

# RUNNER'S WORLD

SHOOTING *RUNNING THE SAHARA* WAS AN HD ENDURANCE TEST.

BY DOUGLAS BANKSTON

In February of 2007, extreme runners Charlie Engle, Ray Zahab and Kevin Lin began a journey on foot across the Sahara Desert to draw attention to H2O Africa, a movement to bring clean water to the region. One hundred eleven days and over 4,300 miles later, the runners touched the Red Sea. Documentary director James Moll's *Running the Sahara* chronicles the runners' epic feat.

"The mindset behind endurance athletes fascinates me — what it takes to give someone such tremendous drive that they will endure physical pain to attain their goal at all costs," says Moll about the allure of tackling such a grueling production. "This was the perfect opportunity to explore that."

With so much unknown, the director approached the documentary with a kind of freeform, *verité* style. "The only outline was knowing that the runners were going to start somewhere on the coast of Senegal and end up somewhere on the coast of Egypt," admits Moll, who's won Academy and Emmy Awards for his work. "I didn't know if any of them would make it."

To capture the action, Moll brought along DP Harris Done, with whom he has worked since their days at USC film school, and though they were in remote locations far from any support, the filmmakers wouldn't settle for anything less than high production values. "James wanted an epic look to the movie," Done notes. With that in mind, they selected smaller, lighter Sony HDW-F900R high-def 1080p cameras and Fujinon 13x, 18x and 42x HA Premier zooms. "The F900R has the new hyper-gamma settings, which are helpful with the heavy-duty contrast issues we faced," he says. "My rule is to never blow out anything in the frame. In HD, when you go over 100 percent, it looks like someone has poked a hole in the picture. Unless there are spectral kicks and things like that I never go over 100 percent."

Hyper gamma produces a rather flat, low-contrast image that may not be pleasing to the eye but records the most information across the widest latitude, allowing for more flexibility in color correction.

Two and three cameras rolling was usually the norm. In a run-and-gun style, Done and the other operators weren't bound to audio tethers and didn't have time to worry about optical filters outside of ND Grads and Tru-Pols for the skies. "The nice thing about the F900R," says Done, "was I could put a wide zoom on it, and I could hold it with one hand out the back of the



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Mounted to a Russian Arm, the camera tracks along with the *Sahara* subjects.

Land Cruiser." But the gear still needed protection from the harsh elements. "For sandstorms," recalls Done, "we discovered these amazing XXXL Ziploc bags. You could take the camera with the super-long zoom, put it in, zip it shut and cut holes for the eyepiece and for the lens and then tape around them. The cameras held up really well. All the cameras and lenses went back without needing any major service or cleaning."

Outside of sandstorms, a brutal environment and alien cultures, another challenge was in the basic shooting of the runners. Says Moll, "There are only so many times you can plant the camera and have runners run by. I wanted a way to be next to the runners close on their faces, and we chose the Russian Arm. It was mounted to the top of an SUV and controlled from inside. We all just crammed in there."

"You could track along with them," adds Done. "All the great shots that we took with that Russian Arm are in the film."

However, the filmmakers weren't always in Land Cruisers, and Done even did some running of his own. "It was about 110°F, and I chased the runners down the road and my soundman passed out," he recalls.

Sound was recorded wirelessly to an Aaton Cantar-X Location Recorder in one of the chase vehicles. Explains Moll: "I was wearing a headset where I could hear everybody's dialog. Through the walkie-talkies, I could ask the cameramen to shoot a specific thing. It was more difficult communicating with the sound guys because they didn't have walkies, so they had to follow the camera guys. It comes back to experience and having top-notch sound people. There were times, however, when the Cantar in the vehicle was too far away from the cameras, so the radios weren't throwing far enough."

Done brought along Arri and Joker lighting kits, but found himself using battery-powered Litepanels when illumination was needed. With such a small crew, "it was bare bones," he says. "We opted to go with a much more naturalistic feel."

*Running the Sahara* was cut from many hundreds of hours of HDCAM footage on an Avid Adrenaline Media Composer, and Moll sat in on the color correction while Done was away on another shoot. "I wanted to make it as true as possible to what we all experienced," says the director. "It was physically, emotionally and mentally challenging to make the film, but nobody on the crew complained. Watching the runners made it easier to not complain!" **DV**