

Thanks to John Bell
for sending this piece...

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Marathon des Sables

IT'S Easter Sunday, April 8, and I'm standing with 855 competitors at the start line in Ammouguer, Morocco, waiting for the start of the 27th running of the Marathon des Sables - the marathon of the sands.

It has been described as the toughest footrace on the planet. A seven-day 250km race across the Sahara Desert where competitors carry all of their own food, clothing, medicines, sleeping bags and mats and safety gear.

The course is frequently hit with blinding sandstorms. In 1994 an Italian competitor became so disoriented he was lost for nine days, eventually found but 13kg lighter. In other years, flooding rains have washed stages out.

I'm trying not to think about any of that at the moment as I chat to Iain from Northern Ireland - a software engineer living in Saudi Arabia who works on weapon systems. Our conversation ceases when the sounds of AC/DC's Highway to Hell start blaring out from the loudspeakers and the gun goes off.

It's been a long trip to get here. It started in 2010 when I ran the 250km Racing the Planet event across the Kimberleys. It had been a late finish to the wet season that year which meant that we were in and out of water throughout the race.

My feet were constantly wet. Blisters became infected and I soon lost a large amount of skin from under my feet. It was a painful finish and it ended with three days in Broome hospital, a loss of 8kg and being wheeled off the plane on my return home in a wheelchair.

Never, ever, again.

These multi-day races were clearly beyond me. But time heals and the idea of seeking redemption through Marathon des Sables (MdS) started to appeal.

I'm 53 and counter my life as an investment banker at UBS with long-distance running. Over the past 15 years I have done five marathons (New York is next), three Oxfam 100km events and several other ultra-distance races including the gruelling Kimberleys event.

I knew that I had to be smarter this time. I had to take better care of my feet and nutrition.

My training program had to be tailored for the event. Rebecca Cooke from the Sydney Sports Medicine practice researched optimal nutrition and Ian Torrence from the McMillan Running Group in Denver designed my on-line training program.

As the gun goes off there is a lump in my throat as I dwell on my own expectations, those of family and friends and those that had donated some \$45,000 to the Fostering Friends project that I was supporting.

I'm also desperately thirsty as I curse taking that caffeine tablet 10 minutes before the start.

There are kids everywhere lining the course high fiving us, a helicopter and a drone overhead taking photographs and it feels like 300 runners have already passed me. I try to settle into a pace that works for me - about 7-minute kilometres - and to avoid the soft sand wherever possible.

I find that pace except that an Italian guy in front starts covering my every move. I would move to the middle of the track and he would follow. Go figure. He's trying to cover me 8km into a 250km race.

I dart to the right. He catches me late but moves across nevertheless and I clip his heels. He gives me a spray in Italian. I apologise and move on.

Stage one finishes with a long climb up soft sand. I hear a flare go off. Someone is in distress but I can't see where.

I battle with a Ukrainian runner. We crest the hill and see the finish line in the distance. It's on the horizon. How far could that be? It went forever.

Stage 1 - 33.8km - in 4:06:

I'm super dehydrated as I've mismanaged my fluids. I'm 83rd out of 855 starters but distressed knowing that if I don't drink enough it won't end well for me.

I take my cup of sweet Berber tea, my 4.5l of water that will have to last me until the morning and search for my Berber tent among the 110 set out in a semi-circle. I eat my protein bars, drink my protein drink and contemplate the delight of cold rehydrated Mediterranean vegetable pasta.

Stage two was a cracker. I gave myself a stern lecture about focusing on drinking as much as possible. We had 38.5km to run across three sections of sand dunes. The temperature hit 53C and there was a lot of flat track running. I had moved up the leader board into 56th, was super hungry but I had a few blisters that needed attention.

MdS provides one doctor per every 17.3 competitors and the care is outstanding. I was repaired and soon on my way.

And that's pretty much how my race panned out. After 250km I finished in 61st spot and was seventh in my age group. I walked and chatted the last 8km on the 81.5km-long day with a Russian guy who holds the uphill and downhill records at Comrades in South Africa.

I climbed the highest sand dunes in Morocco and ran down them like a school kid. I had times when I couldn't see a single competitor in front or behind me and I found it exhilarating.

I tracked footprints through sand dunes when I couldn't see other runners. I ran through a dust storm by following the only person I could see in front of me and I saw camels grazing and kids appearing from nowhere in the desert to watch us race.

I never did manage my hydration as well as I should. After the 81.5km fourth stage my urine was the colour of a Hunter Shiraz. After hydrating it went back to normal but soon darkened after all of my remaining runs.

I drank 76l of water in seven days and ate more rehydrated food than any person ever should. My feet took the biggest battering and I lost four toenails.

I learnt that the best path through sand dunes was to follow camel dung and French runners, as neither like soft sand.

I fell off the emotional bandwagon only once when my sand gaiters perished and my shoes filled with sand. The finish in Merzouga - at the base of the largest sand dunes in Morocco - was wonderful. Crowds cheering, I held back tears, received my medal and told myself that I will never do this race again.

The heat and the demands of the race were just too much physically. Done, dusted, tick - never again, I said.

I'm now seriously thinking of lining up again in 2013.

Peter Kingston ran the Marathon des Sables to raise money for The Benevolent Society's Fostering Friends program which links children in foster care with volunteer mentors. For more information about Fostering Young Lives program, visit www.fosterachild.org.au

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