



IT WAS DAY 3 of the Marathon des Sables, and Jeff Smith had barely made it across the finish line after more than 10 hours of running through the desert. He was malnourished, dehydrated and his feet were badly blistered from traversing the Moroccan Sahara for three days straight. And he still had two more to go, including the dreaded double marathon set for the following day. For the first time in the five-day April endurance test, Smith was thinking of quitting. Twenty-five years ago, when he was in his prime as a professional hockey player in the British League, he would've had youth on his side. But he was 52, now, and running on two artificial hips, the result, his doctors told him, of more than a decade of playing goal.

Smith had faced a similar situation two years earlier when he had to abandon his quest to climb Mount Everest after an accident killed 16 climbers, effectively shutting down the climbing season. But that decision had been entirely out of his control. Here, in the middle of the Sahara Desert, it was all on him. So Smith downed liters of water and force-fed himself in hopes he'd be able to continue. Yet thoughts of quitting didn't leave him as he slept. Nightmares plagued him throughout another night sleeping out in the open under the desert sky. "I dreamt I wasn't going to be able to make it, that I had to go home and that I had let everybody down, including myself," Smith said. "I was in a really crappy way. And then, strangely, the next morning was the double marathon day – so I had 52 miles to run – and I was fine. I woke up and realized it was all a bad dream. I just got my shoes on and prepped, and I actually really enjoyed that day."

On Day 4, popped blisters and all, Smith

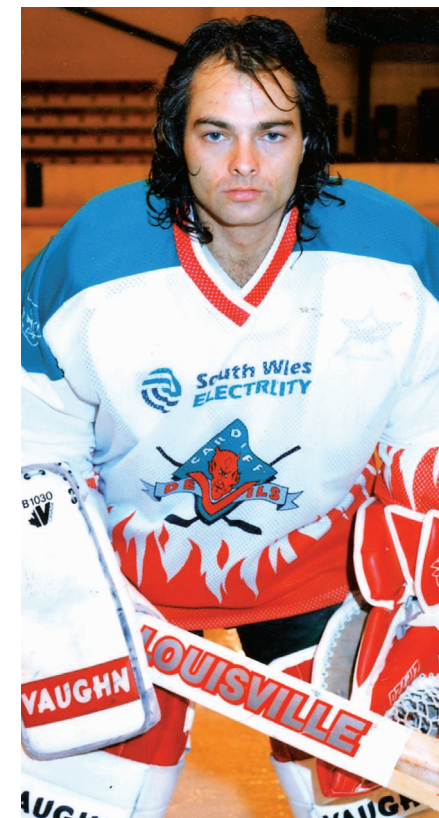
ran 1983 to 1995. He made roughly \$1,000 USD a week – not bad, he said, for what was an obscure pro league more than 20 years ago. His best years were with the Devils in Cardiff, where he won the BHL title in 1990. "I turned pro when I was 21 or 22," Smith said. "Somebody offered me money to play, which was kind of mad. I was, like, 'Wow.' There were no professionals at all in Britain at the time, apart from the Canadians, so for Brits like myself to be actually paid and get other benefits like a car was pretty amazing to me."

After Smith retired in 1995, his competitive spirit lay dormant until his eldest daughter asked him to climb Mount Kilimanjaro with her in 2010. He was immediately hooked. He then tackled some of the biggest, most challenging mountains in the world, working his way up to the granddaddy of them all, and doing it on the new hips he got a few years earlier. He climbed Mount Elbrus in Russia in 2011, Mount Denali in Alaska in 2012 and Mount Manaslu in Nepal in 2013. Then at 50 years old, he trekked to Base Camp to take on Everest in 2014, only to be turned back when it was shut down.

That's when Smith began training for the Marathon des Sables (Marathon of Sands), billed as, "The Toughest Footrace on Earth," as his next challenge. It's not for the unfit, weak-willed or faint of heart. The race's



Days of running in the white-hot desert left its mark on Smith's body, especially his feet.



THE DEVILS AND BEYOND

In addition to Cardiff, Smith also suited up for the Streatham Redskins, Telford Tigers, Basingstoke Beavers and Swindon Wildcats in the BHL.

is over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Part of your brain is screaming at you to stop, right now, to drop out of the race, but the other part of your brain is stronger. The other part of your brain knows that when you complete the final stage of the Marathon des Sables, you will have run the equivalent of five and a half marathons in five or six days."

Over five days, Smith ran more than 150 miles through the desert with a 15-pound backpack. (As if that weren't hell enough, he also ran in the event's charity marathon held on the sixth day.) He carried two large water bottles, which he sipped from every five minutes to stay hydrated, and he also took salt and nutrient tablets to keep his mineral levels up. In case of emergency, he had a GPS on which he could hit an SOS button anytime to receive medical attention. He never needed it, but some runners did after collapsing in the 90- to 100-degree heat and being helicoptered out. Of the roughly 1,300 participants, roughly 400 had to quit.

The biggest problem Smith faced was with his feet. At the end of every race day, a medi-

cal team of about 50 people tended to racers in a massive tent. Smith's feet screamed at him so loud that he was forced into the foot tent three times during the marathon. By Day 4, the balls of his feet had worn away, and he'd lost two toenails. The medics who treated him would clean his feet with disinfectant, cut his blisters with a scalpel and put iodine on them. "Every time I went there, without fail, they'd look at my feet and go, 'Oh my God!'" Smith said. "I'd see their faces change, their eyes open wide, their mouths drop, and they did it every time. That gave me a feeling of, 'Oh my God, what are my feet like?' But also, 'Yeah, I'm hardcore.'"

Smith is finished with the Marathon des Sables – "I've done it now, got the T-shirt, don't want to do it again" – but he's not done challenging himself. Next on his wish list is to run a 100-mile race in one day and then return to Everest to finish what he started. "I want to climb it and have the opportunity to measure myself to see if I'm capable," Smith said. "I genuinely think I am. I just feel like I've got it in me. I'd like to do that before I die." **H**

ENTER SANDMAN

Most players leave their athletic lives behind once they retire. Not so for former British League goalie Jeff Smith, who at 52 decided to run the most brutal marathon on the planet for his latest adrenaline rush **BY RONNIE SHUKER**

ran more than 50 miles over dunes, sand strips and jebels – all under an assaulting sun and a punishing temperature pushing 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Two days later, he'd completed the Marathon des Sables.

It was latest in a string of physical feats for Smith since retiring more than 20 years ago. Smith played 11 seasons in the BHL from

COURTESY OF JEFF SMITH

DEVILS: RICHARD MURRAY;
MARATHON: COURTESY OF JEFF SMITH

website sells itself as possibly the worst vacation ever: "Imagine yourself in the Sahara Desert with nothing but rolling sand dunes for miles around. When you plough your feet through the sand, a fine dust kicks up. You can't feel the sweat dripping down your face because it's evaporating in the baking heat. Your lungs feel parched. Today's temperature