

Profile: Ray Zahab

Local adventure athlete faces toughest challenge yet

By Brooke Broadbent

It's hour 30 of a 60-hour race in the Sahara Desert.

A sinewy lad raised in the Ottawa Valley cuts a trail among sculptured sand dunes. Running hard all day, the sun scorches like a laser and sweat stings his eyes. The blowing sand blasts away the protective coating on his sun glasses.



His mind is a million miles away as he listens to eight tunes over and over again on his broken MP3 player. In the distance: nothing but sand.

Ray Zahab is alone in the desert, sleep deprived, with no trail markings, nobody in sight, and a dwindling water supply. He is completely dependent on his GPS for his survival. The next check point is 23 km away where he'll find a Land Rover with water and tasty French army rations. Taking only 10-minute catnaps over the last 30 hours, Ray is confused and can't recall how many breaks he's taken.

Fatigue makes him doubt his GPS readings. He imagines things, hearing phantom animals in the night. He revels in the euphoria that comes from knowing that he is in second place. He counts his steps, knowing that 1,000 steps cover another kilometre of this gruelling 333 kilometre race. His inner voice tells him to keep his hips lower because he's kicking up too much sand and it's choking him.

At 35, Ray Zahab is a trim and imposing figure, and a dedicated adventure athlete with a quick wit.

"For me, adventure racing is the purest form of sport," says Zahab. "There is me, my muscles, my mind, the elements and a gruelling challenge. I enjoy the adrenalin rush, pushing my body beyond its limits."

As he talks and smiles, there is bottomless energy, boyish self-confidence and zest for life. Ray's life pivoted in the late '90s when he was watching Eco-challenge on television with his brother in Carp.

"It seemed like the coolest thing to me," he explains. "I said I'd do it one day for a living."

At the time he was training horses and teaching people to ride. He was already very competitive and competing internationally and often working with horses in Texas.

Ray trains in Old Chelsea where he and his partner, Kathy, enjoy the beauty and challenge of the Gatineau Hills. Prior to a race, Ray focuses on a rigorously controlled high-protein diet, strenuous exercise and a cupboard full of carefully-selected supplements. He loves to train outside in all weather conditions when he's not indoors on his stationary bicycle or the fitball.

He is well known in Ottawa for his expertise as a personal trainer and has developed an extensive array of core strength-building fitball exercises. Along the way, Ray learned the essentials of psychology, nutrition, and physiology so he can train and compete effectively.

"In the end, my determined attitude accounts for 85 percent of my success," he explains. "I'm able to overcome pain and run. In the jungle, huge chunks of skin were scraped from my feet and I kept going."

Ray has had plenty of success in a variety of conditions during the past couple of years. He placed first in a 160-km race in frigid conditions in the Yukon, and his team placed first in a 200-km race in dense jungle. He was the first North American to finish a six-day race across the Sahara, and he completed a 650-km race in the rocky terrain of the Alps. In April, Ray was the first North American across the finish line in the 250-km Marathon des Sables.

Ray attributes his success to the team that supports him. His trainers are Lisa Smith-Batchin and Ken Brunet and his training partner is Brian Henderson. Solomon provides clothes. Equipment suppliers include Trailhead and Wally Schaeber. Edelsen and Associates help him with travel costs.

"When I compete, I feel the support and encouragement from my friends and family in Carp and so many other people in the Ottawa area," he says. "I train extensively in Old Chelsea and the support of my friends there is crucial in my success."

Ray Zahab is a mind-over-matter kind of guy: "We can do anything we want. I mean it. I can't explain this. It is one of the great mysteries of life. It's something about the ability of humans to channel their energy. If you really believe that you have the power within you, then you do have it."

He sounds convincing and he plans to prove it. The day after he ran 333 km in the desert, a few of the racers got together and planned the ultimate challenge for themselves. An international team is going to run across the entire Sahara Desert this time. They plan to run the 4,500 to 5,000 km next year.

"It will take us about three months," he predicts. "I'm so focused on the goal, I know I can do it. The biggest challenge to me is getting financial support. In 2005, I'll be racing in all sorts of conditions — snow, sand and mountains. You can check out my events on www.eventrate.com."

Ray has some parting advice to anyone considering adventure racing: "Do it. Stretch yourself to learn your limits. It will help you get in touch with your body. That will help you with everything in your life. And stop if you are injured. Treat your body as a loving partner."