

Headline **Run of a lifetime**
Date **22 Jun 2011**
MediaTitle **The Star**
Section **Metro**
Journalist **N/A**
Frequency **Daily**
Circ / Read **304,904 / 1,026,812**

Language **English**
Page No **16**
Article Size **515 cm²**
Color **Full Color**
ADValue **19,272**
PRValue **57,816**



Proud to be Malaysian: Dixon in his sarong posing with a Jalur Gemilang in front of the tent he shared with seven other participants.

Run of a lifetime

Dixon runs in toughest footrace on earth for good reason

By **THO XIN YI**

thoxinyi@thestar.com.my

Photo courtesy of **RALPH DIXON**

PLACING, prizes and self-satisfaction are the usual motivations that spur a marathoner to participate in a race.

But what about those who sign up for Marathon Des Sables — Marathon of the Sand, dubbed the toughest footrace on earth — that requires them to complete a 243km route in the Sahara desert in a span of six days?

Ralph J Dixon found his reason to join the race in a speech by Malaysian AIDS Foundation (MAF) chairman Prof Dr Adeeba Kamarulzaman in a corporate social responsibility conference.

"I have heard about the marathon for a few years but I didn't have a reason to do it.

"Adeeba's speech gave me the fundraising idea — to raise funds for MAF's HIV intervention and treatment programmes in the Baram Delta in Sarawak," he said.

The 47-year-old Malaysian, who is YTL Corporation Bhd environmental investments director, signed up for the race last year.

He approached corporations to con-

Headline **Run of a lifetime**
Date **22 Jun 2011**
MediaTitle **The Star**
Section **Metro**
Journalist **N/A**
Frequency **Daily**
Circ / Read **304,904 / 1,026,812**

Language **English**
Page No **16**
Article Size **515 cm²**
Color **Full Color**
ADValue **19,272**
PRValue **57,816**

tribute to his fundraising mission and RM230,000 was pledged, close to 80% of his initial target of RM300,000.

That did not mean that all he needed to do was show up on the race day and start running. He forked out RM30,000 from his own pocket for the entry fee, lodging and air fares, and embarked on an intense training programme six months ahead to prepare himself physically.

To top it off, the route was extended to 250km last year over a span of seven days to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the marathon.

"I woke up at around 4am to 5am and ran the Bukit Aman-Sri Hartamas route, which covered about 30km.

"Since I have to run the marathon with a backpack that contained my clothes, food and supplies, I increased the weight of my backpack when I practised," he said.

The longest route he tried was a 60km run on the Maju Expressway to and fro Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya, taking approximately seven hours.

Nonetheless, practising here was very different from the real endurance race.

There were no taps with endless water supply to freshen up after the run every day, and no restaurants to dish out piping hot nasi lemak or Hokkien mee for the exhausted runners.

Every participants had to cook for themselves and were only given 10 litre of water a day for consumption, cooking and personal hygiene.

When they felt their nature's call coming on, they dug a hole with their bare hands before they did their business.

Dixon's backpack, which weighed at 15kg in the beginning, was a burden to his shoulders.

"My shoulders ached and I started

giving away the extra food and throw away stuffs I could do away with," he said.

He brought along dehydrated meals which could be consumed after soaking in hot water for half an hour, but the crave for a simple meal of noodles and chicken soup bugged him during the race.

"I just didn't feel like eating the chicken tikka I had.

"Luckily I had some nuts, dried fruits and dates with me. These were the foods that the locals consume," he said.

He was also loaded with Milo, salt tablets, chocolates and savoury crackers. Lunch had to be eaten on the go while breakfast and dinner were taken at the campsite.

From the scorching 50°C in the day, the temperature dropped to 5°C when night fell. Dixon slipped into his *sarong* and rested on inflatable mat, using his backpack as pillow.

Eight participants crammed in a tent put up by the organiser, and Dixon remembered waking up in the middle of one night to fix the collapsed tent.

Completing the race was the main concern for the marathoners and so they had to maintain their stamina.

Dixon was worried that he had to drop out when he was down with diarrhoea on the third day.

"Fortunately, I was fine the next day after taking some medicine to calm the stomach," he said.

Running across the desert with 40% of soft dunes were no easy feat. There was an overnight stage on the fourth and fifth day, where Dixon took 18 hours to cover the 82km route.

"You walked up now and slid back next. Sand got in my clothes and shoes. I took it really slow in the beginning and gradually increased my

pace," Dixon said.

Despite the hardship, Dixon had a great time. The most memorable had to be the friendship blossomed in the desert.

"A Jordanian man offered to carry my backpack for me when he found out that I was suffering from the pain, despite the fact that he had his own backpack to carry.

"It was probably against the race rules but I refused because it was also against my principles.

"A female participant was had very bad blisters and I gave her my insole.

"People were sharing food with each other even though they only had so much," he recounted.

The participants kept each other for company, trading stories, food and encouragement during the race.

"What better way to spend time than chatting with the other runners? We told each other about our lives, and shared snacks," he said.

Friends and sponsors also sent their encouragement to him.

"I received a few sheets of short messages from them every day, transmitted through the satellite. They kept me going," he said.

When Dixon crossed the finishing line, he lost 5kg and weighed 57kg. He clocked 46.5 hours and was placed at the 445th position out of 1,000-odd participants.

"I felt light and really relieved," he said.

Will he do the race again? He has the experience and know-how now, after all.

"That will depend on whether I have another reason to do it. But the race is still too fresh in my mind now," he said.

Read the diary Dixon wrote during the race at <http://ralphmarathondessables.blogspot.com/>.