

A little bit of blood, a whole lot of sweat and a few tears...

The Marathon de Sables is widely recognised as the world's toughest footrace. Its translation literally means 'Marathon of the Sands' and it's both a name and reputation that is well deserved. For seven days competitors from all over the world will attempt to run over 151 miles (nearly 250kms) across some of the hardest, difficult and inhospitable terrain on the planet. – The Sahara Dessert. Running the equivalent of a marathon a day, the rules state that all competitors must complete the race 'self-sufficient' meaning that all food and equipment needed for the entire duration of the race must be carried while running. Add to that temperatures in excess of 120 degrees, violent dust-storms, freezing nights and large scorpions and you may ask who in their right mind would even think of competing in such an event? It was a question I had asked myself many times. This is what happened....

It started in September 2002 when a good friend and someone I respect immensely, Tim Ivison, mentioned that he had decided to enter the MdS. I had known Tim for a long time and had even ran the London Marathon with him that year when at short notice he had stepped in to be my 'zoo-keeper' helping and encouraging me the entire way as I struggled the distance wearing a 40lb seven foot rubber rhino-suit for charity. Having both flown in from Australia a just a few hours before the start I thought this was the ultimate endurance test. However, listening to Tim talk about the MdS made London sound like a picnic and before long I found myself agreeing that this should be our next challenge. It certainly fit my organising principle on setting goals, which states that if I have any idea HOW I am going to achieve the goals I set, when I set them - then they're too small! You see even though the event was 8 months away, there is something powerful in making a decision to do something of that magnitude, especially without having any references of doing things even remotely that difficult. I started getting excited about the idea, then scared, then excited again and then imagining what and how I would feel crossing the finish line. The thought gave me tingles. This was now definitely something I had to do.

How do you train for something like the MdS? Great question and I guess everyone is different, however my training guide and mentor turned out to be a friend who had run the event 3 years previous and whose recent talk on it had inspired Tim to make the leap himself. The man's name is David Becker and I could not have picked a better role model. David is inspirational in every sense of the word and I would like to say upfront that I owe a lot of my success to his words of support, wisdom and encouragement. Although by January I think even David was a little worried by the sparseness of my training and due to my consistently travelling lifestyle, I found it hard to keep commitments to a regular running schedule. Having said that, deadlines are powerful things and I think I did more training in the three weeks prior to the event than in the whole two months before as the realisation of what I was about to do finally came knocking louder on the door. I certainly got some funny looks from my local gym members as night after night I ran on a treadmill wearing ankle weights, a big woolly fleece and a rucksack filled with yellow pages and gym weights.

Finally April 3rd arrived and I said goodbye to my friends and family and boarded a plane to Ouazazate along with the rest of the British contingent (which would eventually make up nearly a third of the 650 entrants.) And off we flew to Morocco.

The first night we were to spend in a hotel, our last bit of luxury before being transported to the middle of nowhere for 10 days. The hotel was excellent and that night we made new friends, ate well and nervously laughed and joked about the adventure that lay ahead. Going back for an early night I checked and repacked my kit and as I crossed the room accidentally kicked the

coffee table instantly putting a large gash between two of my toes that took ten minutes to stop bleeding. Hmm, schoolboy error, I thought. Here I am with a foot injury and I haven't even touched the sand yet! You have to laugh.

Next morning we boarded a coach and started the 6-hour journey to the start point. 5 hours later the terrain got so bad that for the last hour we had to be transported in the back of trucks as the coaches reached their limit on where they could go.

On arrival at the first base camp our instructions were to get together in a group of eight, find a tent and make ourselves 'at home'. The guys I ended up with were great and the final role call in 'tent 68' was as follows: Steve Chadwick, a squadron leader from the RAF who was doing this for the second time. Simon Pressed, a trader from London who had come 2nd in the Thames Meander and who always had a smile and something funny to say, no matter how big his blisters were. Alastair, a solicitor from London who spoke fluent French, Nick Jarvis from Bedford whom I'd met a few weeks before through a mutual friend and at 39 was in great physical shape having trained seriously for the MdS for over a year. Gary Jackets a triathlete from London, Edward a 49 year old veteran from Cornwall who got stuck in and never complained once throughout the whole race, and of course Timbo and myself.

There is a saying that nothing bonds like common adversity and over the next 10 days we became the best of friends, although I have to say that as an 'all guy' tent in the middle of the desert, it did not take long for the social protocol to take a back seat and before you knew it we were proudly talking and making noises like you wouldn't do at home.

The whole of the following day was dedicated to compulsory kit and medical checks. All contestants had to present a whole array of mandatory equipment as well as a minimum 2000 calories a day, doctor's certificate and ECG. After you have been checked you are then issued with a distress flare and some salt tablets and your kit is weighed. Mine came in at fourteen and a half kilos (32lbs). That night we ate our last 'provided' meal and bedded down for a good night sleep in our tent that consisted of a piece of sack cloth with no sides, propped up with sticks that we affectionately named the 'Moroccan Hilton'.

The next morning we awoke at 5.30am as the sun started rising and within 10 minutes the Berbers had flattened our 5-star residence and were busy loading it onto the trucks along with the eighty or so other tents, ready to assemble them so they'd be ready for us when we arrived at our finish point sometime that afternoon. The first stage was a short 25km designed to warm us up, settle us in and test our kit and feet for sore spots and loose straps. We assembled on the starting point and listened to Patrick Bower, the race founder, talk for 10 minutes about the troubles around the world and how the race was an example of how so many nationalities could work and focus together towards a common goal. He then started counting down from ten to zero in French.

Although I had mentally prepared myself and visualised this moment many times, the feeling of excitement and anticipation in those few seconds before the race were amazing. To me this was always going to be as much if not more of a mental challenge than a physical one. Like a fire-walk, once the first step is taken you have no choice but to keep going, the real test is in showing up to begin with. The fact that ten times as many competitors quit before stepping on a plane than actually dropped out during the race was testimony to that. Mentally I was as strong and ready as I would ever be; there was no doubt about that. Now the only thing that mattered was making sure my body kept up with my mind.

As expected day one ambled out quite nicely and there were no real problems. I kept pace with Tim for most of the way and then decided to put my headphones on for the last few miles as a 'reward'. As the carefully selected list of motivational songs started playing, my feet moved faster and I glided in the last twenty minutes with a smile. Back at the Hilton most of the other guys had already arrived and I mixed a rehydration drink for Tim who came in just a few moments later. Time to cook some food, sort out my kit for morning and settle in for some much needed recovery time. That night, just as I was about to climb into my sleeping bag I went to move my roll mat and my head torch caught a rather large scorpion square on that I had inadvertently been lying on for the last two hours. I'm not sure which one of us was more startled. From that point on we all checked our shoes and hats very carefully in the morning before putting them on.

Next day was the infamous 'Dune Day'. We had pitched camp a couple of miles from the Dunes and we looked up in awe as they rose into the distance like the scene from an Arabian postcard. A spectacular but formidable sight as the realisation that we were about to run 34km across what turned out to be the largest Dunes in North Africa came upon us. From a distance it was hard to judge their size but as we got closer it soon became apparent that some of these things were hundreds of feet high. My decision not to take gators was soon to prove a poor choice as every 20 minutes I emptied piles of sand from my trainers and felt more grit get into the little blisters that had started forming as a result. Luckily my feet held out well and I was passing many hobbling people who looked like they would rather be elsewhere.

By now the main challenge had identified itself in my shoulders as the 30+lb I was carrying started taking its toll. Due to following a recommendation on one of the websites (another schoolboy error – oops) I had opted to wear a 'Mole-track' rucksack and regretted my choice from the first mile. Not only did its woefully inadequate 25ltr capacity mean that I had more stuff strapped to the outside of it than I carried on the inside, but there was absolutely no weight distribution on the hips. This meant that everything was carried by your shoulders and by halfway across the dunes the straps were starting to feel like cheese wire. However I kept my spirits high and admired the breathtaking scenery as I galloped along from checkpoint to checkpoint and couldn't resist a cheery little chorus of 'Always Look On The Bright Side Of Life' as I scaled one of the larger dunes, much to the amusement (and bemusement) of many of my fellow runners.

The end of Dune day was met with a great feeling of accomplishment as I bounced happily into camp to meet the rest of the chaps. By now the finishing order was becoming apparent. I would arrive to find Steve, Nick and Simon halfway through dinner having sped the distance at what for me was always an impressive display of stamina. Alistair and Gary would usually follow shortly after I arrived with Edward in hot pursuit, however by the end of Day 2 Timbo was starting to develop some problems with his feet and having arrived with his never failing smile and 'no worries' trademark, would bravely limp off to pay a visit to 'Doc Trotters'.

One of the highlights of every day was when the 'postman' would come to the tent to deliver email messages that friends and relatives could send via the official website. (www.darbaroud.com) They were literally little pieces of 'tent gold' and I would like to thank everyone who sent words of inspiration and messages of support. It was a great boost and each night before I went to sleep I would read every single one again and again, soaking up the encouragement and helping to set my mind right for the following day.

At 5.30am next morning we started our usual routine which by now began with dragging our kit outside of the tent so the Berbers could take it down, cooking breakfast, collecting our water ration, preparing our feet and packing our kit. In total it was a 2-3 hour routine the most important part of which I would spend on my feet. First I would carefully scrape off the ingrained sand with a knife, dress the sore spots and individually wrap each toe, heel and arch in protective tape. I would then apply Vaseline to the bandages to reduce the friction, put on my socks and apply more Vaseline over the socks. It was a tip that David Becker had passed on and the hour or so I invested each morning in this ritual was to eventually see my feet in better shape by the end of the course than many other competitors.

Day 3 was just as tough, a 38km stretch across open dessert but I was in good form and was surprised to finish near the top half of the pack and feeling strong, despite a bad headwind for at least 20 miles and was in good spirits for the fearsome day 4: A non-stop double marathon over some of the worst terrain yet. However, trouble was to strike at about 4am when I awoke feeling the after effects of what was probably a badly re-hydrated chicken korma. This turned out to be a bad mistake. When we got kicked out of our tents as usual at 5.30am I was in pretty poor shape and feeling as weak as a kitten. I couldn't stomach any breakfast and could barely lift my rucksack - not the best start for a 52 mile run. Oh well, I thought, if ever I needed an opportunity to practise good state management, I guess I'm not going to get a better one than this.

As suspected, there was no way I could run and the first 13 miles took over 4 hours and the head wind was the harshest yet blowing sand like a shot-blaster at gusts of up to 40 miles per hour right into your face. By checkpoint three I was on painkillers for the shoulders but my strength had started to return & I met up with a couple of Americans and for the next 25 miles made good time averaging 4-5 miles an hour over small dunes, soft sand, sharp stones & steep hills. The temperature was 44 degrees (112F). I had aimed to make checkpoint 5 (out of 7) by nightfall but because of my poor start I was about 10 miles short and now hadn't eaten any solid food for over 24hrs. Plus my trust of powdered food had taken a sharp downturn. It was at this point as the sun disappeared and the darkness crept in (together with freezing temperatures) that the last of my willpower started to ebb away. The realisation that I had at least another 20 miles to run didn't do anything to bring it back. After running over 100 miles in the most extreme conditions imaginable, it started feeling it was time to quit. Every ounce of motivation had been squeezed out, every mental trick I could play had been played and the last dregs of stamina were all that was holding me upright. It was truly one of the lowest times of my entire life. I immediately started justifying my position with ego soothing self talk like 'I should be proud of getting this far, I've nothing else to prove. Just fire the flair and in a couple of hours I'll be in a warm bed, well done' etc. etc.

Then, unexpectedly, something amazing happened. Just at the point where I was about to throw in the towel, I looked up through the last of the sunlight to see a blind Korean man in his late 60's run past me - tied by the wrist to his guide. Talk about inspiration. I stared in awe at this frail old man trudging his way across the dessert without even seeing where to place his feet! In that moment I realised something that will stay with me forever. That no matter how hard you think you have tried or how far you think you have come, or whatever low you think you are at, there is ALWAYS another level. I felt a surge run through me. What kind of passion and motivation did this man have and where did it come from? I had to know that answer, but in order to find out I had to catch up!

Through his guide and interpreter I learned that this man's brother had died of cancer several years before and that every year since then he had ran this race to raise money for the hospice that looked after him. That was all I needed to know. This man's unwavering commitment to do good for others regardless of the cost or personal hardship he endured touched my heart in a way that immediately made my legs feel lighter.

I ran for the next several hours although I now desperately needed fuel. After a brief stop collecting some firewood and thoroughly cooking a pasta portion I was back on the road and pulled into checkpoint 5 at just after midnight and checkpoint 6 at around 2.30am. Quick stop to tip another dune of sand out of my shoes, down 2 more painkillers and I set off for the long haul home, the image of the Korean man still firmly in my mind.

Navigating through a moonless sky across the Sahara with nothing but a head torch, compass and the occasional glow-stick is certainly a wondrous experience and as the sun started to come up at around 5.40am I saw the finish line in the distance and felt strong enough for a fast run, crossing the last mile in under 7 minutes with a smile of relief so big it made my jaw ache! The benefit of finishing that leg in under a day meant that I could use the entire next day to recover before to preparing for the following day's penultimate leg: another full 26 mile marathon. However, by 6pm that evening Tim still hadn't arrived and by now both myself and the rest of the tent were getting worried. There was only two hours to go before the cut off time and if you were outside of that you were disqualified. We all waited nervously and 30 minutes later a familiar figure appeared on the horizon and crossed the line with over an hour to spare. By now Tim had been on the road for over 33 hours and even though he could only manage a brave hobble, he still had that big smile. We were all relieved.

Having a sense of being over the worst, we set off on day five's marathon with high spirits, however the wind had now dropped and today was getting hot. Very hot. By checkpoint 2 the recorded temperature was 48.8 Celsius in the shade (120F) and very uncomfortable. One of the downsides to that temperature is that every sip of water from your bottle is like putting your mouth under the hot tap. It does nothing to cool you down but is vital to replace lost fluids. After 23 miles I was seriously flagging when the unthinkable happened. I went to take a sip of water only to find out that the container in my backpack was empty. I had misjudged my pace and ran out. Due to the intense heat and relentless effort I was nearing total exhaustion and with three miles left I now had to make a choice. Do I pick up the pace and try to make it to camp in half an hour hoping my body can stand that, or do I cut back but risk being out longer in the heat with no water? I opted for a slightly faster pace and reached the camp 35minutes later, elated but in a physical mess. One piece of great news was that a close friend, Lynn May had travelled to the dessert to see us finish and by now had arrived at the camp with Tim's Girlfriend, Alison Drummond. They were a welcome sight and demonstrated once again that no matter how empty your tank may be, there is always something that can pick you up in a heartbeat.

That night I hadn't the energy to even cook so I ate cold food and I waited by the finish line for Tim who, having played his strategy well, came in just inside the cut off to rapturous applause and a huge and much needed hug from Alison.

The final day was designed as the shortest, and almost victory leg of 'just' 22km. However having just run the best part of 140 miles this final stretch was still longer than a half marathon and was still a 'stretch' as the temperature on the thermometer hit its highest point yet at well over the 50 degrees C mark (nearly 130F). All around me people were drawing on their last reserves and I felt sorry for those whose feet were in so much of a state that their pace had been

reduced to an agonising limp. Those last miles must have seemed like an eternity to them as you could literally hear the blood squelching around in some of the shoes and the pain on their faces said it all. I passed on encouragement wherever I could and just kept going. The last 3 miles wound through the town of Tazzarine and the streets were lined with locals who came out to greet us. Lynn and Ali were also riding along the course in land rovers shouting support and welcome words to everyone in ear-shot. They were great.

Around the final bend the finish line came into view and with all the energy, adrenaline and mental stamina I could muster I picked up the pace and sprinted the last 500 yards crossing the line in a mixture of emotional and physical exhaustion and elation that words simply cannot describe. As Patrick Bauer shook my hand and placed my finishers medal over my head the realisation of what we had just done started to kick in and I joined the rest of the crowd for celebratory hugs and cheers as a few happy tears were shed.

My final overall finishing position was 445 out of 650 with Tim crossing the finish line on the last day a dozen or so places from the back, still with a smile and clutching his medal with pride. He spent three hours in foot surgery the following day. On the last night Edward made a comment that I wholeheartedly agree with. He said that the essence of the MdS is not where you finish but how you cope with what's thrown at you. To me Tim showed more courage, determination and mental toughness than the top ten finishers put together and was always a real sense of inspiration for the rest of us. His pride in what he achieved is extremely justified. Contrast that with people who, having just completed the toughest footrace on earth, were finding excuses to beat themselves up mentally for not getting a 'personal best' or for coming outside the top 200 and you can start to understand why the MdS is not just about how 'physically' fit you are. If it were then I for one would probably not have made it.

So what is it about? Well I can only answer for myself and say that for me it was a true sense of taking oneself to the limits of what you think is possible only to find out that no matter how much you think you can give, no matter how much you think you can take, no matter what you thought was possible before - there is ALWAYS another level and it's only our thinking that stops us. I owe that one to a blind Korean man who I will probably never meet again. Another great teacher and mentor once told me that the essence of being alive is to keep reaching beyond our comfortable grass and to continually keep pushing back the boundaries. I now understand what he meant. Eight months ago this race seemed unconquerable - an impossible dream. Now I know I could do it again if I had to.

Will I? Never in a million years. At least until next time ;-) for the other thing I found is that the human spirit is only truly alive when playing outside of its comfort zone and it doesn't take long before the mind starts to recalibrate and wonder what else is possible. Don't get me wrong - it doesn't have to be a physical challenge. It could be starting a business you've always dreamed of but never dared try, or mending a part of a relationship you hadn't the courage to face. But beware as the mind can be a great distraction and there will always be something we would rather be doing than face the fear that comes with following our passion. The trick is to take the first step as no matter how ready you think you have to be, you'll never get there by standing still - however make the decision and there's not an excuse in the world that can stop you. Looking back we didn't have any fancy resources. The most important thing we came with was courage. We left with medals. Go live your dream.

Peter Sage April 2003