

Doing the impossible: runners tackle Sahara

By ANNA JOHNSON
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WESTERN DESERT, Egypt

Three ultra-endurance athletes have just done something most would consider insane: They ran the equivalent of two marathons a day for 111 days to become the first modern runners to cross the Sahara Desert's grueling 4,000 miles.

"It will take time to sink in ... but this is an absolutely once-in-a-lifetime thing. They say ignorance is bliss, and now that I know how hard this is, I would never consider crossing the Sahara on foot again," said American runner Charlie Engle, 44, hours after he and the others completed the run at Egypt's Red Sea.

Engle said he, Canadian Ray Zahab, 38, and Kevin Lin, 30, of Taiwan, ran the final stretch of their journey that took them through the Giza pyramids and Cairo to the mouth of Suez Canal on four hours of sleep. Once they hit the Red Sea, they put their hands in the water to signify crossing the finish line.

In less than four months, they have run across the world's largest desert and through six countries: Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Libya and finally Egypt.

A film crew followed them, chronicling the desert journey for actor Matt Damon's production company, LivePlanet. Damon plans to narrate the "Running the Sahara" documentary.

The trek is one of extremes. The relentless sun can push tempera-



AP PHOTO

From left, Kevin Lin of Taiwan, Ray Zahab of Canada and Charlie Engle of the United States run during Day 108 of their 111-day Sahara Desert journey Saturday near Cairo, Egypt. The trio ran 4,000 miles across the desert.

tures above 100 degrees during the day, but at night it sometimes dips below freezing. Strong winds can abruptly send sand swooping in every direction, making it difficult to see and breathe.

Running through turbulent conditions is nothing new for these athletes, who have traveled the world competing in adventure races. But they say nothing has tested their physical and mental limitations like the Sahara.

During the run, they have been stricken with tendinitis, severe diarrhea, cramping and knee injuries all while running through the intense heat and wind, often without a paved road in sight.

"This has been a life-changing event," Engle said.

The runners say they undertook the challenge to see if they could accomplish something that many have called impossible. They used GPS devices to track their route and teamed up with local experts and a host of sports professionals who also followed them, along with the documentary crew, in four-wheel drive vehicles.

Typically, the three began each day with a 4 a.m. wake-up call. About an hour later, they started running.

Around noon, they took a lunch break at a makeshift camp, devouring pasta, tuna and vegetables. A short nap on thin mattresses in a yellow-domed tent usually followed before they headed out on the second leg of their day's run.

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No matter how you do math, Tiger's streak is remarkable

There are streaks, and then there are Tiger streaks. Tiger Woods has never had any trouble counting on the golf course, though it's not too hard to add up a couple of nines filled with birdies and pars and come up with something in the 60s.

He didn't have a problem counting to four a few years ago either, when the trophies from all the major championships sat on his fireplace mantle at the same time. And he knows exactly how many more majors he has to win (seven) to top the record of 18 held by Jack Nicklaus.

Figuring out his bank balance might be a bit trickier, since it seems to expand by millions every week. No one other than Woods and his accountants know for certain, but estimates are he will in just a few short years become the first athlete to make a billion dollars in earnings and endorsements alone.

The math really gets fuzzy this week when Woods tees it up in the Accenture Match Play Championship. In the Arizona desert, he'll try to win his eighth straight PGA Tour event and move a step closer to a record once thought as insurmountable as Joe DiMaggio's 56-game hitting streak.



Tim Dahlberg

But wait. It gets even better. Assuming he wins the Match Play — and he's won it twice — it's on to Florida, where Woods is expected to play twice in tournaments he usually dominates. Wins there would get him to 10 straight, one short of the record set by the late Byron Nelson against war-depleted fields in 1945.

So where would a record-tying No. 11 come? How about at Augusta National in April?

On the 10th anniversary of his astonishing first win in the Masters. In his first Masters since his father died.

They couldn't write a script like this in Hollywood.

Then again, it's hard not to believe. Woods has already proved he's the greatest golfer of his time, and he's beginning to make a case for himself as the greatest of all time.

He's the only modern player to win four straight majors, and there's little doubt now that he will pass Nicklaus to win the most majors ever. His name is all over the record books and, perhaps most frightening to his fellow players, is that he seems to be getting better with every year.

OK, so there's an asterisk to this latest streak, somewhat like the one attached to the Tiger Slam because Woods didn't win his four consecutive majors in one year. Woods put this one there himself by traveling to Europe, Asia and the Middle East and failing to win four tournaments.

Critics might argue that the streak ended in September when Shaun Micheel pulled off his biggest upset since winning the PGA Championship by beating Woods 4 and 3 in the opening match of the HSBC World Match Play Championship in England.

Somewhat surprisingly, Woods isn't going to debate the point. It is, as he likes to say, what it is.

Woods can afford to be modest. His place in golf history already is assured.

Tim Dahlberg is a national sports columnist for The Associated Press. Send comments to tdahlberg@ap.org.

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