

CHINA ULTRA RUNNING

Surviving Gobi's gruelling 400-km race

CHINA LOVES ITS MEGA projects and in running they don't come much more mega than the Ultra Trail Gobi, now in its third year. Held on September 25-October 5, on the southern edge of Gansu Province, close to Dunhuang, it is a 400-km non-stop monster.

Runners were sent off into the wilderness, armed with a GPS track and the bare minimum of equipment and nutrition. More gear and food was stored in drop-off bags, at ten rest stations, where racers could get medical treatment and hot water. They could sleep if they chose too – the strategy was up to them.

The difficulty of the race, compared to stage races, was succinctly summed up by Paul

Borlinha of Canada, a veteran of many stage races and Ironmans: "I never wear finisher t-shirts, but I will be proud to put on this one," he said.

The cut-off time was 150 hours, with this year's winner, Bai Bin of China, completing the course in 92 hours 26 minutes (on five hours sleep!), while the female champion, Veronique Messina of France, clocked over 125 hours.

The course was quite unlike what many might have expected: not soft sand but mostly rocky. There were sand dunes but also 3,000-m mountains, salt flats and dry river beds. The route was loosely based on part of the journey of the monk and translator Xuanzang who went to India to retrieve original Buddhist

scriptures, 14 centuries ago. He suffered greatly with the extremity of the climate where a snowstorm and sub-zero temperatures can lash the desert after a day of 30-40°C heat. In his account of the journey, he wrote: "During the day the heat sears your skin like a flame, at night the cold cuts your flesh like a knife."

With such challenges, the race was limited to 50 participants as even those small numbers required an army of organisers, volunteers, medics and physiotherapists to cater for the runners' every need. Water and timing stations were placed every 10km, and every runner was tracked at all times.

"Here you do not have the safe zone of a camp at the end of

the day," said Borlinha, "with your buddies around you, like in a stage race... here you are alone, and you make decisions all the time. At a rest station, in the middle of the night, you start off into the unknown, often alone, and you still have hundreds of kilometres of this unknown ahead of you. Then there is sleep deprivation, I fell asleep running on the third day...there is also no trail to follow. This is much, much harder."

After the trials of the Gobi, the finish line, in the town of Guazhou, was a suitably grandiose affair. Even those who finished in the dead of the night were saluted with a volley of fireworks. Some runners were probably asleep before the spent rockets hit the ground.

PHOTO: DANG HAI YANG

