

# Blood, sweat and charity

Michel van Houten participated in Vattenfall's 33rd half marathon in Berlin on 7 April. There was a lot riding on him because he ran for charity.

Text: David Scherpenhuizen | Photos: Roland Horn





Always keeping the goal in sight – a determined Michel trained two to three times a week to achieve his goal.

**M**ichel (37) used to be a professional basketball player. With his 1.96 metre wiry body, short hair and alert eyes, he is still every inch the athlete. However, when he talks about his charity work or his children – Julianne (10) and Jens (8) – he relaxes, his eyes mellow and a warm smile spreads across his face.

Michel started as a part-timer at Nuon in 1987 as he needed a job alongside his basketball career. He gradually worked his way up to his current (full time) position as Floor Manager for Customer Services Netherlands. He still plays competitive basketball once a week.

In December 2012, he applied for a starting position in the half marathon on a whim and to his delight (and dread) was accepted. It was a big challenge. “Basketball is an explosive sport and is all about short spurts,” he says. “Running, on the other hand, is pure stamina and I had to work on my endurance.”

In addition to his demanding job, family obligations and basketball, Michel started a rigorous training programme, running two to three

evenings each week. With a sheepish look, he admits he used to hate long distance running.

“Some people say I’m crazy,” he grins, “but my family and friends are very supportive. My wife Christel and my kids even help me train, cycling with me during my runs. I couldn’t do it without them!”

**Michel was determined** to run the 21.1 kilometre marathon in under two hours and he had to dig deep to come in at 1:55:29. “It wasn’t easy, I can tell you!” He laughs, but his fierce eyes show that failure was never an option.

So what motivated him?

“I’m a competitor and I like to push the envelope, on the playing field and at work,” he says with conviction. “Taking it easy is not in my vocabulary and testing my limits is part of my drive to succeed. But it was knowing that Christel was waiting at the finish and that people were rooting for me at home that really pushed me through the pain.”

Yet Michel had another, even more important motive. He was raising money for the Youth Sports Foundation in the Netherlands, which helps

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**Michel van Houten**

underprivileged youths. Michel and the Dutch team were able to raise an impressive 4,400 euros for the charity.

“Nowadays you’re lucky to have a job, never mind being able to afford sports. It’s horrible to think that thousands of kids can’t afford to play sports. It makes me realise how privileged my family is and I wanted to do something.”

Would he go through it again?

“After the race you think, never again! But I’m doing a 10 kilometre race in June and the team is already talking about running again next year.”



Elated and exhausted after the race on 7 April, Michel hugs his wife Christel.

With a twinkle he says: "Wouldn't it be great if we could support the same kids over the years and then one day they join us on the starting line!" ■



Christel van Houten

Hard work and perseverance: Michel had his family's support while training for the half marathon.

### Youth Sports Foundation

Set up in 1999, the foundation is a Dutch charity that aims to facilitate sporting activities for underprivileged children under 18. In the Netherlands, more than 350,000 children live in families that cannot afford sports. The Foundation pays the club fees for children, as well as for their sports clothing and equipment. It costs 250 euros a year to help one child. The Dutch Olympic Committee supports the charity, which helped more than 23,000 children in 2012. Foundation Chairman Kees Jansma, says: "It's fantastic that Michel went to so much effort. It's important to help children develop positively through sport."