



After 10 years of dreaming about the Marathon Des Sables (MDS) it finally became a reality on April 5th, 2015. Since I had a good friend, Eddie, who finished in 2014 and another good friend, Doc, who had registered for 2015, I knew this would be my best chance to successfully complete the 160 mile 6-day stage race across the Sahara Desert region of Morocco, carrying all of my kit for the week in temperatures ranging from 90-125 degrees.

MDS is an international race of some prominence and a regular fixture on many an ultra runner's bucket list. Drawing an international field, I found myself entered alongside some of the best runners in North Africa, British explorer Sir Ranulph Fiennes, and elite US runners Dave McKay, Meghan Hicks, and Elizabeth Howard. In all there were 1,400 entrants of all abilities. My target was firstly to finish the race and secondly push for a top 25% finish. The typical format of the MDS is a stage race made up of 5 stages, just short of a marathon distance each day, with stage 4 being a double marathon and stage 5 a full marathon.

Training for a race like this was transformative for me. A year ago, I weighed 175lbs and I knew that once I added a 15lbs pack I'd be looking at 190lbs hammering through my joints. I also knew I'd have to increase my mileage from 10-20 miles per week to approximately 50-75 per week, with occasional peaks close to 100 miles a week. In addition, I would be testing kit, carrying packs, testing foods, electrolytes, running in the dark or the heat of the day in the beach sand. Whenever the urge hit me to take a rest day, I would take that as a trigger to go out and run on tired legs. From the start of November to the end of March, I clocked 1,250 miles of running, lost 20lbs in bodyweight, and managed to rack up some PRs and podiums in build up races. I felt good and ready to go!

I realized fairly early in the planning stage the key to success was going to be how well I recovered each day, which meant I would have to be on the ball with self-management: hydration, nutrition, sleep, and active rest. Hydration was almost taken care of without too much effort, as I knew the organizers would be providing up to 9 liters of water per day at various checkpoints throughout the race. Nutrition was the area I labored over most and still didn't get right. I estimated I would burn somewhere in the region of 3,500 – 5,000 calories per day depending on distance, elevation, and temperature. I also estimated I could run at a calorie deficit for a week without too much issue, and would even add this into my training on occasion. The trade off of food weight over calories was difficult and in the end I went with an average of 2,300 calories per day but wished for another 200 on tough days. The make up would be a bag of dry granola in the morning with Fig Newtons, electrolyte and gels through the run, and a freeze-dried expedition meal (warmed by leaving it in the sun for an hour) in the afternoon followed by 8 peanut M&Ms! Sleep and active recovery was something I tried to keep up with. When I finished each stage I would elevate my legs for 20 minutes (minimum) then make a point of walking around the campsite before eating my only meal of the day. As soon as the sun went down at 7PM there was little else to do but to try and sleep on the rocky ground.

Another key factor was kit and again I labored over big decisions on whether to take a sleeping mat, goggles (for sandstorms), or a cooker. In the end, I decided since I had lost the weight and cut down on daily calories that I need to back this up with some bold kit decisions. I opted for no sleeping mat and would simply use the removable back pad from my pack. No cooker meaning I would rely on the sun to heat my "boil in a bag" meal. No warm jacket (it gets cold at night) instead relying on my sleeping bag to do its job. I wore the same clothes all week and only treated myself to clean socks on Day 4. I cut as much as I possibly could off my pack, any loose straps, mesh pockets, and made several other adjustments like cutting my toothbrush in half. All in an effort to make sure my pack was as light as I could go. If it was something "I might use" it didn't make the cut! Packs had to be a minimum of 15 lbs and I came in at just over around 15.5 lbs.

After arriving in Morocco, the excitement really started to build. I had never before been involved in a race with this level of organization: 400 volunteers, 2 helicopters, 1 plane, dozens of jeeps, 300 tents that moved everyday, GPS trackers, a team of 40-50 doctors, TV and press coverage, a Paris Opera, and numerous camels. Next came the kit inspections; the kit list required a minimum of 15lbs of food and essential items like a sleeping bag, sun cream, foil blanket, reflective mirror, GPS SOS tracker, and an anti-venom pump. Like most other runners, I wore the same running kit the entire week to save weight in my pack! We enjoyed our last hot meal, provided by the race organizers, dubbed 'the last supper' before resting for the night. All I could think was that in the morning I would be setting foot out of my comfort zone and into a dream.



Stage 1 – 36.2km. Time – 4:21:48. Position – 83rd.

One of the things I found out on this day was the race director, Patrick Bauer, loves to talk facts about each country entered and sing happy birthday to anyone who's ever had one. For a whole hour he talked while we watched the rising sun creep

higher in the sky and eventually sit pretty at 95 degrees come the race start at 9AM! The stage itself was point to point, as they all were, and led us south from Jebel Irhs (jebel is a mountain) to Oued Tijekht (an oued is a wadi or small river). The stage had a little of everything—sand dunes, hill climbs, stony sections, crevasses—and while I didn't find it overly challenging, it sure got me excited of what was to come. Going into the stage, my plan was to go easy, get used to the heat, establish a hydration pattern, develop a checkpoint routine, and finish the stage safely. I don't know whether it was adrenaline, or agreeing to run with Doc but stage 1 flew by. From the outset I was drinking water a minimum every 10 minutes, took my salt tablets and gels running the last 100 yards into each checkpoint (thinking of CPs the same as transitions and trying to minimize time stood still), and ran well the whole way. Finishing the stage was a relief and I was glad to have a foot in the race. Back at the tent, a quick check revealed no blisters so time for food and rest before sending an email update to my wife, Danielle.

Stage 2 – 31.1km. Time – 3:56:15. Position – 68th.

Any notion I had in stage 1 that the race was going to be easier than I thought was quickly dashed in the relatively short but intense stage 2. Three hill climbs on the route from Oued Tijekht to Jebel El Otfal, the latter two were climbs up monster sandy slopes, which made for a really tough day. The final climb included a technical rope section and a led to a tricky descent through a dried up riverbed, which caused several blisters, and delivered me into a final few kilometers of rolling sand dunes. Finishing the stage in sub-4hrs was a great feeling but I knew the blisters were going need taking care of.



Stage 3 – 36.7km. Time – 4:45:53. Position – 136th.

I woke with stiff legs and started to regret my decision to only bring 14,000 calories for the entire week. I intended to go out a little slower today and that decision was ultimately forced upon me when I felt how heavy my legs were in the first few kilometers, realizing the three climbs and the tricky final descent the day before had taken its toll on my legs, not to mention running on the blisters I picked up. We departed from Jebel El Otfal and headed south along a dried up lake before making for another steep climb and tackling several sand dunes, which led to a tough sandy climb that seemed to last forever but led to the welcome finish at Jebel Zireg. Now it was all about recovery and rest before the non-stop stage 4.

Stage 4 – 91.7km. Time – 13:26:11. Position – 82nd.

Anyone you talk to will tell you the race starts on stage 4. You can make or break your race on this day and you will quickly learn if your strategy on stages 1-3 was right or wrong. I broke the stage down into a 50km and marathon, then tackled each by breaking them down further to each CP roughly 12km apart. The highlight of the week occurred 30km point from the start of Jebel Zireg, with the climb back up Jebel Otfal (from stage 2), but this time from the other side which meant I got to descend over 1000m down a sand dune at break neck speed. Amazing!

The next 20km went by easy but quickly turned into a long and painful afternoon and evening once I started tackling the final 41.7km. Endless dunes, the heat of the day, failing light, led to a slow and mind numbing march before I caught my second wind and ran into the finish. My goal was to finish before midnight so I was thrilled to be in by 10PM but not so thrilled to arrive to a hellish sandstorm tearing up the camp. It was going to be a long night but even longer for those who would still be out on the course all night and into the next day.



Stage 5 – 42.2km. Time – 4:36:43. Position – 95th.

I knew going into stage 5 that a top 100 finish was within my reach, with a 28-minute lead over the 100th place. I knew if I ran well someone would need to pull a blinder if I was to miss out. The top 200 started 90 minutes after everyone else. The pace was frantic, everyone racing their own battles, it was hard to know who to watch or who to track, so I decided to focus on my own race and pace. It wasn't long before we caught the back runners of the earlier wave and I could start making out familiar runners I had seen during the week, meaning I was probably running around 80-90th place. As the miles counted down I felt the pressure hanging over me lift so I could enjoy the final 10km. All of the training, the stress over food and kit would soon be over. I thought about my family, who had supported me throughout, and what I would say to them when I saw them. Everyday I waved to them on the finish line webcam and today would be the same with the only difference being a tear in my eye. It was an emotional finish!

Total distance – 148 miles. Total time taken – 31:06:51. Overall position – 84th.

Without question I surpassed my expectations. Finishing in the top 100 was beyond my wildest dreams. I ran well but that wasn't the whole story. I was able to draw on other aspects such as managing my feet, balancing nutrition & hydration, coping with sleep deprivation, and saving time in checkpoints by looking at them as transitions. The experience of



MDS has taught me a lot about myself and highlighted weaknesses but given me confidence to work harder at achieving other goals that I might have put off for fear of not being achievable. It goes without saying that taking on and completing events like MDS are not individual efforts, there's a team behind the scenes. The support from friends has been amazing. My family has stood by me throughout and my wife, Danielle, has been a real trooper taking on the lion's share of household chores and looking after our 2 ½ year old and 7 month old children, especially on the weekends while I was either training or racing. I missed them a lot and owe them everything.