



MAURO PROSPERI

The desert runner who drank his own wee (Sahara, 1994)

Completing a marathon is challenging for even the fittest athlete, but the modern ultramarathon is far harder. As well as being much longer than the twenty-six miles of a normal marathon race, they take place in some of the most inhospitable locations on Earth.

Such events can involve climbing high mountain passes thousands of feet above sea level or hiking across glaciers. Others incorporate long-distance swimming and cycling stages, as well as running, skiing and even canoeing. For nearly thirty years the toughest and most extreme is the Marathon des Sables, or Marathon of the Sands, and Prosperi decided to tackle it.

Completing the 156-mile course takes the best athletes nearly a week, and as the name suggests it's run through the Sahara Desert, one of the hottest places in the world. To make it even harder the runners must carry their own food and clothing in backpacks. The temperature in this part of Morocco can reach as high as 58°C during the day, and it drops sharply at night-time, when runners sleep under the stars.

Drinking water is available only from checkpoints along the route. Throughout the event the competitors face many dangers, including deadly snakes, venomous scorpions and enormous camel spiders – up to six inches in diameter and able to run at more than ten miles an hour, they also have a ferocious bite.

Even without the risk of being bitten or stung, the Sahara is a punishing environment. As well as scorching heat and exhaustion from running up to fifty miles in a day, visibility can be cut to only a few inches by the blinding sandstorms that blow up without warning.

It was one of these sandstorms that nearly finished off Prosperi in 1994. In March of that year he lined up with 133 other runners. The Sicilian policeman was a highly experienced competitor and had completed several ultramarathons, as well as making it into the Italian Olympic squad.

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This was his first desert event. He ran hard, and by the fourth day was lying in seventh place. Having covered twenty miles that morning he was in reasonably good shape too, although one foot was becoming badly blistered. (Blistering can seriously injure runners, and at least one competitor was flown home for emergency skin grafts.) Prosperi was confident he could still run hard, and after collecting his water ration he set off on the next gruelling stage of the race.

Shortly after lunchtime a strong wind appeared out of nowhere. It rapidly increased in intensity and Prosperi found himself in the middle of a fierce sandstorm. Desert storms like this can be hard to imagine for anyone who has never seen one. Within seconds ground and sky merge

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into one, and the air is thick with tiny razor-sharp particles of sand. They seem to pierce the skin and, finding their way into the eyes, mouth and ears, the pain can be severe. Meanwhile, in the soupy darkness visibility is cut almost to zero.

Anyone who has experienced a sandstorm knows that it's best to stay where they are until it dies down. However, Prosperi was concerned about becoming buried in the sand, and didn't want to lose his leading position when the storm was over. He felt it would be safer to keep moving, but when the wind eventually dropped and visibility improved he realised straightaway that he was lost.

The storm had lasted more than six hours and many tonnes of displaced sand obscured the course Prosperi was expecting to follow. He knew there was no chance of guessing which way to run, so he reached into his backpack for a distress flare. Runners were required to carry these with them, and by

firing one into the still air he could alert the race organisers and let them know where he was.

The flare was fired, but no help came. Unfortunately Prosperi had strayed so far off the marathon course during the storm that no one even saw the flare. The organisers knew he was missing and had sent out a search party, but they had no idea where to look. In a desert that covered more than four million square miles he was on his own.

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Within hours his water bottle was empty, and he took to urinating in it to give him a source of liquid, should he need it later. He knew enough about desert survival to travel only in the early morning and evening, when the air was relatively cool but there was still enough light to see. But he also knew that even if he could find shade from the midday heat he was facing a horrible death from dehydration.

How far he managed to walk is hard to say, but on his third day alone Prosperi stumbled upon a long-abandoned religious shrine. Inside it was cramped and dark, and as his eyes became accustomed to the gloom he spotted a colony of bats roosting. He killed several of them and then drank their blood. It must have tasted awful and offered little in the way of refreshment, but it was better than nothing. Prosperi realised by now that if things continued like this he would not survive very long.

He reasoned that if he stayed inside the shrine he would eventually be found. He stuck a small Italian flag on the roof, hoping it would attract the attention of anyone who came looking for him, though he accepted that he might be dead by the time they spotted the flag. At

least his family would know what had happened and would have a body to bury.

Like everyone who takes part in these events, he knew that dying of thirst was a particularly ghastly death, and he thought hard about killing himself before this happened. He had a pocketknife in his backpack, and after writing a farewell note to his wife and family he decided to use it to cut his wrists. Knowing he would bleed to death, he tried to get into a comfortable position and then waited to die.

To his surprise, he woke up early the next morning. Tired but alive, he looked down at his wrists and saw that there was hardly any bleeding. Possibly because he was so dehydrated his blood had clotted instead of flowing freely. This chance survival gave him renewed hope. **The previous day he had wanted to die, but now he was determined to live** The previous day he had wanted to die, but now he was determined to live, and to see his three children again. Nomads and other people survive in the Sahara, he reasoned, so why shouldn't he?

His near brush with death also renewed his confidence in his strength and abilities. For the next few days he trekked slowly towards the misty mountain range he could see about twenty miles away.

He had nothing left in his backpack to eat on the journey, and nothing to drink except tiny amounts of dew he collected each morning, and the urine stored in his water bottle. No one would suggest drinking it, but things were desperate and Prosperi felt he had no choice.

Over the next few days he was lucky enough to trap small lizards for food, and each night he buried himself in the sand to insulate himself from the cold desert air.

Somehow he kept this up for nine days before finally encountering a group of Tuareg nomads. By now he was more than 150 miles off course from the marathon, and more than two days drive from the nearest hospital. Having strayed over the border into Algeria, he was now carried by camel to a military base. Initially

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the soldiers thought he might be a spy, but once this misunderstanding was cleared up they treated him well and arranged transport to take him out of the desert.

Prosperi survived, if only just. Having been close to collapse, it would take him almost two years to recover, after which he was desperate to return to the Sahara. The great desert had nearly killed Mauro Prosperi but it had bewitched him too. Perhaps understandably, for a couple of years the organisers flatly refused his applications to re-enter the race. Then, on the third occasion, they relented. After several unsuccessful attempts he finished thirteenth in 2002.