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The Now or Never Athlete

By CHRISTOPHER McDOUGALL

Published: May 19, 2005

If it's seriously sweltering today, you might spot 41-year-old Frank McKinney dragging an S.U.V. tire back and forth across the bridge near his oceanfront home in Delray Beach, Fla. But if it's just plain hot, he'll be in his Death Valley simulator, a room he equipped with a treadmill, scorching lights, an industrial-grade heater, a dehumidifier and massive fans to reproduce baking winds.

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Scott Wiseman for The New York Times

New to the loneliness of the long-distance runner, Frank McKinney, 41, of Delray Beach, Fla., trains for an endurance race in Death Valley with the help of a tire.

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"You're nuts!" passing motorists yell at Mr. McKinney and his steel-belted ballast.

"No," he shouts back. "I'm just a little tired!"

He'll stop, chug an endurance drink and unclip the S.U.V. tire from the rope on his weight belt. Then he'll clip on the even larger Hummer tire he has waiting and resume speed-trudging, mouth slack and heart pounding, for a total of four hours.

In a few weeks he'll look back on this torment as downright restful, because by then he plans to be in the middle of the Badwater Ultramarathon, a 135-mile run across Death Valley and up Mount Whitney known as "the world's toughest foot race."

Like Leigh Begland of Denver, a 39-year-old H.M.O. executive who signed up for a 47-mile bike race through the San Juan mountains before she owned a bike, and Sam Goldsmith, 50, of Waterford, Mich., who had barely jogged before he became obsessed with ultramarathons, Mr. McKinney is a member of a growing tribe of instant adventurers. Casual athletes, if athletes at all, they suddenly vault from a lifetime of sporadic workouts to the workout of a lifetime. The adventures vary: summiting Mount Everest, swimming the English Channel, dog-racing the Iditarod. But the instant adventurers don't, they are normal people who

unexpectedly fixate on one of the world's most grueling challenges.

"This year I bet I had five people contact me who'd never done anything like this in their lives," said

Lisa Smith-Batchen of Victor, Idaho, an ultramarathoner and online coach who caters to novices. She has observed such a surge in first-timers that she calls her business Dreamchasers. Despite how often their sanity is questioned, these amateurs tend to be successful, focused people who feel they have mastered every other aspect of their lives - career, relationships, parenthood - only to discover their last unconquered frontier is the one they have carried around since birth: their bodies.

"From a psychological perspective, these are actually very healthy people," said Dr. Andrew Lovy, a psychiatrist in Mesa, Ariz., who also runs in ultramarathons. "You can't wake up Monday as a novice and do the Iditarod on Tuesday. But you can wake up Monday and say, 'I think I'll start training for the Iditarod on Tuesday.' That's excellent, you're not letting someone else define your limits or capabilities."

This is not a conventional midlife crisis, Dr. Lovy said. It is more a midlife convergence of heightened confidence, disposable income and a taste for travel.

"They're at the top of their game," he said, "and what they want is an extraordinary achievement which will help define them."

Running an urban marathon isn't enough. These athletes want an epic quest, something that pits mind against muscle, with an exotic vacation thrown in. What better than Badwater, a race five times as long as a conventional 26.2-mile marathon that requires, in Mr. McKinney's case, a training binder three inches thick?

"I sell multimillion-dollar spec mansions, and I'd just had the best quarter in my life," Mr. McKinney said. "I could have been retired on a beach in Tahiti, but I always feel most alive when I'm doing something for the first time."

After Ms. Smith-Batchen took over his training and diet last September, he managed to finish a 100-mile race six weeks later by following her carefully graduated proportions of runs and recovery walks. Granted, he needed an ambulance to get to the airport, but completing the event was enough to qualify for Badwater.

Most of her new recruits, Ms. Smith-Batchen said, "tend to be in that 'magic age,' right around 40 or 50, when they say, 'For my birthday this year, I want to do something spectacular.'"

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One reason extreme challenges are becoming more popular is because of the well-publicized successes of a pair of Everymen, Dean Karnazes, 41, and Steve Fossett, 61. Mr. Fossett, now a professional adventurer, demonstrated that a mildly paunchy stockbroker from Chicago can swim the English Channel, cross-country ski 100 miles across the Rocky Mountains and fly a balloon around the world. Mr. Karnazes, whose transformation from hard-partying windsurfer into Badwater champion has landed him on both David Letterman's show and the cover of Time, has a guy-next-door quality that makes endurance races seem as manageable as 36 holes of golf.

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Thanks to the Internet, which connects novices to experts, and new training methods, a weekend duffer can become an endurance athlete in less than a year, said Eric Orton, an ultradistance specialist in Jackson Hole, Wyo. Aspiring adventurers can now receive their marching orders each morning by e-mail, enabling them to train in

downtown Detroit for a bike race in the Andes.

Instead of overwhelming newcomers with vast mileage, coaches like Mr. Orton and Ms. Smith-Batchen focus on low-intensity, heart rate-monitored interval training, core conditioning (toughening up their bellies and backs) and plenty of recovery time. The idea is to make them strong enough simply to finish the event.

"Everyone thinks I'm crazy because before signing up for this, I'd only done one spin class a week," said Ms. Begland, who called Mr. Orton after deciding on a whim to compete in the grueling Iron Horse Bicycle Classic on Memorial Day weekend. "But I'm amazed at how much stronger I'm feeling after just three weeks of training, and it's been much less stressful than I'd expected."

Mr. Orton's most ambitious newcomer is Sam Goldsmith, an engineer who has set his sights on the Ultraman Canada, a triple triathlon in which 35 contestants swim 6.2 miles across Skaha Lake, bike 261.4 miles over Richter Pass and run 52.4 miles.

By alternating difficult and easy workouts, it took Mr. Goldsmith less than a year to progress from huffing through a 5-mile jog to 6-hour trail runs and 100-mile bike rides.

But is it wise to try such punishing endeavors? Even the most seasoned mountaineers lose toes and even lives when attempting high summits. Adventure races, in which contestants might rock-climb, rappel, run and kayak across wild terrain, can be lethal even for an expert like Nigel Aylott, 38, who was killed last year by a shifting boulder. Broc Bebout, a 57-year-old retired engineer from Indiana who had undergone bypass surgery, died of a heart attack last month after his ride of a lifetime, a six-week bicycling trek across the United States. "We all have a list of things we like to say we did," his widow told The Associated Press. "That was right up there at the top."

Understanding when grit becomes recklessness is the key to surviving. "You have to know when to quit and try again later," said Red Sheeshe, who trained Steve Fossett for his endurance runs. "That kind of patience comes with age. That's why you're seeing older people attempting these events, and doing quite well at them."

Younger people sometimes respond to the same challenges, and for similar reasons. Chris Solarz was 23 when he decided to attempt the Manhattan Island Marathon Swim, after he had been shaken up by the Sept. 11 attacks and had lost his job in the subsequent wave of Wall Street layoffs. Even though he hadn't swum since high school, he was one of eight swimmers to risk hypothermia, churning tides and riverside sewage plants in the 28.5-mile journey around the Hudson, East and Harlem Rivers in 2002.

"I guess you can say that after losing my job, it was the ultimate act of defiance," said Mr. Solarz, who also admits to the subconscious desire to exert control over a city that had put him through such

also admits to the subconscious desire to assert control over a city that had put him through rough times.

Sheharbano Ali, a Manhattan banker, 32 when she signed up for the Marathon des Sables, a six-day run across the Sahara. Her past associations with athletics were also darkened by misfortune. Her father had died in 1992 of a heart attack while they were jogging together, and when she resumed running seven years later, she broke both feet in freak accidents.

Rather than becoming discouraged, she became determined. "I had a friend from business school who met an 80-year-old man who'd done the Marathon des Sables in 2000," Ms. Ali said. "I was so inspired by the ability of the mind to achieve anything, to go beyond the difficult. That was the clincher for me."

She, too, signed up with Ms. Smith-Batchen, who devised a schedule that turns Ms. Ali's lunch hour into 60 minutes packed with crunches, hopping and elliptical training. In April, less than a year after her return to running, Ms. Ali completed the Marathon des Sables and won a new training partner: her mother.

Ms. Ali still has scars on her feet from the Marathon des Sables, so she will introduce her mother to the instant adventurers' tribe gently - with only a half-Ironman.

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