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# Conquering the Sahara

> Jeff Lau walked 257km in six days for a good cause

BY YEE JIE MIN

JEFF Lau conquered the gruelling Sahara desert once and vowed not to return but in the name of charity, the 26-year-old subdued "The Greatest Desert" a second time. Lau overcame 257km in six days making him the youngest Malaysian to complete the Marathon des Sables, the toughest race on earth.

Lau joined the marathon the first time with Ralph Dixon, a Malaysian AIDS Foundation (MAF) Trustee and after two years, the Red Ribbon Youth Icon braved the desert again to not only raise RM120,000 for the foundation but also raise awareness about AIDS and HIV.

"Malaysians don't talk about it since there is a lack of education. I believe I can make a small change by indirectly sharing my experience in the marathon and then moving on to the subject," he said.

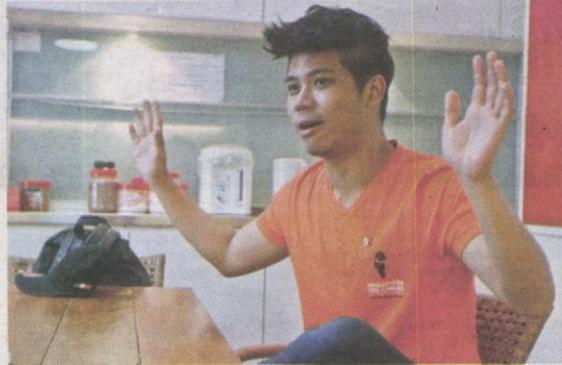
Lau encourages anyone who wants to join the marathon to go ahead and do it for a good cause. He said there are various charities that need help. "do pick one that you wish to help".

"I feel lucky I had the chance to join the marathon and that MAF worked hard to find sponsors for me. I didn't know what charity and donation are before this, and I learned from my experience that if I become rich one day, I will be willing to help. We take many things for granted when a little goes a long way," he said.

## Challenging experience

The Marathon des Sables is a self-sufficient marathon where participants carry their own food and equipment except for water and a tent which the organiser provides. Currently in its 28th consecutive year, the race is truly an international event attracting runners from all over the world.

"The rule is you have to carry 2,000 calories a day and I struggled with what I am supposed to bring. I thought about dehydrated food but it is quite challenging if you haven't tried it. So I tried it before the race and I didn't enjoy it. It tastes too strong and has a



Lau is the youngest Malaysian to complete the Marathon des Sables.

powdery texture.

"In the end, I brought food that is light in weight but high in calories which is instant noodles. I bought different flavours, and *asam laksa* turned out to be the best," Lau said.

He described the race as a well organised marathon and this year, it had GPS, live tracking and live cameras so they were able to track which checkpoints participants have reached. The race even had internet where participants were allowed to send a 2,000-word email with no attachments every day.

"I don't know how they made internet available in the middle of nowhere, but that is why it is a well organised marathon. After finishing the run, there was a long queue for the internet. I joined the queue and updated my family and friends as well as sponsors," Lau said.

For the first race, Lau trained by running 70km every week but the training turned out to be only 10% of what he needed during the marathon. This time, he ran between 40km and 50km a week and built his muscles at the gym. This training helped him more during the race compared to the first time.

This year, 1,200 participants joined but 200 dropped out because of dehydration, diarrhoea and blisters. Lau said these are the three main reasons why

participants cannot continue the marathon. He himself had four, five blisters on the bottom of his foot and when one swelled, it gave him an odd sensation when walking forcing him to stop at a checkpoint to have it cleared.

"They say the Sahara is so beautiful and I should enjoy the view, but in my mind, I just want to reach my tent, cook, eat and sleep," he quipped. "But while walking and running through the desert, you can see people actually living there and that made me feel so lucky."

## Recovery process

After the marathon, Lau had to clean himself thoroughly two, three times from the sand. His skin was tanned and dried out, and he also lost 6kg along with his appetite. Participants got to enjoy two nights in a town in Morocco but Lau couldn't enjoy any of it; only two bites of his food made him feel full.

"The last time I took one month to recover and was only able to have a proper meal after that. This time I want to enjoy my food but I don't have much appetite. I would only go for soup-based food," he said.

Having graduated recently, Lau is heading back to Melbourne, Australia to look for a full-time job to support his interest in drawing. Asking if he would consider himself a fitness buff, he said he

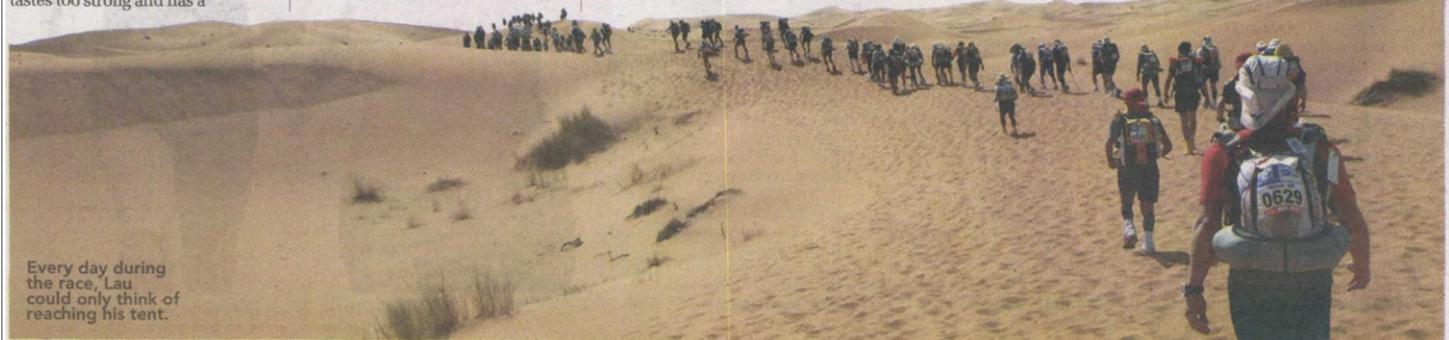


The 26-year-old subdued "The Greatest Desert" raising RM120,000 for MAF.

doesn't want to get to that stage as he wants to enjoy his life.

"I now run every week on a Sunday but it has nothing to do with my fitness. I am so used to it that if I don't run

I feel uncomfortable. I would love to have that elite body shape and will try my best to achieve it," he said.



Every day during the race, Lau could only think of reaching his tent.