largest palm grove, the Oases du Ziz. As Tuareg music blares, the king of Morocco scowls down from a portrait set on an easel. Our army escort is setting up barricades and wielding billy clubs, keeping the street urchins at bay.

Sipping mint tea, I mill among the quitters. There are plenty. Yesterday, during the penultimate and relatively puny 26-mile stage, dozens of runners succumbed to accrued wear and tear. One racer took off at the gun, paced three steps, and pitched face-first into the sand.

To my dismay, Bob Benorden was also among yesterday's casualties. "I was coughing up something that I don't know *what* it was," he says as we wait for the leaders. Worried medics started an IV. Then they gave him another. And another after that. Rejuvenated, Bob stood up after his third, swaying only a bit, and prepared to re-enter the race. "But it turns out they have this rule," he explains sadly. "Two IVs and you're out."

Still, Bob is ready for an encore. He's already put down his deposit for next year's race. "I think I've figured this thing out," he says cheerfully. "I've just got to work on my hydration system."

There's a sudden eruption of cheers from the home crowd, and Mohamed Ahansal comes dashing in, his face burning with impish good cheer. He's covered the 142 miles of the Marathon des Sables in a cumulative time of 16 hours, 22 minutes. Accepting his medal from Bauer, he vaults up to the bandstand, where he waves the red flag of Morocco and performs handstands and back flips. Five consecutive marathons in the desert, and now he's walking on his hands. Big brother Lahcen comes speeding in 12 minutes later.

Then the rest start trickling in, their eyes pooling with tears, faces lit with ecstasy, the un-quitters. Over the course of several hours, 200, 300, 400 cross the finish line; a total of 432 out of the original 495. The runners accept their medals. They scream. They dance and they cry. But mostly they stare with beatific expressions, the proud, dazed look of communicants who've braved the pilgrimage to its redemptive end.

A few feet away from the main square, however, one runner's mood is black. Mauro Prosperi still can't believe he had to exit the race because of something so measly as a mangled toenail. The desert, it seems, has beaten him yet again, this time not with high drama — wandering lost in the wastelands — but with the banal. So Prosperi has the perfect response: "In the autumn," he says, "I will run the entire length of the Sahara, 5,000 kilometers, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Valley of the Kings." It's pain inflation. If seven days in the desert defeat you, try 100 instead. He stares at the far dunes, anxious, I suspect, to get started.

The race winds down, the last dogged finishers plod across the line. Around the square, there's both wild celebration and a small, niggling sense of anticlimax, of "so, this is it?" I'm watching the runners wander off to their buses, when a familiar, silver-maned figure catches my eye. Maurice! I didn't see him finish, and I feared he had joined the ranks of the quitters. But here he is now, the 68-year-old, one-lunged yogi, folded again into the lotus position, savoring a can of Coke. I want to commune with him, ask whether the desert taught him what he hoped it would, but he looks unapproachable in his moment of triumph. He's a million miles away, immersed in a tub of ice.

Hampton Sides, a former senior editor of Outside, *is the author of* Stomping Grounds *(Morrow), a book about American subcultures.*

Photographs by Dan Burn Forti

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