

Just do it: 450 Kms on bare feet

One Marathon is not enough for Mexico's Tarahumara Indians. They can run the equivalent of over ten Marathons in six days – without expensive equipment

By Marlene Jensen

Dirk Lund Christensen of Copenhagen University has been studying the Tarahumara Indians for the past ten years. At Play the game, he had just 30 minutes on the podium to speak about them. A challenge? Maybe so. But, as his testimony showed, greater challenges are faced every day by one of North America's most remarkable people.

»The Tarahumara are the best-known long distance runners in North America,' he says. 'There is a simple reason for this – they are able to run 300 kilometres non-stop, or 450 kilometres in six days. They can do this regardless of whether they are barefoot, or clad in a pair of sandals made from an old car tyre.«

Dirk L. Christensen has brought with him a couple of these sandals which he displays to the audience.

They have no 'air cushion', sweat-absorbing sole or reinforced toe. Instead, they comprise of a piece of old rubber, worn thin and shaped like a banana, onto which is sewn two leather laces to ensure that foot and leather remain more or less in contact with each other.

Cross-country postmen

»The Tarahumara call themselves 'Raramuri' which, loosely translated, means 'foot runners'. This name says a lot about how much running means to their identity,« he continues.

Dirk L. Christensen explains that before colonisation, the Tarahumara primarily used their running skills for moving swiftly around the mountainous areas of Mexico. Later, in the 19th century, their running skills were utilised by the Mexican government, which began to employ them to transport the post or lead wild horses to paddocks.

»They each carried 15-20 kilos of post through the mountains and on to the principal city of Chihuahua – a distance of between 800 and 900 kilometres,« he continues. »The journey took them six days – from Monday to Saturday.

On Saturday they slept in the city before running the 450 kilometres home again.«

With time, word of the Tarahumara's amazing running prowess spread. 'In 1920 they were invited to participate as marathon runners in the Olympics,' he tells.

»The two Tarahumara runners finished in 32nd and 35th place. The story goes that they complained to the judges that the race distance was too short.«

Almost 70 years passed before a representative of the Tarahumara again took part in a running competition.

»Juan Herra participated in the 'Leadville 100 Miles Race' in 1994,« he says.

»Wearing his traditional sandals, he won in a time of 17 hours and 30 minutes. This is still a record today and no one has seen the like of him since.«

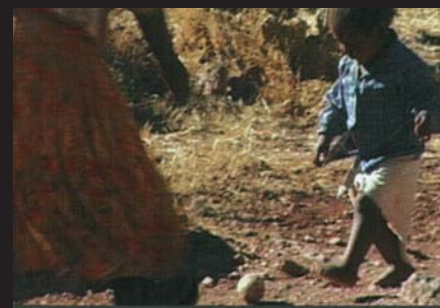
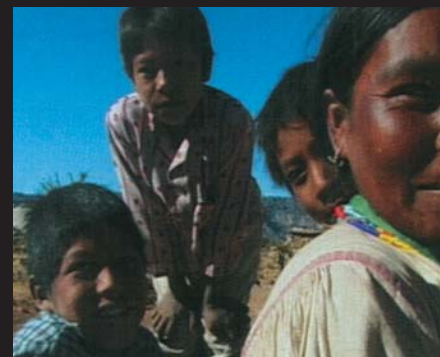
Today, the Tarahumara participate in a so-called 'kick ball' competition where they run 200 or 300 kilometres non stop whilst kicking a small ball. The event takes 24-36 hours to complete. However, on the whole, Lund Christensen does not believe that the Tarahumara's culture of running is consistent with that of modern sports competition.

»The Tarahumara's running culture is more complex than just winning races,« he says.

»For example, the kick ball competition goes hand in hand with a large festival which involves plenty of drinking and smoking cigarettes.«

If their unique talents are used for profit, he also fears for their future.

»If they participate in professional international competitions they would certainly win money, which would alter their living standards to a huge degree. At the same time they would probably lose a large part of their culture. Moreover, they will never be successful enough to achieve major success at the Olympics and World Championships – as long as the races are less than 100km,«he smiles.



PHOTOS BY HANS WESSING

THE TRIBE OF TARAHUMARA

- Live in the mountains of Sierra Madre in the state of Chihuahua
- Don't like to run on plane surfaces since they feel it's harder to judge the distance
- * Smoke lots of cigarettes as their way of preparation before a race – afterwards they drink many beers
- * Live off vegetables, fruit and corn pancakes. Only eat meat on special occasions
- * The average duration of life is 45 years. However, the tribe is plagued by a high infant mortality rate

Source: www.raramuri.com and Dirk Lund Christensen (University of Copenhagen)