

Pagosan completes 'toughest footrace in the world'

By Sarah O. Smith
Staff Writer

For most people, the Sahara is completely remote and alien, nothing more than sand and blank horizons. But, for those seeking to test their willpower, fitness and endurance, the Sahara may be the perfect spot.

Just ask Pagosa's Morgan Murri, who recently completed the **Marathon des Sables**, a race across the Sahara dubbed "the toughest foot race in the world." From March 30 to April 5, he spanned 152 miles in six stages over seven days.

"So it's essentially six marathons in a row," said Murri.

But the race wasn't simply a test of Murri's endurance; he used the opportunity to raise money and awareness about the local charity he founded with his family: Leadership Education Adventure Programs (LEAP). Every mile Murri ran was sponsored, and all the funds will go towards scholarships for youth adventure education for local children.

The Marathon des Sables — that's Marathon of Sand, in French — changes course every year. This year's race was the longest in its history, and in many veterans' opinion, the hardest. The race kicked off with a trek up the highest sand dune in the Sahara, and runners beat a path through sand, washes, rocky hills and salt flats all the way to the finish line.

Of the 801 runners who began the race, 747 crossed the finish line. Murri placed an incredible 51st overall, and earned the impressive title of the third American to finish. He completed the race in 29 hours and 14 minutes.

Besides the obvious danger of

heat and sun stroke (the coolest day was 108 degrees, and the hottest 126 degrees), Murri said the sand is "notorious for getting into shoes," where it grinds and creates blisters and other nightmares. Murri was fortunate enough to escape with a few small blisters and a sore on his back from his backpack. However, others weren't as lucky.

"I saw things that were horrible," he said. "I literally saw things on people's feet that you'd never want to see."

Murri trained for the trek this winter in Pagosa. He often ran through the snow to simulate running through desert sand. However, since Pagosa's winter climate couldn't be farther from the Sahara's 120 degrees plus temperatures, Murri used ingenuity to prepare himself for the desert climate: he ran for hours on a treadmill wearing four layers of fleece plus a rain jacket to trap the heat.

He also trained with a 15 pound backpack. His backpack during the race started at 19 pounds — pretty light, by most standards — although he said it still felt like "absolute torture." Murri and the other runners had to carry any and all supplies needed on their backs: food, clothes, a sleeping bag, toilet paper, medical kits, and more. Murri carried a small titanium stove with him, so he could heat up his freeze-dried meals, and, "most importantly, to have coffee."

"It's not great food in the first place," he said. "I knew I was going to want really warm comfort food at the end of the day."

The race is wholly unsupported, and the only luxuries supplied are water (and that's rationed) and tents that "barely qualified as tents."

The tents were shared by seven or eight people, and were promptly torn down at 6 a.m. On the first day of the race, Murri awoke to a raging sand storm (luckily, the only sandstorm he encountered) when his tent was removed.

"Out of the 101 tents, they came to tear down ours first," he said. "It doesn't matter if you're naked, or if you're freezing — it's coming down."

The tents were also organized by language spoken, and locations moved every day, so Murri encountered people from all over the world. "It's a very international race," he said.

As an American in this international group, Murri found that in addition to representing the ideals and values of his charity, he had also become an ambassador for his nationality.

"We're not the country that everybody loves anymore," he said.

Murri spent a large portion of the race reflecting on these representations, and he certainly had ample time to think during the run, especially when he found himself in what he calls "No Man's Land," somewhere in the middle with no other runners in sight.

One day Murri wandered off the race course — something that's not hard to do, he said — and found some unexpected help.

"These kids pop up," he said, "with no villages, no towns, anywhere in sight."

The children spoke French, but they signalled to Murri that he needed to veer back. They then ran with him for ten minutes until he started seeing the tracks of the other racers.

"They were barefoot, just cruising alongside me," said Murri of the

children. Even when off course, he said, he never worried. "You know there are 700 people somewhere behind you," he joked.

Murri has been racing regionally for years, running many races in the Four Corners area. He won the RATS (Run Across the Sands) race that took him from Grand Junction to Moab in 2005, and he's a devotee of the endurance events in Leadville. He said when he first met his wife, Nancy, she told him she'd love to meet a guy who she could run a marathon with.

"I woke up the next day and thought, 'I'd better go for a run,'" he said. "I made it two miles."

But the next time, he made it three miles, and so on. He progressed from 10k runs to marathons, from marathons to 50-mile runs, from 50-mile runs to ultra-marathons.

"She (Nancy) says she created a monster," said Murri.

For Murri, running for charity was the next natural progression.

"It's fun. I love pushing myself," he said. "But I wanted to find a reason to give it more meaning."

Murri started LEAP to emphasize the importance of exposing children to nature and outdoor activities. "We focus on how important it is to get kids outside. In Pagosa we're a little spoiled because we're right in the middle of it."

But, said Murri, despite local children's advantage, the temptation remains to sit on the couch, and LEAP is trying to negate that temptation. LEAP encourages kids (and adults) to think globally and act locally, and Murri hopes to send two kids from Pagosa on an adventure program to instill leadership, individual thinking and environmental consciousness. He

also plans to start a family-friendly race series in Pagosa.

Running to raise funds for LEAP turned "the toughest foot race in the world" into an emotional and reflective event for Murri.

"Emotionally, it was a really great experience," he said.

Murri has already set his sights on the infamous Badwater race, a 135-mile run through Death Valley in July that also claims to be the toughest foot race on earth. Murri said that's most likely an accurate claim.

And, as far as advice for novice runners who may want to join him next year, Murri keeps it simple.

"Go. Just run," he said. "The hardest part of being a runner is getting out the door."

For more information about LEAP, visit www.goleap.org.

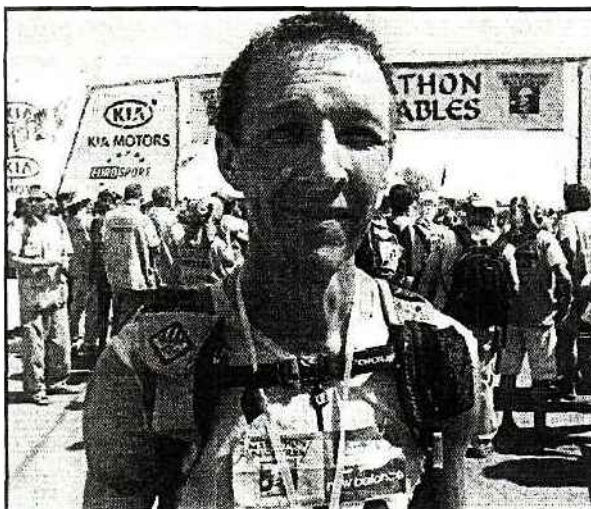


Photo courtesy Morgan Murri

A fatigued Morgan Murri still manages a smile at the finish line of the Marathon des Sables. Murri braved the sand and grueling sun to place 51st out of 747 finishing competitors.

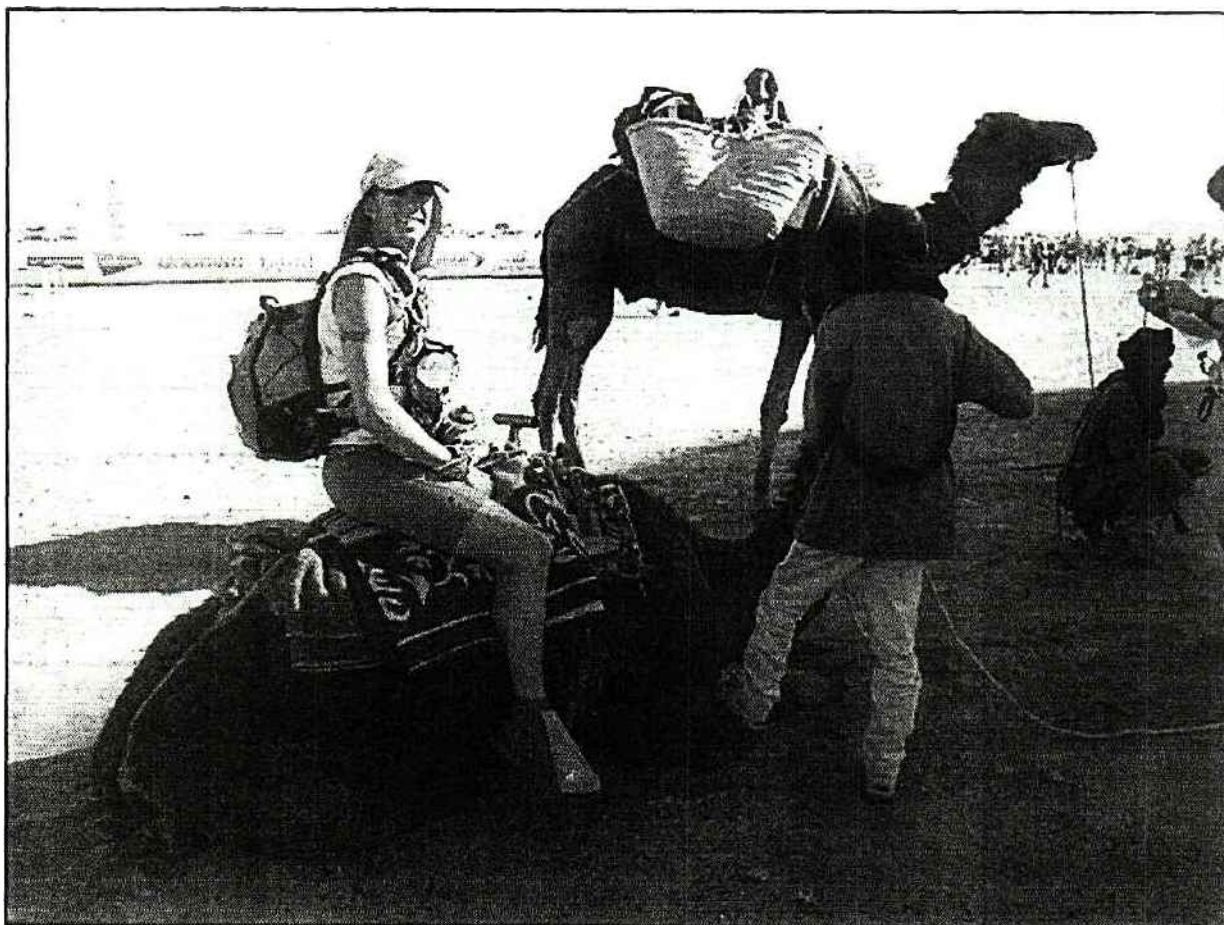


Photo courtesy Morgan Murri

What runs across the Sahara with supplies on its back? A camel ... and Pagosa's Morgan Murri. Murri saddles up with a friend before running the Marathon des Sables earlier this month. The race took Murri across 152 miles of the Sahara over seven days.