

# Making tracks

Sahara Marathon, Algeria. 23 February 2004

By Hugh Jones

Standing still or running full-pelt in any particular direction, the Sahara desert impresses as a big place. The sky overhangs; the horizon is uniformly distant, and you quickly, yourself, become the only distinguishable physical feature within the landscape.

This is only one corner of the Saharan vastness. The Sahara Marathon is held in its north-west corner, over sand and gravel desert scrub. The course lies within the national borders of Algeria, but national borders here

are subordinate to physical conditions (isn't this the stuff of a runner's dreams?). After the race, we ranged freely between Algeria and the Western Sahara, without ever encountering any representative of national officialdom.

Yet the Sahara Marathon, now five years old, came about because of these national boundaries, and the intrepid support of international race volunteers. It is a vehicle by which the Sahrawi people can proclaim their independent existence in face of Moroccan military occupation of their territory. And

as nomads they were used to their independence.

But in living memory, their living space has always been occupied. Western Sahara, until 1975 was Spanish Sahara; when Generalissimo Franco died the Spaniards left in indecent haste, and the Moroccans marched in to expand their national space. The Sahrawi fought back, but eventually retreated into neighbouring Algeria. They established refugee camps which threatens to become semi-permanent settlements.

The Sahara Marathon traverses the territory between three of these settlements: from Aioun camp, via Auserd to Smara. Each camp is poignantly named after settlements within Western Saharan territory that are now under Moroccan control. After flying into Tindouf from Madrid, via Algiers, we were bussed from the military airport to the Smara camp. We arrived in darkness. In the Sahara, darkness is dark: mediated only by glinting starlight.

Whispered conversations took place, and in groups of five or six we were spirited away to obscure corners of the settlement. We didn't have any idea of where we were, but we met with a restrained yet fulsome welcome. During the first of many Saharan tea ceremonies, we got to know our hosts. They are knowledgeable people, able to fluidly connect world events to their own experience. Maybe this comes



from living under UN aegis for so long, but it comes from the heart nonetheless. We spoke in Spanish, French and English – in that order.

Darkness had not lifted before we got on our way to the race start. From Smara, the finish line, all 60 foreign marathon entrants go by bus to Aioun. The journey, as the sun rises, is intimidating. How can we possibly find our way back through this featureless terrain? Lorna Castellanos, an effervescent 5-hour marathon runner who had travelled from Miami to take part, grew disconcertingly subdued at the prospect.

Aioun camp was expecting us. The school opened up to offer toilet facilities, there were nomad-style tents for us to rest up, and bottled water abounded. Right on



## MEN:

1 Hugh JONES	GBR	2:46.39
2 Jose Pallares COLOMINA	ESP	2:58.10
3 Angel de la Mata GARCIA	ESP	3:15.25
4 F MESTIERI	ITA	3:18.00
5 Ivan CUDIM	ITA	3:35.51

## WOMEN:

1 Alessia NICOLINI	ITA	4:03.30
2 Elena Ripoll MARTINEZ	ESP	4:23.16
3 Lorna CASTELLANOS	USA	6:00.16

## HALF MARATHON

## MEN:

1 Jon SALVADOR	ESP	1:22.50
2 Aitor EIGUREN	ESP	1:28.45
3 Manuel Pastor ORTIZ	ESP	1:30.05

## WOMEN:

1 Buyema Dahan AGDELFA	SAH	1:32.47
2 Amelia Garcia PORTILLO	ESP	2:07.17
3 Titziana ZIRIMINA	ITA	2:14.43

## 10km:

## MEN:

1 Hernandez Lopez PAXI	ESP	36.59
2 Sidihammed Chej MAHAYUB	SAH	40.40

## WOMEN:

1 Sahlma Embhareki MUSSA	SAH	43.02
2 Buhari Abdullah BUTALLA	SAH	43.15

## 5km:

## MEN:

1 Isalmo Bussia TFARAM	SAH	26.53
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## WOMEN:

1 Ab-Bachej Malainin CHISA	SAH	28.32
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Pictures: Diego Muñoz

