

Carrigan goes the distance

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Oak Bay News

Sep 27 2006

Running a marathon is tough.

Running a marathon every day for seven days in the desert sounds crazy. But Donna Carrigan is up for the challenge if it means she can raise awareness about breast cancer.

Carrigan was only 18 when doctors discovered a large tumour in her breast.

The disturbing news crushed her.

The tumor was benign, but the experience changed the way she looked at the world.

"I made a promise to myself not to make excuses anymore for things I wanted to do," she said.

Carrigan, now 25, went travelling but never felt like she really got over the experience.

"That's what I get to do now - face it," said Carrigan about her fears.

Carrigan is one of three members in Team Canada training to compete in the 2007 Gobi March - a 250-kilometre race across the Chinese desert.

She hopes to use the race a platform to raise funds for breast cancer research.

"I felt I was diagnosed with a breast tumour because of the current awareness of breast cancer in Canada," she said.

While Carrigan's teammates are seasoned runners, Carrigan only started the sport this year.

She dedicatedly trains everyday after work for up to 20 hours a week.

The realities of what it will be like to run for the same length as a work day hit home when she ran a 56-kilometres last week.

"Maybe I didn't think it through when I decided, but I was so consumed with passion," she said. Scorching heat and sandstorms makes the gruesome blisters and torn muscles seem unimportant.

The race consists of six stages that range from 20 to 80 kilometres per stage.

Competitors must carry all their own food, gear and clothing required to complete the course. Event organizers will provide only water and tents.

Carrigan anticipates temperatures will climb to 45 C.

"The Gobi desert is known for dramatic temperature changes. So it could be really one cold minute and then sweltering in the afternoon," she said.

In addition to the heat, Carrigan is prepping herself for the sandstorms.

"It's like being in a white-out in the desert. You can't tell where the sky starts and the ground starts," she said.

Sand will permeate every crevice of her body acting as sandpaper while she runs, breathes, eats and sleeps.

Even her teammate Rob Mackay's stories of having to tear off all his toe nails while racing in the Sahara didn't scare her - it actually captivated her.

"You have to buy your shoe sizes two sizes too big because your feet swell so much in the heat and you'll be on them so long," she said.

Before Carrigan joined Mackay, she had heard about the Oak Bay resident's adventures of running ultramarathons through the desert.

"I just thought it was such a crazy idea," she said.

Carrigan repeatedly emailed Mackay with questions about what it was like to participate in the run.

"I became progressively more obsessed with the idea," she said.

Mackay asked Carrigan to join the team earlier this year even though they had never met and Carrigan had no running experience.

"He said to me, 'You are going to have to have a little bit of faith if you are going to do something like this,'" she said.

Victoria resident Donald Peterson is the third member of the team.

Like Carrigan, Peterson also became inspired at a slide show Mackay presented on his experiences.

The team hopes to raise \$25,000 to the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation. Participants pay a \$5,000 entry fee on top of their flight costs. The physical and monetary hit from the adventure is worth it for Carrigan.

"When I am running, everything is very black and white: there is nothing keeping you going except your will to move forward."