



HERE BE DRAGONS

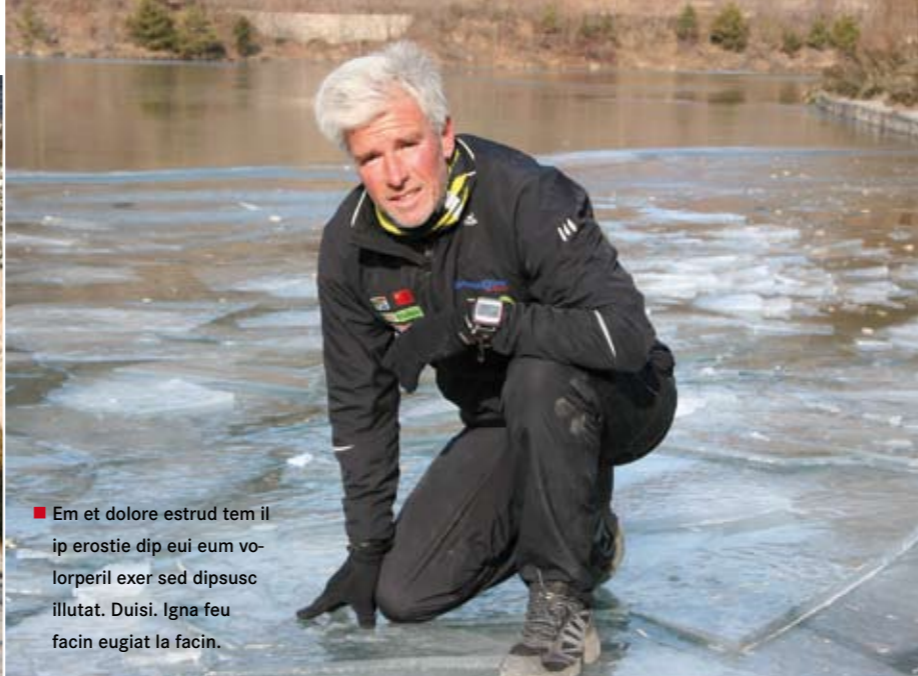
Words Donald Paul

WHEN TWO SOUTH AFRICANS DECIDED TO RE-DRAW THEIR MENTAL MAPS, THEY CHOSE AN UNCHARTED REGION OF THE WORLD, AND DID IT ON FOOT. HERE'S WHAT HAPPENED IN THE MINDS OF THE WALL OF CHINA RUNNERS, BRAAM MALHERBE AND DAVID GRIER.

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On maps of the ancient world, cartographers marked the unexplored regions with the words ‘Here be Dragons’. These were the dangerous and unknown lands, best avoided. The mind maps we create have zones filled with dragons: the things we fear. Some say these dragons are as fabulous as those of yore, that they are our self-imposed constraints, the things that hold us back from exploring our true self.

When two South Africans decided to re-write their maps, their starting point was an ancient structure: the Great Wall of China, sometimes referred to as ‘The Long Wall of 10 000 Li’ or, more simply, ‘The Sleeping Dragon’. The wall literally has never been properly mapped and part of their plan was to measure it using hi-tech global positioning systems and modern mapping technology.

But more importantly, they were going to measure it on foot, running the entire length of the way.

David Grier, 46, and Braam Malherbe, 47, have known each other for more than 20 years, but that didn’t prepare them for the depth of understanding they achieved in the four months they were running through the northern reaches of China.

“It’s like an onion,” says David, a chef in his real life. “Peeling away layers and layers down to that little green pit in the middle, and as we changed and evolved, we started putting the layers back. We learnt so much more about each other. Even now, after the run, we’re learning a lot.”

For Braam, it meant making a greater attempt to understand his friend David on David’s terms. “The biggest learning curve on this journey was not just understanding but appreciating differences of character,” says Braam. “I want you to see my point of view and if I keep pushing you to see my point of view, I’m not going to see yours. David is by nature more introverted and if he got down I started thinking what have I done to cause him to be like this? David tends to go into himself and become insular. He would go two or three days saying very little but all the while he was wrestling with himself. What I had to learn was to say, OK, but not suppress what I was feeling but to ask his permission to chat about things, to wait for a better opportunity.”

As the ultimate team leaders, it was crucial that they did not

A WALL OF SMILES

David and Braam identified Operation Smile, an international medical organisation that performs corrective surgery for children with facial disfigurements such as cleft palates and harelips, as the group for which they wished to raise funds.

“I’ve worked with street kids,” says David, “and invariably you hand over money and don’t see where it goes. Braam and I wanted to see results from the money we raised.” When they finally persuaded Operation Smile to accept them – “they’re so tightly run, it took them eight months before they’d even let us give them money” – they went up to Kwa-Zulu-Natal and identified children that needed surgery. People pledged to donate for every kilometre or 100 kilometres they covered.

However, four weeks before David and Braam were due to depart they had no sponsor to pay for the trip.

“We had a meeting and decided that regardless, we’re taking our rucksacks and getting dropped in the desert and we’re doing this run,” says David. “And we’re going to raise funds for these kids.”

The next morning he walked into his restaurant to find a regular patron, Jerome Smith, CEO of Cipla Medpro. Cipla Medpro is a joint venture between Cipla Ltd, the Asian pharmaceutical giant, and Medpro Pharmaceutica, a South African generics manufacturer that provides cost-effective medicine in Southern Africa. Jerome could see David was agitated and asked what was the problem. David told him: “I’m leaving in four weeks, I’m booking my plane ticket this afternoon. We don’t have a cent but we’re going to do it.”

Jerome looked at him and said, “I’ve got a gut feeling about this. Get me a piece of paper.”

Jerome signed a pledge there and then to fund the run.

So far David and Braam have raised more than R600 000 for the Cipla Medpro Miles for Smiles Challenge.



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CULTURE CLASH

The support team in China threw together six Chinese who didn't speak English, two Austrians who hardly spoke any English, and two South Africans. "We had a Chinese interpreter but he would interpret what he perceived to be the problem," explains David. "With the Chinese, a problem is a big circle. It twists like a balloon filled with water and adapts and changes. The Austrians' mindset was linear: left or right, no in-between." Then there was the matter of 'face': the Chinese don't like to lose face.

"I realised we can't really understand or live other cultures, so we had to find common ground, to respect each other and work alongside each other," David continues. "Once we found those mechanics, we started getting a bit of mutual respect and actually drawing on the good points of each group, and it began to work."

This was precipitated by one particular moment. "Michael, the Austrian doctor, was being really Germanic and dogmatic and though he realised what he was doing was wrong, it was so ingrained in him. He stood up at one dinner, apologised and said he saw the bigger picture. Then the head of the Chinese team stood up to say he spoke for all the Chinese, and he saw what Michael had done and he apologised for what they'd done. It was incredible. We all sat there with tears in our eyes. We learnt so much from situations like that where people were giving."



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come into camp in a foul and uncommunicative mood. The support team was made up of six Chinese, including a translator, and two Austrians, neither of whom spoke very good English. Not surprisingly, during the early stages there were communication issues.

"We'd go through a whole day of hard running," says Braam, "and because there's tension in the team, we'd not come into a warm fuzzy space. If you're physically and mentally exhausted – and this applies in the corporate world – it's going to impact on the business, on the family and eventually you become ineffective. We found we needed space and all we had were our little tents, they became our sanctuary." This was the place that he gathered himself.

David agrees that keeping the team on track proved difficult at first. "With the type of journey we were doing, little things get complicated. You start losing focus and petty things start creeping in. We nearly fragmented a couple of times there. I remember sitting with Braam once when things got particularly hard. We decided the only way to keep this journey going was to sort out every single thing there and then. Stop. Re-asses where you are, sort out the problem, find a decision and then move on."

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It's an adage that good leaders are always exceptional managers, but that good managers don't necessarily make good leaders. Despite their obvious differences – David's the introvert, Braam's the extrovert – there were one or two things they held in common that made this journey possible. Both have big dreams and huge vision and, more importantly, both are leaders. They also believe in giving back and wanted the trip to be more than an individual achievement, so they linked it to Operation Smile, a charity organisation that performs corrective surgery for children.

"My message, which I give out all the time and which I took to the wall, is dream big, plan well and minimise your risks," says Braam. "If I had tried this 20 years ago, I wouldn't have succeed-

LOCAL LEADERSHIP

ed because it was the mental attitude that got me through. Yes, there's trepidation: all the training in the world could not have prepared us for this. So, it's got to be mental attitude and focus. You've got to hold the big picture: we want to finish this wall and we want to be the first in the world to do it."

That focus got them through an average of 43 km a day (more than a standard marathon) for 98 days, nearly 4 000 km in total. The uphill distance alone was more than 118 000 m – that's the equivalent of scaling more than 14 Mount Everests in four months.

As Braam says, "David and I decided before we left that we were not going to try this or attempt this: we were going to do it. Some thought this was arrogant, but it's Ghandi's principle: begin with the end in mind." 🌍

A BRIEF HISTORY

The Great Wall of China runs from East to West and was built to protect the Chinese Empire from the Mongolian hordes to the north. 'The Wall' is a series of walls and earthen works that were started in the 5th Century BC and first linked up under Emperor Qin Shi Huang in about 220 BC. David and Braam started in the west at Jiayuguan in the Gobi Desert on 24 August last year and ended at Shanhaiguan, on the shores of the Bo Hai (Yellow) Sea on 15 December. They had run almost 4 000km. The Chinese government has launched a four-year study to establish the length of the ancient barricade and map the wall's exact route.



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THE BIG LESSON

Braam:

"One lesson was to question my fears. I deal with fear by turning it into an acronym: False Evidence Appearing Real. Ninety percent of the things we worry about or fear don't actually happen. One of my greatest fears was the fear of failure and that translated into fear of loss. One of my concerns was financial failure. To some degree I still carry that, but what I've learnt from this journey, which continues still, is that there is no such thing as failure: there are just lessons in life.

"The other is humility and I suppose gratitude, which is part of it. I am humbled by it all. I am not genetically predisposed to do this. My parents were not Olympic athletes. It's simply a mental attitude. You've got to convince yourself of that; you've got to taste it and you've got to be passionate about it."

David:

"The biggest thing I took away from this is that I went out there as a person with a goal, and that I was going to achieve this goal. But the thing is there was absolutely no way I could achieve that, if the rest of the team and I didn't first of all have the ability to change.

"We had to evolve, and if we didn't we would not have succeeded. You have to change to move on. We had to evolve in four months, we had to take our fundamental foundations and change them as people."