

# A Life of



Hiking through snow-covered mountains was part of the 500-mile endurance race.

TIM HOLMSTROM

# EXTREMITIES

Emergency room doctor from Hartland operates in ultimate endurance race

By Liz Rhodebeck

By day, he's a mild-mannered emergency room doctor at Froedtert Hospital. Just a few weeks ago, however, you would have found Hartland's Daniel DeBehnke climbing a mountain in Montana through 3 feet of snow. DeBehnke and three teammates recently competed in Primal Quest, the ultimate endurance race.

Billed as "the world's most challenging human endurance competition," Primal Quest takes competitors on a 500-mile, 10-day expedition through the wilderness. Prohibited from using motorized transportation, team members hike, kayak, riverboard, bike and mountain climb to reach the finish line.

"It was fun, daunting, bigger than life," says DeBehnke of his first try at Primal Quest. It was also the first

attempt for fellow Froedtert doctor and teammate Chris Decker. Melaine Whitcelo of Iowa and Mickey McNeil from Ohio, both of whom have Primal Quest experience, rounded out the team, which by the rules must be coed.

"We have a great chemistry as a team, with a similar goal and outlook - that's our strength," says DeBehnke. "Our motto was: It doesn't matter what place we're in so long as we keep moving to the finish."

## TRAINED TO BE TOUGH

This year's Primal Quest race began and ended in Big Sky, Montana. The first challenge was a 4,400-foot trek straight up Lone Peak. "The view was absolutely gorgeous," tells DeBehnke. During the first 2 1/2 days, they covered 100 miles on foot.

"You really just have to keep going," he explains. "Part of the challenge of adventure racing is the sleep deprivation." The competitors typically got three hours of sleep a day, if any. "However, my experience as an emergency room doctor really prepared me for that."

But how does one get to this stage of ultimate adventure? For DeBehnke, it started right in Lake Country, at the Mid-Adventure Xtreme Fall Classic Adventure Race at Lapham Peak seven years ago. Easier for beginners, the four- to five-hour race includes running, biking,

All of DeBehnke's preparation for Primal Quest was done virtually in his backyard

paddling and orienteering (navigating the course using only a map and compass). He was hooked.

DeBehnke and Decker began taking in other adventure races in the area such as the winter Frozen Otter Race in the Kettle Moraine State Forest. An experienced triathlete, the doctor finds the challenge of adventure racing very satisfying.

With two doctors and a firefighter on the team, DeBehnke felt the team had more experience in handling the unexpected and unknown. Adding to the team's mental advantage was their age. Aptly named "MAAR" (Middle Aged Adventure Racers), the team members are all in their 40s.

"We have more maturity to handle some of the tougher emotional trials,"



COURTESY OF MCW

**Long hours in the emergency room help prepare DeBehnke for adventure racing.**

**Daniel DeBehnke realizes the agony of "de-feet" during the brutal Primal Quest competition.**



WOUTER KINGMA

By Rebecca Keesbach

## THE CEREBRAL SIDE

Adventure racing isn't all about brawn - it's about brains, too.

"Part of the challenge is how to manage adversity," explains DeBehnke. "Not only physical adversity, but mental and emotional as well." That can include anything from getting along with your teammates after having little sleep, to dealing with the monotony of the trail.

"The toughest part of this Primal Quest was crossing some snow fields in the mountains at night - it was plain nerve-wracking," says DeBehnke.

says DeBehnke. Maturity was certainly an attribute they needed to call on when several mishaps led them to drop out of Primal Quest after completing 232 miles of the course at the 5,571-foot high Big Timber Creek.

## FOCUSED ON THE FINISH

"First, Melaine got her hand crushed between two fallen trees and couldn't hold onto her bike handlebars," explains DeBehnke, "so she had to drop out. We continued as a three-person team, but Mickey was having trouble with breathing at the higher altitudes; Chris and I were concerned about possible pneumonia."

Also disappointing to the MAAR team was the deletion of all water competition when Primal Quest organizers deemed the flooded Gallatin and Yellowstone rivers too dangerous.

"We'd done extensive whitewater training together in the Black River and Wolf River," says DeBehnke. "We were ready, we really felt good."

All of DeBehnke's preparation for Primal Quest was done virtually in his backyard.

"Having access to the Kettle Moraine State Forest was the best training," he says. "There's great trails for biking and trekking. I did most of my paddling on Pewaukee and Nagawicka lakes; all that's missing is the mountains," he jokes, though he also got experience rock climbing at a local business, Adventure Rock.

After a relaxing family vacation at Galveston Island, DeBehnke will be back on the trail at the 24-hour Sweaty Otter Race in the northern Kettle Moraine State Forest later this summer.

"I hope *Lake Country Magazine* can come back and interview me next year - after we finish Primal Quest," he says with confidence.

We'll plan on it. ❖