

“CACTUS SPINES, SANDY! WATCH THE CACTUS SPINES!”

IT WAS MY MANTRA AS I DODGED BRUTAL BUSHES, NO EASY TASK WHEN YOU'RE ALSO CONCENTRATING HARD ON FOLLOWING PINK FLAGS DOTTED THROUGHOUT A DUSKY ORANGE LANDSCAPE. MY MIND WANDERED AS I CLIMBED A STEEP HILL BEFORE THE TRAIL BROKE SHARPLY TO THE RIGHT. I WAS ENJOYING THE SOLITUDE OF ULTRA RUNNING. OUT HERE ALL I NEED WORRY ABOUT WAS GETTING INTO CAMP EACH DAY, EATING, THEN SLEEPING. OR TRYING TO. SCHEDULES, MEETINGS AND LIFE COMMITMENTS WERE LEFT BEHIND IN AUSTRALIA, AS THE MANTRA GOES: ONE STEP IN FRONT OF THE OTHER. MIND THE CACTUS.

Wrapped in these thoughts, I misjudged my footing, the silence broken by screams of excruciating pain. My screams. Someone had stabbed me, surely? No. Something. I looked down to see a big cactus ball, full of long spines, penetrating my calf. The sensation was intense. I gritted teeth but nothing could stop tears rolling down my dusty face, splashing into a micro-puddle of human misery on the desert floor. What was I going to do? How was I going to get this out of my leg?

I started hallucinating. I could hear voices but there was no one around. As I turned hoping the spell would be broken by some vision of reality, two competitors roared. I mentally checked off that indeed, they were real and not a fragment of my pain-infused imagination. Thankfully, I was not hallucinating.

My fellow runners jumped into action. Peter,

also Australian, soon realized he couldn't pull the cactus out with his hands and started to look for two flat rocks. His plan was to push either side of the cactus ball to grip and yank it from my leg. Ronnie, a Canadian, looked on horrified. I was screaming as Peter pried and pulled. The result was a loud yelp, but the desert expanse quickly swallowed my call of agony as the needles came free.

I managed to hobble over the day's finish line and straight into the medical tent. The altitude, the heat and the cactus spines were testing my limits; and this was only the first of six days of running across the famous but forbidding desert landscapes of Arizona.

I had signed up to the Grand to Grand - a self-supported 275km multiday adventure running race - for the obvious challenge. I was also attracted as it offered the opportunity to run through parts of the Grand Canyon wilderness, a growing target for trail and adventure runners. Of course, the Grand Canyon is a landscape that lures visitors of all types, but its trail networks and the lure of the now-popular rim to rim runs (which have caused some consternation amongst other trail users) have raised its visibility on the community running radar. The Grand to Grand, being the only staged race of its kind in the United States, offered not just a chance to run highlight sections of the Grand Canyon, but also to explore its intricacies over a period of time; the six stages giving ample opportunity for the desert to take hold and enter your bloodstream, be that through the visceral daily experience, or, if you're unlucky or lack concentration, via

