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ADVENTURE

3 men vs. the world in endurance test

A trio of South Floridians will attempt to traverse the world's most treacherous deserts. And while they're on their extreme adventure, they hope to raise more than \$100,000 for charity.

BY ASHLEY FANTZ

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Matthew Nelson spent most of his life jumping out of helicopters, crawling on his belly through jagged terrain and riding out Saudi Arabian sandstorms.

So when the military warrior bowed out of the Marines and became a salesman, the 40-year-old father of three knew he had to find something more rigorous to conquer than earning his next bonus.

His two South Florida buddies -- Jim Molaschi of Cooper City, who trained to be a Navy SEAL, and Rob Greer of Coconut Grove, a former Army Ranger -- also felt a hunger they couldn't fill with their day jobs.

So the hard-core jocks are now training with an eye toward completing 4 Deserts -- one of the most grueling adventure races in the world, encompassing 455 miles across four continents, that begins in China's Gobi Desert and ends in Antarctica.

Though Nelson had been running marathons, helping train athletes on the Borneo team of Ecochallenge -- the reality TV multisport adventure race -- and had tackled rock-climbing and cycling, he still was looking for something more strenuous to test his endurance.

"I need to be out in the woods with a compass, all the pressure on me to lead the team in the right direction," explained Nelson, of Lake Worth.

"When I got out of the Corps, I had this void. . . . And it's not like you can just run a marathon anymore. I mean, [even] P. Diddy and Oprah did marathons."

ON THEIR OWN

Each leg of the race lasts seven days, with daily hikes between 19 and 56 miles. Racers must carry their own food and navigate their way to the finish with nothing but their compass and any sanity they can muster.

Staged by RacingThePlanet, a group founded by an American marathon runner, the 4 Deserts begins next May in China's Gobi Desert, a no-man's land of sharp salt flats, 1,000-foot sand dunes, and skin-boiling heat.

Two months later, in July, the South Florida buddies will once again hoist their backpacks in Chile's Atacama Crossing, a desert 50 times more arid than California's Death Valley. And in September, they'll attempt to attack the Sahara Desert in Egypt, ending with a celebration at the Giza Pyramids.

Racers have to qualify for the final trek in Antarctica, a course that's kept secret until a few days before it begins sometime in 2007.

"We might have a few screws loose," admitted Molaschi, who began adventure racing five years ago.

Molaschi, who now works as an engineer in an office in Cooper City, says he is driven to test his physical limits.

More than a decade ago, he remembers Hell Week, the torturous physical maneuvers he was required to perform to become a Navy SEAL. At the time, running felt like trying to push broken bones, his shin splints a sharp reminder that his singular goal was not going to happen.

"I couldn't continue and I started limping," the 43-year-old said. "I missed my chance. That was it."

It's an upsetting memory. But Molaschi is not the kind of guy who finds solace in conference room doughnuts. He conquered his shin splints and now runs sometimes 25 miles per day.

"I do this kind of thing because I'm trying to prove that I'm tough enough because I missed that one opportunity," he said. "But there's more -- there's something that happens to me when I'm out there.

"My mind goes blank. Everything seems pure and I become part of the scenery. I get a lot of thinking done. I expect I'll get to work out just about everything I've ever thought of in those deserts."

His wife, Camma Molaschi, a Broward County middle school teacher, often drives to wherever her husband has biked beyond their home -- sometimes more than 50 miles away.

Nelson, who sells pharmaceuticals for Pfizer, pitched the idea of Gobi to Molaschi when the friends were returning from a five-day race in New Zealand in November.

"It sounded pretty tough -- and perfect," Molaschi said.

A part-time spelunking instructor, Molaschi was itching to go beyond single-sport competitions five years ago when someone in his wife's spinning class told him about adventure racing, a combination of canoeing, trail running, biking, rappelling, compass navigation and SAT-like logic questions.

The sport's shorter distance races quickly bored him, so he entered competitions that athletes sometimes train for years to conquer -- courses that take days and require extreme physical and mental challenges. This year, he completed an Ironman competition in the Canary Islands where gale force winds can make the 2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike and marathon even more torturous. He'll race an ultra-marathon -- 62 miles -- in Virginia in the fall.

His 6-year-old son is also following in his father's footsteps: He has completed two kiddy-level triathlons.

"He sees pictures of his dad doing races," Camma Molaschi said. ``We know that that's who he is. With my husband, every day is extreme. And you have to just let him go or he's going to be stressed out. And, you know, there are far worse things for a man to be out doing than exercising."

The Gobi has grown from a little more than 40 competitors to 89 last year. The majority of the racers are in their mid-30s and early 40s, and able to afford RacingThePlanet's individual registration fee of \$2,600, plus the cost of travel and expensive gear.

"It's like combat," explained Greer, 34, a former U.S. Army Ranger who works in pharmaceutical sales at Pfizer with Nelson. ``It's like we're going to be deployed and we're preparing."

FOR CHARITY

It was Greer's idea that the team raise \$50,000 per race for Half the Sky Foundation, a charity based in China that have helped coordinate adoptions for friends.

Partly supported by the Ford Foundation, the charity runs orphanages that house thousands of Chinese girls who have been abandoned by their families. Under China's "one child per family" policy, many Chinese families who had girl babies "abandon" them to orphanages so the parents can "try again" for a male child.

Several local businesses have already pledged their support, and the men are hoping that Pfizer will also contribute.

"We create difficult situations for ourselves in doing these races, but our lives are pretty cushy compared to what those kids go through," said Greer, who trains most days in his wife's Coconut Grove spa.

So the question becomes, what will they try to do next?

"I'm not sure what we do after this," Molaschi said. ``Unless there's a race on the moon."