

DEAN KARNAZES

commands speaking fees as high as \$20,000 and his clients have included Google, Nike and Facebook. Given both the volume of requests and the time he spends preparing for each speech, Karnazes describes himself as “oversubscribed.” His media résumé includes being profiled on *60 Minutes* and making appearances on *The Late Show with David Letterman* and *The Today Show*. In 2007, Karnazes made the 200-person shortlist for *Time’s* annual compilation of the “Most Influential People in The World” – along with Steve Jobs, Angela Merkel, Hu Jintao and Queen Elizabeth II.

That’s a lot of exposure for an endurance athlete, especially one who has never won an Olympic medal, or any of the world’s major marathons (Tokyo, Boston, London, Berlin, Chicago, New York City) or endurance events, like the Tour de France.

All of those races focus on speed. Karnazes’s fame doesn’t stem from how fast he is, but rather, how far he goes.

It was Karnazes’s 2005 best-selling memoir, *Ultramarathon Man: Confessions of an All-Night Runner*, that propelled him into the national spotlight. The book detailed

Karnazes’s legs, right, are chiseled from racing and training for extreme ultra-endurance events.

LEGS

FOR DAYS

DEAN KARNAZES, the endurance sports icon who ran for 80 hours without stopping, talks business with Brunswick’s **BRIAN BAKER**



some of Karnazes's near-masochistic athletic accomplishments: finishing a marathon at the South Pole where temperatures dropped to -13 Fahrenheit (-25C) – a feat Karnazes celebrated by running a lap of the frozen course nude; racing a 135-mile ultramarathon through the fittingly named Death Valley, where Karnazes ran on the road's painted white lines so the 130-degree heat bouncing off the black pavement wouldn't melt the rubber soles of his shoes; completing, on his own, a 199-mile relay race meant to be carved up between a team of 12. For a while, Karnazes woke at 2 a.m. so he could run a marathon each morning before work.

Whether they thought he was superhuman, inspirational, or insane (or perhaps some combination of all three), people took notice of Karnazes. He was at once relatable – most of us have jogged at some point in our lives – and yet unfathomable; few of us have ever rolled up a pizza “like a big Italian burrito” and eaten it while running to prevent our bodies from shutting down in the midst of a 199-mile run.

Today, Karnazes admits it's challenging to summarize exactly what it is he does for a living. “I'm an endurance athlete, an author (I've written several *New York Times* bestsellers), a keynote speaker, a brand ambassador for such companies as The North Face and Fitbit, an investor in early-stage ventures, a product endorser and a spokesman. And to my kids, I'm also a dad!”

Karnazes, 54 and still chiseled from the thousands of miles he logs on the road each year, refuses to let a growing list of titles and responsibilities interfere with his brutal training regimen. From his sleep schedule – four to five hours per night – to the design of his office, Karnazes is scrupulous about maximizing the time he has to train: “I don't just train regularly; I train constantly. I do all my writing and emailing while standing up and bouncing around on my toes. I've got a pull-up bar and dip chair in my office, a sit-up mat and several weights. Throughout the course of the day I cycle through sets of pull-ups, push-ups, dips, sit-ups, curls and burpees. I view life as training, and training as life.”

Karnazes wasn't always this disciplined. In a story that would be strange were it to come from anyone else, Karnazes says he re-discovered running and began his journey into the world of ultra-endurance events when he was drunk, celebrating his 30th birthday: “I walked out of a



bar, three sheets to the wind, and decided to run 30 miles to celebrate. I hadn't run in the past decade and it was midnight. But I still set a course into the darkness. I ran straight through the night and it almost killed me, but I just kept going. It felt right, despite the pain and blisters.”

Karnazes was working in marketing for a multinational corporation at the time. The pay and benefits were generous, but Karnazes felt unsatisfied with his life. So he left. “Walking away from all the corporate perks (healthcare, 401K matching program, stock options, reliable paycheck, company car) was scary... There is little existing infrastructure to support such a lifestyle.” Since then Karnazes has built a highly successful career out of his own flesh and blood and his wits.

What, exactly, does running very long distances teach you about business? “Patience and perseverance” are two of the most important lessons, according to Karnazes. “You learn that

Above, Karnazes competes in the TransRockies Run, a race that takes place over six days. Parts of the course are more than two miles (3.2 km) above sea level, making oxygen scarce and breathing difficult.

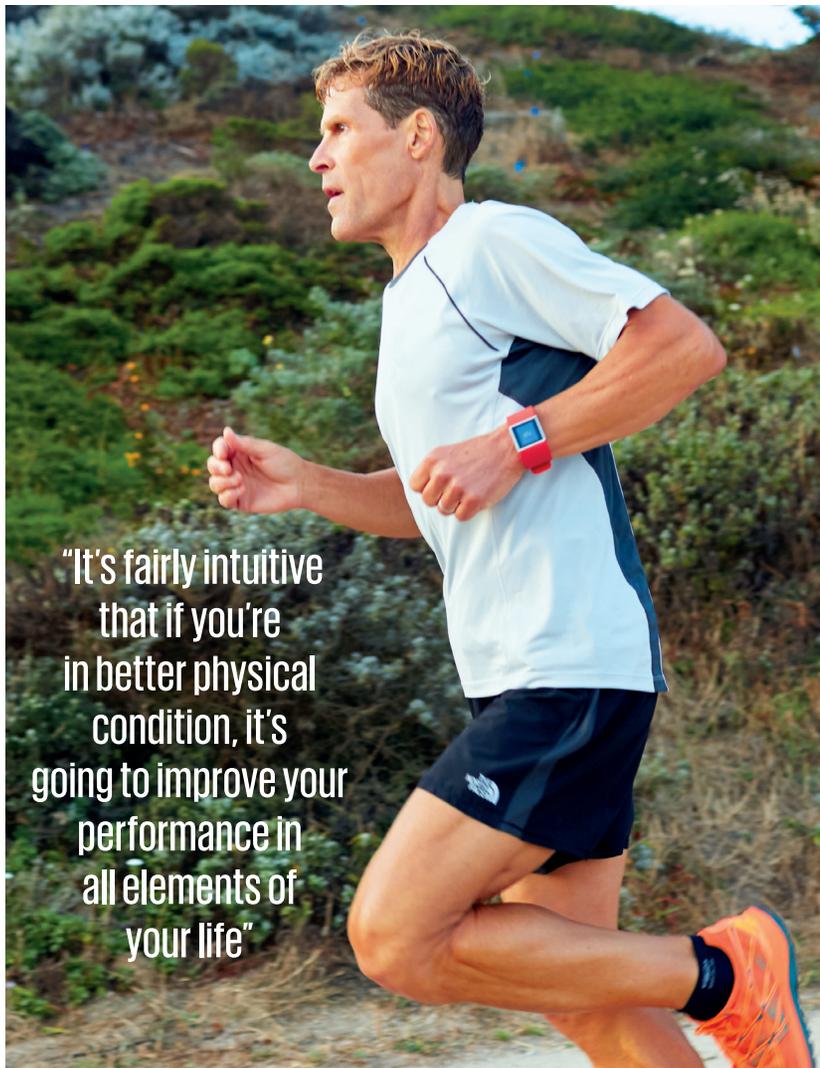
Karnazes, right, finishes a 155-mile run across the Sahara Desert – one leg in the “4 Desert Race Series,” which includes three other 155-mile desert races in Chile, China and Antarctica. In 2008, the year the photo was taken, Karnazes won the overall male category in the race series.



SAHARA RACE 2008



**"I walked out of a bar,
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“It’s fairly intuitive that if you’re in better physical condition, it’s going to improve your performance in all elements of your life”

Karnazes wears black shorts made by The North Face and a red Fitbit on his wrist – two companies Karnazes is paid to endorse, and which, through their products and advertising, encourage healthy living and exercise.

there are no shortcuts on the path to success. Training and conditioning for endurance sports requires discipline, commitment, sacrifice and grit. You learn how to push yourself to exceed your limitations and constantly improve. All good lessons for business, and life.”

Another lesson, perhaps unsurprising from Karnazes, is that professional performance is linked to physical fitness (see “Chief Exercise Officer,” Page 58). “Not only does being fit bolster mental acuity, it helps promote overall vigor and energy. Let’s face it, business can be grueling. We could talk about it on a biochemical or physiological level, but it’s fairly intuitive that if you’re in better physical condition, it’s going to improve your performance in all elements of your life.”

The marketing career Karnazes left behind actually helped lay the foundation for his success as an athlete, author and entrepreneur. Karnazes has won very few of the races he has entered –

he didn’t cross the line first in the marathon he completed in the South Pole, where three people finished. Nor, in many instances, was he the first to attempt or complete them. He simply told the most compelling stories about his experiences and these races in a way that an everyday runner or business professional could understand and connect with. “People talk a lot about converting athletic experience into business, but for me it was just the opposite. I was a businessperson to begin with and used that corporate experience to develop my athletic career. Now I use the lessons gleaned from business and sports to do both better.”

Karnazes was so effective at telling his own story that veterans within the ultramarathon community voiced their frustration at the disproportionate amount of attention and money Karnazes was receiving. In a 2010 *Runner’s World* article, novelist and long-distance runner Rachel Toor wrote, “As much adoration and enthusiasm as Dean generates among recreational runners, he inspires even more animus from those who take themselves and their running seriously.” (Toor ended by imploring Karnazes’s critics to “grow up.”)

For those interested in what Karnazes learned out on the road, just as many wonder why he spent so much time out there in the first place. In *Ultramarathon Man*, Karnazes concedes it’s difficult to explain: “Addictions are never neatly defined.” Though he doesn’t answer the question directly, he doesn’t avoid it entirely, either. In telling the story of finishing a 199-mile relay by himself, Karnazes writes, “People think I’m crazy to put myself through such torture, though I would argue otherwise. Somewhere along the line we seem to have confused comfort with happiness.”

And this, perhaps, is Karnazes’s most powerful – and prescient – lesson. While the apps on our phones and technology in our homes enable us to remove so much of the inconvenience from our lives today, Karnazes wants us to remember that “struggling and suffering are the essence of a life worth living. If you’re not pushing yourself beyond the comfort zone, if you’re not demanding more from yourself – expanding and learning as you go – you’re choosing a numb existence. You’re denying yourself an extraordinary trip.”

BRIAN BAKER, a Director based in Brunswick’s San Francisco office, leads programs for technology, financial and consumer clients. While he has yet to run 350 miles continuously, he has completed multiple 100-mile rides and is a committed bicycle commuter.