

DELUGE IN THE DESERT

by Bryon Powell

When you sign up for the Marathon des Sables, you know you are signing up for an adventure. The nature of that adventure varies from year to year; in most years you can expect the desert heat to be the most significant weather-related aspect of the race. Not this year. Instead, a once-in-a-decade deluge reigned over the week-long adventure across the Moroccan Sahara.

MdS is typically a nine-day event - a Friday drive from Ouarzazate to the first campsite, or bivouac as they are called, a Saturday check-in and gear-check, and six stages run over the following seven days. This, the 24th MdS, began as usual with all the competitors boarding buses, but under atypically overcast skies. A light drizzle fell as our "five - six hour" drive began. That drizzle gradually intensified into torrential rain that lasted for hours. Midway through our journey an impassible river stopped the caravan in its tracks. After waiting for three hours for the river to recede, the buses attempted to cross a still-submerged bridge. We watched as the first bus fishtailed across then transferred all of our gear from the storage compartment below the bus to the passenger compartment before anxiously fording the river. Many a deity was invoked before, during, and after the successful crossing.

We finally pulled into the market in Erfoud after nearly 11 hours aboard the buses. Following another half-hour of uncertainty, we were informed that the first bivouac was under water and that all competitors would be staying in hotels. Such was the first leg of our adventure.

We awoke on Saturday to more rain, news that Saturday's "admin" day was delayed and that



PHOTO BY GEORGE VELASCO

Meghan Hicks, Bryon Powell and more dunes than you can imagine

the first stage was cancelled, and to rumors that the entire race might be cancelled. The day was spent trading additional rumors, eating heartily, cutting grams from our race packs, wandering Erfoud's markets in search of plastic sheeting, and getting to know our fellow competitors better - all useful endeavors save the speculating.

After one final night in hotels, competitors again boarded buses, this time bound for the starting line of stage one. While still miles away from the start we could see Erg Chebbi, the largest sand dunes in Africa. We would soon be crossing these mountains of sands, as approximately 15 of the day's 33 kilometers would be run across sand dunes. Perhaps distracted by the striking contrast of the large golden dunes beneath bluebird skies, nearly all competitors went far off course in the day's second dune section. Those few competitors who followed the actual course were awarded a time deduction for their route-finding abilities. American Meghan Hicks made herself known by being the third woman across the finish, while fellow American Michael Wardian finished seventh overall.

A yachtsman could have laid out stage two. In essence, it was a 36-kilometer triangle that started and finished at the first bivouac. The first side of the triangle was 15 km over dunes that sapped one's strength and prevented one from getting into any sort of rhythm. The second leg ran straight down a flat dirt road better suited for a road runner than a trail ultramarathoner. The triangle was completed on rolling double-track that led runners to a few kilometers of dunes

before they returned to the bivouac. With a third place stage finish, Hicks moved up to second place in the cumulative rankings. The flat and fast stage also suited Wardian's strengths, as he finished fifth on the day.

This year's road book described a 47-mile "long stage," which was already longer than most of the MdS's long stages. Much to the dismay of many competitors, the race director shocked everyone when at 8:00 p.m. on the evening before the long stage, competitors were informed that it would be 57 miles long - the longest stage in MdS history. With a second place finish on the long stage, Meghan remained second woman overall. Those who quickly completed stage three were rewarded with a full day of rest in the bivouac, while those runners using nearly all of the 34-hour time limit would have to return to the course for stage four with merely a night's rest.

At the end of the race, Mohamad Ahansal and Touda Didi repeated as the men's and women's overall champions. Meghan Hicks remained second woman - the highest placing by an American woman since Lisa Smith-Batchen won the women's title in 1999. Michael Wardian's eighth place finish is believed to be the best overall finish by an American. The Dreamchasers USA team of Michael Wardian, Ted Archer and Bryon Powell became the first American team to podium with their third place finish. Charles Cosman of the second place Eurosport team, was the top Canadian, in 16th place. Christine Lallier led the Canadian women. ■

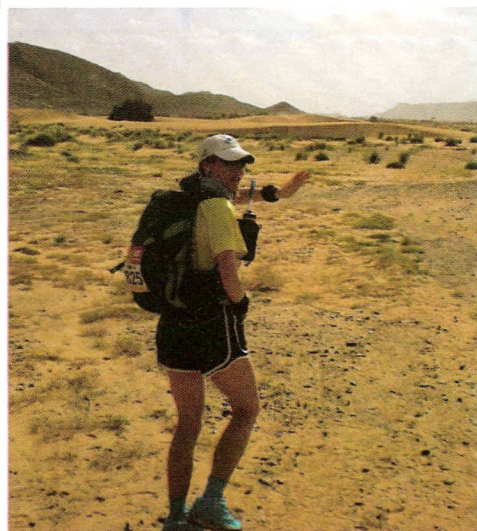


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Meghan Hicks on the "long stage" of 57 miles