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Lau raised over RM80,000 at the 2014 Marathon Des Sables and hopes to double that this year.



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NO test of endurance is too big for 26-year-old Kuala Lumpur-born Jeff Lau. Lau, the youngest Malaysian to have completed Marathon des Sables (MdS) in 2014, is set to take on the challenge again in April.

Dubbed the toughest footrace on earth, the marathon is a six day ultra-marathon spanning 251km across harsh terrain in the Moroccan Sahara Desert.

This year the race is from April 8 to 18 and will be divided into multiple stages, with each participant carrying their own backpack containing food and sleeping gear.

Lau said he was initially hesitant to participate for the second time but he intends to dedicate his effort to raise more public awareness on HIV and AIDS in Malaysia.

"It was the most physically excruciating experience of my life but seeing the current HIV and AIDS situation here I have no other choice but to continue running," Lau said.

"I still remember on the fourth day my knees were strained from running over 60km under the scorching sun and I still had over 150km more to go.

"That was when I wanted to just give up but I persevered anyway."

Lau said his source of nutrients during the race were instant noodles, 3-in-1 coffee and energy bars, as the rule stipulates each runner must have at least 2,000 calories every day.

"We cannot afford to lug around a heavy backpack throughout the entire course so we need to bring lightweight food with enough calories to keep us going," he said, adding he plans to reduce

his backpack load from 12kg to 10kg this year.

Lau started training for this year's event in December which includes a walking routine of 35km from Bukit Aman Royal Malaysia Police Headquarters to Taman Tun Dr Ismail Park.

"I want to focus more on building my endurance so that I will not burn out during the marathon," he said.

The endurance athlete has previously raced in several triathlons, swimathons and marathons across the world including the Penang International Marathon last year and Jeju International Ultramarathon in 2014.

"I only started running in 2012 after recovering from knee ligament surgery. The injury taught me to appreciate my physical abilities," he said.

Lau was appointed by the Health Ministry as the first Red Ribbon Youth Icon during the national World AIDS Day celebration in Penang last December.

"I will use this recognition as a platform to spread the word to my peers and other young people about the importance of responsible sexual health behaviour," he said.

Lau added his goal is to debunk common misconceptions about HIV and AIDS in the country.

"It should be taught that you cannot get HIV by being around people who are HIV-positive nor is your life over if you are diagnosed HIV-positive.

"These misconceptions are always about how easy it is to get infected with HIV when most of them do not even have supporting evidence," he said, adding social stigma can deter HIV-positive people from getting treatment.

Lau raised over RM80,000 at the 2014 MdS and is hoping to double that amount this time around.

"It is a bit ambitious but Malaysia AIDS Foundation (MAF) has a huge group of trustees and I believe this is achievable through their fundraising which is also known as Simply Giving," he said.

MAF chairman Prof Dr Adeebe

Kamarulzaman said young people aged 20 to 29 accounted for more than one-third of new HIV infections in Malaysia in 2014.

"Given the rise in sexual transmission of HIV, which in the same year made up 78 per cent of new HIV infections, the HIV epidemic is now more than ever affecting the young population."

She said MAF applauds Lau's achievements and hopes more passionate young Malaysians would take the lead in charting the course of the AIDS response and inspire other young people to join the movement.



Lau says the run was the most physically demanding experience of his life.

