

Marathon des Sables 2008 – The Story

28 March - 7 April 2008 – 7 days / 6 stages – 245.3 km

Part II – The Marathon des Sables

So 4500 km later, \$15000 poorer and with a damaged knee, Uli and I headed off to Morocco. Marathon des Sables 2008 – here we come!

At this point, I felt proud and grateful that I had been able to transfer a total of over \$5000 to The Fred Hollows Foundation – more than 200 people will be able to see again thanks to Run4Vision and the generous supporters of my project. Thank you!

To overcome the jet lag and tired legs after 38 hours of travel, we decided to spend a few days in luxury at the Sofitel in Marrakech. I still kept up my running and enjoyed some nice jogging around huge olive plantations just outside the old Medina. The altitude was new and together with the traffic pollution it made running interesting to put it mildly.

I met up with fellow runner Stephen, 'Marathon Man' Trent, and Becky for a last supper before we travelled in a small bus over the High Atlas Mountains to Ouarzazate, the base of the Marathon des Sables 2008.

The drive was amazing: huge, snow-covered mountains hovering above a narrow road and we would our way up higher and higher until we reached the pass at 2200 m surrounded by 4000m-high peaks. Clean, cool air made us wish we could stay here, as locals already warned us that the desert would be hot the following week.

Five hours later, when our car drove over the last hill and around the last corner, there it was ... woo, no more green trees, no more houses, only different shades of yellow and brown as far as the eye could see – the first sand dunes of the Sahara desert! Well, we asked and paid for it!

Ouarzazate is a quiet town at the foot of the Atlas Mountains and the gateway to the desert. Only during shootings of Hollywood movies (there are a couple of studios here) and pre and post Marathon des Sables, this town 'rocks' – taxi prices double and triple and all hotels seems to be fully booked.

27 March 2008, D-Day -3:

The last runners from all over the world arrived and last minute shopping and preparing was frantically taking place in hotel lobbies and rooms.

My friend Josh, who arrived with the last plane the night before, needed help to get his gear and food sorted out. Runners had to pack a minimum of 2000 calories/day in order to pass the food inspection. We managed to sort various bundles, one of them adding up to exactly 2002 calories – well, he needed to loose some extra weight anyway!

Trent "The Marathon Man" Morrow ... well that is another story altogether. Never in his life he had raced more then 20 km, he had no clue of what to expect out there in the desert, and even

worse, did not know what to take with him. So better be save than sorry he said, and bought everything 3-fold. A few hours before heading out to the desert, two very patient fellow runners helped him sorting out and packing his backpack. We all had our unspoken doubts that he will make it further then stage 1, but as we would later learn, The Marathon Man was born during the Marathon des Sables!

28 March 2008, D-Day -2:

By 8 am, after a very short and sleepless night in a comfortable bed for the last time, we all were nervous and ready, waiting for our buses that were nowhere to be seen till 11 am.

During these hours while we were waiting for departure, I suddenly noticed my Wiley X Desert glasses hurting my ears and head. And it got worse. Were these just nerves playing up? Anyway, in the last minute, Uli who had been waiting outside on the street to waive us goodbye, decided to run back to our hotel and get me my spare pair. What a God-sent that one was! I could never have finished the race the way I did if I did not have those extra sunglasses.

Finally, the last bags were stowed away, and we headed off towards the small town of Merzouga and the dunes of Erg Chebbi. A good 6 hours drive east of Ouarzazate.

We had stopped for lunch when we first met some of the 'local inhabitants' of the desert. While sitting along the road eating our sandwich, people suddenly started jumping up and pointing towards the ground – there were scorpions everywhere! I just wondered whether they could get into a sleeping bag at night? I will make bloody sure Josh is on one and Marathon Man on the other side of my sleeping bag!

Finally we reached our destination. Camp 1 was a mere 2 km west of the biggest sand dunes in the region and about 10 km north of Merzouga. We spent the day to settle in, while the following day would be used to check-in and for medical and final preparation. The organisers feed us during these two days, so after 'moving into' our new home, we had time to go for a wander around the camp and started to meet fellow runners from 32 different countries. Then we has a 3-course dinner with wine – the French certainly know how to start a marathon in style.

Luckily Josh and I were able to move from a tent with 8 people to a tent with only 6 people. A bit more comfort is always nice out there in the desert. So here we were: English Alan, Cliff from Melbourne (both had raced the MdS the year before), Josh and Keith from Brisbane, Marathon Man Trent and I. We were a mixed bunch with different levels of experience: the walkers were Alan and Trent, Cliff wanted to improve his time from last year (~40+ hrs), and the rest of us had no real clue where we would all fit in this race.

29 March 2008, D-day -1:

The medical and equipment checks were done in order of race number, so being in the 500+ range, our tent could hang around during the morning. We used the time to wander towards the dunes and check them out. Those dunes are sooooo high, and the sand sooooo soft – how on Earth were we going to run 14 km across the famous Erg Chebbi Dunes with 11 kg heavy backpacks!?!?

Before our technical and medial check, I went for a visit to the shop. Yes, we had an MdS shop out there, selling everything from backpack to sunglasses. I was wondering whether they sold a backpack on that day – I mean, who would arrive out here without having a backpack ready? I bought the stove and fire cubes that would all go into Josh's backpack!

At lunchtime, suddenly darkish clouds at the horizon crept closer and closer. They did not bring rain but sand. So our check was done during a nice sandstorm – making it quick and painless. Race number and drink card collected, we only had to indicate weight of pack and food, plus hand in our ECG to the doctors. Everyone just wanted to get out of the sand and hide

somewhere. Josh ended up with about 9 kg, while I had 11 kg to start with. The difference was due to 2000 cal vs. 3500 cal food per day.

With the finishing of dinner (with beer), we were left on our own for the next 7 days – self-sufficiency was the motto. We received 3 bottles of water for the day, which had to last for breakfast on the following morning as well.

30 March 2008 – Stage 1: Erg Chebbi to Erg Znaigui – 31.6km

Finally – the start! We were delayed, as there had been a sandstorm blowing at 25–30 knots, and we had to wait for the race helicopter to be able to take off. What a feeling of excitement and relieve after all this months of training, plus the huge anticipation for a first stage which would be a killer!

802 runners were assembling on the starting line. Several people already had to pack and leave, which is very sad as they came soooo far and then were not allowed to start because they were not well enough.

The first 14 km went across sand dunes, which were often several hundred meters high. No way we were going to run anything out there, and sure enough, the field of more than 800 runners soon stretched out over several kilometres very quickly. A sight not to be forgotten. Like little ants we looked, crawling up and sliding down those mountains of sand. There was also no risk of getting lost. I actually sometimes liked to walk a few hundred metres away from the main line, and I felt like I was the first man to leave footsteps in the sand, almost like a real explorer.

There are runners who skip over these dunes like dragonflies, and there are ordinary people who plough through the sand like turtles. But there is less difference between the first and the last, than between them and those who have never done a race like this at all.

Josh and I stayed together, and we took some photos and videos along the way. In hindsight, I must have forgotten to drink already there – because of all the excitement.

At checkpoint (CP)1 we received two 1.5 l bottles of water, enough to refill our drink bottles, have a good wash of our sandy feet and cool down our heads. I took three salt tablets from the doctors. The second half of the stage would lead us across a stony and hilly plateau, and it was a very hot day with temperatures between 37 and 45 degrees and with 18% humidity.

I really needed to run after those slow 2.5 hrs crossing the dunes, so I left Josh behind and tried to get out of this hot flat plateau as quickly as possible. It felt great to finally run the Marathon des Sables! The ground was HOT: the moment you stopped moving, the heat could be felt through your running shoes. It was like walking in a hot Teflon pan!

With all this adrenalin pumping, and overtaking runner after runner, I forgot to drink properly, and by the time I arrived at CP2, I must already have been dehydrated.

The final 8 km I had to cross some small dunes and vegetation (camel grass), and then, as this was ultimately a dessert race, the organiser threw in another 3 km of bloody high dunes! That tipped me over the edge. Suddenly my back started to hurt and I wished so badly for that finish to show up. Up a dune ... nothing but another one ahead of me ... down the dune ... more sand in the shoes ... up the next dune ... nothing ... it got worse and worse, and finally, on the top of another bloody dune, just when I caught a glimpse of the finish line 500 m down the hill, I suddenly got dizzy. The next thing I remember was a fellow runner shaking my shoulder and encouraging me to get up again. I had fainted due to lack of fluid, and only after a few minutes of resting, drinking half a litre of water (I had far too much left so close to end of a stage) and swallowing another energy gel, I was able to get back on my feet.

Tent mate Cliff from Melbourne caught up with me, and together we waddled into the camp. There I started getting the worse cramps ever in both legs. They were so bad that I was unable to collect my allocated water, and a race official helped me to sit down at the side of a truck to allow me to stretch my legs in the shade. Thankfully, he brought me my 3 bottles of water, and when I finally was ready to get up and look for my tent, I found a 4th bottle under the truck which I quickly grasped and drank immediately – ahhh, just what my body needed so much!

After another 1.5 l of energy recovery drink together with a few sodium tablets, the worst was over. I realised, that to be successful during this week, I needed concentrated running and proper planning of liquids and food intake. After I had overcome this little scare, I started to believe again that I could finish the race. During the next couple of hours, Josh, Keith, Trent and Alan arrived in the camp as well. Everyone looked pretty shattered after a very hard first day out in the desert. Bloody hell, is that what we were going to get for the next 6 days?

Day 1 was hard and unforgiving, but the scenery was stunningly beautiful. I had the first 31,6 km behind me – and 5hrs 45min on the clock.

31 March 2008 – Stage 2: Erg Znaigui to Oued El Jdaid – 38.0 km

During a windy night, I was up quite a few times to go for a pee, but not as often as poor Keith who had caught a stomach bug and was unable to keep much of his food or drink inside. For this day, I decided to power-walk the stage. After yesterday's close call I did not want to push my luck again, and I thought if I wait till my backpack gets a bit lighter, I will be able to catch up in the longer and more important stages.

To be on the safe side, I popped some Imodium and also my anti-inflammatory as my knees had started hurting a bit.

Josh and I headed out into a mostly gravel-covered vastness, crisscrossed with several *wadis* (riverbeds, but without water). As usual, there were sand and dunes to manage as well. Crossing a few agricultural fields meant that we were close to some human activities – most likely a small village or an oasis. We arrived at CP1 to pick-up our bottle of water. Like the day before, there would be three checkpoints during the stage. Mostly, the distance between the CPs was about 11-13 km. After the previous day's S/SE bearing, we slowly turned during this first part of the stage, and for the first time, our compass direction showed WEST, the general direction until the finish of this race.

It started to get hotter, a few degrees more than yesterday, and someone had told me that we hit about 48 degrees out there. So drinking was very important, and I made sure I stopped every 10 to 15 minutes to drink a few sips, plus every 30 minutes, I ate some nuts or dried fruits.

Josh got impatient and he started to run off after about 10 km, so I was on my own again. The next 25 km passed relatively quickly, I talked to other runners, took photos along the way, and most surprisingly to me, I overtook lots of other runners, even though I only did about 6 or 7 km/hr.

Just before CP3, I passed a small co-operative that had received money from the MdS charity. The money allowed this small community to build a new water well with a solar-powered pump.

True to their policy, the organiser threw in another little surprise for the last 4 km: a nice, steep hill of about 300 m high and a rocky descent on the other side.

Josh (who I caught up with after about 4 hours into the stage) and I made it 'home' in just over 6 hours; feeling good and still full of energy for the days to come. This time I was running across the finish line with my inflated Aussie-flag Hand.

Sadly, Keith could not continue with his quest as the bad diarrhoea took its toll, and after CP2 he had to throw in the towel. This was a big blow, not only for Keith, but also for us in the tent. It would always be in the back of your mind, this 'what if', and we were happy to see Keith taking it in well. We were glad that he had decided to stay with us for the rest of the race, and he became our 'tent bitch' – an important task, as Keith would now make sure that no sharp rocks would be under our rugs, that the tent poles were be safely secured, and he even went out of his way and got us firewood for cooking. Thanks heaps for your great help, Keith!

With a perfectly executed plan and Day 2 behind me, I could add another 38 km and 6.17hrs to my tally.

1 April 2008 – Stage 3: Oued El Jdaid to Ba Hallou – 40.5 km

Well, the last night had been a tough one. The wind had started to pick up shortly after we had 'gone to bed'. So in the middle of the night, the sandstorm hit us and the tent came down in a big bang. A lot of other tents had problems too, and even though I had bribed the Berbers a couple of times to do their job properly, it seemed I had not given them enough money to have secured a stable tent for the night.

Josh and I bothered to get out of our sleeping bags, and we lowed the tent side down, trying to avoid all the sand blowing into our tent. As if it would have made a difference! Some other tent groups just left their collapsed canvases covering them and stayed under it for the rest of the night. It did not make much of a difference – the next morning we all looked like the little fellas who fell into Willy Wonka's chocolate sauce. We were covered in brown sand, and everything – did I say EVERYTHING – was full of this stuff ... it was in your mouth, between the teeth, in the ear, in your nose, in your eyes, between the toes and between all other parts I do not want to mention right now. The grains of sand invaded the tiniest hole in my clothes, and I 'became' the sand ... backpack, sleeping bag, teacup, camera, solar panel – everything had a slight layer of brown! What else can you do but smile and live with it. Five more days to go! ☺

So, with two days worth of food gone from my backpack, I felt strong. After the previous day's power walk and with the outlook of a stage of mixed terrain to come, I felt like giving it a good go today.

The organisers tried to make us believe that they got the roadbook wrong, and told us that this stage actually would be longer than indicated in the instructions ... hahaha ... the French's 1st April jokes are nearly as bad as the Swiss ones!

Today's stage was almost a full marathon, and starting off on a S/W bearing we made a big turn and ended up heading N/NW towards the end.

After a few km of rocky surface (those rocks are sometimes pretty sharp and they can cut your shoe or gaiters) it started to go slightly uphill and then after 9 km – surprise-surprise – we encountered sand dunes again. What can I say, please don't invite me to the beach for a while, ok! This sand is so fine, and it makes it soooo hard to walk and move forward. I tried to follow, whenever possible, some heavy and big runner, and quickly stepped into their steps before the sand covered them up again. In combination with the heat this was again a strenuous day.

At CP1, we received two bottles of water. We did not really feel like we needed two, but I told Josh that we should carry the second one towards the next CP, and this was a great move! Because later on, in 48-50 degrees heat with almost no humidity, having crossed even more dunes for 8 km, we arrived at km 20, at the bottom of a huge cliff and we had quite a technical climb-up ahead of us.

We could use that bottle! We had a quick break, washed our feet, refilled our drinking bottles, ate and cooled our heads. A few people passed us when we sat in the shade of the only tree far

and wide, and they envied us for that water bottle I guess. Drinking water becomes a joyful experience, but the smile of others is a marvellous present too.

After that refreshment stop, we managed to get up that cliff like mountain goats and almost flew down the 200 m steep rocky mountainside. Finally, after another 5 km of dunes, we finally reached the longed-for CP2. The organisers always tried to hide the CPs until the very last minute, and people not carrying a GPS sometimes had no clue how far it was until the next water stop.

After CP2, I left Josh behind (again), and I started to jog and run a bit. It was a good part of the stage with flat, rocky terrain and I made up some invaluable time. About 1 km before CP3, I ran into a Swiss guy who was in bad shape. He was staggering and zigzagging across the desert. He was obviously dehydrated, and he was still carrying more than one full bottle of 1.5 litres with him! How silly, but sometimes the hot sun makes you not think properly anymore and you forget the most simple and essential rules. I urged him to bloody drink that bottle NOW as in 1000 m he would get a new one!

In this stage, I tried to follow one marker to the next and to run or walk in the most direct line. Sometimes, it was nice to be all alone in the desert, and funny enough, I often harder ground than if I would have followed the line of runners some 500 m to my left where the ground was mostly walked out and too soft.

CP3 to the bivouac was uneventful, and I was glad when I arrived 'at home'. Keith had not expected me so early, but he was glad that he had someone to talk to after a whole day on his own in tent 79. This was again a good day, and I was ready to attack on the long stage on the following day.

It occurred to me that we were at the halfway mark already. During the day, I had added another 40.5 km to my tally, and I had done this in exactly 7 hours. Now we approached the stage; the one most of us feared: the 75.5 km across some of the most difficult terrain of this Marathon des Sables. As for me, I thought "bring it on – I am ready"!

2 April 2008 – Stage 4: Ba Hallou to Oued Ahssia – 75.5 km

When I woke up in the morning, I immediately sensed that this would be 'my stage'. I felt ready to show myself that all the hard training was worthwhile, and today, I would 'kick ass'! My pack was much lighter by that time, and I felt strong. Josh and I got ready early, and as you can see, we managed to get to the front of the starting line. This was an interesting one: the 50 runners currently on place 1–50 had to start three hours later than us – ensuring that everyone had to run parts of this stage in the dark.

There was an eerie silence throughout the camp this morning. Everyone was in deep thoughts about this coming stage ... 75.5 km in the hot desert was going to be a challenge for every single one of us who was still in the race.



<http://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=4709544&page=1> (article and video)

The first 7 km lead us towards El Oftal *jebel* (mountain). This is an ascent of an average 25% inclination to reach the summit. I decided to run fast towards the start of that climb, expecting a bottleneck of runners, as everyone had to climb in a line, using handrails to get up.

Sure enough, this was a huge climb! Over the top, and back down, along a rocky river bed. My fear was for my right knee on the downhill, so I went slowly. Once down in the flat again, I started to speed up, and I crossed a very rocky plain and a few dunes before I reached CP1 and received my two bottles of water. Ahead of us, towards CP2, which was at the entrance of a big cap in this massive rock cliff we just crossed 17 km, earlier, laid a vast and flat section. Now it started to get hot, and when I took a look around, there was nothing alive there apart from silly people trying to run as fast as possible towards the next CP and water.

I was on such a high, passing and overtaking people all day. Now this started to become a race, even for me. That's what it was all about after all! But again, it was important to remember that all of us came out here for different reasons, and I'm of the opinion that the journey is far more important than the end result.

After CP2 and crossing an impressive gorge, we were confronted with our first stretch of salt flats. And this was just a glimpse of what was to come later. The sun poured onto us for hours already and never relented. We all dragged our weakened bodies through the flats only to be welcomed by some more mountains to climb. CP3 was sitting on a small mound just ahead of a short climb bringing us onto the ridge of Mhadid Al Elahau *jebel*. The next part was most beautiful – we went along the ridge overlooking two valleys on either side, about 300-400 metres deep – a phenomenal view – unforgettable.

Coming down the other side and after battling a 4 long kilometres of sand dunes (again), we arrived at the edge of an endless salt flat. The last time I saw a similar landscape was in the highlands of Argentina at the border to Chile, and that was in the comfort of an air-conditioned train.

It is hard to describe these salt flats. What looks soft as cotton is sharp like razor blades. The ground gave in under the weight of the runners and this hurt. Our legs seemed to get heavier and heavier. It was like trying to run through quicksand. I had to bow before the forces of nature, understand them and bend to their will.

The hours came and went. I caught up with people along the way – those little dots on the horizon became my little *Sardines* and I was the big *Tuna* catching them.

I knew that somewhere out there, in the middle of it all, was CP4. Thank God for those two bottles we had received at CP3. I tried hard to manage my fluid intake, but with this relentless heat it looked like I was going to run out of water before reaching the safety of the next CP. Funny enough, at CP4 there were local kids watching us arriving and leaving again. Here it was also the time when the leaders caught up with me. They had started three hours after me, and I was already suffering for six hours. They were passing me on light feet, looking like gazelles flying across these salt flats.

At CP4 (halfway), I was handed another two bottles, and I was told that the temperature had currently reached 50 degrees! After refilling my running bottles, I headed out again, carrying the second bottle of water with me. The local kids were into those bottles, empty or full and they followed me for quite a while out into the second half of the salt flats, hoping for me to finish the water and hand them the bottle.

I was running west and the sun slowly crept towards the horizon. My goal was to reach CP5 before darkness, and I had to keep my speed up for the next 13 kilometres. Finally, I left the dry lake behind me, only to be welcomed by a uneven, sandy and bumpy but at least flat section. There were camels grazing, so there must be people living out here – crazy.

With the sun going down, the temperature dropped too, and for a while it was very nice running along in mid-30ies without the blaring sun. CP5 appeared, and that gave me a chance to grab my head torch and take a compass bearing. My GPS battery had died along the way after about 9 hours, and even though I had tried to charge with my solar panel on the run, it did not pick-up position anymore. So, with a glow stick on my backpack, the headlight on my head, and the general direction figured out, I started off into the dusk and night. It got really frustrating trying to keep up a rhythm in this sandy terrain. Some hard bits, then soft ones, making me sink in to the ankle, hard on one leg, soft on the other ... so after 10 hours my knees started to hurt a bit. I felt like crying out for a cold beer and a soft bed.

Only twice I had done some running in the dark before. This night was magic – the sky was full of stars, and the night was calm and there was total stillness around me. From time to time, I saw some light popping up and down behind me in the distance, but I still tried to keep ahead of other *Tunas*. There were still some more *Sardines* ahead of me.

The organisers had promised to shine a green laser into the sky to show us the way to the bivouac, but there was nothing in sight so far although it got close to 9pm. By now, I was twelve hours into the race, and I could see a white glow in the distance – so ‘home’ couldn’t be far anymore.

On the last kilometre, a big guy overtook me (he must be from the *Shark Family*), and when I looked back I could see at least 50 more headlights bearing down on me! Shit, I realised that I have become a *Sardine* on these last kilometres. With what little energy I could still mobilise, I started to jog, then ran, and when I finally saw that finish line, I sprinted – I sprinted and caught that big guy again on the last meters! What a finish after a great day. I had run 75.5 km in 11 hours and 50 minutes. The desert had been kind to me.

Keith was more than surprised to see me so early, and when I started looking around the bivouac, I only saw empty tents. The next day, I learned that I had finished in 109th position, so I guess I kept up with the *Tunas and Sharks* all day long!

3 April 2008 – Rest day (for some ☺ : Oued Ahssia (Moroccan desert))

During the entire night runners had arrived, and our tent had slowly started filling up. In the morning only Alan was still missing. Josh had surprised many, including himself I think. He had arrived about 2 hours after me, but still before midnight. What a great effort!

Cliff made the same silly mistake as in the previous year, wearing his 1-size-too-large shoes that gave him the worst blisters you could imagine. He was in tears and agony for 9 hours and hobbled in at 2am in the morning. The Marathon Man arrived at 4am, and Alan made it under 24 hours just in time for breakfast at 9am! What a long, long day and night for some.

We had breakfast and lunch, wrote the daily email for the blog, relaxed, had a shower (take one 1-l-bottle, drill a few holes into the cap, and start squeezing over your head), sorted out our gear and made the pack lighter for the marathon stage which was to come up on the next day. During this, still runners arrived to finish their stage 4!

Just after 3pm, 30 odd hours since the start of this stage, we all hobbled, crawled and limped towards the finish line to welcome the last runner arriving: a 58-year-old Japanese lady followed by the two sweeper camels. Someone was playing a blowpipe (and you thought I was silly to take my blow-up hand), everyone was cheering, clapping and hooting. We all had a tear in our eyes as we knew what this woman just went through, and we all felt what enormous task she had achieved! A true champion! On this evening, we all were champions.

Cliff spend hours with the Doc Trotters to get his feet repaired. He had no more skin left on the sole of both his feet, and when a doctor dropped some antibiotics for him at our tent, I asked (in French) what Cliff's chances were to continue. The Doc was shaking his head, but told me that it was up to the runner to decide when to drop out. I knew that Cliff would never give up, and sure enough, he managed to finish this race almost on his knees! During the mere 17 km of the last stage, two medics accompanied him as he shuffled over the finish line after 4 hours! I had already been under the shower back in Ouarzazate when poor Cliff finally got his medal at the finish line. Apparently, his doctor back in Melbourne has never seen feet like his before, and it may require skin crafts to fix them. Personally, I think this is too high a price to pay for just a few days of running.

On this evening, we received a little treat: first, they asked us to swap our race numbers for a new one, so that the TV crews could get some nice photos of us running the true marathon across the desert on the following day. As an incentive they offered us a cool Pepsi. Now, who would have said no to that!? How good did this can of coke taste with my dinner! And I normally hate Pepsi.

Further, we were presented with a movie night in the middle of the tent village. We were shown pictures from the first four days of the race. This was footage for the official DVD and also extracts from *M5*, a French TV station, that transmitted had transmitted news back to France on a daily basis. Guess what – 'The Hand' was well featured.

My backpack was now almost empty, as I had rid myself of some food, planned for the following day, by eating it earlier. My stack was down to the bare minimum, and I felt ready for another fast day. I was really looking forward to see Uli and my parents at the finish line, which has been a great motivator during the whole week!

4 April 2008 – Stage 5: Oued Ahssia to Isk N'Brahim – 42.2 km

Finally, the organisers had pity with us. This stage was made for the fast marathon runners – flat. Still, it took the winner 3.10hrs, as of course there was still – yes, you guessed right – sand and more sand.

I was relieved that my shoes had protected me well during the last 5 days, and my approach running with 2 pairs of socks had worked well – no major blisters. As mentioned above, most

contestants, at this point, had to pay the price for their hard running during the first 3 days. I, on the other hand, could now increase my speed and make up lots of lost time.

On this morning, there had been a party mood at the start. Sadly, we still had to comfort some dropouts. Some people just had not been able to make it in the 34 hours time frame on the previous stage, others simply had to give up due to ill health.

The music was pumping, people jumping, and off we went running towards civilisation again. On this day, we would cross a small oasis and a little township, all signs that we were getting closer towards the end of this adventure.

After climbing a small pass, Rich Merzoug, we crossed mostly stony but flat terrain. It was hot again and the sun was burning down relentlessly. Every little puff of hot air was welcomed as it may have cooled us down from 48 to 47 degrees for a minute!

I had told Uli that it may take me about six to seven hours to reach the stage finish, but halfway into it, I realised that I was on a roll again, and that I would be able to keep up with the big *Tunas*. I had decided to run on my own, and often I would not look up to see whom I just overtook. Stephen, my 6-Foot-Track sweeper buddy, told me afterwards, that I had passed him like a steam train – eyes down (you had to, with all those big rocks) and breathing heavily. And we were already running the sixth marathon in a row here!

Sand dunes, rocky flats, small river bed, little *jebel* – I just left them all behind me, and with some backwind, I was on my way to our last bivouac in the desert. I kind of felt sad that it would soon all be over. I had made new friends, had discovered a new personal frontier, and I was now feeling better with every day. I could have run another few days easily – without sand though.

After 4.5 hours, I came around a corner and I could see the finish in the distance. This was the first time they let us see the finish from so far away! I realised that Uli may not be there in time, but that did not slow me down, and I did not blow-up my Aussie-hand (yet).

I sprinted into the finish just under 5 hours – my longest marathon time ever, but who cares. I just got my water when a 4WD pulled up close to me, and my parents and Uli got out – surprised to see me already here! After some heart-filled welcome and congratulations, I asked the organisers if I could run through the finish once more, this time with my inflatable hand, to allow Uli to take some photos.

All done, I needed to sit down in the shade of the water truck and get my breath back. It had been a hard day with a great finish. It was wonderful to see Uli and especially my parents, who were very reluctant to make the trip into the desert in the first place, but once there, they loved it!

Dad even made friends with the 2nd of this stage, the Jordanian Aziz El Akad, who incidentally also finished the race in 2nd position. The Ahansal brothers are simply unbeatable. Poor Aziz was 3rd for 10 years in a row behind Lahcen and Mohamad, and now with Lahcen retired, he will probably be 2nd for another 10 years behind Mohamad.

I was allowed invite my parents and Uli to the camp. This is unusual, and an Official had to be with us all the time to avoid any risk of me getting some extra food or water. My parents were shocked that not only were we running through this harsh desert, but that we also had to sleep on the ground with little protection and no toilets or shower for 9 days! I guess they were looking forward to their hotel bed that night.

After the little inspection, we all walked back to the finish line to wait for Josh to arrive. He had a slower day and arrived 6.5 hours after the start.

Uli and my parents then returned to their hostel, but of course they had promised to wait for me at the final finish line in Tazzarine. We, on the other hand, had a treat waiting for us: the organisers had flown in parts of the orchestra of the Paris Opera, and the musicians arrived after dinner at 7 pm for a one-hour concert under a star-filled sky. This was an amazing and emotional finish to a wonderful week in the desert. The French certainly know how to make such events special!

I felt so happy and content. We did it after all, and for the last time, we fell onto our small thermo mats and into our smelly and dirty sleeping bags.

5 April 2008 – Stage 6: Isk N'Brahim to Tazzarine – 17.5 km

There was a short sprint on the program today, and it would not make any big difference in the total tally anymore.

The Berbers did not take down the tents this morning as there was no rush to get them to a next bivouac. After our last breakfast in the desert, we got up to pick up our water for the last stage. My backpack was soooo light, I almost did not feel it anymore on my back. Only the sleeping bag and mat, plus a few bits and pieces I had to carry 'home'.

Standing all in the shade of the balloon, we waited for the Chief Organiser, Patrick Bauer, to do the final countdown. We all ran through our camp to say goodbye, and then we headed out into the desert for one last time.

It was a fairly flat course with no dunes (!) in front of us. We all rushed out and ran strongly towards Tazzarine. The course was still rocky, and in the heat of the excitement, I was not the only one who fell and stumbled over these rocks. I realised that the last two days had taken its toll and my legs, and my feet were tired, so to avoid any last and unnecessary injuries, I slowed down a bit and enjoyed my last stage of the MdS, taking in all the beauty of this extraordinary countryside.

In the distance one could already see the town of Tazzarine, and once we had left the sand, *jebels* and *wadis* behind us, it felt very strange to suddenly run on normal tarmac streets again. I stopped to blow up my Aussie-hand for the last time, and then ran the last kilometre through the town. We were cheered and clapped on by the locals as we ran towards the finish. I was not much bothered by other runners overtaking me, as I wanted to make sure that my parents and Uli can see me coming. And hey, with my hand I was an attraction for the locals as well. So waving at everyone, I slowly jogged through the village and after the last corner, I steered down the finishing lane into the arms of Patrick Bauer for my well-deserved medal!

Mohamad Ahansal had won his 2nd MdS, and he looked almost as unbeatable as his famous brother. Trent, our Marathon Man, is now a real marathon finisher and he had surprised many of us by finishing this race – well done!

It was an emotional finish of a very tough week, but it was also a great finish to a wonderful adventure in one of the harshest regions of this beautiful planet.

People ask me why I did this, and would I do it again? For me, such an adventure means setting off towards the unknown and putting oneself in the hand of fate. Going through sandstorms, limited water, harsh countrysides (stunningly beautiful at the same time), pushing your body to the limit – so yes, I definitely would love to find a new adventure as challenging as the Marathon des Sables, and as rewarding as the last 18 months helping The Fred Hollows Foundation.

I would like to thank all my friends and supporters for their words of encouragement, and that they have helped me to help hundreds of people by donating money to The Fred Hollows Foundation.

So, until we meet again – and in the meantime – happy running!

Markus



My tips

I can offer information telling you all about what worked and what did not work gear-wise. Feel free to contact me at info@run4vision.com anytime.

Regarding the food, I would change a few things for future races, and replace some of the heavy food items with lighter options such as Amaranth, the race food for champions.

As organisers did not allow us to count drink powder towards the 2000cal/day allowance, I had to find ways to compensate for that, and the result was that I ended up with heavy packs of over 3000cal (incl. the drink) per day. I had about 7 kg of food at the start.

I would probably change the following:

- No coffee and no double (2) serve camping food.
- Replace some meals with Amaranth instead.
- Almonds, pepita seeds, dates, apricots or mango cubes were great, but maybe there is something lighter out there for during the run? More beef jerky, more mix nuts,

There are 23 checkpoints (incl. start) where you can fill up a bottle with electrolyte powder. If you go with the water only option, you need to compensate with tablet form electrolytes!

Breakfast comparison:

- Voyager Muesli (France) 100g / 1.2dl water / 389 cal = 3.89cal/g
- Expedition foods – Mangoceral 184g / 1.5dl water / 800 cal = 4.34cal/g
- **Mountain House** 113g / 1.2 dl water / 500 cal = 4.42cal/g **Winner**
- Yogurth Muesli Backcountry 150g / 2 dl / 596 cal = 3.97cal/g

My backpack was probably about 11–12 kg heavy on the first day, and that was too much! Try everything you can to get this down to 8–10 kg and you will be happy all the way to the finish.