

Chasing



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by Sandy McCallum

# Grant

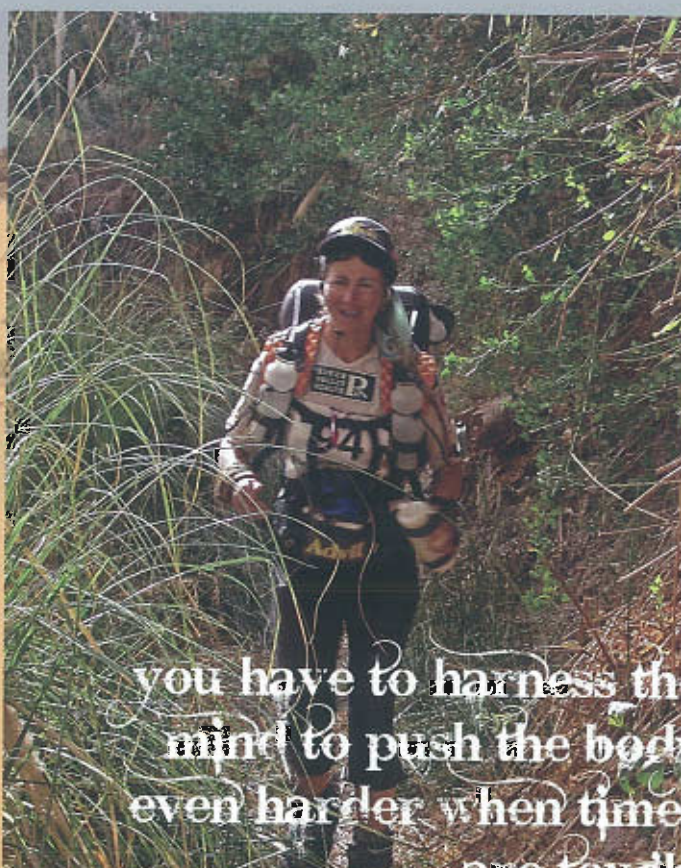
a quest to be the first woman to complete 6 desert ultramarathons in one year

runners acclimate to the heat and conditions. Then the illness came. Vomiting and subsequent dehydration. But I wasn't alone. It wasn't a case of over-exertion, or of dysentery. There was some sort of virus that swept through camp that year, it seemed as if there was someone in every tent that had the same illness. This included many race veterans, and people who race this event year after year do not usually have problems with dehydration.

With this illness weighing over me and many of the other competitors I headed out into the sand and wind for the second day of running. Slowly, very slowly. I knew there was something terribly wrong, because I was still desperately ill and very weak. I stopped at the first water checkpoint to seek medical aid and as soon as the doctor saw me, I was whisked over to the medical tent and put on an IV. As I watched the needle go into the vein on my arm and I could almost see my world record attempt drip out. How could this be happening? The first race in my world record attempt and I was sick as a dog on day two.

Missing out on the first race would be devastating. I knew I could continue on and perhaps finish this race, but I would be extremely trashed at the end of the week, and my next 150 mile race was only a month off. It would take me that long just to get my strength back after being that sick and pushing my body to the finish line. Not only that, but I would not be in top physical condition to start the next race. I lay back staring at the IV drip and then it occurred to me. If I quit now...I could start the world record with the next race, and then finish in Morocco at the Marathon des Sables. Rather than starting at the beginning of the year, and finishing at the end of the year...I could just pick myself up and start in the middle of May, and finish the following May, one year later. Once I thought this out, the decision was a given and with a renewed confidence I dropped out of the race.

It is never easy to make the decision to quit. But looking at the bigger picture, it was the only sensible option in order to complete my goal. I had learned through the years that there is always a way toward your goal...you just have to become flexible and learn to roll with the punches. And many of the other competitors I headed out into the sand and wind for the second day of running. Slowly, very slowly. I knew there was something terribly wrong, because I was still desperately ill and very weak. I stopped at the first water checkpoint to seek medical aid and as soon as the doctor saw me, I was whisked over to the medical tent and put on an IV. As I watched the needle go into the vein on my arm and I could almost see my world record attempt drip out. How could this be happening? The first race in my world record attempt and I was sick as a dog on day two.



Left: Grand Sahara. Right: Alencium Crossing.  
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Through some digging I managed to find a sponsor for this event, and was thankfully heading off to Hong Kong to begin my journey.

From Hong Kong I made my way to a city in Northwestern China called Urumqui. It was there I met up with the other competitors in the race and we made a nine hour bus trip into the desert. It was a long haul, but man, was it worth it. The Gobi Desert is one of the most beautiful areas on earth...a hidden jewel buried in China's interior.

There are so many facets to this desert. At times it felt like I was in the Black Forest in Germany. We had to climb up a giant mountain, and the forest on the way up was dark and damp. We passed through a very small village where time had stopped 100 years ago. The people were tending to their animals, and they had piles of manure in the back yards to burn for fuel. Some had huge dogs tied up in their yards, and I just prayed they wouldn't

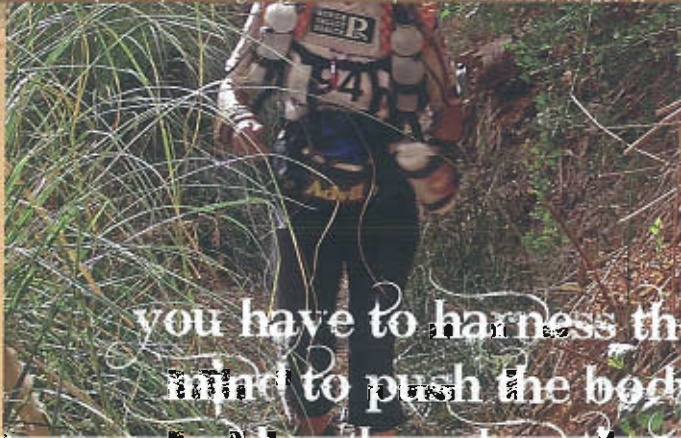
welcome relief from the heat down below. After gasping on the way up, I just let my legs fly on the way down, and was in first place for women at the bottom of the valley.

Then we made our way up a stream and through a slot canyon. It seemed like we were in Utah now. At the end of the day we were following a winding path and the camp was nowhere in sight. I was exhausted. All I wanted to do was lie down on the side of the path and go to sleep. But it is death to stop, or even think about stopping. It was only 5 minutes later that we made a sharp turn and the camp was right there in front of us.

The following day we had to go through some dunes, and it was like being back in the Sahara again. But there was a fierce storm, and the wind was savaging us. I ended up with a slightly lacerated eye that I couldn't see out of it. One of the camp volunteers made their way to a nearby town, and was able to find me a prescrip-

tion just around the corner, and still hadn't found a sponsor for it.

Finding sponsorship is extremely difficult. I was making a bit of money doing motivational speaking, and it paid the bills. But this world record attempt was going to cost about 60 thousand dollars, money that I just did not have. I thought that media coverage of my races would help me to find sponsors. I sent out hundreds of race packages to companies across the country. I had my main sponsor, Advil, and I had a small chiropractic company, River Valley Health, that had come forward to help me. But that money was gone after two races. I picked up a part-time job waitressing to help make ends meet. I would work until 8pm and midnight about three nights a week. But it was very tiring standing on my feet all those hours serving, and then getting up at 5am the next morning to train. And training for my upcoming event was a real head game. I didn't even know if I was going to come up with the money to go. It



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begin, an anonymous benefactor came forward and helped pay for the race. I was ecstatic, the dream was still alive! The money was in my account on a Friday. I purchased my plane tickets that weekend, and packed my things. I was on a plane on Tuesday, and off to South America for the Atacama Crossing which would begin on Sunday.

The Atacama Desert in Chile is the world's highest altitude desert. It is here that NASA tests out its Mars rover vehicles. This desert to me was hell on earth. It was freezing cold at night, and hot during the day. Almost the entire 240 kilometre course was set on rock and boulder. I am not adept in this type of terrain.

On the first day we had to run down a steep mountain. We began at an old church, and made our way down to a very cold stream. I think it was the only stream in that entire desert however we had 55 water crossings that day. The race course directors ran into a problem and couldn't get us out of the canyon, and so we were stuck going through the boulders and water for the entire day. The first day in these stage races is usually short, so that competitors can get their legs under them. At this event, competitors at the back of the pack were getting into camp after dark. The nights were freezing.

People are always amazed when they find out I am Canadian and can't take the cold. I was absolutely miserable. As soon as I finished racing every day I would run straight into my tent and crawl into my measly sleeping bag to try and stay warm. At night I would fill an empty water bottle with hot water from the fire and keep it near me for warmth.

By day three of this race, I had sprained both ankles, badly smashed my knees, and had broken my finger during one of my many falls. I was like a duck out of water. I just felt hopelessly clumsy. The women and men in front of me seemed like nimble mountain goats, where I felt like I had to crawl among the rocks and boulders like a timid sloth. I started to fantasize about quitting. This is the kiss of death. I try at all times to be positive and stay focused, but I was losing it here at this race. I wanted out.

When I crossed the finish line for the third stage, I didn't say a word to anyone. I earth. It was freezing cold at night, and hot during the day. Almost the entire 240 kilometre course was set on rock and boulder. I am not adept in this type of terrain.

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The salt covers the landscape for miles. It is hard and jagged and sharp. It rips the rubber right off the bottoms of your shoes. I got up in the morning and had motivated myself to get through this stage as fast as I could. My mantra for the day, "The faster you run, the sooner you're done." I had to make time here or I felt the terrain would break me.

The two girls in front of me were strong. They were doing extremely well in this terrain. As I bounded through the salt flats, I came up behind them and they were shocked to see me pass. I couldn't believe it either. I was actually having fun out there! I had turned the course into a puzzle. I would bound from patch of salt to another, visualizing where I was at, and where I was going. It became a game to work out my own little race course through the flats. I was the first woman through the course that day.

Suck it up, ignore the pain, and give the course 110 percent and life is worth living again.

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I always try to remember that if you end up in a low, there is a high around the corner. The only difference between those athletes at the front of the pack and those at the back, is that the runners out front have mastered the art of working even harder when the going gets tough. Everyone out there is hurting. But you have to harness the mind to push the body even harder when times are tough. I know. I have been first, and I have been last. Each time you push the envelope of your endurance, it makes you stronger for the next test. In each race if you do this, you will become stronger than you ever dreamed.

I finished this miserable race in 2nd place for women. I couldn't believe it. Not only because it was so difficult, but, I were shocked to see me pass. I couldn't believe it either. I was actually having fun out there! I had turned the course into a puzzle. I would bound from patch of salt to another, visualizing where I was at, and where I was going. It became a game to work out my own little race course through the flats. I was the first woman through the course that day.

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This too was a 240 kilometre stage race. I love the Sahara. I had done this same race the year before and had finished in 6th place for women. I was hoping to do just as well this time.

The organizers have athletes race through the famous White Desert, an expanse of bright white sand with huge white limestone formations that dot the landscape for miles. As I raced through this area, the formations began to take on the shapes of familiar objects. One looked like a camel, another, a bird. Although they provided some mind relief, they also serve a practical purpose, they provide some shade from the burning sun.

On the last day we were bussed into busy downtown Cairo. We had a 12 kilometre sprint which would take us right to the base of the ancient pyramids. They organized us into three waves. The slowest runners would start first, followed by those in the middle of the pack, and then the last wave had the top runners. I was fortunate to be in the last group.

This gave me time to absorb my surroundings. The bus had dropped us off on a side road next to a drainage canal. The canal was filled with rank, dirty water that smelled like sewage. Garbage was piled up in it, and along the sides. Right in front of me I could make out the bloated body of a dead donkey. Little children were on the other side of the canal, picking through the garbage for usable or edible items. It was so heart breaking to see them working their way through the filth in their bare hands and feet. So little, and already life was so hard for them. Cars were zipping by honking their horns at a little cart of hay being pulled by a donkey. The juxtaposition of old alongside new in Cairo is mind-blowing.

The sprint to the finish took everything I had left. The route took us up behind the camel stables and in the back gate to the pyramids. I had to get past two camel jockeys who tried to play a game of chicken with me. They galloped straight



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Grand Sahara. Raid Sahara Organisation

toward me on their giant mounts, and then parted around me at the last minute. I reached up and slapped at them as they ran by.

We had to run up and over a series of dunes, and then blast down a short paved hill past the great pyramids. It is the most awe-inspiring race finish ever. I crossed the finish line in second place for women. I vowed then and there to come back to this race the following year to try to win it.

After this race I was able to spend a couple of months at home. It would give me a much needed break. I would be able to enjoy Christmas and welcome in the New Year. It would also give me time to raise more money. Once again I was broke. This time my long-estranged parents came through for me. We hadn't been in communication for about 20 years. They read on my website that I was in desperate need for a sponsor, and they emailed me, offering to help. I couldn't believe it. It didn't matter what had happened in the past. All that mattered was that they wanted to help me make my dream come true. It still brings tears to my eyes.

My fourth race was in January in Mauritania, Africa. I had never really heard of this place before. After doing

way down from the base of my skull and down to my spine. I also felt very dizzy at times. It was terrible.

This was a really small race. There were only about 40 competitors from around the world that showed up here in the middle of nowhere. It was a 220 kilometre supported stage race. This meant that for the first time, I would be able to run a desert ultra without having to haul all of my stuff in a backpack. Organizers would carry it for me. What a treat! This race also featured a massage therapist, and a daily shower! Now that was luxury. Those treats helped make up for the loneliness I felt during the race. There were days where I would run for hours without seeing anyone. It would be such a treat to come in to the water checkpoints and be able to talk with another human being. Well sort of. I was one of the only English speaking competitors. Everyone else there spoke mainly French and Italian. There were also a few Russians. I managed to get by with a few words learned here and there, and with some universal hand language.

The end of this race was memorable. We had been crossing over a huge sandy stretch of desert, when suddenly the land dropped down into a deep gorge. I

Once runners crossed the finish line they would jump into the water. Everyone that is, except me. I had read that standing pools of water contained microscopic worms that could get into your body and grow. They would then try to escape through either your knees or your eyes. This nightmarish knowledge kept me out of the water. From all the desert racing I have done, I have learned that if anyone is going to catch anything it is going to be me. I finished this event in third place for women, sans infection... so I thought.

Once the race was over, we all took a charter plane back to Paris. After boarding I started to feel sick. Sure enough, I had managed to become the only one in my group to get dysentery. I spent the entire trip throwing up in the airplane washroom, and having diarrhea. To this day, there has been nothing more disgusting than being desperately sick in a filthy, small, confining space with paper-thin walls. Everyone on board could hear every sound. So much for being cautious while traveling, the trip home was an ultramarathon of its own.

By now I was getting tired. I had two big races left, and they would be back-to-back competitions. I was registered for the Libyan Challenge at the beginning of



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cover, and then take a bus to Quarzazate to meet up with the other competitors for the Marathon des Sables. Following the race, I would fly to Toronto to spend a few days doing media interviews, and then finally head home to Edmonton. It was going to be a long haul.

Libya was a 120 mile long non-stop race, long being the key word here. My teammate and I had planned on completing the event in 45 to 50 hours. We did not intend on pushing ourselves too hard, and were going to walk large portions of the race. It ended up taking us 68 hours. These were the longest hours of my life. We got lost twice, really lost. We had to shoot off a flare at one point to get rescued, because we had run out of water. I was so delirious at the end of this three day nightmare that I was hallucinating. I could not wait to shake that race off and move on to my last event. Pretty soon this year long journey would all be over. It was becoming a slogfest now.

Morocco is like my second home. I love it there. I love the country, I love the people, I love the culture and traditions, and I love the race. I have competed in this event more times now than any other woman in the Western Hemisphere. I have a lot of friends here, it is almost like showing up for a family reunion.

The first three days of the Marathon des Sables was like a dream. I was having my best run ever. But on the afternoon of the third day I tripped in the sand, snagged a rock and twisted my ankle. I heard the snap and I knew I was in big trouble. A competitor running by stopped briefly and threw me some pain killers. I took them without even thinking twice. Anything to numb the pain. I managed to finish the day and limp into the medical tent. My ankle was black and swollen. I had a third degree sprain, and the doctors were concerned that I might also have a fracture. At this point there was no way that anything was going to stop me from finishing this event. I had come way too far, and spent way too much time, energy and money to be held up so close to my goal. I only had to make it through 3 more days. I would crawl if I had to. The doctors taped up my ankle, I took a mittful of Advil, and I used a tent pole for a walking stick.

One hour into the fourth day I threw the race. It ended up taking us 68 hours. These were the longest hours of my life. We got lost twice, really lost. We had to shoot off a flare at one point to get rescued, because we had run out of water. I was so delirious at the end of this three day nightmare that I was hallucinating. I could not wait to shake that race off and move on to my last event. Pretty soon this year long journey would all be over. It was becoming a slogfest now.

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runners had died in his sleep after the 80 kilometre run. The race director delivered the news in the afternoon. This hit me hard. I did not know the French runner, but I was still really upset. I started to cry, I just could not control the tears. I was sad for the runner and his family. I was sad for his tent-mates. I was upset for the race director who couldn't control his emotions when he delivered the news to the competitors. I guess the stress of the year, the physical and emotional toll had just beaten me down to a point where I was just very emotionally fragile. The bad news cast a dark shadow over the entire camp. Everyone went to sleep that night with a heavy heart.

The race did go on, and was dedicated in memory of the French runner and his family. I did manage to finish the race. When I started the last day of running, I remember thinking that when this day was done, I would never have to run another step if I didn't want to. For some reason, it was a very liberating thought. When I crossed the finish line the cameras surrounded me, and the moment was almost surreal. I had done it. The record was mine, and I had earned it. This was the toughest thing I had ever done. I was happy I had done it, I was happy it was over, and I was looking forward to going home.

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mine. Letters from witnesses, race bibs, race results, log books, photographs, videos, and media clippings. I mailed the box of documentation to the Guinness head office in England and waited. Weeks later I received an email saying that they had lost my parcel, could I please send them everything again. That was it. I wasn't going to do it. I just could not believe it!

Just as I was about to start assembling the paperwork again, I received another note saying that they had found the missing parcel. Thank God! Within a few weeks the record was official and I received my certificate in the mail.

The certificate is now framed, but I haven't bothered to hang it up yet. It is sitting on the floor leaning against the wall. It is hard to believe that that piece of paper has so much meaning. It represents one year of physical, mental and spiritual growth. I learned so much about myself, and about others, during this time. I learned that large goals are more easily achieved by breaking them down into small steps. I learned that if you are willing to sacrifice, anything is possible. And I realized that every person has huge reserves of strength. Each time you tap into it, you build up stronger and smarter and tougher than before. We are all crossing deserts in life. We just need to keep moving forward one step at a time. By doing so we can and will achieve our goals.



Sahara Race. © Racing the Planet

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