



Running for lives

Participants in race across China's Gobi Desert hope to raise awareness of breast cancer

Jim Gibson, Times Colonist

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Donna Carrigan was just a teen when her doctor found a tumour in her breast. "It's pretty scary for an 18-year-old to be facing," says Carrigan, now 25 and training to run across China's Gobi Desert next June. She remembers being "just freaked out" while being wheeled down the halls to surgery at Royal Jubilee hospital. "I could have breast cancer," she had agonized for two weeks.

Her tumour -- albeit the dimensions of a banana-- proved to be benign. She's been tumour-free ever since, but the impact of the experience persists.

"I lost a third of my breast in surgery and have been struggling to reconcile what that means to me as a woman. At times, I wish I could wear my scar where people could see it!"

"If I have been so affected by my experience, I can only imagine how it would be for others who do have to face breast cancer."

Carrigan thrives on challenges. At 16, she spent a year as a Rotary exchange student in Denmark. Her breast surgery scar had barely healed when she took off as earlier planned for Australia.

"I needed to go, to distance myself," she says, explaining why she wouldn't postpone the trip. She spent a year managing a bar.

Her breast-cancer scare was not a challenge of her choosing, but the current challenge is.

Carrigan is member of Team Canada Gobi March, a trio of Victorians prepping for next summer's seven-day, 250-kilometre race across China's brutal Gobi Desert, where daytime temperatures hit 45 centigrade.

"You know what? You could die in the desert," an Iranian friend warned her. Either people think what she's doing is "amazing" or "kinda crazy."

Blistering desert aside, another reason for skepticism is her running history. She only began seriously running earlier this year.

At this point her training isn't about racking up impressive mileage, but increasing the time spent on her feet running. Daily distances in the Gobi race range from 20- to 80-kilometres, which translates into a lot of hours of putting one foot ahead of the other in terrain ranging from salt flats to mountain ridges to sand dunes. Race participants carry their supplies on their back, with organizers providing only water and tents.

After work at a business consulting firm, Carrigan logs 90-minute runs three or four times a week interspersed with stints in the gym. Three toenails are her only training casualties to date. "I can't wear sandals anymore. I've got the ugliest toes."

Running isn't something that comes easily to her, she says. Team captain Rob Mackay disagrees. "When I run with her, she looks so natural . . . so comfortable," says Mackay, 36, head of marketing and sponsorship for athletics at the University of Victoria.

It's because of Mackay that Carrigan joined Team Canada Gobi March. She had read about him in last year's Marathon des Sables, a seven-day, 253-km race in the Sahara desert. The desert challenge intrigued her.

"It rolled around in my head like a grain of sand. I couldn't get it out of my brain," she says, adding "If I could do that I could do anything."

She started e-mailing Mackay regularly for advice about the Sahara race until he finally suggested she join the Gobi team. The third member of the team is Donald Peterson, 37, an IT manager at a Victoria janitorial supply company. He became hooked last year after hearing Mackay's presentation on the Sahara race. "It just grabbed me. It's mentally challenging and physically challenging."

Peterson has a slight edge over the other two. As a U.S. marine, he spent time in the Middle East with both Desert Shield and Desert Storm operations. However, he did no running there, only starting here six or seven years ago. He's done two Royal Victoria marathons.

As a single father, Peterson grabs running time whenever he can -- sometimes that means several short training periods a day or extra-long runs on weekends his daughter visits her mother. Both he and Mackay did last month's 50-km Elk/Beaver Lake ultra-marathon, with Carrigan completing the event's 25-km walk.

The Victoria trio hopes to raise both \$25,000 and awareness for breast cancer through their Gobi run. Often ultra-marathon race teams run to benefit a charity.

The Breast Cancer Foundation is a logical fit for the trio. Carrigan had her own scare, while there's a history of breast cancer in Mackay's family.

"I've got two little girls. There's always that concern when you've got [breast cancer] in the family," says Mackay. Peterson would like his 11-year-old daughter to become an adult with no worries about breast cancer. For more information, contact www.teamgobi.com