



Ultra-Running
CHARLIE ENGLE: ENDURANCE JUNKIE

Find out how Charlie Engle went from drug addict to ultra-marathoner.

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Photographs by Rod McLean

When one spends 111 consecutive days of his life running across the Sahara Desert, there is time to think. Lots and lots and lots and lots and lots of time to think. So that's what Charlie Engle did. He thought about a double cheeseburger, nestled comfortably alongside a pile of fries, and a large, icy Pepsi. He thought about his two sons; about his boyhood in North Carolina; about Johnny Cash; about the Tar Heels; about a cool shower; a clean bathroom; a funny joke; the strange color of his last poop. Mostly, he thought about Wichita, Kansas. About a curb and a druggie and a life 99.9 percent ruined. He thought about who he was. About who he had become. About who he still could be. "Really," says Engle, "I thought about how unlikely it was for me to escape and how lucky I am to be living."

The curb still remains--a slab of indistinguishable gray concrete on the to-be-avoided-at-all-costs corner of Kellogg and Broadway. Though Engle, 45, has not been back to the projects of Wichita for more than 15 years, the images refuse to fade. He speaks of the date--July 23, 1992--quite often, not with a reverential tone of fear or remorse, but with the confidence of a man who finds motivation in his past. "That was my lowest low," he says. "The day when I woke up." He was, in the bluntest of terms, a crackhead--stealing, lying, begging for that next hit. For more than a decade, Engle had been addicted to alcohol and drugs, and now, on this corner, he reached absolute bottom. Engle had spent the past week holed up in a \$10-per-day motel, smoking crack, drinking cheap liquor, screwing prostitutes, dealing with quarter-sized bullet holes in the side of his car. Back home in North Carolina, he had a wife and a 2-year-old son, and yet he could not care less. He was about one thing, and one thing only: the high. "I hated my life," says Engle, "but I couldn't escape it. So I prayed."

Though lots of **ultrarunners** speak of going long distances as something akin to a spiritual quest, Engle has never been a particularly religious man. But where else was he supposed to turn? "I prayed to have my addiction removed from my body," he says. "I'm not sure who I was praying to, exactly. But I sure was praying hard."

This is what Engle pondered as he and two cohorts, Ray Zahab, 39, and Kevin Lin, 31, became the first Homo sapiens on record to run across the Sahara Desert. The trek--from November 2, 2006, through February 20, 2007--encompassed 4,500 miles, six countries (Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Libya, and Egypt), bugs the size of bowling balls, disease, the mother of all foot fungi, and endless mounds of sand. It was, in Zahab's understatement, "incredibly tough." But when you've already visited the gates of Sheol, already felt the 1,000-degree flames engulfing your soul, well, the desert is merely a climbing wall.

"My suffering in the Sahara and the Amazon Jungle and all the different places I've run, they're all 100 percent voluntary," says Engle, who's competed in the **Badwater Ultramarathon**, the **Eco-Challenge**, and the 155-mile Gobi Desert March, which he, Zahab, and Lin won in 2006. "I'm there because I had a crazy idea

and enough money to give it a shot. But nothing in the world compares to the deprivation and humiliation of my addiction. There's no pain in running that comes close." He pauses, rubs his chin, sighs. "When you're averaging 45 miles per day for 111 days, that sort of motivation is a powerful tool."

Like many improbable ideas, talk of the Sahara trek first came up during a run. Only this was during a 200-kilometer stage race in Brazil called the Jungle Marathon, and perhaps the Amazonian tropics prompted Zahab to say to his running buddy Engle, "I wonder if anybody has ever run across the entire Sahara Desert?" The thought hung in the air--preposterous and unrealistic and ludicrous. Yet immediately enticing. For two adventure junkies eternally in the market for another hit, this was intoxicating. "In this sort of sport, you take the biggest idea imaginable, toy with it, dismiss it, then see if it's possible," says Engle. "We did a little research and found out nobody had ever run the Sahara before. So we thought, Well, what the hell? Why not?"

Engle and Zahab next roped in Lin, a Taiwan-based adventure racer with a like-minded yeah-sure attitude and an ungodly amount of determination. "I wanted three people, because for the mission to succeed, at least one person had to finish," Engle says. "With two, there were still good odds we both might not make it. With three, you figure someone will pull through." But running the Sahara isn't as simple as running, say, the **Boston Marathon**, which Engle has three times. Engle hired a four-man support staff for the trip, including a logistics coordinator, a doctor, a trainer/massage therapist, and a local guide, all of whom traveled in a pair of Toyota Land Cruisers. One of the vehicles would travel ahead of the pack to map out a course and scout future camping spots. The other would stick with the runners. "For the three of us, there was no such thing as catching a ride to burn off a few miles or cheating," says Engle. "The support staff was there because running the Sahara is a beast, and you can't just slap on some sneakers and go."

Also along for the trip was a production crew filming a documentary, **Running the Sahara**, which was screened at the Toronto International Film Festival last September and is scheduled to be released this spring. While organizing his adventure, Engle, media-savvy from his work as a television producer, had met director James Moll. Engle's plans intrigued the Academy Award winner. "Charlie had such a passion for what he was doing, and that sort of passion can be very powerful," says Moll. "The whole idea was too huge to ignore." Matt Damon signed on as executive producer, narrated the film, and helped Engle found H2O Africa, a charity to raise awareness for clean water on the continent.

When the three runners kicked off their journey that first day in Senegal, they looked out at the wide, imposing earth before them and cringed. The original plan was to finish in 80 days, averaging roughly 50 to 55 miles per day. "Opening day we only ran 22 miles," Engle says. "The next day I woke up sore, tired, and miserable. It was the reality that this was not going to be even remotely fun."

In the span of a soul-sucking 16 weeks, the three runners survived on two (yes, two) showers, five hours of sleep per night (they would wake at 4:00 a.m. and stop running at 9:30 p.m.), 1,411 liters of Gatorade for Engle alone, and countless bouts of diarrhea, tendinitis, foot swelling, hand swelling, ankle twists, and endless blisters. "I've since learned that almost everybody gave us no chance of getting all the way across the desert after those first 10 days in Senegal and Mauritania," says Engle. "We weren't adapting very well. Kevin and Ray both had serious stomach problems. Kevin had some major muscular issues. We were just falling apart. For the first 30 days, temperatures were well over 120 degrees. But one day, about 10 or 11 days into the expedition, it was almost as if someone flipped a switch. We began to get into a rhythm. From that point on, things got better."

Though the physical challenge was enormous, what truly struck the participants was the mental quagmire that is one...long...endless...jog...through...nothingness. All three men regularly saw illusions--plants disguised as sexy women, sand masquerading as a lake. "I had this game in my head where I would relive an entire day," says Zahab. "One time I wanted to see how many times in a row I could listen to Peter Frampton's 'Do You Feel Like We Do' on my iPod." The song, off of the classic Frampton Comes Alive! album, lasts a numbing 14 minutes, 17 seconds. Zahab listened to it 20 consecutive times. "Crazy, right?" he says. "But that's how you survive out there, by finding little things to occupy your head."

The three traded iPods, memorized song lyrics, debated courses of action, struggled to persuade Libyan border guards to let them cross. As it became clear that the expedition would take significantly longer than 80 days, Engle and company had their doubts. "There were moments when I didn't know if I could take it any longer," says Zahab. "I mean, I literally couldn't stand the smell of myself. But each morning there'd be Charlie, yelling at us to get going. We needed that."

Let's be perfectly honest--Charlie Engle was destined to be unusual. He entered the world on September 20,

1962, the son of 20-year-old hippies enrolled at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His mother, Rebecca Ranson, was an aspiring playwright and his father, Richard Engle, an English major. As a young boy, Charlie--stringy brown hair draping his shoulders--marched through downtown Chapel Hill, carrying signs and chanting slogans protesting the Vietnam War. He was taught to think differently. Don't accept everything you're told. Keep an open mind. Experience everything. "My parents were very free-spirited," says Engle. "They divorced when I was only one, but they had similar outlooks. When I was a teenager my mom came to me to announce she was a lesbian. I was like, 'Why do you think I've been calling [Rebecca's partner] Julie "Dad" for the last year?' It was how we lived and who we were."

Though quirkiness trailed Charlie like a lost puppy, he was also gifted with an uncommon athletic lineage. Not only had his father played freshman basketball under Dean Smith at North Carolina, but his grandfather, Dale Ranson, was a legendary UNC cross-country and track coach for decades. So it was no surprise when Charlie developed his own aptitude for sports. He ran his first sub-five-minute mile as an eighth-grader, and as the star quarterback at Pinecrest High School in Southern Pines, North Carolina, he was recruited (albeit lightly) by Clemson and North Carolina. "I got more attention for football than running," he says. "But when I got hit hard on the football field, I didn't like it. The punishment that appealed to me was from running. I just loved the freedom, the time for thought, the individuality. Even as a teenager I was getting up at 5:30 a.m. and running. I had that urge."

Engle ran a 4:40 mile in high school, excellent for the prep ranks but hardly good enough to excel at the Division I collegiate level. Once he arrived at North Carolina, Engle switched focuses from long distances to long nights. He drank--and then some. "One night a buddy had a little cylinder with a chamber filled with cocaine," Engle says. "I did two hits. I didn't feel anything particularly strong, and that's what started the mind-set of, 'This really isn't that big of a deal.'" Two weeks later Engle spent an entire night doing coke. "And I can honestly say that I spent the next 10 years chasing that feeling."

Indeed, the Charlie Engle everyone once knew--trustworthy, honest, hardworking, engaging, decent--was no more. Oh, he'd return in spurts, a good grade here, a helpful act there. But Engle snorted so much cocaine as a junior that a fellow member of the Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity called his father and urged him to retrieve his son. "I was living in Seattle at the time, and his communication with me had turned sporadic at best," says Richard. "I noticed there were some disturbing signs, especially his mediocre attendance at class. But I didn't know the depths of his addiction until I picked him up."

The ensuing years were nightmarish. Engle dropped out of college and moved with his father and stepmother to California, where the family owned two Baskin-Robbins ice-cream shops. Richard allowed his son to operate the storefront in Monterey, then watched in dismay as Charlie would take money from the register and spend it on binges. "I'd take the dough, buy drugs at 8 p.m., sell enough of it to recoup the money, do the rest of the drugs, and get back the next morning to open the store," Charlie says. "I was totally unhappy, but I didn't know how to stop."

Engle went on to sell cars for a few years before starting his own hail-damage repair business. In 1990, Engle employed 100 people, made up to \$200,000 annually, married his girlfriend, had a son--but could not kick his demons. By day, he was the consummate professional, going through paperwork, managing staff, kissing his wife, and tucking his boy into bed. By night, however, he was snorting coke or smoking crack.

Remarkably, he was also running. Engle completed his first 26.2-miler--the Big Sur International Marathon--in 1989 with a time of 3 hours, 22 minutes and, he says, "the next day, of course, I'm calling my dealer." He would go on three-week drug binges, then sober up and train hard for, say, the Boston Marathon (he completed two in his 20s). "There was enough of me that loved to run and cared about my body and myself that I would take some time to really train," he says. "I'd run a marathon, convince myself I'd never use drugs again--then use drugs again. I loved running. Just loved it. Unfortunately, I loved drugs, too."

"He was a goner," says his mother, Rebecca. "I went to his apartment one day and he was crying, lying on the floor completely naked, fully out of his mind. My fear was that he was going to die."

Enter Wichita. In the city for seven months for work, Engle had just dropped off his wife and son, who had flown in from North Carolina for a visit. Upon departing the airport, Engle drove straight to the seediest part of downtown, where he bought drugs and paid for a motel room. As soon as he finished praying on that curb, Engle stood up, went back to his room, and found an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in a nearby church basement. He attended three sessions that day, then three more the next day. And the next day. And the next day. "Finally," he says, "something inside of me woke up."

It has been more than 15 years since Engle last took a sip of alcohol or a snort of cocaine. Today he lives soberly in Greensboro, North Carolina. But, says Lisa Trexler, his girlfriend, his past hasn't completely vanished. "A lot of who he is, of what makes him go, is what he went through," says Trexler, who works for an athletic skin-care company. "It's hard for me to imagine him as that person, sitting there, going through such torture, but on the other hand, it's not hard. Because he lives for torture. Just in a different way."

If there is a direct link between Charlie Engle, druggie, and Charlie Engle, athlete, it's the substitution of one addiction for another. As he gradually distanced himself from coke and booze, Engle ran with increasing frequency, completing his 40th marathon by the mid-'90s. In 1996, he was watching the Discovery Channel's coverage of the Eco-Challenge, the Mark Burnett-created adventure race that had teams of four or five members trekking 24 hours per day over a 300-plus-mile course through British Columbia. "You see that," says Engle, "and you either think, Those people are crazy. What the hell are they thinking? or That's the coolest thing I've ever seen. I have to do that. I was smitten."

So Engle signed up for the 1998 Raid Gauloises in Ecuador. "Marvelous, horrible, excruciating, amazing--all rolled into one experience," Engle says. "It took the energy I had put into drugs and offered me a whole new direction."

Finally, in 2000, Engle was accepted into the Eco-Challenge. By this point, Engle was an unemployed, separated father of two preteens. Having long aspired to work in film, he jokingly scribbled DOCUMENTARIAN under PROFESSION on his Eco-Challenge application. Before the start of the race, Engle was contacted by a producer from the CBS news show 48 Hours, asking whether he would carry a miniature camera throughout the event. The producer told Engle the show would likely use 30 seconds of material--then wound up airing more than 11 minutes, including segments detailing Engle's addictive battles, which led to a job as a producer on the hit reality program, Extreme Makeover: Home Edition.

The job provided the resources and the time to pay for his new addiction--extreme running. In the next few years, Engle finished first in races across the Gobi Desert and through the Amazon Jungle. He crossed the Atacama Desert in Chile, charted the jungles of Vietnam and Borneo, climbed to the top of the volcanoes in Ecuador, and ran across Death Valley. Then came the fateful day with Zahab, when the Sahara came into play.

To put it mildly, the days were long. Really l-o-n-g. At 4 a.m., Engle would instinctively rise and wake his cohorts, all of whom would be nestled in sleeping bags or atop foam mats in a temporary campground. From 4 until 5, the groggy men would drink instant coffee and dine on bread and a less-than-enticing selection of peanut butter, jelly, or Nutella. "We had a cook with us who knew how to make the most delicious bread," says Engle. "Unfortunately, in order to bake it he needed charcoal and wood. In the Sahara there ain't much wood. So there wasn't much fresh bread." At 5 a.m. the vehicles would rev up and the three runners would begin their journey. For the first 20 minutes, they would walk in an effort to shake off the rust. "By 5:30 we'd be running," Engle says. "Our support vehicle would go 10-K ahead, we'd catch up, have something to drink, then let it go another 10-K ahead. We repeated that process all day." Come noon the trio would take a break to eat lunch, stretch tightened muscles, and nap. "It'd often be 120 degrees in the sun," says Engle. "It was like sleeping in a sauna." From 2:30 until 9:30, the trek would continue. "Dinner was the worst," says Engle, who lost 35 pounds in the first 35 days. "Couscous and goat, couscous and goat, couscous and goat. If I ever see either again I might go into convulsions."

Though Moll's film crew tagged along, they slept in a separate camp, ate separate foods, spoke only minimally. "I loved the idea of the movie," Engle says. "But it could not compromise the authenticity of the trek. I didn't care if they had regular showers and ate McDonald's on the side. We were staying true to the mission."

When, on the final day, the trio reached the Red Sea and could at long last stop, the addict in Engle wanted that buzz. He craved euphoria. He craved ecstasy. He craved the high that coupled itself with a thick line of coke, with a flask of Mad Dog 20/20. But that's not what he felt.

"The highs from drugs are intense, but they're fake," says Engle, who plans to start a run across the United States in May. "They give you something, but they rob you of even more. When we completed our Sahara journey, I was too exhausted to feel much of anything. But I know that we did something no one else has ever accomplished. You can keep all the drugs. Me? I'll settle for achievement."