A full-page photograph of a man, Dion Leonard, holding a small, scruffy, light-brown dog. The man is wearing a bright yellow short-sleeved athletic shirt with a logo on the left chest and the words 'ULTRA EQUIPMENT' printed vertically on the right side. He is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background is a vast, arid desert landscape under a clear blue sky, with some distant mountains visible. The overall tone is warm and heartwarming.

Endurance runner
Dion Leonard tells the
heartwarming story of
being befriended by a
scruffy little dog in the
Chinese desert – and
his quest to adopt her

BRINGING GOBI HOME

Dion was in China competing in the Gobi Desert race, a grueling 249km ultramarathon, when he first spotted the stray dog (BELOW) that was to capture his heart.



HE WAS racing across the Chinese and Mongolian desert, competing in one of the world's toughest endurance races, when a scruffy dog started running alongside him. Over the next few days a bond was formed. When Dion Leonard finished the race he decided there was no way he could leave the plucky dog behind. But getting her back to Scotland would prove to be a marathon undertaking.

THEY say it takes a village to raise a child. When I fell in love with a stray dog in China during one of the most grueling endurance events in the world I discovered it takes much more than a village to rescue a pet. I needed the help of half the planet.

The dog's name is Gobi because I first saw her on the cold, rugged slopes of the Tian Shan mountains bordering the Gobi Desert in northwestern China. She was born to run in the hills, a true climber. When she gallops ahead of me she becomes more alive with every bound. Her tail wags so fast it blurs, her whole body bounces and pulses with joy. She looks back at me and I could swear she's grinning.

But the very first time I saw her she wasn't running. She was begging. It was the end of the first day of an ultramarathon: a seven-day, 249km run in some of the most forbidding territory anywhere on Earth – freezing peaks, incessant wind and that desolate, lifeless scrubland known as the Gobi Desert. And I was going to run across it.

After dark the other runners were sitting round a fire, chatting about how tough the first stretch had been. I joined them to boil water for a packet meal – dehydrated chilli con carne. And then I saw a small dog, sandy-coloured with great dark eyes and a funny-looking moustache and beard.

It was walking between the chairs, getting up on its hind legs and charming people into giving it bits of food. Getting ultramarathon runners to part with any of their food is no mean feat – they need every kilojoule they can get. Clever dog, I thought, but I won't be feeding you.

At the start line next morning I looked down and saw the dog again. It was standing by my feet, apparently trans-

fixed by the bright yellow gaiters on my shoes. [Gaiters are made of fabric and worn around the ankles to keep debris from getting into running or hiking shoes.] Its tail was wagging constantly.

Then it did the strangest thing. It looked up, right into my eyes, and I couldn't look away. I heard the marshal counting down to the start of the race. "Go on, get away," I told the dog. "You'll be trampled." I waved my foot at the dog and it took a playful bite at the gaiter.

And then we were off, and the moving gaiters made the game even more fun for the dog, who was dancing around my feet. It kept this up for about 500m then disappeared. I told myself I was glad to see it go because I'd been worried I'd trip over it. But then after hours of hard going through steep forest there it was again, trotting alongside me.

When we crossed the line at the end of the day I sensed people were cheering more loudly for the dog than they were for me. A volunteer brought it a bucket of water, which it lapped greedily. I sat down next to a tent and pulled out some biltong. The dog's eyes were fixed on me.

With a piece of biltong halfway to my mouth it struck me that I hadn't seen the dog eat a thing all day. Even now, though it must be famished, it wasn't trying to steal food. "Here you go," I said, tossing half the meat down. The dog chewed, swallowed, spun round a few times and lay down. Within seconds it was cuddled up beside me, snoring.

Some of the other guys came over to tell me how cute my new friend looked asleep. "You've got to give it a name," one said. A quick check told us this dog was a female. "I'm calling her Gobi," I said.

GOBI was there at the start line with me the next morning and for the rest of the week. On the third day we reached a river at least 45m wide. I waded in, concentrating to keep my balance on the slippery rocks and in the fast current. My pack was high on my back but my provisions would be ruined if I fell into the water.

I assumed Gobi would be paddling along behind me until I heard her barking and whining. With every step I took the sound became more desperate. I was a quarter of the way across the river when I did something I'd never done during a race before. I turned back. I tucked Gobi under my left arm and, using my right for balance, edged back out into the fast-running water. Gobi didn't wriggle. Her head was level with my face and when I looked at her I could swear she gave me a look of love and gratitude.

When I finally struggled up the other bank, in soaking-wet running gear with a dog clutched to my chest, there was an old man sitting on a donkey at the side of the road watching us. I can't imagine what he thought of Gobi and me.

(Turn over)

(From previous page)

For the fourth and fifth stages, with the desert temperatures rising as high as 57°C, I was afraid Gobi would get tired and dehydrated. I gave her to one of the organisers who promised to take care of her in their convoy. She'd be waiting for me at the finish line.

I missed having the dog at my side. The way she ran – determined, consistent, committed – inspired me too. She didn't let hunger or fatigue slow her down. I couldn't wait to see her again.

As I came around the final bend I could see Gobi sitting in the shade and scanning the horizon. When she saw me she was a blur of brown fur, tearing over the ground towards me, tail up, little tongue flapping.

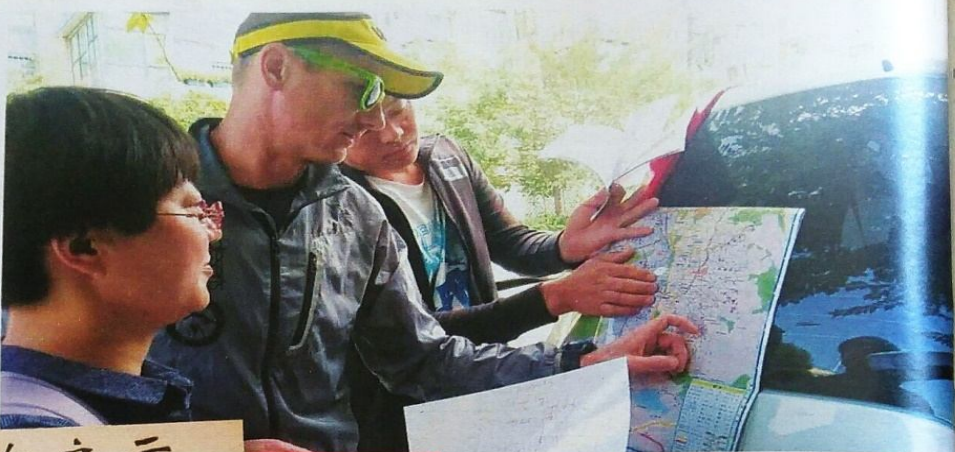
That night I told some of the other runners I'd reached a decision out there in the boiling desert. When I flew home to Edinburgh to rejoin my wife, Lucja, I was going to take Gobi with me. To my surprise and delight my friends immediately offered to chip in towards the costs. They wanted to see Gobi safe too. "Any dog that tough deserves a happy ending," one said.

First, though, I had to break the news to Lucja. I picked up the phone and dialled with trepidation. But before I could say much more than "hello", Lucja was asking about Gobi – she'd been reading the blogs by other competitors and they were all talking about my dog. Some of them had even uploaded pictures. "She's a pretty little thing, isn't she?" Lucja said. "Are you bringing her home? As soon as I read about her I knew you'd want to."

She began to research how to get Gobi home and we quickly realised it wouldn't be easy... or cheap. Apart from the cost of the flight back to the UK she'd have to spend months in quarantine.

And first we'd have to get her out of China – a country that wins the international prize for red tape. The authorities there insisted she had to remain in the country for 30 days for medical examination.

After that Gobi would have to be transported across China from the remote city of Ürümqi near the Mongolian border, where the race had been held, to



寻狗启示

寻找“戈壁”Gobi。母犬，丢失地点：幸福花园七期。如果您看到这只小狗，请及时与我们联系。
联系人电话：13999809025
13899976716。

凡找到Gobi的人，我们愿付10000元酬金，提供有效线索者重谢！同时请您尽量拍照，万分感谢！

即使你看到的不是戈壁，也请关照一下它们，一杯水，一点食物，温暖世间。关爱流浪动物，它们同等重要。



ABOVE: Dion with a search team in the Chinese city of Ürümqi after Gobi went missing.
LEFT: One of the reward posters Dion put up.

Beijing. Then we'd need a crate and a flight home. I was looking at a minimum of £5 000 (R87 500), even before the £1 500 (R26 250) cost of quarantine.

But strange as it might sound, Gobi was already part of the family. And you don't count the cost of family.

I flew back to Edinburgh, leaving Gobi in the hands of one of the race organisers, Nurali, who promised my little dog would be kept safe. By the time Lucja and I were reunited I'd already had emails from complete strangers who'd read on the running blogs that I'd gained a pet. Several people offered to donate money towards the expense.

Lucja and I realised that Gobi's courage and determination had touched a lot of people. We set up a crowdfunding page, an online appeal for donations small and large, and immediately saw a response. My phone chirped every time someone gave a pound or two, and I loved reading the donors' comments. Helping Gobi made people happy.

Within 48 hours I had a call from a newspaper, which ran a page of pictures of me and Gobi under the headline, "I will not desert my ultramarathon pal." Then the donations really took off. My phone went wild.

I was astounded. I could barely believe it was happening. Within 24 hours we'd reached our £5 000 target, and I was suddenly in demand for TV and radio stations from Scotland to New Zealand.

My worries about hidden expenses and red tape evaporated overnight. Thanks to the generosity of so many people from all over the world I knew beyond doubt that we could bring Gobi home.

There was just one problem. Nurali, the woman looking after the dog in China, had stopped answering our emails. I was getting increasingly concerned at the silence. After three days and some frantic phone calls I got a response. Nurali had been away in America. While she was gone her father-in-law had been looking after Gobi. And the dog had run away.

My head swam. My stomach turned over. Nurali assured me she had people out looking for the dog but that did nothing to calm me. It was hard to get a clear answer about anything, but as far as I could tell Gobi could already have been missing for 10 days.

Immediately I got in touch with a dog charity in China and had posters printed offering a £1 000 (R17 500) reward for her safe return. They were handed out all over Ürümqi. But I knew Gobi could easily travel 2-3km every 20 minutes – in 10 days she could be anywhere in Asia. What if she was searching for me in the Tian Shan Mountains where we'd met?

I posted updates on the crowd-funding



FAR LEFT: Gobi needed surgery to repair a dislocated hip after she was eventually found. **LEFT:** Dion celebrating with her soon after their arrival in the UK.

page, assuring people that if the unthinkable happened and Gobi wasn't found I wouldn't cash any of the pledged donations. But people weren't concerned about the money – they, too, were devastated that Gobi was lost.

Many sent positive messages full of sympathy, prayer and good wishes. Others warned that Gobi might have been kidnapped for ransom, although we hadn't received any demands.

Others expressed fears she might be killed and eaten. But that was unlikely. Ürümqi is a largely Muslim city and dogs are seen as unclean. Unlike in some parts of China, they aren't food animals.

Then the news hit the national media and I felt, perhaps irrationally, that some people blamed me for Gobi's disappearance. I hadn't taken enough care of her. Part of me felt that too.

There was only one thing to do. I had to fly out and join the search. "I have to," I told Lucja. "If I don't and we never find her I won't be able to live with myself."

WHEN I arrived in China the reality of the situation caught up with me and I became convinced all was hopeless.

Most people couldn't understand why I was so determined to find a missing dog. They seemed to think any old mutt would do. After I did an appeal on a local news station a woman called to claim she'd seen Gobi... in a dream vision. According to her psychic senses, my dog was in the mountains.

We got into blazing arguments with the litter wardens who objected to our leaflets. Up to 50 people had joined the search as word spread but my hopes were sinking lower every day.

When I'm running I can block out pain and hunger. But the fear of losing Gobi was with me every waking minute. I couldn't flip a switch in my mind and stop caring – I loved her too much.

After a week with no reliable sightings, despite all the publicity, I was close to despair. Then my phone buzzed: someone had sent me a photo of a brown dog with a nasty scar on its head. "This is Gobi," the message read.

I almost ignored it. That didn't look like my dog. She didn't have a scar for one thing. But there was something about the eyes...

Against my better judgment I drove out to an address I was given in the wealthiest part of Ürümqi. I was afraid this was a hoax or a scam; perhaps an attempt to sell me a different dog. But as we arrived at the gated community and knocked at a door something incredible happened.

The door opened – and a streak of sandy brown shot across the room, jumping at my knees and barking madly. There could be no question. It was Gobi.

She'd run away from where she was staying and the family who'd found her at the roadside recognised her from

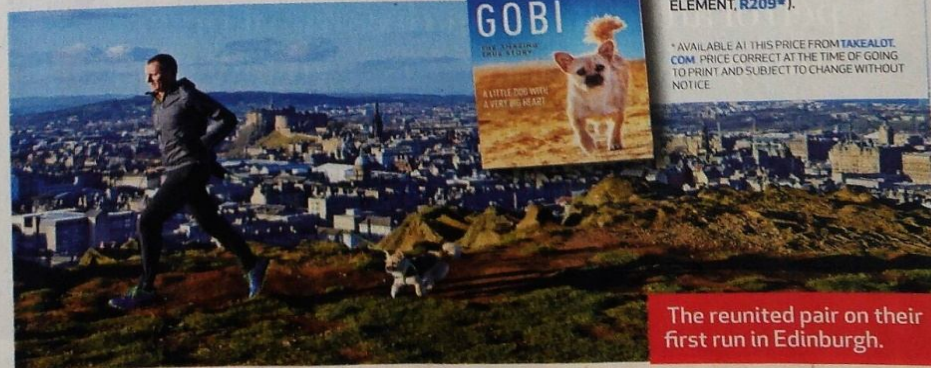
news reports. They were well-off animal-lovers, aghast at the thought of any reward.

Gobi was battered and bruised and her hip was severely dislocated. A vet thought she'd been hit by a vehicle and she needed a serious operation immediately or risked losing use of her leg.

The hip operation was a success and it wasn't long before she was back doing what she does best: running.

After spending four months in Beijing completing the quarantine process Gobi was finally able to come home with me. She flew business class on the seat beside me. After we arrived in Edinburgh it didn't take her long to adapt to her new life.

When she runs, Gobi is a ball of energy. Our favourite route is up Arthur's Seat, the grassy mountain that dominates the city's skyline. She charges up the slope then turns, tongue lolling, ears forward, chest puffed. Her face is bursting with happiness and her eyes are bright with a message for me: "Come on!" she's saying. "Let's go!" ■



THIS IS AN EDITED EXTRACT FROM FINDING GOBI: THE AMAZING TRUE STORY, BY DION LEONARD (HARPER ELEMENT, R209*).

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The reunited pair on their first run in Edinburgh.