

A DAY WITH

Jalal bin Thaneya

Braving the desert for a special cause

Jalal bin Thaneya is a staunch special-needs activist and has been campaigning to raise awareness for the cause for the last decade.

Since 2006, Bin Thaneya has conducted numerous journeys all across the region to raise awareness, and most notably finished a 2,000km voyage on foot to the city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia from Ruwais, Abu Dhabi to perform pilgrimage in the holy city.

The travel-weary Emirati opened up to *Sport360* about some of the hardships he faced while trekking across the vast expanse of the Arabian Desert and his upcoming journey, a Guinness World Record attempt to walk across the seven emirates of the UAE in seven days.

Tell us a bit about yourself...

I am 30 years old. I graduated from Middlesex University in 2010 and I am currently employed at Dubai Ports World as a quality and strategy officer. I started campaigning for special needs 10 years ago. I walked across the seven emirates in 2006 to raise awareness for the Dubai Autism Centre.

After that I started campaigning for other special needs organisations in the country. In 2008, I raised awareness for the Rashid Paediatric Centre, where I conducted a vertical marathon. In 2009, I walked to the Empty Quarter for the Senses Special Needs Centre.

I went on another journey after that, where I walked from Abu Dhabi to Mecca for the Dubai Special Needs Centre. The last thing I did was cycle across the GCC. So the formula I apply is that I go on these long journeys and I document them to talk about the plight of individuals with special needs in the UAE.

How did you get involved with special needs activism and do you feel your work has made a difference?

People often ask me the reason behind my involvement with the special needs community and often my answer surprises them.

I have no one who has special needs in my family. I don't know or have been in contact with anyone who has special needs. In 2006, there was not a lot of awareness for individuals with special needs. After I finished my first journey, there was a ripple-effect and a lot of activities started springing up in order to raise awareness.

What sort of barriers have you faced?

People's attitude. It is very easy for me to walk from one place to another; all you need is food and a place to sleep. But people have



this attitude where they don't help you out. It is not the journey in itself that has created any problems for me because you can fix a flat tyre on a bicycle or if you get hurt, you can put some ice on it, take painkillers and continue.

I mainly believe people's perceptions and attitude has been the biggest barrier in my pursuit of raising awareness for special needs; bureaucracy and just unnecessary animosity.

Is there a cultural stigma?

Of course there is a stigma; there is a cultural barrier in raising awareness for special needs because people don't want to show this side of the society to the rest of the world. That's what I personally think. Organisations just don't want to be associated with this.

There was one event that was stopped. I wanted to do a vertical marathon in Burj Khalifa and the company that was managing the tower did not want to be associated with any cause pertaining to special needs because it did not fit with its overall image. That's the sort of attitude I have dealt with.

Do you think you have overcome these barriers or changed the attitude?

No, I don't think so. I really have not had any impact, but after the Burj Khalifa incident I did a journey two years ago, where I walked from Abu Dhabi to Mecca. I had to abandon the idea of climbing the tallest tower of the world completely. I don't get to be a celebrity or get any fame out of doing these journeys, nor am I aiming to be famous. I do interviews to talk about special needs and use it to underline their problems and their plight. I am merely a marketing tool for organisations that actually are doing something for individuals with special needs.



Can you describe the impact it has had on your life?

The thing is when you go on these journeys and come back; integrating back into society is the problem. Walking from Abu Dhabi to Mecca did take a lot out of me. It has changed me as a person. I was out there for 50 days. It is difficult and requires a lot of discipline. Sometimes you have to sleep on the side of the road, or sometimes you sleep in a car.

I have become more stern and resilient; certain things do not bother me anymore. I have greater appreciation for life and what I have now. When I was walking to Mecca, sometimes there was no food. It was very difficult, plus Saudi Arabia is very big. UAE is a lot smaller in comparison. It is a rough place to be, the people are tough and the road is very long and monotonous. So the whole journey just hardens you.

What is the '7 Emirates in 7 days' about?

10 years ago I walked across the seven emirates. I was 20-years-old at that time. I did that to raise awareness for the Dubai Autism Centre. Recently, I wanted to return back to my roots. I want this to be my last journey.

I went to the Guinness World Records office here in Dubai. They opened a file specifically for me and told me that if I can cover the seven emirates in seven days on foot, they will give me the world record.

I would have to walk from Abu Dhabi to Fujairah. I will be conducting the journey on the 20th of December. It is the same idea, but now I have to walk from the beginning of Abu Dhabi, from a town Ghweifat, which is 300km away from the city. So this walk is going to be a Guinness world record attempt and at the same time, it is to raise awareness for special needs. This walk is associated with SEDRA, an organisation in Abu Dhabi that trains people with special needs based on the UN charter.

Can you describe your fitness regime?

I train twice a day, that's about it. And you have to eat good food, because if you are trying to eat lean, you will kill yourself and I am always hungry. I am not just running once a day, I am running twice a day and besides running, I also work out and train at the gym.

The body goes a bit mental, because you need to rest as well. In every sporting activity, major component is resting. But right now, I am trying to fine-tune my body to keep going. I do stress exercises, like I rest for 20 minutes and then as soon as I wake up, I start running – straight away. I have to charge my body into action, because I don't have time. I want to make the world record; I want to get that certificate at least.

If I don't get the record, it is an attempt or I just have to do it again.

By Hiba Khan

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