



■ Think running Death Valley is tough, as Engle is doing here? Try running across the entire Sahara.

## PROFILE

## THE MAN WHO RUNS THE WORLD

**CHARLIE ENGLE** ran across Africa. Next up: America. But he doesn't live to run. He runs so he won't destroy himself. by DAN HALPERN

**C**HARLIE ENGLE LIVES AT THE end of a cul-de-sac outside of Greensboro, North Carolina, with a Volkswagen in the garage and a Chevy in the driveway. He has an ex-wife, two sons, and a girlfriend. He goes hiking with his family in Yosemite every year, isn't entirely sure if there is or isn't a God, and is the sort of person who makes friends on airplane flights. All in all, he seems to be a pretty reasonable guy. What he likes to do best is run. And run. He likes to go farther and faster than he, or anyone else, thinks he can. Which is why, in late 2006, this reasonable-seeming 45-year-old family man started running at one end of the Sahara Desert and didn't stop until he got to the other.

If most Americans can name even one ultradistance runner, it's probably Dean Karnazes, the master of publicity whose most famous stunt was to run 50 marathons in 50 states in 50 days. But Engle's Sahara feat was the equivalent of nearly two marathons per

day for more than 100 days straight, across some of the most forbidding terrain on the planet. This spring, as an encore, he plans to run across America faster than anyone ever has. And still almost nobody knows who he is. Yet. A film about the Sahara run, produced by Matt Damon, is being released in April. Engle has already been on the *Tonight Show*, and now Oprah has come calling.

What Engle has is a darker, more complex story than Karnazes's feel-good message of healthy living and you-can-do-it fitness. "Hi, I'm Charlie Engle," he says on a video posted to his website, talking to the camera in full stride, "and I'm into pain."

Two decades ago it was a different sort of pain. Engle was an ordinary working guy with a wife, a small business offering paintless auto dent repair, and an addiction to cocaine. He'd follow hailstorms across the country, making money fixing the damage, then blow it on drugs. But he was still functioning.

Then he found himself in Denver, taking a bag from a stranger he'd met on a street cor-

ner. Inside were five little rocks. Engle had discovered crack. "Five days later I'm peeking under the door, totally out of my mind, haven't showered or changed, my car's been stolen, I'm in the middle of Denver at this motel room I've rented just for the drugs, with no idea what I'm doing, and way beyond caring." Over the next two years he would spend days on end in run-down crack houses all over the country.

Engle had been a runner in high school, and actually picked it up again in the midst of his addiction, but that was no solution. At one point, over a period of 45 days, he ran three marathons, averaging a very respectable three hours each time — with drug binges in between. "I ran Boston," he says. "Two days later I'm drunk in a motel room with a crack pipe."

He'd always resisted the AA route — "Every time they said the phrase 'higher power,' I just heard 'God,' and that bugged the shit out of me" — but in July 1992, after the birth of his first son, he tried again. "That day was not that much different than a hundred times before," he says, except this time it worked.

Four years later he discovered how much he needed some sort of suffering in his life. Engle was in Australia, still chasing hail in the dent business, when he went to run a 10-K near Brisbane. When he arrived, however, he discovered that he'd misread the flyer and that the race was in fact 100 kilometers. "It was a three-loop course, very hilly, and I figure, What the hell, I'll make it a training run. I'll do one loop and quit," he says. He did the first loop and looked back; he was in 10th place out of maybe 100 runners. He was

sore, his feet hurt, but, he thought, Why not try the second loop? And the third? He had come to run a six-mile race and ended up winning his first ultramarathon.

That same year he saw Mark Burnett's *Eco-Challenge* adventure race on TV, and thought, I gotta try that. He went to adventure-racing school in San Francisco, and from that point on he did every major race, including the next Raid Gauloises, three straight Eco-Challenges, and his first major ultramarathons — epic competitive sufferfests — often finishing in the top few runners.

Which raises an obvious question: Has he simply switched addictions? "I haven't," Engle says. "I don't spend every moment planning to run, the way I spent every moment planning to binge." On the other hand, he adds, "I have nowhere else to put this energy. I hate to think of myself as obsessive. It's a negative word, *obsessive*. It's horrible to be driven to destruction despite the obvious signs that it's a bad idea. But I need to keep pushing until I find out what the limit is."

In 2004 Engle started thinking about the very outer limits. He'd met ultrarunners Ray Zahab and Kevin Lin at the Jungle Marathon, in Brazil; a month later, after Zahab had run a 207-mile race in Niger, Africa, he called Engle and said, "Dude, I've got this crazy idea. I wonder if anybody's run across the whole desert." No one had, which intrigued Engle. He had quit the dent business and found his way onto the crew of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, thanks to some footage he shot on one of his own races for *48 Hours*, which had led to a job as a cameraman and producer. He mentioned the idea to a friend in television, Tim Beggy, who immediately saw the possibilities and introduced him to James Moll, the Oscar-winning documentarian.

"I thought the concept was insane," Moll says, "and I wanted to follow them. I wanted to know what drives elite athletes, these people who have a goal at all costs." The first time Moll met Zahab, he asked jokingly, "What happens if in the middle of this you can't take it anymore and you want to quit?" Zahab's reply: "There's no quitting."

They started in Senegal, on the Atlantic Ocean, on November 2, 2006, and for more than a week nobody thought the three runners would make it. The first day they managed only 22 miles, and Engle woke up the next morning feeling sore and tired. "We weren't adapting," he says. "Kevin and Ray both had serious stomach problems, and Kevin had some major muscular issues. We were falling apart." But in Mauritania, 10 or 11 days into the expedition, they started to feel more comfortable. "It was like someone flipped a switch," says Engle. "We began to get into a rhythm." From that day forward Engle, Zahab, and Lin averaged about 40 miles a day across six countries, accompanied by a doctor, massage

therapist, local Tuareg guides, various fixers, and an entire film crew.

Over the 111 days the runners would drink more than 3,000 liters of Gatorade, wear out scores of running shoes, and discover that their west-east route meant they'd be facing headwinds almost the entire way. In Niger's Tenere Desert they nearly ran out of water; Engle had a single bottle to drink over a full day's 50-mile run. They ran on dirt, through ankle-deep sand, in 125-degree temperatures, through a monster sandstorm that didn't let up for three weeks. They were assailed by locusts, scorpions, and poisonous sidewinder snakes, cornered by wild boars, and chased by warthogs.

"They were running in the heat of the day, and I made them stop running from 11AM to 4 PM," says team physician Jeff Peterson, a sports medicine doctor in Stanford. "That was the first time Charlie and I butted heads. Which happened a lot on the trip. He always wanted to just keep going. Eventually, the way that Charlie countered was to say, 'Fine, we'll get up at four in the morning, and we'll run until 12, start again at three, and run until nine.'"

Engle's relentless drive both kept the team going and pissed almost everyone off. Lin called him "the monster." Says Engle:



■ Engle's attempt to break the cross-America record will require at least 68 miles a day. He starts April 27.

"We were trying to run 50 miles a day, but also trying not to kill each other."

They ran the final 48 hours without sleeping, past the pyramids at Giza and across Cairo to the mouth of the Suez Canal — 150 miles, just on guts. Zahab veered off the course at one point to follow a hallucinated trail. "We were like soldiers in a death march," he says. When they reached the Red Sea the three runners dipped their hands in the water, just as they had 111 days earlier in the Atlantic.

*Running the Sahara*, the film documenting the adventure, narrated by Damon, is coming out April 27. (Proceeds will benefit H2O Africa, a nonprofit co-founded by Engle to build wells and call attention to the need for new water sources on the continent.) Engle has several proposed TV projects in the works, including one that would combine adventure travel with addiction treatment programs, and another about what he sees as the coming international wars over water. "Charlie just makes shit happen," Zahab says simply. "That's who he is."

As if the Sahara run weren't enough, Engle is looking to go even farther and harder, starting with his attempt to break the 46-day speed record for running across the United States. He plans to start April 27, to coincide with the *Sahara* movie release. He and his running partner Marshall Ulrich will have to average 68 miles a day. He also wants to climb Everest and then run all the way down to sea level, across India to Calcutta. Both runs sound as though they could be episodes in an adventure reality series idea he's hatched with Beggy, in which Engle would get himself "killed" every week, like Kenny on *South Park*.

Does Engle like the idea of getting killed every week?

Beggy laughs. "Oh, yeah."



■ His life has stabilized after fighting off a cocaine dependency, but Engle hasn't just switched addictions. "I don't spend every moment planning to run."

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