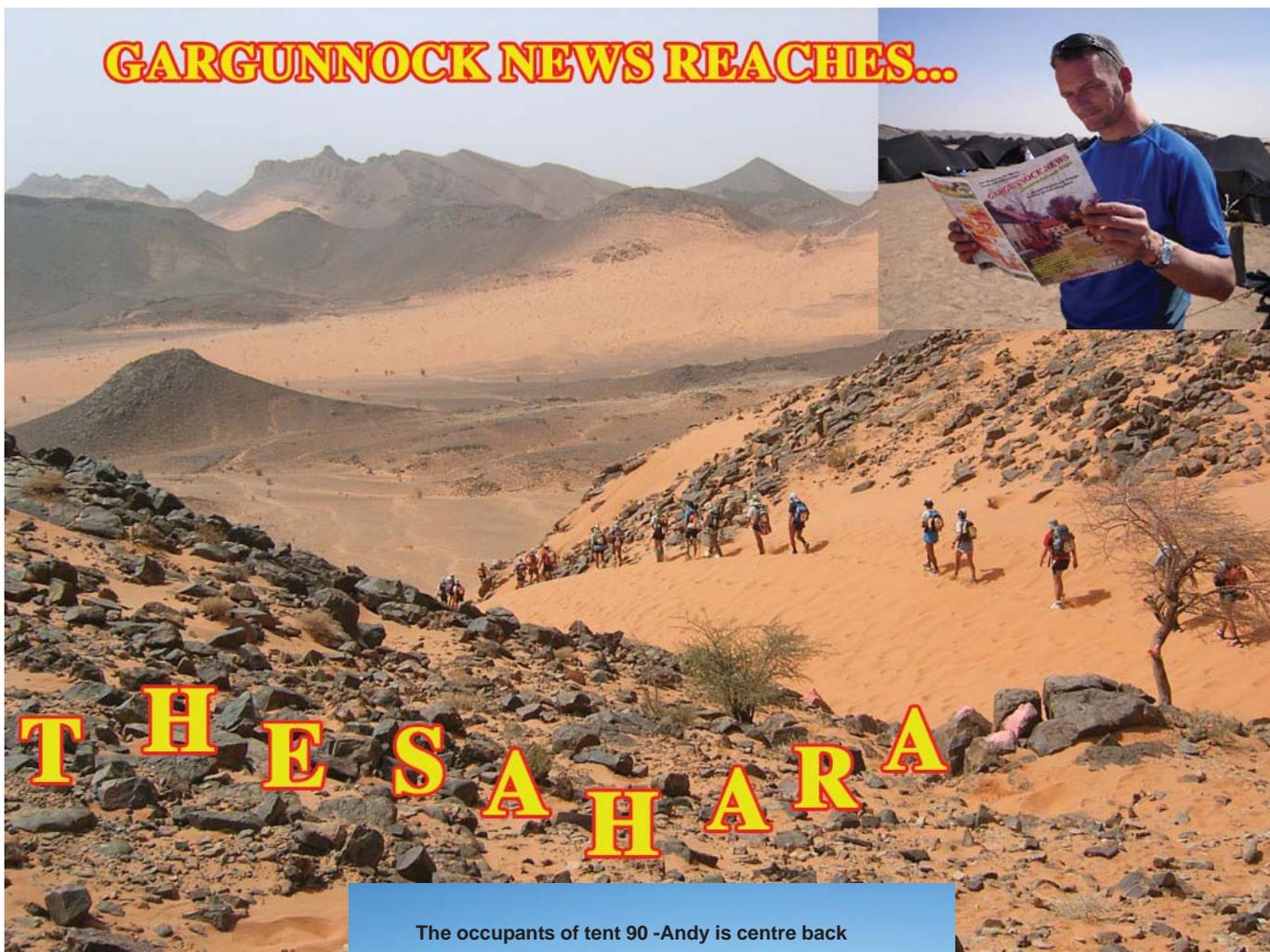


MARATHON DE SABLES

Imagine racing 150 miles on foot in the space of just 7 days in the blazing-hot Sahara desert, carrying your own tent, water and food and all for charity! Mad, dedicated or whatever, no less 799 Supermen did just that recently including Andy Simpson, Millbrae (with his Gargunock News, of course) Here is his story.

GARGUNNOCK NEWS REACHES...



The occupants of tent 90 -Andy is centre back

We'd arrived the day before into a tented city, a hundred black Berber tents stood in a ring while off to one side stood the support tents. Each one held eight and so it was that 'Tent 90', that's us, was born; a disparate group from all walks of life, (a big cat keeper, public school teacher and musician amongst them), but all with one aim – to complete the 20th Marathon des Sables – 155 miles, cross country, carrying all your own food and camping gear!

Day 1 - So there we were, on the start line, some sort of jazzy/salsa music playing from the loudspeakers.... then the countdown, 3...2...1...GO!!! People cheered and whooped and flashed by in multicoloured t-shirts and strange hats, rucksacks swaying, dust flying as the crowd poured from the start and swept over the plains towards the first Djebel (large hill). I looked at The Lion King, (the big-cat keeper, Peter), he looked at me and we started our



first steps of the 155-mile trip. Very slowly – well, it's a long way isn't it?

The heat peaked at about midday to about three in the afternoon and reached around 120 degrees, so it was a tad warm, I was glad I'd brought that cosy jumper I can tell you! The crowd slowly turned into a long winding snake that hugged the ground across the Djebel, sand dunes and gravel plain. I had paced myself to a run in the morning in the cool, a fast walk in the afternoon and then whatever energy I had left was sparingly used later to get me into the camp at the end of the first day's run

Every 6 miles or so there was a checkpoint run very efficiently where you replenished your water and sped on across the desert – well, a cigarette was vital also, and a chat to that nice chap who looks worse off than me, and it's such a nice day it



would be a shame to rush and, well, you just had to finally drag yourself out into the sun again guilty in the knowledge you had squandered vital minutes but happy you didn't feel like death any more.

I counted them out and I counted them all back in again – 'Tent 90' was complete after the first day, a day of beautiful scenery, long stretches of flat sand that went forever, white heat bouncing from the floor into your face, hot plastic tasting water, sweat crusting around your tee-shirt and shorts, swollen tongues, burned skin and blistered feet – what I needed right now was a chilli – seemed like a good idea when I'd bought about seven packs of it on a rainy day in Stirling. We brewed up water for tea and food, chatted (that's 'moaned a lot' to normal folks) and generally thought that the whole thing was terribly ill advised but really, actually, surprisingly, great fun.

Day two saw the same optimistic start...more desert terrain and heat. – but when we all finally met at Tent 90 portents of looming agony started to appear on the feet of most of the group – blisters.

Some made off to 'Doc Trotters', the Medical Support Team. When the guys hobbled back with half the soles of their feet missing I labelled them 'Doc Butchers' and never even walked/hobbled close to their tents for the duration, but I was lucky, three blisters during the whole event – I put it down to that chilli you know.

Day three was more of the same but distances were getting longer now and fatigue accumulated was starting to slow people down a little. I sort of plodded on as normal and managed to start to creep up the rankings, which was good for moral. several people were helicoptered away never to be seen again and many faster runners found the mountains hard work. Oh dear, what a shame.

At Tent 90 we had mail - emails from home were delivered to your tent – all mentioned beer (thanks all) and all encouraged and supported you and let you know that although you were alone with 799 loonies, you were, in fact, in many peoples thoughts.

I had about £2,000 for CHAS in sponsorship riding on this also, so really a combination of things kept your head down and your moral up, and a huge thanks to those that supported, it really was appreciated. Also appreciated was an hour of live opera with a string quartet laid on by Patrick as a surprise that night. No really, a string quartet was in full cry as the last of the runners came in under cover of darkness.

On day four people were a little slower again out of the traps, ahead of us was the 55 mile stage which promised to be a beast and was, hills, dunes, rocks, sand, day and night; already weak but luckily not too bad on the foot front, (some had got so bad they were now in flip-flops held on by duct-tape), and not too bad on the morale front, (I'd opened my small bottle of wine I'd been lugging around with me last night and my paperback was getting lighter by the page)

I plodded on, sunglasses replaced by head torches and heat replaced by cold. We all stumbled, winced, hobbled and dragged ourselves around to get to Tent 90 late in the evening. Peter and another weren't there and didn't appear until the next day – a tragic tale of torch batteries and exploding running shoes meant they'd spent the night out under the stars until day break, they settled down in the tent and we got the tea on for them. Tent 90 was coming together.

Day five was rest day – great I thought, so washed clothes with the precious water ration we had, brushed teeth, 'showered' with a bottle of water and generally got myself back together. I lay down to read and then was covered in sand, the wind picked up and just lashed sand over the camp, all day, all that night – we had to stay with our mouths covered and of course, my washing became even filthier. Great.

Day six was another marathon day and so off we went – buoyed by having got the big one out of the way but mindful that this wasn't over yet we ploughed on, I'd had a problem starting due to some tendonitis but slowly it eased off and I really didn't push things as I wanted to get to the Hotel bar under my own steam. Tent 90 was now an organised, streamlined and efficient machine; water on, firewood twigs gathered, tent was pegged and rocked down, tea bags shared out, food heated, fags rolled – well, just me, floor tidied and bed made all within a few hours.

Day seven! The last day, only a half marathon chaps, a walk in the park, a doddle, easy-peasy, there is even the last few kilometres on track!

I ran the whole way. Well, you have to don't you? Just flew around as well, just the thought of the condensation on the beer glass was enough for me to dig deep and 'give it stacks' as they say. In the event it turned out I came almost exactly half way – 404th which was very satisfying and even more surprising.

I crossed the line and was at once fulfilled, happy but also a little sad. It had been a great adventure with great company. About half an hour later Peter came in – 'I thought you were behind me' he gasped, 'why would I be there?' I asked rolling a cigarette and taking a swig of tea, we both laughed and shook hands. Like I say, a great adventure with great company.

We got to see the condensation on the beer glass at the hotel bar, still dusty, sweaty and smelly from the week away. For a moment it all seemed too clean, too sterile, too easy. That didn't last long though and we were soon into the restaurant, cleaning several plates of food at a time.

So If you've ever teetered on the brink I would say to do it. I'm no athlete and certainly no great runner but I got around and still, to this day, find bits of sand in my bags and emails from the rest of tent 90 in my mailbox.

But finally a big thanks to Lois for all her support and love which helped me get through the worst bits, like the opera and the chilli...!

Andy Simpson

The Marathon des Sables (Desert Marathon) was started in 1984 by a Frenchman, Patrick Baeur, who wanted to do a stage of the Paris-Dakar Car Rally on foot armed with nothing but 8 pints of water and a couple of pounds of dates! As it was about 150 miles in all you can see that he perhaps wasn't the full shilling!



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