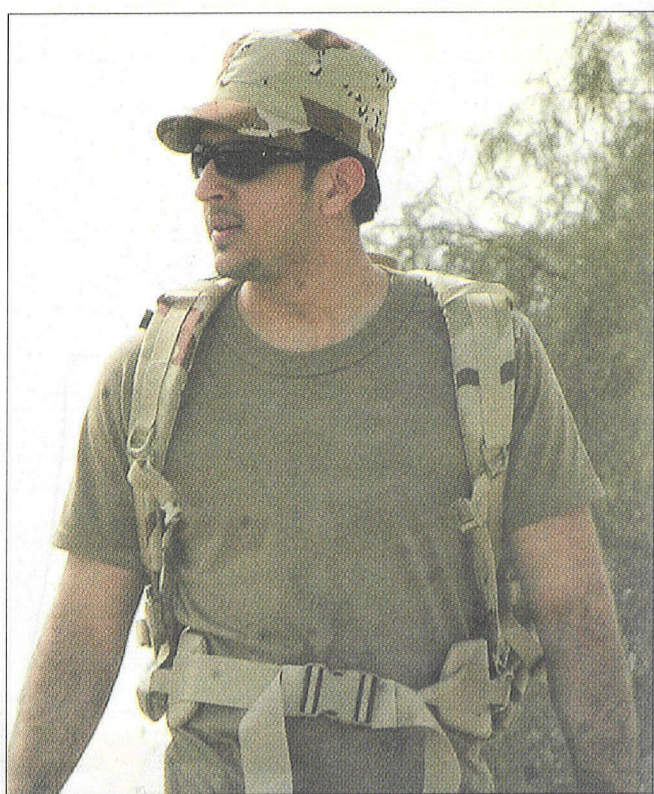


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UNsung HERO

UPDATE

David Tusing catches up with last week's *Unsung Hero*, Jalal bin Thaneya on his trek across the seven emirates

Two of my toes are broken and my little toe has become inflamed," says Jalal bin Thaneya, speaking from Al Dhaid in Sharjah. "My toes started bleeding yesterday."

But the 20-year-old Emirati – who is undertaking a 500km trek across the UAE to raise awareness for his favourite charity – is unfazed.

"This is natural. It's normal," he assures. "I'm taking anti-inflammatory tablets and the bleeding has stopped for now. I've also asked for a pair of replacement boots."

Jalal has been on the road for three days and covered a distance of more than 72km entirely on foot. "I'm seeing what most people in Dubai do not see," he says confidently. "I feel so alive."

"I feel better than in the city," he continues. "I feel cleaner. There is nothing like waking up at dawn and praying with the wind blowing on your face."

Nominated as an *Unsung Hero* recently by one of his friends, the college student's walk through all seven emirates is a first for the UAE.

But it has not been easy. "Sometimes my muscles give in. Then it depresses me, because I want to go the extra kilometre," he says.

Jalal has had his share of critics as well. "I was told by an individual that I have nothing better to do than walk around the UAE," he writes in his blog. "I am sure there are more of you who think this."

"I could have visited my mother whom I haven't seen in years, or had parties at my

house instead of putting my health at risk," he says, slightly disappointed. "But it's up to people to decide. Doing this seems easy but it is not and there are risks."

Specialists at the Emirates Technical Innovation Centre are closely monitoring Jalal's diet and overall health. A support van, loaded with food and medical supplies, trails him on his journey in case of any potential upsets.

"It gets lonely sometimes," says Jalal, for whom the solitary trek has proven to be a great learning experience.

"Friends who promised help have backed out when I really needed assistance," he reports. "I have come to realise that there are a few people you can really call friends."

"But on my journey I have met so many wonderful people," he continues. "There is so much to the UAE that many people do not know. I've never seen so many friendly people."

For three days, Jalal will be accompanied on the journey by Youssef, a Bidoon. "It's their tradition," he explains. "Years ago, when people passed by their settlements in the desert, they would travel with them for three days, keeping them company."

Jalal says he prefers not to think about the long stretch of highway and hundreds of kilometres that he is yet to traverse.

"Let's just take it one day at a time," he says.

■ To support Jalal and help raise funds for the Dubai Autism Center, visit his blog online at www.jalalwalk.blogspot.com