



Raul scores for Real Madrid

A double from Raul Gonzalez helped Juande Ramos secure his first win as Real Madrid coach in the Champions League week and extended the Spanish striker's record as the competition's all-time top goalscorer. Raul's two goals and a third by Arjen Robben gave Real a 3-0 victory over UEFA Cup holder Zenit St Petersburg in Group 'H' in its first match under Ramos, who replaced the sacked Bernd Schuster. Holders Manchester United took top spot in Group 'E' despite being held 2-2 at home by Danes AaB Aalborg, which qualify for the UEFA Cup. Raul has scored three goals in the 2008-2009 season of the UEFA Cup Champions League.

Leveaux sets 50m world record

Amaury Leveaux of France set a new world mark for the 50m shortcourse freestyle in Rijeka, Croatia, last week, timing 20.48 seconds in the European Championships semi-final. Leveaux edged the previous mark of 20.64 seconds, which South African Roland Schoeman had set on September 6.

IOC gets tough with doping cheats

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has decided to disqualify the last three athletes convicted of doping at last summer's Beijing Olympics, including the two Belorussian medalists Vadim Deviatovskiy and Ivan Tsikhan, who won silver and bronze in the hammer throw. Deviatovskiy has now been banned from all future games.

Anthony makes NBA history

For one quarter, Carmelo Anthony went into attack mode, and then into NBA history. Anthony erupted for 45 points, including a league record-tying 33 in the third quarter, carrying the Denver Nuggets to a 116-105 home victory over the Minnesota Timberwolves. Anthony added 11 rebounds to his ninth career game.

Pavin named US Ryder Cup captain

Corey Pavin has been named captain of the US team for the 2010 Ryder Cup in Wales, where the team will try to claim the trophy in back-to-back years for the first time since 1993. Pavin, a 49-year-old Californian who won the 1995 US Open, was named by America's PGA to replace Paul Azinger, who guided them past Europe in September.

Davenport to play at Australian Open

Lindsay Davenport has indicated she intends continuing playing on the WTA Tour by officially entering next month's Australian Open. The former world number one and 2000 Australian Open champion has not played since the US Open last August sparking speculation of retirement from competitive tennis. But Australian Open officials said the 32-year-old American intends to return to Melbourne Park to play in the year's opening Grand Slam tournament from January 19 to February 1.



EASIER SAID THAN DUNE

With a mosquito net of a tent, bogged-down 4WDs and stinking socks, Sujit Chandra Kumar finds out that there is more to covering extreme sports and desert life than the romanticised versions seen on television

Day 1 (December 6)
Tentative moves

"This looks like a mosquito net," says Stefanie Trier, casting a lazy glance at the tiny hiker's tent that a German friend just helped me set up at the semi-arid space near a resort in Wadi Bani Auf. I stare at my tent with hurt pride and compare it with the domed structures that my new-found colleagues have put up all around me. A few big drops fall from the sky, eroding the last reserves of my self-confidence and I wonder if I made a terrible mistake in agreeing to cover the Dune-Up. Stefanie comes to my rescue, asking her brother Martin, the chief organiser, to let me sleep in one of the two rooms in the little resort.

We - a group of 25 including eight athletes, three journalists, two doctors and other support staff - had just arrived there in six four-wheel drives from Muscat, driving past Barka, Nakhl and Al Awabi. I am the lone Indian in the group, which consists of two Englishmen and a Swiss national while the rest are all from Germany.

Luckily, the inflatable mat and the sleeping bag that a colleague had thoughtfully given me the previous day along with the tent prove

valuable during the cold night in the canvas bed. One thought lingers: how will I survive the next few nights after we hit the Sharqiyah desert?

Day 2
Reinventing the wheels

I wake up and instantly grapple with a crisis. I had switched off the mobile phone the previous night but when I try to switch it on, it asks for a PIN, which I have not the foggiest idea about. I am new to the sultanate, having moved here less than a month ago, and am still getting used to the Oman way of life and Oman Mobile. The desert adventure is an unexpected,



► Steffen Schelenz (left) pedals away and 'Muscle Martin' carries his bike when the path proves too steep

though pleasant, early surprise. I put the phone away and decide to get on with life. The drive up Jebel Akhdar and Jebel Shams mountains offers a breathtaking view of pristine nature even as the twists and turns leave me breathless.

The cyclists huff, puff and pedal and push when the path proves too steep. Martin Mair, the star of the cycles, finds the routine too boring. Instead of pushing his bike like others, he lifts it up à la Hercules and walks till he reaches a plain surface, earning the nickname 'Muscle Martin' for his efforts.

After a stopover at Al Hamra and



a working lunch, we proceed towards a village resort. A truck arrives to pick up the cycles and transport them to Muscat, and the Pakistani truck driver makes use of my broken Hindi as the medium to communicate with the Germans. I am delighted to learn that we have group tents at our camp for the night and we have a great time of fellowship. All seems well when comes the news that a car key has broken into two and one part is irretrievably stuck in the keyhole.

Day 3
See one, do one

My moment of reckoning arrives as all of them unfurl their umbrella-like tents. I take my 'mosquito net' out of the bag even as the strong wind mocks at me with a moan. All of a sudden, Dr Jan Brommundt, who is part of the medical team, appears on the scene and hands out a spare tent that was lying in his car. Pitching it is more complicated, but the anaesthetist shows me each step with clinical precision. He then tells me about a principle that men of medicine adopt when it comes to procedures. "See one, do one and teach one," he says. "Then, write a book."



► The driver of a four-wheel drive negotiates a tricky stretch of desert

As my anxieties dissolve, I enjoy the early dinner, which comes all the way from Muscat thanks to Café Glacier, the fireplace banter in German that goes above my head and a good night's sleep.

Day 4, 5 and 6
Splash in the sand

The athletes look as though they have stepped out of a sci-fi thriller with their sand-proof shoes, adjusting to the sinking surface and gulping down gallons of water and other rejuvenating concoctions to stay rehydrated. Dave Duffy, the Englishman who is the oldest of the lot, nearly sets a Guinness record in

consuming H₂O. I ask him why he runs and this is what he comes up with. "I started running after my wife ran away from me."

The drivers are as baffled as the athletes when it comes to the unexpected ways in which the desert reacts to their acrobatic driving. Often, the tyres sink more and more into the sand as they rev up the engine. Another vehicle will then pull it out of the mess, only to discover that the rescuer has become the victim. Gradually, the drivers learn the tricks of desert driving. "You should never apply the brakes," one of them informs me. "You should learn to read



As I master the art of pitching a tent, it boosts my ego so much that I don't care about the fine sand particles on my head or the stinking socks that hug my feet

the dunes," announces another. I nod to every theory, as I am completely dependent on them for my survival.

Once or twice, Bedouins appear as if from nowhere and convey their displeasure about the vehicles having a free run with their lights on. Their camels are apparently getting frightened and running away in panic. The convoy tries to stick to the track between dunes and cars go about their business in a more disciplined manner.

There isn't any point in driving fast since the vehicles have to follow the athletes. The start-again-stop-again routine for three days does not

allow for much excitement, so I try to break the monotony by offering the athletes refreshments and sharing jokes with whoever can speak English. The anecdotes are hilarious but not worthy of recounting in a family newspaper.

Martin Trier lives up to his second name and does a superhuman task of trouble shooting, consulting his GPS, coordinating the whole event and running 40km a day on the desert. When-ever he spots signs of fatigue in either himself or his colleagues, he lets out a guttural "Yalla", which means 'go' in Arabic. "We are a bit crazy," he tells me, awash in sand, while accepting a bottle of water from me. "Not just a bit," I reply, admiring his indomitable spirit.

I finally master the art of pitching a tent and receive a bear hug of appreciation from my new-found guru, Dr Brommundt. It boosts my ego so much that I no longer care about the fine sand particles on my head or the stinking socks that hug my feet. I agree wholeheartedly as I hear someone humming the line, "My feet are my only couch..."



► Martin Trier

All photographs courtesy of Frank Stutzke (Germany)

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