



Billings man to cross desert in Chile to honor lieutenant

By LAURA TODE
Of The Gazette Staff

"Are you crazy?" Travis Norby gets that question all the time. In July, he plans to run up to 155 miles across the Atacama Desert in northern Chile.

Sure, it's an extreme endeavor, but the Billings man is not crazy. He's running to honor his best friend, who was killed last year in Iraq.

The Atacama Crossing is one of four ultra-distance races organized by Racing the Planet. Norby, 31, expects to find two types of competitors, the "pros," who are crazy and routinely run races of 100-150 miles, and the "mortals." Norby sees himself among the mortals, even though he's competed in 10 triathlons and ran the half Ironman in 2003. This spring, as part of his training schedule, he'll run the Bighorn Trail Run in Dayton, Wyo., -- a 50-kilometer (30-mile) race through the Bighorn Mountains.

He's running three days a week, usually about 10 miles on two of those days. On the third, he works in a long run, somewhere between 20 and 30 miles. In the Atacama race, he'll run four days of 20 miles, 40-50 miles on the fifth day, take a day off, and finish with a leg of 15 miles. Except for a tent to sleep in and water at the end of each stage, competitors are required to carry their own food, gear and clothing for the entire race. Each day, they have to take enough water to get them through to the next stage. All the running he does in training is under a 30-pound pack filled with most of the gear he'll use for the race. He avoids running on roads and sticks to the trails along the Rimrocks -- after all, that's almost exactly the terrain he'll encounter in the Atacama Desert.

The Atacama is a mountainous desert. Most of the race will be run at about 5,000 feet above sea level, but it will demand climbs into areas as high as 14,000 feet.

"At that point, you just walk, crawl, do whatever you can to bear it," Norby said.

He'll bear it for his friend Tyler Brown, who was killed in combat just three weeks after his unit arrived in Iraq.

Brown was from Atlanta, and he and Norby were assigned to the Army's First Battalion, 19th Infantry Regiment in South Korea. Brown was a first lieutenant, Norby a captain.

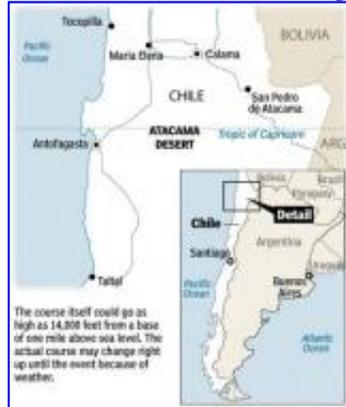
Before Iraq, their plans were sealed: they would run the



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The course itself could go as high as 14,000 feet from a base of one mile above sea level. The actual course may change right up until the event because of weather.

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Atacama Crossing together in 2004. They started training, bought all the gear, and their military leave was approved. Two months later, they were notified of deployment to Iraq for a two-year assignment. By August, they were on the ground in Iraq stationed in Ramadi, west of Fallujah.

"We just said at some point in our lives we'll hook up again and do this," Norby said. "But things change."

Brown was hit with a burst from an AK-47 assault rifle during a routine security mission at an observation post. Norby said Brown was rushed to a medical facility, where doctors said he was in critical condition, but stood a good chance of recovery. Later that night, Norby watched as Brown was flown out by helicopter to a hospital for better care.

"I just stood there and said a prayer."

By morning Brown had died.

The incident will be hard to forget, but Norby easily remembers his friend's best qualities and the times they shared.

"Tyler is simply the most charismatic person I've ever met," Norby said. "I've got lots of friends, and they're good dudes. But they're not like Tyler."

He was known as "Speaker Brown," Norby said, for his ability to encourage his teammates, argue his point and win friends.

After Brown was killed, Norby began to contemplate his eight-year career in the Army. In Iraq, Norby was commander of 100 soldiers, and as he watched six soldiers under his command die in combat and 18 more from his battalion die, all he said he wanted was to get home alive and start a new life.

His resolve to run the Atacama Crossing in memory of Brown grew stronger, and he started training for the race while in Iraq.

"It's my main focus right now. It's the number one thing in my life," Norby said.

After his two-year deployment, Norby returned to the United States at the end of July, 2005, and his discharge was approved in September. A month later, his unit was called up for a second tour, while Norby was able to make it home to Montana in time for the holidays and to start school at MSU-Billings in January. All his experiences aside, he doesn't regret the years he spent in the Army or his service in Iraq. He just never wanted to go back.

"Everyone wants to go. That's what we're trained to do. For me, I had no problem going once. I just didn't want to go twice," he said.

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Current rating:  29 Ratings

Event is series of 4 races

Racing the Planet is a series of four 250-kilometer (155-mile) races across deserts of the world: the Sahara in Egypt, the Gobi in China, the Atacama in Chile and Antarctica. The races are run in six stages over seven days. Some competitors will run the entire way, and others can hike. Participants are required to carry their own gear, food and clothing in a backpack, with water and shelter provided at each stop.

The Atacama Crossing will take place in the Atacama Desert in northern Chile, which is considered the driest place on Earth. The Atacama is a high-elevation desert that borders the Andes. The race is usually run at between 5,000 and 10,000 feet above sea level and includes a traverse across a volcano. The race is limited to about 100 participants.

All four races are held once a year, but to compete in the Antarctica race, participants must first finish the other three races.

For more information, visit on <http://www.racingtheplanet.com/>. Travis Norby's training journal is available there, too.

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Carey Brown wrote on February 28, 2006 7:32 AM:

"Travis, please know how very grateful Tyler's family is for your honoring him in this way. We wish you well in this endeavor."

Rick Cantrell wrote on February 27, 2006 10:17 PM:

"Travis, Thank you for remembering our friend, Tyler, by running and completing the Atacama on his behalf. You are in my prayers; I will be with you in spirit. Rick "

Mary wrote on February 27, 2006 6:07 PM:

"Thank you for honoring Tyler. I know he'll be with you in spirit as you cross the Atacama. Mary"

Justin Boyer wrote on February 24, 2006 5:03 PM:

"Travis, Glad to see you are doing well! Best of luck in the race! "

ollie wrote on February 24, 2006 12:46 PM:

"Thanks, Captain Norby for your service to this great nation and good luck on your marathon run in the Atacama. "



