

Andrews reaches finish line, clarity in Sahara

Jackson resident takes 13th in race across desert.

By Kelsey Dayton

There are those who seek inspiration in audiences with spiritual leaders, hunt for purpose by making pilgrimages to religious destinations, or look for clarity at meditative retreats.

Laurie Andrews, 40, found these qualities in herself in the middle of the Sahara Desert wearing the same shirt and shorts for six days of running.

The Marathon Des Sables is considered by many the toughest foot race in the world. Competitors brave sandstorms as they tackle dunes so steep they need ropes. In six days, they take on 150 miles of varying terrain, coated in sand that is packed, crusted, windblown, or in the form of towering dunes.

Andrews knew it would be a race like no other ultra event she had done.

"What you're asking of your body, it's going to break down," the Jackson resident said before she left.

"I'm going to do this if it takes me to my knees."

But her coach, a former competitor in the race, knew the Marathon Des Sables would be about more than pushing past Andrews' threshold for pain and endurance.

"It is a journey of self-discovery and an adventure that will stay with you for the rest of your life," said Lisa Smith-Batchen.

It forces people to dig into their souls for courage to finish, and with that they often pull something out of themselves they didn't know was there.

It is a race that changes lives.

Andrews is an elite ultra-athlete,
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having tackled multiple marathons, 50- and 100-mile races.

For her, it has always been about the training. She is used to the judgmental looks when people find out how much she runs. She is used to the attempts to understand.

What are you running from? What is missing in your life?

"I've taken a deep breath and said,

'this running has given something to me, it's a sense of purpose, so they can judge,'" she said before leaving.

For months, Andrews was focused on training. In the midst of blizzards, or nights her friends were getting together, Andrews was running.

When she boarded the plane to Morocco, clinging to her stuffed carry-on bag with all her race supplies, she knew she was as ready as she could be.

The reality of what she was doing hit Andrews when she and the more than 800 other racers clamored aboard a bus headed to the middle of the Sahara Desert.

They stayed at a base camp, planted in the shadow of towering sand dunes, for two days. The dunes sparkled in the light, inspiring awe and fear, and reminding Andrews of what she would face the first day of running.

Andrews quietly turned into herself, packing and repacking the bag she would carry with all her supplies for six days.

Did she have all the required equipment, like her venom pump and compass?

Could she trim any more weight from her pack?

Race day began at 6 a.m.

Andrews' eyes flew open, as the tent above her was ripped away. That was how mornings would start as race workers packed up camp around still-dozing competitors.

Helicopters roared in the air, carrying international news crews.

Racers postured as they milled by the starting line and "American Woman" blasted from loud speakers. Andrews found herself settling into the middle of the pack, the center of a mass of wild energy.

In the chaos that began as soon as runners left the line, Andrews found herself near Mike Ehredt, her training partner from Driggs, Idaho. They hadn't planned to race together but found that day, and for the next two, they were in perfect sync, talk-

ing in grunts as Ehredt clocked their
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eight-minute run and two-minute
walk pace, while Andrews made sure
every 45 minutes they ate salt sticks
to replenish electrolytes.

The dunes stretched endlessly,
mountain after mountain of sand.

Foot problems began immediately
for other racers as sand settled into
shoes and scraped away skin.

Andrews was lucky, her custom-
made gators let only a tablespoon of
sand into her shoes. But a thin film
coated her skin and grains of sand
stuck between her teeth.

Sleeping was pointless.

Sandstorms came frequently,
sweeping everything not tied down,
whipping tents into large rages of flap-
ping fabric. Sometimes lasting most
of the night, the storms left Andrews
no peace other than short, infrequent
naps.

While lying on her thin sleep-
ing bag with rocks digging into her
back, she thought of the day before
and the stretch ahead. She thought
of home.

Every night racers received printed
e-mails from supporters. Her mom kept
writing about the wonderful weather
because she was reading the Celsius
temperature as Fahrenheit when she
checked the weather in Morocco. Each
e-mail offered a form of unconditional
love and support, regardless of where
she was in the standings.

It was the only time Andrews
cried.

Andrews watched others' bodies
fail. No one in camp spoke of quit-
ting. Never had Andrews been sur-
rounded by so many people with
so much heart. But still, 54 people
faded quietly away, withdrawing
from the race.

Even as exhaustion seeped from
her muscles and bore down into her
bones, even as jagged river bottoms
prohibited any rhythm to her stride, a
frustrated Andrews remembered she
was lucky to be standing.

The day that felled the most run-
ners was Andrews' day. The fourth
stage was a 50-mile run racers had 48

hours to finish. The terrain included
a rock scramble up a gully that stag-
gered runners. But Andrews surged. It
reminded her of running in the moun-
tains. The weather was cool by Sahara
standards, only 120 degrees with a
slight breeze. That day Andrews pro-
pelled into 13th place among approxi-
mately 85 women racing and took the
No. 1 spot among American women.
She finished in 11 hours, 40 minutes.

Andrews, who had started the jour-
ney as a way to celebrate her 40th
birthday that was in March, could
suddenly see the top 10.

The next day she put away her
camera. She maneuvered her way to
the front at the starting line for the
marathon stage ahead of her.

And then her body quit.

The nausea slammed her, forcing
stops to throw up.

It became mind over matter.

"I'm trained to do this," she told
herself. "I can do this. I don't have to
like it."

She turned on her iPod, blasting
music like MC Hammer and Nelly
Furtado, to psych herself to keep
going.

She focused on making it check-
point to checkpoint, each about 10
kilometers away, scanning the hori-
zon for the red flags and balloons sig-
naling water.

"I didn't know if I could run a mar-
athon," she said. "I knew I could make
it to Checkpoint 3."

That night Andrews lay on her
mat, sipping water, working to keep
it down.

Classical music from the Paris
Orchestra, flown in to perform for the
athletes, swelled in the air.

Andrews stared at the sky, watch-
ing shooting stars. She knew she
would make it. But she also knew
something in her life would change
when she was done.

Andrews has always run because
she loves it. But now she just wanted
to be done.

Andrews finished the Marathon
Des Sables in 36 hours, 42 minutes.
She placed 13th out of the women and

190th overall. Only about an hour separated her from the top five female finishers.

Instead of celebrating, Andrews wondered if she failed since she didn't make the top 10.

It was a reality check. Competing had taken over her life.

"It started to matter too much," she said.

She had lost balance in her life. Running was not just a part of her life; it had become its entirety.

Perhaps one day Andrews will again tackle the Marathon Des Sables. But for now, she needs to remember why she runs.

Before she left for Morocco, Andrews planned a full summer race schedule, starting with 100 miles in June and finishing in November with the Ironman Triathlon. She might still do it all. She's not sure. Right now all she knows is she wants to run with her dog, Max, and not worry about how far or long or fast she goes.

She wants to find her sense of purpose – not in the training, or the race, but in the chance to be outside, celebrating her surroundings and her life. And running will always be a part of that ritual.



PHOTO COURTESY LAURIE ANDREWS

First-time racer Laurie Andrews joins fellow competitors in the first stage of the Marathon Des Sables, a six-day race through the Sahara Desert.

Other valley racers

In addition to first-time racer Laurie Andrews, two other area veteran competitors took to the sand in the 23rd annual Marathon Des Sables.

Mike Ehredt

In his second time running the Marathon Des Sables, Mike Ehredt found himself focusing on the experience more than his place.

There was something special about being an experienced runner and watching new people experience a race like no other, the Driggs, Idaho, resident said.

When Ehredt ran the marathon in 2005 he finished 119th. This year he came in 151st, finishing in 35 hours, 10 minutes.

Ehredt's hardest and best day were the same. On the marathon day, the fifth stage, Ehredt found himself running alone for the first time in the race, working hard to stay focused.

"I just kept saying 'push, push, go, go. This is what you train all winter for,'" he said.

He finished the leg half an hour faster than he did three years ago and came in 46th place for the stage.

He credits adding hot yoga to his training regiment for amping up his tolerance to heat, which soared more than 130 degrees.

Ehredt has been running ultra events for about four years. He started out running shorter distances and found seven hours could pass quickly.

Ehredt's next challenge is the Rocky Mountain Slam where he will compete in four 100-mile races between June and October.



Ehredt

Jay Batchen

Jay Batchen placed 30th the first time he ran the Marathon Des Sables in 2000.

Batchen and his wife, Lisa, are representatives for the race, helping coordinate competitors from the United States, Canada and Australia. Batchen isn't required to participate, but has run the race five times.

Batchen's goal was to make the top 100 this year, as he always has, but he came in 135th.

He didn't train as intensely as he has in previous years and the competition was better, he said.

But the race is about more than where he finishes, Batchen said.

The Marathon Des Sables throws strangers into the desert with the bare minimum needed to survive. Suffering from the heat and weight of the pack, amazing relationships develop, he said. Many times people don't even speak the same language, but become friends, running together every day. Suddenly strangers help each other through their darkest hours.

Batchen did his first marathon in 1997 when a co-worker told him he could never finish one. In Batchen's quest to prove him wrong, he found he loved to run.

"You find a good rhythm and hopefully stick to it for a long time, like 10 hours or 24 hours," he said.

Batchen doesn't have a race schedule set for the summer, yet. He needs to recover mentally and physically before planning his next challenge.

He hopes to do at least one 100- and maybe a few 50-kilometer races.



Batchen

– Kelsey Dayton