



Ryan Sandes. Photo NICK MUZIK

Cape Town's ultramarathon wunderkind speaks to Mark Johnston about his training, his goals and how he got into trail running in the first place.



What are you doing right now? Yes, of course, you're reading this fantastic piece of prose. But the point is you're probably lounging on a sofa with your feet up, or sitting at the kitchen counter with a mug of Illy medium roast. Not Ryan Sandes. Right now he's sweating up a hill somewhere with a weighted backpack on his shoulders. The same backpack he carried up the mountain yesterday; the same one he'll train with tomorrow, in between a Pilates class and a workout at the gym. You see, whether you're a trail runner or a sport climber or a venture capitalist, you can't help but be inspired by Ryan's unflinching commitment to his goals.

I certainly was. 'I've recently opted for reduced work hours – and pay – so that I can focus more on my running,' the 27-year-old Sandes says to me while stirring his cappuccino. We're sitting in a bustling coffee shop in his home suburb of Hout Bay in Cape Town, where he's agreed to meet me for a blitzkrieg Q&A between his now half-day job as a quantity surveyor and an afternoon Stairmaster session on the mountain. Time is tight. I look at my watch. Let's klap it.

profile **RYAN SANDES**

Ryan out in the lead on the 2008 Sahara Desert race. Photo RYAN SANDES COLLECTION

>>FROM ZERO TO HERO

For those of you who don't follow long-distance running, Ryan burst onto the scene in March 2008 after winning the Gobi March, a seven-day, 250-km slog through China's Gobi Desert. What's impressive is that he also won every single stage. Even more impressive was the fact that this was the first time he'd run a race of this nature. Then, just in case anybody thought that was beginner's luck, he went on to take gold in the Sahara Desert Marathon that October (also cleaning up all seven stages there).

So, how did he get into this running lark in the first place? 'I wanted to run the Knysna half, but it was full,' says Sandes, 'so I signed up for the full marathon instead.' This was in 2006, a mere two months before the start of the race. Running experience before this? 'Oh, nothing really. I played rugby at school and did a bit of surfing.' After cruising the marathon, he decided to join a running club and take the sport a bit more seriously. Later that year he entered the Table Mountain Challenge, a 35-km circumnavigation of Cape Town's favourite peak, and crossed the finish line ninth. Soon after that he discovered the 4 Deserts website (the organizers of the Gobi and Sahara marathons) and got hooked on the idea of entering a multi-day ultra. The rest, as they say, is history . . . the running equivalent of the Google story.

>>TRAINING

That Ryan has bucketloads of raw natural talent no one can dispute. But like the boys at Google, the take-home message here is that if you really want to climb to the top of your game – and stay there – natural talent isn't enough. You've got to work incredibly hard too. Set goals. Plan your training. And stick to it, even if it means taking a pay cut or missing out on after-work drinks with your mates. This is where Ryan has really stepped up to the plate.

With the help of biokineticist Ian Waddell he's designed an exercise programme specifically for long-distance events. It's based on a four-week cycle that slowly builds him up for the high-mileage pummelling he'll receive on an event like the Gobi. At his peak Ryan will run 200 km in a week, spending up

to nine hours a day on the mountain. (For more details on his training programme, visit his website www.ryansandes.com.)

But kilometres under the belt isn't necessarily enough to secure victory on a desert marathon. Key to Ryan's success is also the way he mimics the conditions of the race he is training for. 'Before the Sahara I would run twice a week in a special environmental chamber at the Sports Science Institute,' he explains. 'Having hot air blow over me while I trained was tough, but it really helped prepare my body for the high temperatures in the desert.' It's also the reason he trains with that weighted backpack. On multi-day races, competitors are expected to carry all their own kit and nutrition. 'It's suicide to arrive at a race like this if you haven't run with a backpack before.'

What about his weaknesses? 'My core strength. I've started doing Pilates to work on this. It's amazing how stronger core muscles help your running.' In addition to Pilates, Ryan also does a few gym sessions every week to work on those muscle groups that don't get strengthened from running. This keeps a balance and helps reduce the chance of injury.

>>THE FUTURE

You can't maintain a ruthless training programme like this unless you've got some juicy goals to work towards. So, what's on Ryan's agenda for the rest of the year? 'In October I'm running something called the Jungle Marathon in the Amazon rainforest.' (Sounds pretty interesting – I checked out their website and it includes information on knee-high 'snake gaiters'!) And beyond that? 'I'd like to win all four of the 4 Desert marathons,' (that's the Gobi, the Sahara, the Atacama and – wait for it – Antarctica) – 'I've signed up to do the last two in 2010. Oh, and Badwater' (a 215 km ultra run through America's notorious Death Valley in one push, considered by many to be the hardest race in the world). Well, there you have it. So what's on your agenda for 2009? ■

Ryan is sponsored by Salomon, ProNutro, Oakley and Hammer Nutrition.
www.ryansandes.com



Not too tired to crack a smile, also on the Sahara Desert race.
Photo RYAN SANDES COLLECTION