My account of the week during the 29th Marathon des Sables

Having thought about how to start describing and summarising the week, I’m finding it hard to know quite where to begin. How to convey the levels of excitement and anxiety building up to the event, the butterflies and trepidation on the start line, the unexpected euphoria while running across the dunes and the despair of running out of water a few km from a checkpoint - more than once - all seem impossible to quantify with words. I’m also aware that for many of you reading this, the concept of wanting to run a single marathon in the first instance is perhaps slightly alien, but for someone opting to run 6 marathons on consecutive days, across the Sahara desert, over mountains, is more than likely to be dismissed as utter madness. Quite simply, if you have to ask why I’d want to do this, you’ll probably never truly understand the answer anyway. At this point I can barely digest that I’m back in the UK. I’m not depressed, nor sad it’s over, but despite investing the last 2 years in training and planning I feel nothing but total satisfaction and fulfilment. I hope it lasts...

The journey over those 6 race days was nothing short of exhausting, in every aspect. Every emotion that could be experienced, I felt. It was probably the most memorable, dangerous, challenging and enjoyable week of my life so far, and despite the aches and pains, I’m looking back fondly at the entire experience, the friends I made and the times shared. I’m extremely grateful on so many levels to not only have been able to participate, but to all those around me who have supported, helped, motivated, mocked and driven me. You are all responsible for having helped me complete the distance.

What I learnt and witnessed over that week was that the human body is clearly far more capable of enduring absolute physical misery and duress than you might think. Even when you’re rock bottom, facing absolute despair and exhaustion, you can always give more. I know this because I did it. While significant training and preparation were essential, it’s self-belief and utter pig-headed determination that will drag you across the finish line. When your legs just don’t want to work, and your calves are tight and screaming each morning, it’s your ability to relax, switch off the negativity and crack on that’ll see you through. This was most evident on the last day for me, which I’ll describe later.

In terms of a race plan or strategy for the week, the only thing Dharm and I had really discussed was to go out steady on the first couple of days until our bodies had acclimatised. Ultimately, we wanted to finish, and try to enjoy the entire experience. I’d been warned by a colleague, Greg Collett - an MDS veteran, that my heart-rate would be in overdrive for the first 2 days, at least. I was intending on running with my heart rate monitor, and using it to guide me in terms of when I needed to back-off. I found it very useful and I’m glad I took it. It would take discipline and maturity to not race off at the start like a loon, but I was confident we had what was required.

For those interested in the brief history of MDS, it all started back in 1984. At 28 years of age, Patrick Bauer decided to make for the Sahara to try to traverse a 350km expanse of uninhabited desert, on foot, alone, where he wouldn’t come across a single village, oasis or watering place. Totally self-sufficient, with a rucksack weighing 35kg and containing water and food, he set off on a journey which was to last 12 days. It was the starting point of what was to become the Marathon des Sables. 12,000 competitors later, on the eve of the 29th edition, I was preparing to join the relatively few who could say that they’d gone the distance.

Arrival

On arriving in Morocco on Friday 4th, we were transferred immediately into the desert. After a couple of hours in an air-conditioned coach, we climbed down into the dust and sand to face a wall of heat. The camp, or bivouac - as it is called, lay sprawled out across a vast plain. Looking something like a cross between Camp Bastion and a scene from Tatooine, workers, volunteers and support staff were running between trucks, jeeps and tents, silhouetted against the sun, racing the
remaining daylight to finish off their tasks for the day. Just unreal, like something from a movie set. Helicopters were continuously ferrying cargo of some kind, and dust clouds kicked up with any walking, or vehicle traffic, and a gentle warm wind carried the grit and dirt which just hazed everything in the distance. We were there, in the desert, on camp. It had been such a long time in the planning. There had been moments when I’d thought this time would never come.

Within 30mins of locating an empty tent, darkness had set in, and tent #141 was complete. Along with myself and Dharmesh, it was to become a temporary home to media-shy Ted ‘El Diablo’ Jackson, cool Aaron Robinson, dry-witted Dave Smith, Scott Danks - a contender for one of the nicest guys on the planet, Rebecca Drahota (THE happiest person alive, in the entire world) and Clair Draper - all the way from Vietnam. Sadly, our 8 were to become 6 sooner than we could have expected, but for the time being we all prepared for the gruelling week ahead. Next door we had Sian Brice, former Team GB Olympic Triathlete along with her best friend and partner-in-crime Angela Bell. Both living quite close to me, we’d travelled to Gatwick together that morning, after initially meeting quite accidentally on Camber Sands beach a few weeks previously whilst they were out training in their full desert gear.

Saturday followed a windy and cold first night sleeping on the hard ground, and involved much queuing, packing, repacking, weighing kit, eating, staying hydrated, pacing, waiting, and more waiting. The sun was already too much for me, and we were only sitting about in the shade. The allotted time came when we had to hand in our main luggage, saying goodbye to iPhones and other luxuries, in exchange for an emergency flare, salt tablets, race numbers, a transponder and to have the medical team inspect our ECG results. From that point onwards we only had our race pack. Self sufficient for next 7 days; all food, all equipment and clothing would have to be carried by us in our packs. It would be strapped to our backs during each of the coming race days. 1042 competitors had queued that day, but already 13 had been denied the right to start the race the following morning. They were already being sent home. I can’t imagine how they must have felt.

Baptism by fire - Race Day #1, Sunday 6/04/14, 34km

I awoke to the sound of vomiting, and people urinating 10m from the tent line - that was to become the norm. It's amazing how quickly you all lose any sense of modesty or inhibition in conditions like we were in. Another cold restless night had left me worried and already dreading the rest of the week from a sleep perspective. Having given up all my warm clothing with my luggage and trusting the few pieces of kit I had to be sufficient for the week ahead, I’d sat shivering and cross in my sleeping bag until the sun came up, which was around 7am. With breakfast finished, bags packed and water collected, I hoisted my rucksack up - at it's heaviest for the week - onto my shoulders. For the first time that morning I smiled to myself. I’d endured weeks of intensive weight bearing in my 12kg training vest
on the final countdown to coming out here, and consequently my pack was more than manageable. My spirits lifted immediately, especially hearing the groans around me as others did the same but didn’t necessarily feel the same relief, and as the camp was dismantled by the support staff in front of our eyes, 1029 idiots headed over to the start line. I was limping, and we hadn’t even started running. My achilles was playing up, as usual/expected, and having intentionally not run during the proceeding week, I was in pain - too much for my liking actually. I shifted my weight onto the fronts of my feet, trying to ease the pressure and attempted to ignore it.

The atmosphere was electric. Pre-race routine ensued with Ted either bellowing out opera at tannoy volumes or being interviewed by a camera crew, in his Devil costume, complete with trident/pitch fork, and the helicopters were already hovering above. Race director Patrick Bauer stood on the roof of a truck on the start line, the sun was scorching. Countdown, music blaring, the hot breeze in your face, being pushed and shoved from all sides by the mass of people crammed in to the start area, the thunder of the desert-ready motorbikes roaring ahead into the dunes, preparing to guide/escort the runners. It was total sensory overload, and I was loving it. HRM on, GPS tracker on, water bottles tight, salt tablets left pocket, some food right-hand side. We were off. The helicopters were repeatedly flying over the stream of runners, 10m overhead, filming. It was just utter madness.

Already over-hydrated and needing the toilet, heart pounding, the chaos gradually calmed as the sea of runners trailed away ahead of us, and we assumed a steady gentle jog over the dirt. The first few km towards the dunes were over hard ground, and soon enough there was space around us to relax into a gentle run. My achilles was screaming, and the terrain wasn’t helping, but there was no way I was going to stop for a little pain. Soon enough, my first real problem struck as we hit the soft sand of the dunes. My feet were going numb, pins and needles. The shoes felt ok, maybe a little tight from the gaiters having been stitched in, so I didn’t think that was the problem. Swelling is common in the heat, and I soon realised my calf sleeves were the cause. My calfs must have been swollen. I normally wear the compression sleeves, especially on the long runs, but they were clearly constricting blood flow to my feet. I shouted to Dharm that I needed to stop and sort it, and within seconds I’d pushed them down to my ankles and was back on the move. Within 5-10mins the feeling in the feet had returned, as had the achilles pain. Perfect.
The sand was far worse than expected. Soft, fine, golden powder, hot to the touch, feels like it totally engulfs your shoe with each step. As far as you could see, the route disappeared off into the dunes. The realisation of the situation was like a slap in the face, followed by a punch. I wondered how I was going to survive this. We faced a total of 12km of dunes before hitting the first checkpoint where we'd get our next water rations. No time to be a big baby, there was only one way out of this - onwards. I'm not going to lie though, I felt a semblance of despair in that first leg of stage #1. The following 2.5hrs to CP1 could only be described as utter cruelty, but it was during that early desperate time as we all sank into a silent survival-mode that I became conscious of two distinct thoughts. Firstly, this place was absolutely beautiful. Stunning, like nothing else I had ever seen. Yellow moving mountains of sand, stretching for miles in every direction, combined with the dead silence similar to being on an Alpine piste, then occasionally the wind rushing past your ears, this really was one of the most beautiful places that I’d ever seen / run. Secondly, on appreciating the sheer beauty, the absolute isolation I felt as a result of truly being in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by maybe 20-30 other silent nameless runners, all trying their best to survive, generated an unexpected feeling of euphoria mixed with terror. While frightening, and life-threatening, this was a serious rush. What the hell was going on? I spent over 90mins of those 2.5hrs to CP1 at over 90% of my max HR. If we had any vague assumptions that the week ahead was going to be easy, then it was soon made crystal clear - MDS isn't known as the toughest footrace in the world for no reason. The breeze vanished with every dip into a sand basin. With no breeze, the heat radiated off the sand and it was felt instantly. I'd missed sun protection on the backs of my hands, and they were already burnt. My throat and mouth were bone dry - I’d run out of water already, so I endeavoured to keep my mouth closed and only breathe through my nose. The hot air stung after a while, and it made my throat sore, but I felt it helped me stop losing moisture.

I was bursting to empty my bladder, but there was no way I was going to voluntarily get rid of any fluid until I had my next bottle of water in my hands. CP1 was a very welcome sight, but it was evident there were a lot of broken souls. The support crews met us with what was to become the usual “ca va?” greeting, “you guys ok?”. A quick nod, thanks for the water, and we were gone. From CP1 we headed into an oued - a dried river bed, dark soft sand. It was later that we were informed that temperatures out in the open, especially on the dark sands, were in the 50s. It was insane. The heat was really starting to take it’s toll. Dharm suggested we sat for a couple of minutes in the shade of a large bush, and there were no arguments from me. My eating plan for each day was more or less the same, except for the double marathon on Wednesday, and that was to eat very little during the run. I wanted to keep something sweet/sugary going in at each checkpoint, but nothing heavy. No large food intakes. I’d packed 40g of dried banana chips for day #1, and I’d planned to have a couple of chips at each checkpoint. In general I try not to use gels, and
more recently at various events I’d personally had better results with small amounts of proper food. So as we sat in the shade, and cooked on the riverbed, I had my first helping of food. A few runners passed us, each checking we were ok, then we mustered the enthusiasm to get moving again.

The rest of that day is a bit of a blur. I recall running over a sharp rocky plain, and it was a relief to be able to start running. The dunes made it impossible for us to move quickly, unlike for the elite runners who seemingly dart over every surface with ease. We passed through an old abandoned village at one point, again I used some shade to crouch and release the pressure off my calfs, but the final 3km was sadly back into dune hell. 2km from the end we passed a medic jeep, with a runner out flat on his back, unresponsive. The sad reality is that this was no fun-run in the park, and the poor guy was almost certainly not going to be competing tomorrow.

At the finish we collected our 4.5L of water (to last us until the morning) and we hobbled back to tent #141. Aaron and Scott were already in, looking fairly tired. Dave and Ted followed soon after. The girls finally arrived back at camp in a 4x4 at around 11pm, after ultimately not being allowed to enter the final 3km of dunes due to it getting dark, and they’d been driven back to camp. They were tired and angry, there was a lot of confusion about navigational instructions they’d been given, and they were told to report to the race director at 6am the following morning. It was looking like a disqualification, but there was nothing that could be done at that point. The first day had been brutal, to all of us. The thought of running a double marathon on Wednesday, should we make it that far, was terrifying.

Pos 517, 6h 59m 37s, Avg pace 12:14 min/km
Avg HR 148bpm, Max 207bpm (50-60%:2%, 60-70%:5%, 70-80%:34%, 80-90%:36%, 90%+:21%)
Energy used: 5,706 kcal, food for the day: 2,871 kcal
Ascent: 309m, Descent: 359m

More of the same - Race Day #2, Monday 7/04/14, 41km

I woke with a bloody nose and a sore throat from breathing the scorching air through my nose for most of the previous day. I also couldn’t walk. Angela, our resident physio from tent #140, had taped my achilles and calfs the previous evening in an attempt to offload some of the pressure. It was helping. The sheer volume of walking from day #1 over the dunes had further aggravated my legs to the point of agony. As I struggled to my feet like TinMan, everyone else was already awake. Thankfully I wasn’t overly hungry - my food plan and strategy seemed to be working, and I’d gone to bed the previous night with a full stomach. The girls had rushed off to meet with Patrick Bauer at 6am, and so the breakfast routine followed. Boil some water, mix your porridge, listen to the chorus
of flatulence from fellow runners as stomachs attempted to adjust to surviving on only powdered Expedition Foods and sports gels. More vomiting and dry-wretching from corners of the camp, including from our very own Ted, and the camp once again being dismantled while we packed up for another challenging day. My clothes felt grubby - I’d of course slept in everything I’d run in the previous day, but I did have 2 pairs of spare socks. One more day in this pair and I could ditch them. The night had been warmer than the previous two, and I’d managed to get a couple of hours of sleep. For that I was grateful, as I expected day #2 to be the worst from a fatigue perspective.

A long line of sorry-looking competitors could be seen walking, limping and hobbling out of camp towards the support crew tents where a number of transfer vehicles were waiting. The poor folks hadn’t survived day #1 and had been DQ’d or had retired for various reasons. It was then that the girls came back, and it was immediately obvious by their body language that their appeal hadn’t gone as hoped. They were out. Through no injury or medical reason, they’d been disqualified for not making the cut-off and ultimately they’d not finished the stage yesterday. By getting in to the marshal’s Jeep they’d unwittingly sealed their race fate. While Clair was busily trying to arrange something with one of the guides, Rebecca was understandably distraught. So much effort invested, so much investment emotionally and financially - it was heartbreaking to witness. They were eventually led to a 4x4, their kit was loaded on, and they were driven away. It was a horrible start to day #2, and left the 6 of us unsettled. No one really spoke as we moved towards the start area.

We were collectively down to 1002 competitors. A greater number of people had already dropped out on the first day than had done so for the entire event last year. We wondered whether stage #1 had perhaps been harder than the organisers had intended. My pack was approx 600g lighter than the previous morning, but it didn’t feel it. I’d had to tape across my shoulders to help reduce rub from the straps. The weight wasn’t necessarily the problem, but the straps were already starting to grind the flesh away.

The entire course details from day #2 elude my memory, especially to the same level of detail as the other days, but I do recall feeling sick and struggling in the early stages to control my body temperature. As we left CP1 I crouched on my haunches to relieve my calfs, and children from the nearby village had gathered to watch the commotion. “Bonjour monsieur”, one smiled at me, I nodded in response, and tried to force a smile in return. “Run!” the little bugger shouted. I stood up as Dharm finished topping up his water, and we set off towards CP2. Angela and Sian had passed us and we tucked in behind. As the day progressed I started to gradually feel that I was slowly managing the heat better. I’d figured out how to hold the 1.5L bottle while running without it being too much of a pain, tucked in on the inside of my arm/crease of my elbow. I would periodically use the water to pour over my head to help stay cool. Before long you didn’t even realise you were carrying the bottle.
I remember consciously trying to keep my HR in zone 3 for as much of that day as possible. Having realised that stage #1 had been a far greater effort that I had expected, I had to do what I could to manage my exertion levels. I would never last the week if everyday was like the stage #1. The kids from the village were gathered in groups every couple of hundred meters, and they were asking for our equipment as we passed. One of them pointed to my buffs protecting my burnt hands, and shouted for them. I don't think so buddy. We pushed on away into the heat, alongside a ridge, and settled into a 4min run, 1min walk pattern. My clothes reeked - I could smell my own stench, even over the breeze. That made me smile, being this filthy already didn't bode well for the next 6 days.

The finish line was a welcome sight from our elevated position, and we’d survived day #2. Water was collected, dinner eaten, and darkness again settled over the camp pretty quickly. We wondered how many runners we’d lost during the day. Aaron had managed to run into a giant bush at some stage on the course and Ted’s sense of humour was gradually deteriorating. The rest of us took the opportunity to sleep as soon as we could.

Pos 476, 7h 16m 23s, Avg pace 10:31 min/km
Avg HR 135bpm, Max 230bpm (50-60%:3%, 60-70%:18%, 70-80%:52%, 80-90%:26%, 90%+:0% [9s])
Energy used: 4,790 kcal, food for the day: 2,840 kcal
Ascent: 208m, Descent: 212m

Turning point - Race Day #3, Tuesday 8/04/14, 37.5km

I had slept well. The ground under our tent was soft and the mounting sheer physical exhaustion from the previous 2 days had allowed me to rest properly. As I stood up into the morning sun, my legs felt ok. The tape Angela had applied on Sunday night had clearly helped, and I felt ready for another day of abuse. I was actually looking forward to it. I still wasn’t thinking about the double. I couldn’t - had to be one day at a time. Get through today, and tomorrow’s problem was exactly that - tomorrow's problem. I still felt tired though. I could feel the calorie deficit, although I wasn’t craving food. The water deficit was also evident. I was going to the toilet less and less.

The start was more of the same; camera crews, music, helicopters - it was all becoming quite normal. We no longer looked up as the chopper buzzed over our heads. Anywhere else, under any other circumstances, you’d be standing awe struck with your jaw wide open. Hey, we were the survivors who had so far made it to day #3. We set out into the dunes in good spirits.

Within 30mins we’d settled into a steady run, and eventually left the dunes to head across the rocky terrain towards a climb up a rocky gorge - Foum Al Opath Jebel. As we climbed I was feeling better and better, the line of guys in front were slow and beginning to frustrate me. I jumped off the
rock path they were following, and darted around them. My pace picked up, and I could feel the familiar lactic burn in my legs. It was wonderful. Sweat started pouring off my face, and as I clawed my way to the top, over loose rocks and sand, the warm breeze hit me again in the face. I was in good shape, and felt amazing. I later learnt from my watch that I'd peaked at well over 200bpm on that climb, if only momentarily, but I hadn't felt a problem. I sat for a moment, soaking up the view. It stretched for miles. Dharm, Angela and Sian soon reached the top, and the girls immediately started their descent over the other side. The downward journey was technical and hard on your quads, but enjoyable and a welcome change from the dunes and sharp rocks of the plains. The rest of the trek to CP2 was across more sandy dunes, some lovely descents that swallowed each footstep, and some gruelling climbs.

The rest of the route passed without incident, and as we crested Ba Hallou ruins, the finish line was in sight. Angela and I were out front, with Sian and Dharm a few hundred meters back. Between us and the finish was a stream of broken-looking runners, including some French - there's nothing like a little international competitive spirit. We nailed it, reeling them in one by one, and for the third day in a row we'd finished strongly. The second day in row where we'd placed better than the previous day. Three marathons down, 21hrs of moving in that heat, and I was feeling invincible. I was feeling mentally ready to take on the double marathon. Ted and Dave made it in to camp later that evening, just inside the cut-off times. Dave was starting to look very tired, and Ted admitted he'd nearly bailed. The exertion was taking it's toll on him. His only consolation was that his family were leaving home back in the UK shortly to join him at the finish. That was what had carried him through the day. Scott's feet were a total mess. His toes were heavily swollen and the medics had attempted to drill through his toenails to release any pressure. They hadn't been able to, and he ended up with layers of bandage wrapped round each foot. He was clearly in a lot of discomfort, but it didn't seem to be affecting his race pace, or his mood.

As the tent, and camp, settled down to sleep, I lay awake looking out into the darkness listening to some music. I'd had emails delivered by the support crew from the family complaining that I wasn't entertaining enough as I crossed the finish line. They had apparently been waiting and watching us every day on the live webcam. It was so motivating and encouraging to hear that - we hadn't imagined that everyone would be so interested in our progress. Poor Dharm had received an email from my boys, giving him abuse. It was all good natured banter, but unfortunately it was more ammo for his tent mates to use against him. These were indeed good times, and I realised I was lucky enough to be sharing a truly unique experience with these 5 guys, a week that we'd never forget.

Pos 421, 6h 54m 17s, Avg pace 11:19 min/km
Avg HR 121bpm, Max 222bpm (50-60%:11%, 60-70%:44%, 70-80%:31%, 80-90%:5%, 90%+:1%)
The morning brought more vomit, and everyone was fairly quiet. Humour levels were low, and talking was kept to a minimum. Everyone was feeling anxious. Ted performed briefly for another camera crew, but even they detected his slight lack of enthusiasm. This was going to be a tough day for everyone, and a very long day for quite a few of us.

Less than 1000 of us collected in the start area, and after another obligatory TV interview for Ted, he stopped the crowds with an impromptu rendition of Nessun Dorma, much to the visible annoyance of Patrick Bauer on top of his truck. Then business as usual - we were off. Dharm started the run with stomach trouble, and he suggested we split within the first 5km so he could hang back with the walkers. No way was I going to agree with that, especially on the long stage. We had to stay together that day - no debate. I persuaded him to ride out the pains for 30mins or so and re-review at CP1, and after a short break the trouble subsided, and along with Angela and Sian we were back on the move. The climb after CP1 headed right up, almost vertically, over El Otfal Jebel. A difficult climb, over rocks and through soft shifting sand, the top section aided by a rope to pull yourself up on. It was slow progress, and what should have taken us 40 mins, took us nearly 2hrs. We were eating into valuable time, and already our predicted 14-16hrs for the entire day was looking unlikely. The descent on the other side made up for the exertion somewhat, and I had a blast running down the other side like a mountain goat, hopping from rock to rock. Once we’d all met up at the base, we faced a long hot crossing over a vast stony plain to CP2. Broken down into 1min run / 1min walk, we were soon on the other side, but the CP tents were filled with exhausted overheating runners. We didn’t stay long, and soon enough we were back on the opposite plain crossing to the hills on the far side. The girls went on ahead, and Dharm, Aaron and myself followed. It was at that point that the elite runners came filtering through the field. They were held back for 3hrs today to allow
the rest of the field to start, and then at 12noon they were released to catch us. Danny Kendall came running past comfortably, and we cheered him on. What a sight to see. The Moroccans ran over the sand like it was the simplest task. A pure joy to watch.

As the minutes turned to hours, I was itching to get moving a bit faster - the walking was aggravating my calves and achilles due to the heel strike, and I needed to be running in order to manage the pain. I agreed to run ahead to CP3 and wait for the guys there. As I ran on through the valley, though El Maharch Pass, out onto a dry lake bed, I passed walking runners who mistook me for one of the elite coming through the field, mainly because of my pace. They clapped and cheered, acknowledging respect, so I waived thanks as I passed which made me laugh to myself. Such a wonderful feeling.

By CP3 I’d caught Angela and Sian, had my water-card stamped and I sat eating a small bag of dried cranberries in the shade. I’d had to prep today’s food slightly differently. I’d opted for a small bag of something for each CP, and I’d already had 40g of dried banana and some dates. Chewing gum had kept me going in-between checkpoints, so I took a moment to sit with some fellow runners and attempt to cool down. Dharm arrived shortly, replenished his water, and strode on up the sandy hill which exited CP3. He had put his music on, so I knew he was trying to focus and grind out the next few miles. I followed suit, put on my headphones and tailed him. We left Aaron to rest in the shade, and he assured us he’d catch us up later. Dharm set quite an aggressive pace for an hour or so, then eased off as the terrain changed to a sandy off-camber gentle ascent. One step in hard sand, 2 steps in soft. It just sapped the energy from you, and continuously messed with your momentum. I tried to take my turn out front and keep the pace going, and I soon felt something fall from my pack. My flare had managed to work itself loose from the bottom of my rucksack, and I’d seemingly lost my blue race vest, which had been strapped to the underside with the flare to help shield the backs of my legs from the sun. I was so pissed off. It’s unsettling too, thinking all is well, and then realise you’re dropping things. Losing the flare would incur me a time penalty, and probably a fine, and as for my race vest, I’d become attached to it. It also made it easy for Dharm to spot me from a distance, and I was instantly annoyed at having lost it. I was then distracted by someone shouting my name, which I heard over the music in my headphones - it was Angela, and she was waving my vest at me, and ploughing through the sand like a machine. I felt like Tom Hanks being reunited with Wilson in Cast Away, which is silly considering it’s just a crappy vest.

For the next 6km I carried my flare and vest in my hands, and a soon-to-be-empty bottle of water up Mhadid Al Elahau Jebel, which was a 13% incline. Angela was setting a monstrous pace, and I did my best to keep up. I found myself tempted on more than one occasion to pass her on the narrow path, but I knew it would have sparked her furiously competitive edge, and we’d have ended up killing ourselves by pushing on too hard. Before long I’d run out of water, and there was still 3km to go to CP4. There followed probably some of the darkest moments of the week for me, as the thirst escalated proportionally to my growing despair, and my mood plummeted. I found myself asking why I was here, what the hell was I doing. Such a fool. I was missing home, I was tired, and we still had 40km to go. I had to get a handle on the situation. The climb kept going up, then trailing off, and then further up. Eventually a sharp left hand turn and a huge descent brought us out onto a plain with CP4 in sight. It was a huge relief, but I was dangerously hot and desperate for water. I was feeling weak, both physically and for the first time, mentally. We were just over the half way point. It was going to take some serious effort to do another 40km. I was just looking forward to the bloody sun going down to give us some respite. As I sat with Dharm at CP4, I
reasserted that we had to stay together from here onwards. It was going to get dark soon, and fatigue levels were increasing. Sure enough, within an hour it was pitch black.

The long tedious hike from CP4 to CP5, following the green laser in the sky, was over a crappy sandy undulating terrain. We couldn’t run on it, we had to walk, but as the day cooled my mood slowly improved. I was however getting pretty hungry. All I’d eaten that day so far, apart from my porridge breakfast, was 4 bags of 40-50g of dried fruit, yet I’d climbed 2 mountains and been out in the Saharan sun all day. I’d decided that whatever happened, I’d eat proper food at the next checkpoint. Dharm and Angela arrived at CP4 ahead of Sian and myself, and we found them in a tent amongst a bunch of makeshift beds with sleeping runners who’d obviously given up for the day. I begged for a 5 min break to heat some water on my stove, and within no time I had a sloppy over-watered beef curry re-hydrating in the bottom of a cut-down plastic water bottle, with a sprinkle of extra chilli flakes. It smelt amazing and I drank it down like it was a pint of Stella. Psychologically I felt it running through my veins. I felt like a renewed man. I filled my water bottles, ditched an entire spare 1.5L bottle, so that I didn’t have to carry it, and we set back out into the black night. Soon enough Dharm and I were jog/walking the 11km to CP6. The girls had dropped back and we could no longer differentiate them amongst the line of dotted head torch lights spanning out behind us. We knew they were staying together, so we ploughed on ahead into the dark.

Once past CP6 we knew we were close. Just 11km to go. The moon was out, but it wasn’t full, or altogether that bright. Dharm and I both had renewed motivation to crack on, and as we ticked the km off we reeled in both lone walkers and groups of silent broken runners. We hadn’t expected to be able to run during the night stage, but we were moving at a good pace, and our projected finish time - by my calculations - was shortly after 1am. Soft sand, more soft sand, undulations, stumbling, no grip, a herd of donkeys seemingly appearing from nowhere (I don’t think I imagined it), and more soft sand. It was draining us, and my GPS watch had stopped recording our distance, so we had nothing to gauge the final few km countdown with. At about 5km to go we could see lights in the distance. It was the finish line, but still deceivingly far away, especially for someone short-sighted. The twinkle and flashing of lights pulled us in, but it was so frustrating that they didn’t seem to be getting any closer. As the undulations in the terrain took us down into dips, we lost the lights, then they reappeared. It was mental torture. Dharm started complaining about chest pains. “Slow down” he swore at me, with quite a substantial list of vulgarities, through semi-clenched teeth. In the fatigued state I was in I laughed, finding the situation hilarious, and told him he’d be ok. “Just keep moving and stop being wet”. I’d later feel pretty bad for not appreciating how hard he was working, but it was the source of much amusement to the occupants of tent #141 the following morning. We jogged in across the line, staggered over to the webcam - forgetting our head torches were still on full beam - and tried a smile for anyone watching. I later heard that Nicola had waited up all night to see us finish safely, but all I’d managed to do was blind her, and anyone else watching.

Scott was already in the tent when we arrived back. He’d done incredibly well considering the state of his feet. Aaron, Ted and Dave were yet to finish. We sat and talked for a bit, recounting the horrors of the day, and I rehydrated some chilli con carne and had a protein shake. We’d finished strongly, again coming in in the final day in a row in a higher position than the previous day. We’d broken the back of the MDS beast. I was however faced with a more pressing urgency. I’d been in my Skins shorts since Saturday evening (actually, I’d worn them since Friday morning since flying out to Morocco, out of worry of losing them), and my groin area was pretty unhappy with the
situation. I was rubbed raw on the inside of my legs, and I desperately needed to get my shorts off and allow some fresh air to my skin, but I simply had nothing else to put on. I remembered I had a shemagh scarf in my pack, which I’d intended to use in the event of a sand storm, and I hastily fabricated a makeshift skirt, or sarong. Of course this went down like a treat with Scott and Dharma, and girly-boy Westcott was the subject of much taunting for the remainder of our time awake, and well into the following day. It was worth the abuse though. Not having those shorts on was a huge relief. I just had to be careful of the breeze. I didn’t have any way of fastening it closed, so the lads were often treated to some unexpected viewings. It wasn’t appreciated by them either.

Aaron arrived back at around 6am on Thursday morning, Ted around 8am and Dave nearer lunch time. We had all survived. We thought about those still out there, yet to come in. Angela and Sian appeared, limping, swollen feet, and tired. They’d got back about 2hrs after us during the night, and the day had left them with broken spirits. Angela admitted she’d sobbed for an hour after getting back, which is unthinkable giving how determined and strong she’d been all week, and Sian’s knee was giving her serious trouble. Still, the day had brought fresh realisation that we only had the final marathon stage to go. One more timed stage in order to finish. Scott spent a large amount of time that day in the medical tent for his feet. He was only capable of slow gentle walking. He was clearly in a lot of pain, but not once did he moan or complain. Always smiling.

The rest of the day passed surprisingly quickly, and once the final competitors were within sight of the finish line, the entire camp gathered around to welcome them home. I’m feeling emotional now just typing this out, and remembering the crowd cheering, and the spirit, and the appreciation we all had for those last few limping individuals who had been out battling since 9am the previous day. It was very moving. We applauded each of the stragglers across the line, with huge shouts of respect. There is no way you could defy feeling touched having witnessed such a spectacle. As I limped back across the stony ground, barefoot, with the wind blowing my dress, the desperation I’d felt the previous night was replaced with a general appreciation, a happiness and an awareness that I had already achieved something incredible. I felt grateful and lucky to be here. I no longer worried about the run the following day, I knew I had it in the bag. It was just a marathon to go… sounds ridiculous maybe, but I was feeling confident and stronger than ever.

Pos 387, 16h 36m 46s, Avg pace 12:30 min/km
Avg HR 118bpm, Max 166bpm (50-60%:22%, 60-70%:43%, 70-80%:23%, 80-90%:7%, 90%+:0%)
Energy used: 7,774 kcal, food for the two days: 3,682 + 2,830 kcal
Ascent: 680m, Descent: 653m

Just one more marathon - Race Day #6, Friday 11/04/14, 42.2km

Sadly, that confidence and strength from the previous day hadn’t lasted quite long enough. I’d awoken stiff, and dehydrated. I felt sick and once again I could barely walk. Having sat around doing nothing during the previous day, we’d all been guilty of not drinking enough, or taking enough salt tablets on. The truth was that we were still sitting in the middle of the Sahara desert, and we were sweating all the time. Because the air is so dry, you don’t even realise it’s happening. Rapid food exchanges and throwing kit out led us towards 9am for the final timed stage. I’ll forever remember echoes of “anyone want a Clif bar?” or “I got a porridge going if you need it”. NO, WE’RE ALL SICK OF PORRIDGE AND CLIF BARS! Everyone was craving real food.
We laughed and joked our way over to the start line, but it was obvious we were all exhausted. No one was moving quickly. The buzz at the start line was again highly motivating, as it had been every morning, but what happened next totally surprised me. As the stage was started, and the runners moved off, the support crews and staff had lined the sides of the course and were applauding us, shouting their thanks and congratulating us. I hadn’t expected it, and once again - typing this up - I’m not ashamed to say I’m feeling a little emotional remembering it. At time it knocked me sideways, and I think I struggled not the cry. I had expected to feel tearful at the finish of the final timed stage, but not at the start.

For a few minutes it helped me forget how crap I was feeling, but soon enough the crowds were lost in the dust behind us, and Dharm and I limped, walked and jogged our way towards CP1. It was a real struggle. Dharm was dry-wretching at periodic intervals, and I was struggling to get into a rhythm and settle down. I was overheating and thirsty. This last stage felt like it was going to be torture.

At CP1, greeted as usual by the friendly volunteers, checking our health, we topped up our water and cracked on immediately. Slowly but surely I was starting to adjust and settle down, but Dharm was still battling his dehydration. He knew he could push through the day, but he also saw that I was perking up a little and he wanted me to go on ahead. We argued for a minute about splitting up, which I didn’t initially want to do, but reassured by his reasoning I knew he’d not have a problem finishing the day. I’ve witnessed his ability to endure misery on a number of occasions, and this was no different. I shouted goodbye and stamped on the gas. I wanted to make the most of feeling good, as it might not last - nothing to hold back for, no reason to save anything. There was no race tomorrow, so I could give it 100%. One by one I reeled in the runners who’d passed me on our way to CP1, and before I knew it I was at CP2, feeling alive. For the second time that week, the elite runners had been held back a short time to start after the main group, and soon enough the leaders came running through at a hell of a pace. It was magnificent to watch. I kept on hard and on a few occasions, again for the second time that week, I was mistaken for an elite runner, being cheered and clapped as I passed people. I couldn’t understand where my pace had come from.

I hit Asderm Jebel pass like a mountain goat, hopping from rock to rock, climbing up the track like it was freshly laid tarmac. While others were cautiously negotiating the stones, I was flying across the top of them. My mood had lifted, I had my hydration under control, and my legs weren’t giving me too much trouble. I wasn’t sure how long I could keep going for, but I thought it would be fantastic to catch Scott or Aaron. At CP3, lo and behold, the lone figure of Scott came into view. I actually sang out to him some verse about how I was going to whip him today, we laughed and exchanged a few shouts, and I moved onwards. He later remarked how amazed he was at the speed at which I passed him. He’d shouted that Aaron was further on ahead, and estimated 20mins. It's impossible to know how close to reality that was, but I was determined to pull the stops out to catch him. I wanted to
steal the day’s victory from him. Following an eternity of soft-sanded riverbed, and a winding climb up through a canyon, I found myself still running on the ascent. Slightly alarmed I was possibly pushing a fraction too hard, I checked my HRM. I was in zone 5 (90%+), and needed to be careful, especially after peaking so high on day #3. I backed off a little. At the top, I hastened back into a jog over the rocks, and once on the flat I resumed my pace. The rocks were quite unpleasant, and again I passed seemingly-stationary people negotiating them with great care.

An English volunteer next to a Jeep shouted to me that there was only 5km to go, and wanted to know if I was ok. I nodded, and tried to focus on the distant runners that I could see. Where the hell was Aaron? It was well known that the last 3km of the stage consisted of dunes, and I was desperate to see him before entering the soft sand. And then I spotted him - he’d just reached the edge of the dunes. His familiar frame, red compression calf-sleeves and blue rucksack made it easy for me to spot him. He was walking up a section of dune. I was running out of time. I ignored the race line the other runners were taking over the precarious terrain, and I followed the direct line of sight with the course markers, meaning I’d have less distance to cover, but probably tougher terrain. It was a gamble. I ran hard, I was out of water, and my HR was climbing steadily. Each time Aaron climbed an ascent he walked, so I kept going - gradually closing the distance. At 50m to go I was on my limit, I could barely keep moving, and it was then I heard someone chasing him down. He didn’t realise who it was at that point, but he wasn’t prepared to lose a place to anyone so close to the finish. He picked up his pace and crossed the line literally seconds ahead of me. I hadn’t caught him, but it had been an epic run, and I was over the moon to finish so close to him. His surprise at realising it was me was clearly evident, and we laughed about how I was clearly still the loser. What a cracking last run it had been. We both walked forward to collect our medals from Patrick, and we crashed on the sand a few meters past the line. He took the photo, two fingers for second place - he wanted me to always be reminded of it. It was done, we’d finished, and I was ecstatic. Not in the least bit emotional.

Pos 251, 5h 32m 40s, Avg pace 8:06 min/km
Avg HR 133bpm, Max 179bpm (50-60%:6%, 60-70%:18%, 70-80%:29%, 80-90%:36%, 90%+:4%)
Energy used: 3,666 kcal, food for the day: 2,889 kcal
Ascent: N/A, Descent: N/A

Charity Day, Saturday 12/04/14

The 7km walk to the town Ait Ichchou was something that none of us really wanted to do. The mood in camp had changed immediately following the completion of stage #5, and everyone had ditched their race-mode and were now simply craving home, family and food. We ate powdered breakfast for the last time, packed our kit, applauded the support teams who - for the last time - drove out past our tents and beeped their horns in salute to all of us, and we headed out to the start line for the final time. It was a very relaxed atmosphere. Lots of photos, the elite runners posing with us all, it was a scene to remember. The day also marked Scott’s 31st birthday, and we all looked forward to celebrating with him later that evening once we’d arrived at the hotel.

Once we’d reached the town, crossed the line and handed our flares and transponders in to the support crew, we boarded the waiting coaches and prepared for the 4hr drive to Ouzazate. Aaron had spotted Rebecca and Clair in the crowd, and they’d told him that on being deported from camp on the previous Monday morning, they’d hired a guide, purchased their own water in bulk, and
embarked on their own unofficial MDS, in order to cover the same mileage as us. They had sponsors back home, and reasons for needing to complete the distance, and simply wouldn’t accept the fact that they’d been excluded following the incident on stage #1. Using the original map book, and a guide with local knowledge, they’d run the same course, only 2km off to avoid intersecting the main group. Their guide had pitched their tent each night, monitored and watched them, ensured their safety, and provided their water in the same rationed quantities as we had been given. The only key difference was that they had no helicopter support, or medical cover. What we were hearing was simply amazing. It had never been done in the history of the event, and the official MDS crew were not happy about it. It was great to be reunited with them, and once back at the hotel we enjoyed a well earned meal and cold beer together.

Reflection and gratitude

The two things most likely to have taken me out of the race, at any point, were blisters and dysentery / stomach upsets. I was fortunate to not have had either. Quite how I escaped, I'll never know, but I'm eternally grateful. Getting blisters in those conditions can be horrendous, and once you have them, there's no way to get rid of them. Similarly, diarrhoea would have finished anyone attempting to stay hydrated, and having been both the victim and witnessed it's effects in the past during events, I knew that I had to do everything I could to avoid it. I'm thankful that I didn't encounter either.

Something else that struck me, on a few occasions out there, are that athletes - amateur and pro, come in all shapes and sizes. I spent a great deal of the week with calf and quad envy. Even our very own Ted, a non-runner by his own admission, had a set of calfs that I'd kill for. My little chicken legs look pathetic next to the likes of him, but I realised towards the end of the week that it actually didn't matter. Apparently size doesn't matter! Who would have thought? My little chicken legs were capable of everything that the others were capable of. As runners from all various and random backgrounds, different builds, different strengths, collected their finishers medals it was clear to me that you don't have to be built like James Cracknell or the Moroccan Mohamad Ahansal in order to run MDS, or to run any event for that matter. It's about attitude, drive and commitment. I'm thankful for everything I have, and it was an honour to be able compete alongside all of my fellow competitors.

The last thing I will say is that you should never give up. The human body is truly amazing. Look after it and you will find that it is capable of far more than you think.

Tarne, #853.

Some stats and facts

• 30 % repeat competitors
• 70 % international
• 30 % French
• 14 % women
• 45 % veterans
• 30 % in teams of three or more
• 10 % walkers
• 90 % alternate walking and running
• 14 km/hr: average maximum speed
• 3 km/hr: average minimum speed
• Age of youngest competitor: 16
• Age of oldest competitor: 79

• 130 volunteers on the course itself
• 450 support staff overall
• 120 000 liters of mineral water
• 300 berber and saharan tents
• 120 all-terrain vehicles
• 2 “Ecureuil” helicopter and 1 “Cessna” plane
• 8 “MDS special” commercial planes
• 25 buses
• 4 camels
• 1 incinerator lorry for burning waste
• 4 quads to ensure environment and safety on race
• 52 medical staff
• 6.5 kms of Elastoplast, 2 700 Compeed, 19 000 compresses
• 6 000 painkillers, 150 liters of disinfectant
• 1 editing bus, 5 cameras, 1 satellite image station
• 10 satellite telephones, 30 computers, fax and internet