



Desert Runners Discussion Guide

Directors: Jennifer Steinman

Year: 2013

Time: 99 min

You might know this director from:

Motherland (2009)

FILM SUMMARY

Atacama: the driest desert on Earth. Gobi: the windiest desert with the wildest temperature fluctuations. Sahara: the hottest desert on Earth. The Last Desert: Antarctica, the coldest place on Earth. **DESERT RUNNERS** takes us to these four inhospitable locations and bears witness to the incredible power, resilience, and capacity of both the human body and the mind through the story of four seemingly average individuals.

56-year-old Dave O'Brien views the races as a personal test, to prove to himself that he is not getting old. Ricky Paugh, on the other hand, wants to do something different, to be more than an average 33-year-old American male. "I didn't want to run a marathon," he says. "That's too conventional." For Tremaine Kent, the races are a way to grieve and process the pain of having lost his wife to cancer and to remind himself that he is still alive. 26-year-old Samantha Gash thirsts for one last burst of adventure before embracing day-to-day realities of life. By the time they cross the finish line, each individual has experienced more than they bargained for. They are transformed, forever altered.

Despite injuries, attacks, and breakdowns, these four ordinary individuals achieve the extraordinary, pushing beyond their own personal limitations. There are times of pure insanity as their bodies collapse, their minds begin to deteriorate, and motivations are lost. Yet **DESERT RUNNERS** manages to display the intimate stories that lie behind the infinite strength of the human spirit.

FILM THEMES

The film is a testament to personal endurance, the power of friendship, the reality of limitations, and the vast expanse of the human spirit.

ENDURANCE OF SPIRIT

The 4 Deserts Race is much more than a test of physical endurance. In order for the human body to undergo such a grueling endeavor, the mind must be sharp and strong. Competitors train their bodies in preparation for the race, but they must simultaneously hone their minds and fortify their spirits, or else the finish line will remain a distant target. Faced with the arduous task of crossing silent, solitary, and inhospitable terrain, the human being comes face-to-face with itself, and even the slightest loss of determination can bring the whole race to an end. Only a strong mind and spirit have the remarkable capacity to push the body across the finish line.

LIMITATIONS OF BODY

The competitors trained, endlessly running through their hometowns, lugging packs on their backs, and preparing their feet. They also spent time learning about nutrition, hydration, and metabolism. But no amount of knowledge can assist a body that is being pushed beyond its limits. The body has the final say, and one must heed that warning or face fatal repercussions. Nick Kruse, who lost his life in the Gobi March, ultimately learned that lesson. The jury is still out on whether endurance sports can cause more damage than not. Perhaps the true winners are those who will honor their physical bodies rather than pushing them beyond boundaries in order to reach the perceived glory of the finish line.

POWER OF FRIENDSHIP

Many people have friendships that last a lifetime, but those in DESERT RUNNERS form extremely fast bonds. Due to the experience they endure and share, camaraderie cuts deep and becomes as profound and meaningful as a friendship with a longer history. Human beings thrive off of and take strength from one another, and despite all the training and personal pep talks, many of the runners would not have made it as far as they did without the friendships formed in those deserts. By competing with and not against one another, the runners display the incredible power of people coming together.

MATTER OF PERCEPTION

What makes 200 individuals cross the desert, while billions of others balk at the mere thought of such a task? Each of us has our perceived stopping point, a self-constructed safety zone in which we lead our lives. When those limitations are taken away, anything becomes possible. As proven by Dave O'Brien and the many other non-athletes who carried themselves through 1,000 kilometers across Earth's harshest terrain, the only barricade standing between doing and not doing is within the mind.

“The real truth is: it’s me against me.”

David O'Brien

“There’s a limit to everybody. It can be fatal... Life is worth more than pushing yourself to that level.”

Samantha Gash

“The purpose of doing the deserts was to find the most extreme thing. I don’t want to conform. I want to be on the outside edge.”

Tremain Kent

FILM FACTS:

- Director Jennifer Steinman attended a conference on health and nutrition in 2009, where David O'Brien was a guest speaker. When he announced his intention to complete the 4 Deserts Race at the age of 56, she got the idea for a film. Originally Steinman was going to focus solely on Dave, but extended that to include 4 other runners. Steinman is not an experienced runner herself, and had never heard of the race before encountering O'Brien.
- Endurance sports are defined as demanding prolonged athletic output over an extended distance or period of time.
- After the 4 Deserts Race, Samantha Gash went on to become the first female to complete the Beast of Burden 50-mile race and the Northburn 100-km race, as well as 3 Marathons in 3 Days.
- 4 Deserts is on Time Magazine's list of the top 10 endurance competitions. The other 9 are: 24 Hours of Le Mans, Tour de France, Dakar Rally, Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race, Cannonball Run, 4 Deserts, Tevis Cup, Marathon des Sables, La Ruta de los Conquistadores, and Vendee Globe.
- DESERT RUNNERS's film crew consisted of Director Jennifer Steinman and Director of Photography Sevan Matossian. They lived under the same conditions as the runners - hauling their own gear, eating freeze-dried food, and not showering for 7-day stretches. They didn't use helicopters or dollies in any of the shots.
- The Antarctic Desert covers an area of 13,829,430 sq. km and is the most extreme continent on Earth. It is the coldest, driest and windiest place in the world with the highest elevation. Antarctica is known as the Last Desert and contains no lakes or rivers.
- As of 2014, only 29 competitors had completed the 4 Deserts Grand Slam. Three have won all 4 Deserts Race Series events. Competitors must be between 21 and 70 years old to compete. Approximately 20% of 4 Deserts competitors are female; 80% are male.
- Competitors may compete in the 4 Deserts Race Series in any order except The Last Desert (Antarctica), which requires competitors to have completed two of the other races beforehand. The Atacama Crossing, Gobi March, and Sahara Race each have a \$3,600 entrance fee. The Last Desert Race costs \$11,900 to enter.
- In December 2013, Kim Allan of New Zealand ran for 86 hours and 11 minutes without sleep, covering 500 kilometers (km). In 2005, Dean Karnazes of the U.S. ran 560 km in 80 hours and 44 minutes without sleep. Paddy Doyle from England holds 55 Guinness records for endurance sports, including "fastest marathon cross country with a 40 lb. back pack."
- Mark Allen, a 6-time Ironman World Champion and Olympic distance runner, recently won ESPN's Greatest Athlete of All Time competition.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others the chance to be inspired by its story.
2. Consider helping the cause of [Racing The Planet](#), an organisation that has donated more than \$750,000 to [Operation Smile](#), a charity providing reconstructive surgery for children born with facial deformities.
3. Visit [Endurance Athlete](#) for extensive information on endurance training.
4. Push beyond your perceived limitations and challenge yourself to do something you think is "too difficult."
5. Read the American Psychological Association's publication "The Road to Resilience" with tips on how to handle life's hardships, whether physical or psychological.

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In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.