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PHOTO COURTESY JAY BATCHEN

Jay Batchen crosses the finish line of the 155-mile Marathon des Sables. "It was brutally hot and brutally windy this year," said the Driggs, Idaho, resident, who has run the race twice now. "It was really howling, and that takes its toll."

Sahara no problem for Batchen

Ultrarunner is top U.S. finisher in seven-day, 155-mile stage race.

By Michael Pearlman

Jay Batchen expects a healthy amount of suffering mixed in with his competitive running.

In fact, he seems to enjoy it.

The Driggs, Idaho, resident was the top American finisher at the 20th anniversary of the Marathon des Sables, a seven-day, 155-mile running race across the Sahara Desert known as one of the most punishing endurance tests on the planet. Batchen averaged nine-minute miles and finished in 31 hours five minutes to place 62nd in his second appearance in the race field. The fastest runner in the 777-runner field, seven-time winner Lahcen Ahansal of Morocco, finished in 19:09.

The Marathon des Sables was started by Frenchman Patrick Bauer in 1985 and has grown to mythical status among the international ultrarunning community. Held in Morocco smack in the middle of the Sahara on a course that changes annually, runners endure temperatures that can top 135 degrees, howling winds and blinding sandstorms. The stage race takes place over a week, with one 50-mile stage that begins at night. During the race, runners sleep in tents with eight other competitors, an experience that fosters camaraderie, Batchen, 36, said.

More than a race

"You can't explain it. It's more than a race and more than an ultra", Batchen said. "People are in tears when they're going home. You're stuck in a tent with the same eight or nine people for a week, and they become like family."

This year's weather conditions were among the worst Batchen could recall in his five years of involvement with the race as volunteer and competitor. "It was brutally hot and brutally windy this year," Batchen said, "It was really howling, and that takes its toll."

All racers are required to be completely self-sufficient for the entire week, providing their own food,

drink mixes and minor medical supplies. Water is provided at checkpoints every six to 10 miles along the course, though some competitors require additional fluids to combat the furnace-like temperatures.

"I was fine with it, and I'd actually dump part of my ration over my head," Batchen said. "At the pace I was running, I didn't need as much water as some other people out there."

The race course is only 15 percent sand, but the rest of the terrain is rugged and rocky, requiring technical running skills to avoid falling when racers become fatigued.

"I saw many people around me trip

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— Jay Batchen
COMPETITIVE RUNNER

and fall and get cut up," Batchen said. "I think having the Tetons as a training base is priceless in this situation."

Batchen's involvement in the race is a family affair. His wife, Lisa Smith-Batchen, who owns the Dreamchaser Spa at Grand Targhee, topped the women's field in 1999. After she was pulled from the course due to an asthma attack in last year's race, she discovered she was allergic to dust and sand. A sprained ankle suffered earlier this winter confirmed her decision to sit out this year's race, although she went to Morocco to support her husband.

Though he wasn't able to devote as much time to training this year, Batchen said he didn't find the conditions as oppressive as in his first race.

"I dealt with the heat better this year," he said. "I think that comes from the experience of doing these events. You just focus on something

else." For Batchen, that meant turning on his portable MP3 player, pulling out a photo of his family when things got rough and focusing on the horizon while running into a sandstorm.

Major logistical challenges

Given the event's entry fee of \$3,000 and winner's prize of only \$4,500, it's likely Ahansal is the only racer making a living by running quickly through the Sahara. Batchen says the race's entry fee reflects the logistical expenses of staging an event of this magnitude in such a remote location. Each day, a mobile city of race officials, medical workers and volunteers along with tents and supplies must be moved along the route, often requiring vehicles to navigate long detours.

The race is staffed with a medical team, and helicopters are on standby to evacuate racers in the event of an emergency. There's been only one death in race history, a 28-year-old competitor who suffered a heart attack in 1988. In 1994, an Italian racer disappeared in a sandstorm, only to be found alive nine days later and 300 kilometers away in a hospital in Algeria.

"If there's a severe sandstorm, they make you stop," Batchen said. "There's medical staff going up and down the course, checking for the thumbs-up, and if they don't see that they're going to verbally ask you."

At each checkpoint, racers have to pass through a medical chute so that doctors can see their condition.

What drives people to spend their time, energy and money in order to spend a week running across the Sahara? Batchen believes it lies partly in the feeling of satisfaction that comes with completing an event with so many different challenges.

"It's just a different form of suffering from a 5-k and a marathon," Batchen said. "It's about crossing the finish line and feeling the relief. It's about being around other people and helping someone who might be having a bad moment. For me, it's not about any kind of personal gain. I'm doing it to see if I can do better than last time."