

CPA vs. Sahara

CalCPA member and CPA Jeff

Neumeister's story in accounting is primarily in the forensic realm as director of the Thomas St. John Group, with some work as a professor on the side. But his story outside of work is that of a distance runner who most recently competed in a 156-mile ultramarathon over the hot sands of the Sahara. We caught up with this runner to talk more about his experience competing in one of the "toughest footraces on Earth."

How did you become such a prolific distance runner?

Running had been my preferred form of cardio exercise since college. Shortly after moving to California in late 2007, I entered and trained for a distance race. I completed my first marathon that following summer with the 2008 San Francisco Marathon. Crossing that finish line for a distance further than I had ever run before afforded an incredible sense of accomplishment. I was hooked. Since then, I have competed in more than 200 other distance races including 10Ks, obstacle course runs, triathlons and many other marathons.

At what point did you decide to take the leap from the numerous other races you have competed in to this 156-mile marathon?

After several years of casual runs and other organized races, the standard marathon had become almost like a regular workout for me so I started to look for other challenges. I quickly learned of ultramarathon type of events that generally encompass any footrace over the 26.2 mile standard marathon distance. The Marathon Des Sables (MDS) was one of the most frequently referenced ultramarathons and was touted as the "toughest footrace on Earth." I quickly added this race to my bucket list and then finally registered for the 2017 edition last summer, giving me a little under a year to train.

What did training look like?

The MDS is unlike many other races because distance is just one of the challenges. It also requires racers to be self-sufficient (carry all food and gear for the week), traverse difficult terrain and do so within the heat the Sahara desert is infamous for. A typical training week consisted of a few hot yoga classes, 50-70 miles of running, a CrossFit class, a few days of weight training at the gym and an occasional mixture of other workouts such as swimming, Pilates or spinning.

Did you ever second-guess yourself?

Despite all of the training, there was no way to fully substitute for all of the race conditions. The first stage of the course was very eye-opening. The combination of the heat, sand and carrying that extra 30 pounds that first day was tough and I questioned whether or not I would be able to make it through the whole race under those conditions. This chance to really test my limits is exactly what drew me to this race and I became increasingly faster and more confident about the race each stage.



Upon arriving in Morocco, what were your first impressions?

My first impressions were that it was pretty hot and sandy, but not as much as I was expecting. In fact, there were quite a few palm trees and other forms of green vegetation. Some of the experienced MDSers quickly pointed out that it is much hotter and sandier once we bus out to the start line further into the Sahara ... they were not wrong.

What is it like running in the open sand for so long?

Running on the sand for so long makes it feel like you are moving in slow motion. The time it would take to cover the same distance on a hard flat surface (like a road) can be half of that as on sand. Thankfully, the course was not all soft sand as there were many areas of compacted sand that felt similar to running on a trail.

What were the biggest challenges of the race?

The combination of conditions. If it was just the 150 or so miles or the heat, then it would not have been so tough. When you add all of the obstacles together while running up and over sand dunes, it's easy to see how MDS can lay claim to being the toughest footrace on Earth. One of the surprising challenges was the number of jebels (or mountains) that would have to be traversed during the course, with some requiring rope to safely ascend and descend certain parts.

Did you finish close to your expected time?

I went into the race expecting to finish somewhere in the middle out of the roughly 1,200 participants. Each stage of the race, I got progressively faster finishing 929th (stage 1), 804th (stage 2), 648th (stage 3), 608th (stage 4), 425th (stage 5) and 42nd (stage 6). Overall, I ended up being ranked in 643rd place.

Are there lessons learned when approaching this race and others that are applicable to your professional life?

We're capable of so much more than what we realize. There's no doubt to me that the best way to grow in any aspect of life is to get outside our comfort zones. The time and effort in training for this race paid off with crossing that finish line. Similarly, any professional goal can be accomplished by putting in the needed time and effort while accepting that there will be unforeseen obstacles along the way. Just keep putting one foot in front of the other. 