

Marathon des Sables 6th – 17th April 2006

Thurs 6th April

After 18 months of training, several marathons and ultra marathons the day had finally arrived for me. Dad dropped me off at Gatwick airport early and I walked in nervously to be greeted by the sight of many other competitors dressed as idiotically as me, wearing gaiters in strange colours, sporting huge backpacks and trying to look as inconspicuous as possible. After the initial greetings I met the two guys I had trained and maintained contact with during the run up, Steve from Dorchester and Michael from Lancashire with whom I had completed the Thames Meander.

After checking in we were given the news that the flight had been delayed by an hour. We went through the hand luggage check and I had to unpack all of my backpack due to my metal spoon looking like a sharp object. I was only allowed to continue after it had been inspected by a supervisor. Luckily my knife was in the suitcase.

After an uneventful flight to Morocco over the Atlas Mountains and a very bumpy landing we were taken to the Berbere Palace Hotel where we would spend one night before going into the desert. The weather was warm but not too hot. We had a free evening and Steve and I walked up to the hotel where the Americans and Australians were staying. There we saw hundreds of Moroccans crowding the street and singing and chanting, apparently they were hotel workers on strike and having a demonstration outside the hotel. We chatted with some Australians who were staying there who were going off for a training run, very keen. On our way back we met some more Brits who told us that the Aussies had actually stopped running just round the corner and had actually walked around the town, not quite so keen. Later in the evening we were well fed with a huge buffet for dinner, possibly our last big meal for a while.

Fri 7th April

We were given another buffet meal for breakfast and were then herded into air-conditioned coaches for the journey into the desert. The journey by coach took about 5 hours including stops. The highlight of the journey was not 200 Brits having a pee stop by the side of the road but a large scorpion (the size of my hand) which was found at one of the stops. It was very aggressive and obviously protecting its territory. Most of us agreed that we would not like anything like that sharing our sleeping quarters. Also during the coach journey we were given the “road book” which had the itinerary for the trip and also the route. We all read it from cover to cover making various comments but to be honest it didn't really mean much to see it on paper at the time, the only meaningful reference was the distances but these were to mean nothing as I was to find out.

The coaches reached the end of the road and we then had to gather our baggage again to transfer onto army trucks for the remainder of our journey. So far we had only seen mountains, rocks and bare landscape, no sign of any dunes. The one thing we did notice when we got out of the coaches was the intense heat which took my breath away at first. The drive by truck was only about 10km but we had to stand up and it was very bumpy as our driver was intent on being the first to the camp. (He was by a mile!) We were then greeted by the organiser's representatives, issued with a couple of bottles of water and told to find a tent. The tents were the Berber style, basically two sticks supporting large pieces of canvas or coffee sacks sewn together which are secured to the ground on two sides. There were 100 in total in two large circles one inside the other. We took one on the inner circle and just a little way from the entrance, tent number 85. There were 8 in each shelter, ours consisted of myself, Steve, Russell (an Englishman living in New Zealand), Rob and Dave (both English), another Steve (Welshman living in London), Harley (New Zealander living in the UK) and our one lady Mel (New Zealander). We made our shelter as comfortable as possible and tied down the back against the breeze before having an evening meal courtesy of the organisers. The sun went down about 6.30pm and we were all in our sleeping bags by about 8.30pm. This first night was to be a trial for us before handing back any unnecessary equipment we may not need. As it turns out my fears about a freezing night were unfounded as it was actually very warm and humid at night which surprised us all but meant that I was able to discard extra clothes.

Sat 8th April

We awoke at about 5.30am following a restless, warm night and were fed by the organisers again. Today was all about making decisions as to what to carry with me for the week and what to leave behind. I was told to present myself at lunchtime for my inspection and to hand back my suitcase and any excess equipment. We spent the morning checking our food was correct, that we had all the compulsory equipment and packing and repacking our backpacks until we were happy. I then had to hand over my suitcase which was to be held until my return to the hotel. We then went through several inspections where the organisers checked our packs, how much food we were carrying and our medical forms and ECG's. Once complete we were issued with an emergency distress flare and some salt tablets and our running numbers, mine was 565. Whilst this was happening we could hear and feel the wind outside getting stronger and stronger and picking up more sand as time passed.

By the time we had got back to our shelter there was a proper sandstorm brewing. We spent the rest of the afternoon in the tent sheltering, only coming out during brief spells to put more rocks on the side of the tent before cowering back inside away from the vicious sand which felt like needles stabbing into any exposed skin. We were unable to prepare our equipment for the morning due to this storm during which winds apparently reached 50 mph. We were lucky; many other shelters were blown down as the occupants were not as proactive in securing the sides with rocks. Despite this the storm went on until about 6.30pm when we emerged all covered in a deep layer of sand which had found its way



into every gap in the shelter. There was no time during daylight to prepare for tomorrow's race start, we would have to do it in the morning. The one benefit from the storm was that it enabled us all to get to know each other better and bring us together more as a team. It was hard not to when we were all gathered together in such a small area for about 6 hours, luckily all 8 of us were/are of the same mind. As the storm finished the organisers gave us a talk on how to take the salt tablets (minimum 5 per day with food) and we were given a show by some Moroccan horse and camel riders who performed all sorts of acrobatics and created a large amount of noise with their guns. After a last meal supplied by the organisers and a bottle of water we returned to our tents knowing that we were now self-sufficient for the next 7 days. We all settled down for the night at about 9pm, nervous for what was to follow. The night passed restlessly and strangely hot, many people slept outside the tents, without sleeping bags or even naked so as not to be affected by the unnatural warmth.

Sun 9th April – Race Day One

We all started to get up at about 5am, as soon as we heard the Berber's start moving. We were anxious not to be in the tent when they came to remove it. The sky was just lighting up at this time. We all followed similar rituals, eating breakfast, cleaning teeth, finding a tuft of grass or a bush for modesty for toilet arrangements. We also all checked the road book for today's agenda. Typically the first day of the MDS is a warm up. It is usually used to get people used to the conditions and running in the heat and is usually fairly flat with not too many problematic areas. We had heard however that the sponsors had been putting pressure on the organisers to maintain the title of the "toughest footrace in the world", so we expected it not to be as easy as in previous years. The book showed we had to cover 28km (about 18 miles) and in the main was fairly flat with one hill in the middle (that was how we interpreted the book). We all gathered at the start early as requested having taken many photos. We had to form a "21" shape so that the over-flying Cessna aircraft could get some shots of us. In addition we had to listen to lengthy pre-race speeches concerning the route, safety and who was running. Then at about 9am following a "trois, deux, un" we set off accompanied by the Moroccan camels and horsemen from last night blasting their rifles into the air. In addition the Eurosport helicopter was dramatically sweeping across us a few feet over our heads backwards and forwards getting its shots for the news. I have to be honest, it was one of the spectacular starts I have had to any race, maybe due to the long build up, but I enjoyed it immensely.



My plan for today was to jog slowly to start with as much as I could and to see how it goes. I still had a full backpack (11kg or so) and I didn't want to ruin the week by rushing off. I think most people started running at the start, even if it was just for TV or the excitement. However within a few hundred yards it became apparent to me that running was going to be hard. The temperature at the start was very hot as the sun had been up for a few hours and was only going to get hotter. I became out of breath very quickly and could feel my body temperature rising quickly as I exerted myself. I slowed down and took care to walk during difficult parts and stop to take photos at any opportunity. We passed the hill on the edge of the campsite and into some sandy areas up to some ruins and palm orchards which were very picturesque. During many parts it was single file which helped to keep me slow. We then mainly followed a dried-out river bed, crossing some stony areas before getting to checkpoint one (CP1) after about 12/13 kilometres. Despite the excitement it seemed to take ages to get there and as I approached I downed the last of my water and checked my watch, it had taken me nearly two hours! I stopped to take my 1.5 litre water ration and to find somewhere to cool down, there was nowhere except a couple of palm trees (surrounded by runners) where I replenished my water bottles and ate some food. I had a brief chat with Michael from Lancashire whilst this was going on before he strolled ahead. My plan today was to stay at each checkpoint no more than 10 minutes, even so it was a struggle to get going again as I felt so hot and I knew we were heading into the hottest parts of the day. The next checkpoint would only be about 9km away so shouldn't take so long, or so I thought. The next area was a stony plateau gradually going uphill for about 4km to the "small mountain". This wasn't too bad but I could feel myself getting warmer and warmer and could feel myself sweating even though it was evaporating straight away and the wind which was getting up again was just drying me out. The base of the hill was sandy and as I crossed it I made sure I took down plenty of water before the main climb. By the time I had crossed the sand and started climbing (hands and feet) up the rocks I was out of breath, within a few metres I felt absolutely nauseous and soon stopped to retch violently at the side of where runners were passing me. This happened twice more before I was able to get going (one step at a time) up the side of the mountain. The rocks were loose underfoot and I continually held on with my hands before I eventually got to the top and sat down to try and regain some calm. I looked back down to see a long line of people as small as ants approaching the base of the hill. I was just glad to be at the top. I looked the other way and saw the next checkpoint in the distance in the valley and in the far distance the base

camp which looked deceptively near even though there were another two "hills" between us. However to get to the next checkpoint we had to climb further up and along the ridge before a very steep and tricky descent before crossing a plain and over another small hill. I again downed the remainder of my water before replenishing and stopped for about 15 minutes at CP2. I could not believe how hard that section had been and looking around I wasn't the only one, it was about 1pm and people were struggling. I heard that some had already had to have IV drips due to dehydration. I tried not to dwell on the negatives and went on. Even though I had seen the camp from 12km away it seemed to take ages to get there, we had to go over two more (smallish) hills and a last 3km over sand and stones before crossing the line. As I went over I could feel my leg cramping up and had to rest a few minutes as I collected my water for the night. I returned to the tent which apparently had only been up a short while before resting, glad to have completed the first stage. I was so tired, it had taken me about 5.5 hours to complete today but it had been the hardest 28k of my life. I was still boiling hot and I just lay in the tent for the next two hours drinking water, trying to get my body temperature down and trying to relieve the cramps in my legs which continued long into the night despite salt tablets and water. As I lay there Steve and Mel both returned just behind me, both looking remarkably good. I went to queue for 2 hours to send an e-mail back home. On my return there had been unrest amongst the rest of the competitors due to lack of water. The faster runners who had come in some considerable time earlier had now run out of water as the conditions were unnaturally humid. We had all been issued with 4.5 litres as we finished which would have to last until tomorrow morning but it was apparent that this wasn't enough as the humidity was unusually high and people would suffer. Complaints had gone in from all nationalities, English, American, Spanish, Canadian etc but it wasn't until the French complained that we were told that the Race Director would be consulted. It was still 3 hours after we heard this before we were all issued with an extra 1.5 litres, not enough for a lot of people but better than nothing. We also heard that 10 people had dropped out today due to the conditions and there had been over 20 IV drips carried out, the worst ever first day of the MDS. The forecast was more of the same and if this were true tomorrow would be even harder. We settled down after the water ration for the night at about 9pm and most of us spent the night trying to drink water in between sleeping in again very humid conditions. One incident also made us uneasy at night. Whilst Dave was tidying up his equipment in the tent, most of us were outside, he let out a "what the **** was that?!" Upon investigation he had seen an animal looking like a large spider shoot across the tent and disappear. We had all heard rumours about camel spiders beforehand (12 inches wide, travel at 35mph, can jump 3 metres, one bite can kill etc). This made us all a bit wary so we circled the tent prodding and poking at the tent, the packs and anything that might hide a small arachnid. Russell went to move his pack and out shot a large brown animal with large legs and lots of them which moved swiftly through us followed by all our head torches until it stopped about 20 feet away. We were all jumping around like 5 year old girls but eventually surrounded it. Within seconds a camera crew from ITV were there (they were filming a documentary with Jack Osbourne next door but one). They continued to film as we gathered round and admired this large spiders legs, pincers and general scary look. I have to say it did look nasty, it was about 5/6 inches long including legs, light brown and was very speedy. Unfortunately Jack Osbourne's film crew's possible aspirations about filming an unusual animal were short lived as Welsh Steve jumped into the middle and killed it with a water bottle and a shout of "take that you ****". It did take two blows before keeling over though. As a result 5 of our tent slept outside, not helped by me finding two more in the tent; one I killed and one that ran up my leg as I sat down (both smaller than the first). I did walk around the camp later on and saw at least 3 more running around but didn't tell those outside till the morning. I was too tired to worry about them even though their bite could be nasty. I just tightened up my sleeping bag and made sure my water and my torch were in easy reach.



Mon 10th April – Race Day Two

Day two started with the usual routines for most people. I noticed two people walking towards the administration tents apparently giving up. They were and that brought the total gone so far to 12. We all got ready at the start again at about 9ish and it was obviously going to be a hot one. We were already sweating profusely and most of us were still dehydrated from the day and the night before. Today's stage was to be 35km with only 2 checkpoints along the way and lots of sand dunes. To add to this the first 3km was straight up a mountain larger than the one from yesterday. We started and I had already decided to take it easy up the hill. This wasn't difficult as most of the path was sand and loose rock and single file. There were a few passing places where a few

people managed to creep by through sand. However the majority of us trudged slowly up and had constant stops where people ahead were stopping to take photos of the view. I didn't, I just wanted to get to the top as soon as I could as I could feel myself getting hotter and hotter. Eventually I did and descended the other side steeply where I paused at the bottom. Mel from our tent briefly spoke to me with some encouragement as she went past at this point and I plodded on. The next section was over stony ground, generally slightly uphill but flattish. I was still boiling from the climb and had real trouble getting fluids down. After about 3km there was a tree with several troubled runners underneath. There was a space and I sat down quickly to get some shade. It covered most of my body and provided some relief. I was struggling and knew I would not even reach the next checkpoint unless I could cool down a bit. I decided to wait for Steve and plod on with him. I waited for half an hour but no sign of him (I found out later he had passed me on the mountain). I decided I had to carry on to the next checkpoint whatever otherwise my water would dry up and would never make it. To compound matters I could feel blisters appearing on both feet and they were beginning to hurt. I got up slowly and decided I needed some music so I plugged my MP3 player in and carried on. I don't know what music I listened to or how I got there but eventually ended up at CP1 so it must have worked. By the time I got there I was overheating and had run out of water. I took the ration and looked around for some shade. I saw Jack Osbourne talking to his attendants and he looked unhappy, I later found out he retired shortly afterwards. There was no shade except in the medical tent which was full. I sat down outside it and looked in. The floor was full of bodies, a Frenchman on an IV, a Canadian lady looking out of it and several others. After a short while I was approached by a medic and asked if I wanted anything. I asked for some shade and a rest and was allowed into the back of the tent to sit down. Once I did I realised how far gone I was, my whole body seemed to be shutting down. Although I was drinking I felt constantly nauseous and didn't know how I could keep going. Eventually a medic asked me what was wrong and he prescribed me some more salt tablets which I duly took. This wasn't going to be enough though and I could feel myself going further downhill. A little while later I was examined and they checked my temperature and blood pressure and realised I was worse than they had thought. By this time I had given up, I was unable to stand up and had resigned myself to finishing there and then. Patrick, the chief medic talked to me and offered me an IV drip. He told me it would entail a time penalty and I was only allowed the one and if I was in need of another I would have to pull out. My only question was if it would help but I had decided to have one, I had nothing to lose, time penalties mean nothing when you are on your way home. They prepared my left arm for the drip but couldn't get a vein; Patrick told me I was too dry as I had dehydrated so much. They tried a few times before eventually getting it in on my right arm. My left arm bore the bruises for several days afterwards. Once it started I just lay back and drifted away, not to sleep but just aware of what was going on around me. I was aware of runners passing through the checkpoint outside, people coming and going inside the tent. The wind outside had built up again to the levels similar to the admin day and sand was sweeping through the tent. The Canadian girl laid out on one side of me had already given up and had her number stripped, the Frenchman at the other end had also pulled out and several runners were lined along the tent. Patrick told me that they had done 25 IV's yesterday and already at lunchtime today had done more than that again. He also said that's lots of people had pulled out. As I lay there I watched as they started to dismantle the checkpoint as most runners had been through. I had had 4 bags (2 litres) of liquid put into me and was starting to feel better. I wondered what my daughters would think of me pulling out at this point and if they would be proud or not. I thought that they would be if I had tried my best and it dawned on me that I still had something left. As I watched the last of the competitors pass by I had my picture taken by a medic and he told me to smile. I tried and realised I could. I asked Patrick if I could go and carry on, he asked if I would like one more bag to which I agreed. As I was having the last of the IV I was aware of an Irishman lying next to me in the same predicament. He leaned over and said to me, "If you've got the balls to carry on then so have I, can I join you?" to which I replied in the affirmative. We were warned by the medics that it would be near impossible to get to the next checkpoint in time as there was a strict cut off in two hours and we had to travel over dunes to get there but we had decided to give it a go. The Irishman, Fergal, and I hugged and shook hands with all the medics who all wished us well and set off at a steady pace. About half of the next 11km was in dunes and we were in the teeth of a heavy sandstorm but helped each other along. We talked about anything and everything over the next couple of hours just to keep our minds active and away from the negatives. We passed the bones of dead camels in the dunes, poor Fergal was suffering from diarrhoea and we had frequent brief stops. However we kept each other going and although we had been



the last people to leave CP1 by a mile we passed several others along the way. We were so motivated and it rubbed off, we had been at the bottom of the barrel and were rising again. We got to CP2 with 4 minutes to spare to the applause of the marshals and other competitors. This had given us few minutes to spare and we sat in the shade calmly and topped up water etc. As I was there another British competitor came in in tears, all he could say was "No more", and he gave it in there and then. People were around who had given up. Fergal and I looked at each other and decided to go on and quickly, we were still in danger of not making it. As we were leaving a Canadian came back out of the dunes, he had given up, his partner had gone on but he had decided to call it a day. The next 4km were over dunes again. The sandstorm was still raging and all we had for the next 4km was a compass bearing. My feet were killing me but I had no time to attend to them, I could feel blisters all over the balls of my feet and the heels. As I moved I could feel the skin rucking up and the squelching of the burst ones.

We were again the last to leave the checkpoint but as we passed through the dunes we overtook several people. Navigation was easier than expected despite the lack of markers as the wind slowed slightly and then we moved out of the dunes onto hard packed ground which made my feet scream with every step. We used the next runner ahead as a marker and concentrated on catching each one and overtaking them in turn, not easy to do when they could be a mile away. We were also constantly passed and checked off by various officials not wanting to lose any runners through this difficult section. We still made good time and despite the pain we stayed together for most of this section. About 2km from the end we passed through a herd of camels loose in the desert, I had to get some pictures there. We passed an American sat down who asked what time we would get to the end, I told him 7pm to which he replied that he would be there at 6.45pm then! As we got near the end Fergal went ahead, he was clearly stronger than me and my feet were really hurting, every step was agony. Then about 1km from the end I decided to try and catch him up so I ran after him realising that my blisters didn't hurt as much if I ran. When I caught him we decided to cross the line together. At the finish line it was getting dark, we had made it with 20 minutes to spare. Harley, Mel and Michael were waiting on the line with TV crew and many others and we hugged as we crossed the line together and I roared at the camera for effect. It was a moment to cherish, we had both been written off earlier and thanks to the medics and each other had pulled through. This was what the MDS was about, camaraderie and spirit.

I staggered back to the tent (Harley generously carried my pack) and was greeted by the rest. I learned that over 50 more people had dropped out today and there was even more issues with the water. Again the organisers agreed to another bottle each which we received later on. However I know that I was still very dehydrated and only made it through due to the IV. There would have been many more like me, on the edge, another day like today would compound things or finish us off. There had already been more drop outs in the first two days than in the whole of last year.

I spent a while sorting my feet out which involved cleaning them with precious water and I ended up using three quarters of my medical supplies in taping them up. Basically the skin on both heels and ball of both feet were hanging off as well as the skin all round a few toes. In short, a mess but they had got me this far and I knew that no matter how much they hurt the pain would not stop me and they would carry me through. I was too late to send an e-mail home but knew that everyone would see the results anyway and know that I was struggling. I did receive some e-mails from friends and family, all of which were very encouraging and good to read, strange to read about the rain at home in this heat. I managed to wolf down some noodles for dinner before taking in some ibuprofen and settling down again to get some rest.

Tue 11th April – Race Day Three

On the face of it Day Three didn't look too bad. 38km – only 3km more than yesterday and one mountain in the middle and the rest looked fairly flat. 3 checkpoints today and the promise of a well towards the end. We were given the bad news during the pre-race talk that many more had dropped out yesterday and were told again how wonderful the organisers were for providing another bottle of water. They had also brought forward the start time this morning by 30 minutes. This was all greeted with derision as we had all heard the rumours about numbers that had pulled out and that even the front runners, Lahcen Ahansal included, had taken up the water issue and some had been waving their empty water bottles at the TV cameras as they crossed the line. Also, a lot of the elite runners had been walking at several points due to the heat and humidity, surely a measure of how bad conditions were. Surely the organisers had to do more or the result could be disastrous.

I couldn't rely on them to help any more than was allowed though and had begged and borrowed some re-hydration tablets from some fellow competitors to make drinking easier and made sure that I had an extra bottle of water on the start line. I was determined to try and avoid a repeat of yesterday.

At about 8.30am we set off and the first 11km to CP1 were not too bad. I made sure that I drank regularly and didn't push myself hard. The heat was intense though and it was hard going even though the ground was mainly flat. We passed over some small dunes, dried out lakes and hard ground to CP1 which was in the centre of a dried out lake. When I got there I got my water ration and found some shade. I had decided to spend no

more than 30 minutes at each stop but to try and make best use of this time. I saw the Race Director running around looking fairly agitated, the medical tent at this checkpoint was full to bursting already, it may have only been mid-morning but the heat was amazing and obviously people were suffering badly. I felt bad but not as bad as yesterday and set off after 25 minutes across the rest of the lake.

The next section was the hardest section so far and was responsible for the most retirements ever in this race. Basically it was 9km or so, the first 8km across sand, all uphill to the base of a mountain and then 1km virtually straight up a sandy, rocky pass to the top and across to CP2. There was no shade at all and most people were doing it like me in the hottest part of the day. By the time I had got to the base of the mountain I had run out of water. I had been climbing and drinking steadily for 8km or so and was in danger of not getting to the top. I must have paused/stopped about 10 times as I climbed the last section to the top. There were medical staff everywhere as I climbed and I had to wind around competitors who had stopped on the way up. Many people did not make it up that hill and I heard many stories of people just passing out and collapsing on the way up. Eventually and slowly I got to the top over some large rocks and saw what I can only describe as a war zone. The checkpoint was a few hundred metres away across the top of the mountain but there were no vehicles as it was impossible for them to get there. A helicopter was ferrying stricken runners off the top and was buzzing back and forth like a wasp. There was one tatty tent which housed the medics and I could see as I approached that this wasn't enough, there were bodies everywhere and no shade whatsoever. I was issued with my 1.5 litre ration which was not warm as previous ones but positively hot as it had been sitting in the sun all day. I sat down as planned and filled my bottles and drank the rest. The heat was all consuming and there was no respite, the sun was beating down and the rocks were radiating heat. I tried to cower under one side of the medical tent but couldn't so I took off my pack and tried to get my body out of the sun in its shade. I sat there for half an hour basically wondering how I was going to get going, I was hotter than I had ever been in my life, it felt as if my whole body was on fire. Eventually I wobbled to a standing position and got my pack back on. It was dispiriting to stay there listening to the cries of those inside the tent, watching people being ferried off the mountain and seeing so many good people lying around. I started to walk along very slowly, my feet were screaming as my blisters were telling me to stop, every step was on sharp, hot rocks. I stumbled across the top of the mountain which was like a ridge for a few hundred metres before a sharp descent over rock and sand to the bottom. This seemed to take ages and the heat was coming from above and at me from underneath and both sides as the sun reflected off the rocks. It was like being cooked. By the time I had got to the bottom I was done in. I saw the Japanese film crew Land Rover and sat in the shade of it for a few minutes to gather my thoughts. They were very kind, unfortunately they spoke no English but managed to tell me to go away when they saw one of their competitors approaching. My water had nearly gone again and I still had over 10km to the next checkpoint. I couldn't see a way out, there was no way I could last that long without water without doing myself permanent damage so I decided to call it a day. There was another Land Rover on a hill a short way away, I waved at it but the man sat beside it either ignored me or couldn't see me. A wind had started to blow up again so hearing me was impossible. I decided that I would carry on and wave down the next vehicle to take me back. After another kilometre or so a Land Rover came past on my right, I waved at it and made a cut-throat sign, I wanted to get inside that vehicle and go home. They stopped and 3 officials dropped out, they asked if I wanted more water. It was something that hadn't occurred to me. I had seen others ask and been refused extra water on the mountain so had dismissed it as an option. They told me that I would incur a one hour penalty if I had an extra bottle. I was dead on my feet but decided it was better than nothing as a time penalty was better than a bus home. They gave me the water and I again refilled the bottles and drank the rest. I didn't feel any better but at last with a small water supply I could get further hopefully. I carried on, very slowly and painfully. The skin had gone from both of my feet, of that I was sure. I felt like I was still cooking and very nauseous. I carried on like this for 3-4km as ground undulated and gradually rose to go through a sandy pass between 2 mountains. As I exited the pass I saw the two last "mounds" I had to cross at the other side of a wadi. They looked huge, I saw several runners slumped underneath a lone tree, no space for me so I went on over the wadi and stopped on a small ridge. I was done in, another man sat down next to me and we stared together at the hills ahead in disbelief. He got up and went on, I couldn't. I sat there and strangely decided to have something to eat. I pulled out a packet of Tooty Frooties which had been my special treat each day. I sat and ate most of the packet, they tasted very sweet and nice but made me feel more thirsty. I still had a little water left but had to cross these next two hills and cross a salt plain before the next checkpoint, it was not possible so I looked around for a way out, there was none so I decided to climb the first hill to see. It seemed to take an eternity to climb the few hundred feet up, not helped by the fact that the Japanese were attempting the climb at the same time and their film crew was trying to get all the best shots of their runners. I stopped after every 10 steps to catch my breath and eventually made it to the top whereupon I could see a steep sandy descent followed by a very stony valley and no sign of any officials. The one amusing thing I did see was one of the Japanese cameraman falling head over heels down the steep sand at the descent, his mate thought it was funny as did I, poetic justice for pointing his camera at me at every opportunity as I had climbed up as I was suffering.

I descended the sand and wound my way through the valley to see the second hill. No sign of any help, surely I

couldn't get over that hill. I had no choice but to try even though every step was agony. My energy levels had dropped to zero, how I was even moving at all was beyond me, I had lost so much fluid. Luckily the second hill wasn't so high and I reached the top and sat down, that was it, game over, I had nothing left to give, it was home time. I sat there for a while and one or two people passed me including the Japanese. After a while I realised that I would not be found here hidden away in what was basically a rocky crack up a hill and I would have to move to do anything. The only way was down and that was down a steep sandy hill. I couldn't stand up, I had no energy at all so I did the only thing I could and slid down on my backside. This got me to the bottom OK but unfortunately because I had dehydrated so much my usually skin tight shorts were hanging off me and they filled with the Sahara's best as I went down. At the bottom I sort of stood up and what I had picked up on the way down dropped out, I staggered through the last of the stony pass before looking out at the dried salt lake in front of me. The checkpoint was about 2.5km away but I couldn't see it due to the heat haze. It was about 6pm but still roasting hot, I sat down on a pile of rocks which collapsed beneath me so I lay back on my pack, done in. I thought then that whether my daughters were proud or not I had given everything and my wife and parents would all agree that enough was enough this time, I could always come back but not if I had permanently damaged my health. It was the hardest decision of my life but also the easiest as I couldn't move. I saw a Land Rover crossing the plain but he couldn't see me, I knew what carnage there was behind me and the medical team were stretched but I had done my time and needed them now. I started to sob, no tears – I was too dry. A Frenchman stopped beside me and put his hand on my shoulder, no words were necessary, he took out his flare and tried to read the instructions but had to get his glasses from his pack to do so. When he had deciphered the words and pulled the tabs a distress flare went up vertically above us despite the wind and I lay back and watched it go, knowing that this was the sign for the end.

After two or three minutes a Land Rover appeared from the haze and the Frenchman left me. Two medics, Jokol a senior doctor and Anne-Charlotte came to my aid. I told them that it was finished and I was not prepared to risk my life any more. They reassured me that I was not yet finished and they would try everything before I had to give up which surprised me as I had pulled my flare and was outside the cut-off. They gave me some water which I threw up, I managed to take some hydration tablets which I kept down but continued to retch. I was also shaking a lot as if cold even though I felt like I was boiling. They parked the Land Rover to give me shade and continued to try and get me going. Eventually they got me to stand up again but my legs just shook and my head spun so I had to lie down. I had a long chat with Jokol who told me that I only had one "health" and was wise to look after it after which he ceremoniously removed my number from my chest and Anne-Charlotte started to arrange another IV drip. I had been laid there for about an hour with them and they had tried their best but I had been too far gone to get going again that day. I had been conscious and lucid throughout and had made the decision myself but am sure to this day that I would have suffered more permanent damage had I even attempted to go further. Once the IV was going they lifted me into the back on the truck and took me via a bumpy ride back to camp as it was getting dark. We passed CP3 which had been only about 2km from me but out of sight. They were packing up to go but there were still runners being attended to there. We arrived back at the camp in the dark and went straight to the medical tent. As I went in I saw and locked eyes with Fergal who was on his way out who could only say how sorry he was. I was unable to walk in any true sense of the word so two men lifted me through the medical tents to find a bed, there was one left at the far end. The tents were packed out and queues were outside. People were in all sorts of trouble and many were still out on the course. As I lay down the doctor checked my heart rate, blood pressure and temperature. I believe my heart and blood weren't too bad as I had had some IV but as soon as he saw my temperature he grabbed several bottles of water and covered me from head to toe with water several times. I lay like this for a while as my body temperature dropped and eventually started to shiver with cold which felt so good in comparison. I looked around and realised that there were several people in a worse state than me, a young lady across the tent had been brought in a coma induced by the medics following a stroke and I had heard about an Irishman who had been taken back to France he was so bad.

After the medics were happy that my temperature had stabilised and 2.5 litres of fluid I was allowed to hobble back to my tent. This was when I realised how bad my feet were. The adrenaline had shut off the pain previously but now I was calmer the pain was excruciating. I slumped into my tent and took some ibuprofen as I told my tent mates the story. They had all made it in but were all sorry for me, it didn't upset me as I thought it would as I had said goodbye to my race earlier. Apparently approximately 100 runners had dropped out today presenting the organisers with a logistical nightmare, they now had to feed and transport the 150-200 of us around. It was no surprise that they tried to get as many as possible to go home. I had already decided to stay for the duration, for the experience, to help anyone else if I could and basically I couldn't afford to pay the inflated prices to travel etc.

Whilst we talked a representative came round to each tent from the organisers. They came to inform all the runners that tomorrow's stage, supposedly the longest at 72km, was to be reduced by 18km. In addition they were cutting out the big climbing section to do this and the water rations were to be doubled at every checkpoint for this stage. This was truly amazing, undoubtedly the organisers had agreed (too late) that they had to

take drastic action to avoid so many more drop outs and/or potentially having a fatality. I was pleased for the remaining runners as this gave them a better chance if this humid weather kept up, but I was also saddened for myself and others who would not be able to take advantage of this. This would basically also reduce the two day stage into one day for most resulting in a rest day. I was too tired to worry too much about it and I was too scared to remove my socks so I slept in them as I was.

Wed 12th April – Race Day Four

The next morning was different as I didn't have to prepare to run like my tent mates. I gave them all a hug as I left them at about 7am to get my supplied breakfast. It was hard to go knowing that was out of the race but I kept cheerful in front of my friends as they would need all the help and support I could give. At breakfast I entered into a different world, the world of the "abandons". A group of people not able to continue, unable or unwilling to return home and presenting the organisers with a problem. Many runners had gone home already but there were still a lot of us left. We were to be taken to the next camp which was a long drive, either 6 hours by road in a minibus or 4 hours by Land Rover over the desert. I was still dehydrated and was considered one of those less able so was given a seat in a Land Rover with two English girls who were good company. We were all still raw from yesterday's events and just let the organisers do the work. Our vehicle was driven by a Moroccan who spoke no English and little French. He was very pleasant but drove by his own rules. We set off in a convoy of about 30 vehicles across the plains and dunes towards our next objective. The scenery was truly stunning and there were frequent stops for photos and toilet breaks along the way. In addition every so often a group of vehicles would break away and head in a different direction to set up the checkpoints for the runners. After a couple of hours our driver decided to do his own thing and headed off on his own across the desert. After a while we stopped outside an isolated building into which he ran and came back clutching some bread, no problem, he had just been to the bakers in the Sahara! We went on without the other vehicles and stopped again outside some more buildings in the middle of nowhere. There were several Moroccans milling around and the driver informed us he was going to the toilet, which he did. Then we were approached by some locals inviting us in for a drink, we declined as by this stage we were all convinced we were to be used as hostages or physically abused in some way. This was far from the truth as they then asked in the driver could come in for a drink, I said yes and he did, we were sitting outside a Moroccan pub in the Sahara! He came back a while later and took us on a roundabout route to the campsite, the journey had taken 6 hours. When we got there the area was bare except for the satellite for the TV stations and the vehicles. The tents and organisers were coming by road. Upon speaking to some other English lads in other vehicles they had spent an hour looking for one of the Land Rovers which had gone missing during the journey. Eventually some tents turned up for the organisers and we were allowed to use one for shade as we had been sat in the sun for another two hours. There were 7 of us in the tent and we made ourselves comfortable as we pooled together what food we had left to make lunch. We also used the time to attend to our feet and the sight of our feet caused the girls to leave the tent. We all compared wounds and Tom (a fellow English abandonee) took pictures and helped me with my feet which were particularly bad. At about 5pm one of the organisers came in and told us that lunch had arrived, it had been on the other vehicles which had been stuck in the sand. We ate what we could. The organisation side of the tents were going up fast by now and we sat outside on rugs in the cooling day. Then all of a sudden a shout went up, the first runners were coming in, truly amazing. We all hobbled down to the finish line to watch these amazing athletes scamper home to our wild applause. Then slowly the runners started to come home and laid out on the rugs as the competitors tents were not yet up. As they came in we all made welcome and helped them as much as we were able. The first one from our tent in was Harley who looked fresh as a daisy and on a high, he had had a good day, a shortened distance, more water and cooler temperatures with little humidity. He was followed by Russell who had set off with the elite runners later on, still looking good. Next in was Rob who was not good, his feet were trashed and he was struggling to walk. I went with Russell to make our shelter comfortable as it had only just been put up at 9pm. We made it as good as possible and Harley, Dave and Welsh Steve all came in. I hobbled back to get Rob who had crawled into his sleeping bag and was asleep. I felt guilty waking him but he couldn't sleep out there. He had trouble even standing but together we eventually got him back to our shelter (it took about 30 minutes). His feet were a mess but he is one of the toughest men I know and wouldn't let a bit of pain stop him. We all settled down for the night and Mel and Steve both came in later, both seeming very good. Runners came in all night to smatterings of applause and even into the next day as some elected to sleep under the stars on the course. It had been a fairly successful day for the race, still 20-30 more dropped out presumably most of them as a result of earlier endeavours. The camp settled down gradually and the weather was cooler and there was even a cool breeze throughout the night.

Thu 13th April – Race Day Five

This was a rest day for most due to the shortening of the 4th Stage. I still had to attend mealtimes with the other abandonees. A siege mentality had developed amongst us and we resembled a group of prisoners of war shuffling about on our bad feet and being given meals at certain times. Having said that, despite our anger at our position we remained in very good spirits. We would stand in line awaiting our food whilst whistling “The Great Escape” to the bemusement of our French hosts. We would also seek every opportunity to smuggle out some treasure like a piece of bread, a yoghurt or the ultimate prize a can of luke warm coke. It was still a sad time, there were many highly trained athletes amongst us who had been pulled out due to dehydration and felt more should have been done earlier by the organisers when the high humidity was realised. I saw Jack Osbourne again, his film crew still hovering, probably getting some last footage of the unfortunates.

Apart from mealtimes I was free to spend the day with my friends and I tried to be as supportive of them as they were me. They were still pushing themselves to the limit and I tried to help where I could. Most of the day was spent cleaning, checking feet, eating and sorting ourselves out. The competitors packs were getting lighter and I helped them by taking away some of their unneeded equipment to the end.

This was also the first time I had been able to send an e-mail since Day one. I had not been able to let people know what had happened even though they knew I was out. I had to queue twice to get a basic story back which probably sounded like drivel at the other end. At least I had made contact. When I got back to my tent the daily e-mails from friends and family were waiting, all brilliant but sorry I had had to pull out. This was the lowest moment of the week and I had to go for a walk (hobble) in the dunes to get my thoughts together whilst I read the messages. The messages were all so nice and supportive but made me realise what could have been.

In the evening it was announced that the organisers wanted to freshen up the runners numbers and would be issuing replacements tonight. As they lined up in the centre of the camp they had their numbers swapped and given a can of coke each as a reward! This was supposed to be a motivational boost (and totally against the rules). It certainly livened up the camp despite the coke being warm. Not to miss out I lined up as did several abandonees to try and blag one. I took my water ration card to flash at her and called my number out as I held out my hand. One of the attendants handed me the coke as the other looked for my number which she could not find. As she was having difficulty she called over the supervisor but I was already off, hobbling as fast as I could shouting that I already had my number thanks. He just shrugged and smiled at me.

The camp settled down slowly as the coke had an amazing effect on those deprived of such riches for many days. The Japanese and the Moroccans were particularly excited and the TV cameras homed in on their singing and dancing, it will make the documentary look like a party on film.

Eventually things died down and we all went to sleep.

Fri 14th April – Race Day Six

Today started as normal, I wished all my tentmates luck and went off to breakfast. Today they would have a measured marathon (42.2km). The conditions were even cooler today (by Sahara standards) and most runners were now in good spirits. In fact as it turned out there would be no more withdrawals today. We only had a journey of 2-3 hours to get there and I took my chances in one of many minibuses arranged with the organisers. In with me were 5 French and two English, all in fairly good spirits, especially the French. We had an eventful journey and at every sandy point one of the minibuses would get stuck in sand at which point all of us would stop and all the drivers would get out and help. We had a particularly brave (and good) driver who got us through unscathed but kept taking the most unorthodox routes.

Eventually we got to what would be the last camp and already the tents were nearly up already – amazing! Someone must have said something to the tent Berbers after the chaos of the last few days. We were able to sit in tents straightaway on our arrival and lunch was provided on time. We then headed off to watch the lead runners come in – again truly amazing. At least the runners could go straight to their tents this time. During the afternoon we saw a stage and large screen being erected at the entrance to the camp. Apparently there was going to be a concert tonight for us. In addition there would be a load of Moroccan dignitaries, VIP’s and military attending. This would explain the sudden efficiency.

I had also noticed a small camp a mile or so away, this was apparently some of the French competitors families who had paid a small fortune to meet their runners and watch the last stage. I hope they wouldn’t be disappointed by the dirty, unwashed, smelly, exhausted mess that might greet them.

All of my tentmates came in in good order, they all said it was the easiest stage so far due to the conditions and the days rest. It was good to see them all so happy, they only had a short stage tomorrow to finish.

I went and had my evening meal with the other abandonees and VIP’s and we were given wine and beer (only one). We drifted back to our tents as the concert was starting. It was a classical orchestra accompanied by a Japanese opera singer who played a variety of classical and operatic musical pieces followed by a showing of the first part of the official DVD/Video. I was too tired to watch and all my tent were asleep when I got back except Steve who watched the concert. I plugged in my earplugs and went to sleep.

Sat 15th April – Race Day Seven

Today was the last and shortest stage but the last 4km were over some of the largest dunes in the Sahara. After breakfast we were bussed to the finish which was in a small village where we awaited the runners. This journey was in the back of a Transit type van with no windows over some very bumpy terrain, very scary but good fun. The dunes were truly huge and awe inspiring. I filled my spare water bottle with sand as a souvenir. After only ¾ hour we saw the Eurosport helicopter circling above the lead runner getting closer and closer. Lahcen Ahansal appeared over the dunes and romped home to victory, an amazing sight and experience. He was quickly followed by the other elite runners. The finish was very good. There were tents specially erected (proper ones) for the runners to rest and Moroccan musicians played and sang the runners home. The Race Director greets each runner in with a kiss and a hug as he puts the medal on them. They are then given a goody bag with lunch and a bus ticket. I saw most of our tent come in one by one, Harley first followed by Russell, then Rob, Dave, Steve, Steve and Mel. I also congratulated Michael and Fergal who I saw come over the line. I was truly pleased for them all, they had all done exceptionally well. They were all naturally pleased, as they should be, some emotional but all happy at having conquered the toughest footrace in the world.

We all then got onto air-conditioned coaches for the 6 hour ride back to the hotel. I sat up the front with Welsh Steve and we didn't stop talking the whole way. Many other grabbed missed sleep or simply dozed. The scariest part of the journey was through the mountains where it felt as if we were going over every ravine as the coach wound its way up and then down the hairpins.

Upon arrival at the hotel we checked back in and then went to our rooms to sort ourselves out. I shared with Steve again and we both took ages in the shower trying to get every bit of sand and sun cream off, it took me about ½ hour in the shower which was agony on my feet which had now swelled right up due to the bruising and blisters. Most men shaved, I didn't, preferring to keep the rugged look to show my children. Eventually we trooped down for dinner and a couple of drinks. I had trouble recognising a lot of people due to lack of beards and dirt. The women had also done their hair and found some make up. The mood was surprisingly quiet as everyone was tired. Some went out to find the local nightclub but most like us had a couple of beers and retired for the night.

Sun 16th April

This was a free day. After breakfast myself and Harley went down to investigate the local town and market. We had great fun haggling with the local market traders and we both came away with some Berber jewellery. We then went to the French hotel where they were giving out the t-shirts and selling souvenirs. We had our picture taken with Mohammed Ahansal (Lahcen's brother) and wandered around. We then decided to sample some local cuisine for lunch and found a local café with Michael and Welsh Steve and had a glorious 6 course meal, traditional Moroccan (it cost about £6 each!). Then we took the others down to the market where Harley swapped his trainers for some sandals and Steve his watch for some jewellery. We had a good time until a misunderstanding between myself, Michael and an Algerian trader meant we had to leave the market quickly, which we did making signs of aeroplanes and intimating we had to find one quickly. We then had another evening in the hotel with dinner and a few more drinks before retiring. Not before Rob had demonstrated his hardman image by winning a pancake eating competition beating both Harley and Dave in the process by knocking back about 23.



Mon 17th April

Last day. We got up at about 4am, breakfasted, packed and ready to get on the coach to the airport at 6am. Once there we queued for what seemed about the 500th time and checked in. We were then let straight on the plane (the only plane there) and took off slightly late. The flight was uneventful but fun as we all knew each other by now. On landing we all agreed to get some photos before going home. We gathered by the luggage reclaim as the suitcases came off straight away. Unfortunately Mel was still in Morocco extending her holiday, Harley had shot straight off and Russell was in a hurry. I got a quick picture with him before the five of us left had some photos done. We were then the last to leave arrivals and were greeted by those who were to meet us. Seeing my wife and two daughters was very emotional but a nice greeting. The five of us chatted again before heading off in separate directions with various mentions of future meetings. I look forward to seeing them all again soon.

Conclusion

Although I failed to finish this awesome event I have had the adventure of a lifetime and can honestly say that I enjoyed the whole experience. I received many supportive messages from family and friends before, during and after the event which has helped to carry me through, to all of those people I thank you.

On the positive side I have made many new friends who will always be part of my life. I did complete the equivalent of 2 ½ marathons in 3 days in some of the harshest weather and environment imaginable, indeed in the world. I learned a lot about myself, my limits, other people and their limits, the desert and the power of the human mind. I have seen some of the most beautiful scenery in the world. I have also managed to raise, with the help of many people, some money for Children with Leukaemia which will be worthwhile. I have coped with a lot of things I would have thought I would not have been able to: creepy crawlies, lack of washing, sharing a tent, sleeping rough, no toilets, running through sand etc.

On the negative side I was unable to beat the heat and humidity, my choice of footwear was wrong and several other smaller mistakes were made in my preparation.

I do not regret trying (or failing), just the attempt was an amazing adventure. I know, in my heart of hearts that I made the right decision to pull out at that point on Day Three and I may not be here if that were not the case. I will be back to try again because the gremlin in the back of my brain will not shut up till I do, it will be unfinished business so to speak, so 2008 here I come, older and a lot wiser!