

THE MIND & BODY ISSUE

RUNNER'S

WORLD

SA'S BEST-SELLING RUNNING MAGAZINE

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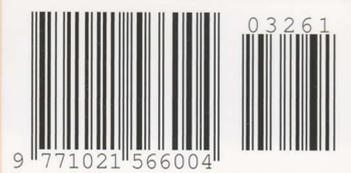
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ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

To run in the Himalayas is to respond to adversity from a deep and pure place within ourselves.

► **THE DARJEELING REGION** of West Bengal straddles the Nepalese border in Northern India. It is home to some of the most spectacular but arduous terrain imaginable, and elevations reach an oxygen-scarce altitude of almost 3 700 metres. I may not be ultra-running fit, but I am fit – and yet at this height above sea level, even a light, uphill stroll gives me pause for thought.

Then there are the elements. While covering the Himalayan 100-Mile Stage Race, we experienced rain, hail and bitter cold. Participating in this gruelling five-day event is considered an adventure sport. Race director (and founder) CS Pandey even goes as far as to call it a ‘calculated risk’.

But running has a way of bringing out the best in people. It may be because we’re born to do it, if you accept (as I do) the theory proposed by Christopher McDougall; or perhaps it’s because it challenges us to strive for the finer human qualities – discipline, persistence, and courage. There’s just something about running that motivates us to reach for our better selves, or at least parts thereof. In any event, that’s



Fewer than 40 participants attempt this gruelling five-day event.

how I felt after watching a party of 30-odd participants attempt this epic race.

A TEST OF WILLPOWER

The first stage starts at Mane Bhanjang, at 1 900 metres, and climbs to the race apex at Sandhakphu. The gradients are hair-raisingly steep, but there are also many downhill sections, which give the disheartening impression that gains are given up in progress towards the formidable summit.

I witnessed runners finishing on the first night, cold and wet, on the verge of hypothermia, ailing from

altitude sickness, or just tired, sore and depleted. Sleep didn’t come easy, because none of us were accustomed to the altitude. Getting up to do it all again the next day would prove a serious test of willpower. But get up they did.

The most remarkable (but by no means the only) example was one of my media companions, Helmut Linchbichler – a 74-year-old, third-time veteran of the race, hailing from Austria. Having fallen prey to a logistical miscalculation in the deployment of his rain gear, he’d been one of the

participants who’d been badly affected by the weather. His predicament was further aggravated by the fact he’d taken a tumble during a trail run in the week preceding the race, which had left his upper leg seriously bruised.

At the end of the stage, he’d endured a few hours of wet, glacial conditions, without a jacket and with very little insulation. He was chilled to the bone, and in bad shape; I thought the guy was done. But when I got up the next day, warmly ensconced in my down jacket, there he was in his running gear. He was laughing,

joking, and looked ready, come what may. It seemed I'd underestimated his fortitude.

The second stage doubled back along the ridgeline, so we actually spent the first two nights at Sandakphu. From there, we were afforded views of four of the world's five highest peaks – a breathtaking affirmation, at a time when participants needed it most.

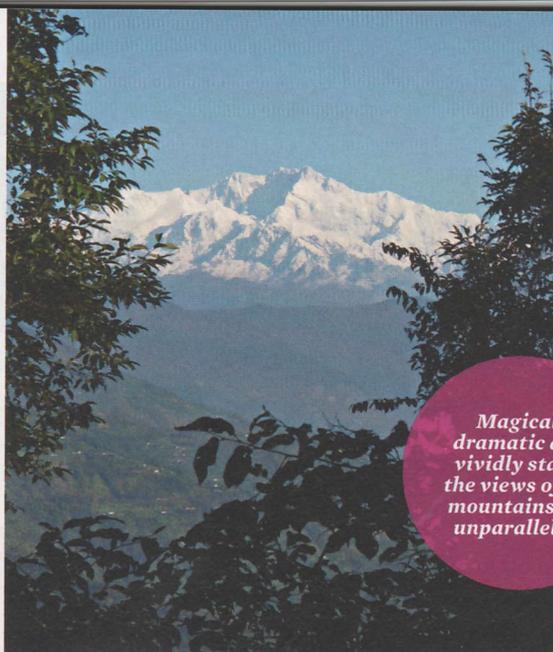
Kanchenjunga, the third-highest, was the most impressive in terms of breadth; so much so that it was more like a massif than a single mountain. It felt so close that I could almost reach out and touch it. Sandakphu was indeed magical: its position is dramatic, and the views are virtually unparalleled, and vividly stark.

UNBRIDLED JOY

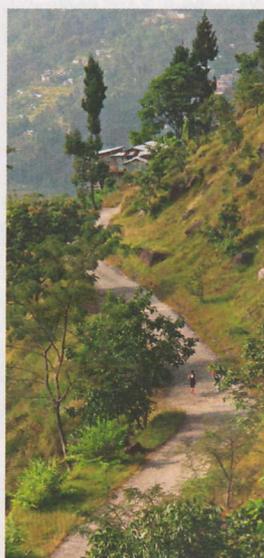
There's some debate over whether the third stage is actually a standard-marathon distance, but it wasn't resolved, because of patchy GPS connections in the region. Regardless, it features a tremendous, quadriceps-crippling descent to the town of Rimbik, returning to an altitude of 1900 metres. Despite their stoic forbearance, runners must have been maniacally overjoyed to become reacquainted with running water and hot showers.

We stayed at a small lodge, the Hotel Tenzing Sherpa, which was a warm and friendly place. It was here we were offered an entirely unexpected treat, one that would've been a major boon for kilojoule-craving runners: a tagliatelle napoletana, of Neapolitan standard, with what tasted like genuine Parmesan cheese. To suggest that this was surprising in these rural backwaters – where I couldn't even get my hands on *Indian* tonic water – would be insufficient.

As the race wore on into the fourth and fifth stages, with no sign of the steep gradients letting up, it became clear that stage racing in these conditions is a beast all of its own. Experience and holistic preparation (as opposed to just training) is crucial. Many of the participants were amateurs, but the race had attracted some prodigious runners.



Magical, dramatic and vividly stark, the views of the mountains are unparalleled.



Over the first three days the contest was hard-fought by three of these: a hugely talented 18-year-old Canadian – who was the leader at that point, running his first race of this kind – and two highly practised Australians. The Aussies, Tegyn Angel and Kellie Emmerson, eventual winners, were noticeably well equipped, and were set apart from other entrants by a professional approach to their race nutrition, which started to tell in the latter stages.

Taking nothing away from their own talent, and the immense discipline and determination that would've been needed to train for and run this event so effectively, I'm sure that this supplementation played an important role in staying stronger – and critically, healthier – when many started to wane.

Others fought and won their own battles. An Englishman struck down by an adverse reaction to the altitude, and by the lingering effects of a cold, gutsed it out over the full five days, finishing strongly, in an impressive display of stiff-upper-lipped resolve. An American woman struggled with diarrhoea – woe betide the person whose immune system lets down its guard in India! – but also persisted bravely, to the end.

It was rousing stuff. Insanely admirable. At times I had to ask myself, why? What was it for? All runners have their own reasons, their own motivations, but I think everyone is driven by the elation that comes with finishing, and for a race of this scale and stature, that unbridled joy – at overcoming the obstacles, at surmounting the challenge, at completing the mission, at giving the best of yourself and not being found wanting – seems enough reward in and of itself. This was an occasion that enhanced the lore of running. And say what you will, it was truly an experience that brought out the best in everyone. 

Patrick works in packaging, with a sideline in liquor and travel writing. He enjoys a regular dose of running.