

FOREWORD

PROLOGUE:

Without the Walls Within



**THE
FIRST
WALL**

Normal /
Extreme



HIGHEST

01



02

COLDEST



LONGEST

03

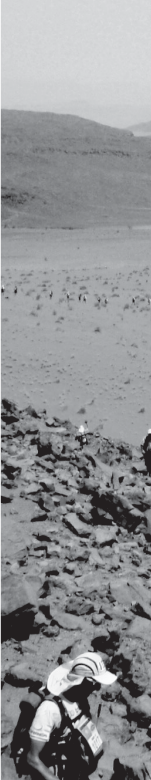


04

WILDEST

Body /
Mind

**THE
SECOND
WALL**



05

**SANDY &
FREE**



**BEASTS &
MADNESS**

06



07

**OXYGEN &
FATE**



**FAILURE &
REPETITION**

09

**BURNING &
MINIMAL**

08



10

**PAIN &
ACCEPTANCE**

C O N T E N T

Self /
Other

THE THIRD WALL

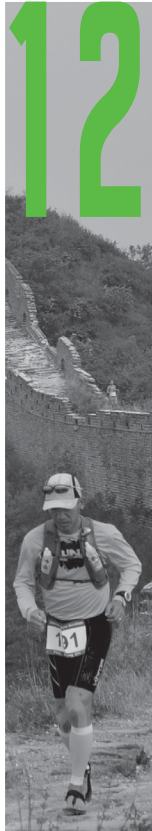


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NATURAL
EXPANSION



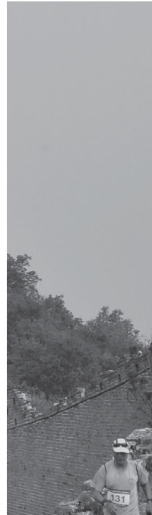
RUNNING
HOME



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COLLECTIVE
MASTERY

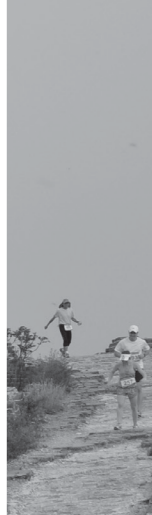


SHARED
FEAR

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LOST
TOGETHER

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SINGING
PRAISES

CONTENT

Time /
Space

THE FOURTH WALL



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GOING
BEYOND

EPILOGUE:

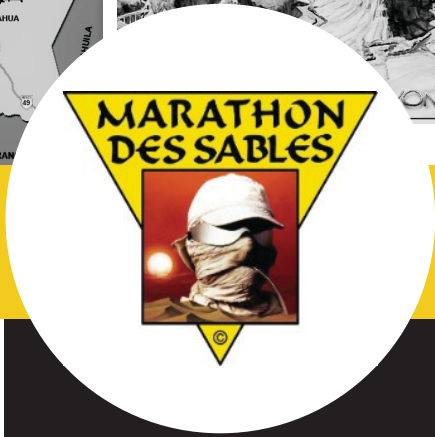
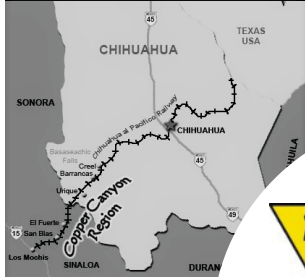
Barefoot in the Beginning,
Barefoot Until the End.



CHAPTER 5 [REDACTED]

SANDY & [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] **FREE**



MARATHON DES SABLES



04 - 10
APR
2010

Dedicated to the late Mr. Ngae Koh Hieng,
who inspired me to go back to barefoot running again in 2009.

THROUGH THE DESERT ALONE

A powerful green laser beam cuts through the pitch-black darkness high in the sky. Limping slightly below it, I let it draw me in like a moth. For five days, I've felt a little bit like an insect—just a tiny being, fluttering its limbs alone, dwarfed by the vast emptiness of the Sahara Desert. Of course, the desert is neither completely empty, nor am I totally alone. The desire to conquer one of the toughest ultramarathons on the planet has brought over 1000 runners to the Moroccan Sahara and the world-famous 250km Marathon des Sables (MdS).

I first heard about this race from a UK runner, Andrew Murray, in 2007 during the North Pole Marathon. He'd told me that a French runner had passed away while resting in his tent. Then, I heard about it from runners at the 2009 Amazon Jungle Marathon who had previously completed this race. This isn't exactly my first desert race. A year earlier in March 2009, I ran the same Sahara Desert in another North African country, Tunisia. But that was only a 100km race with four day-stages.

In 1984, at 28 years of age, Patrick Bauer from France decided to make for the Sahara to try to traverse a 350km expanse of uninhabited desert, on foot, alone, where he wouldn't come across a single village, oasis or watering place. Totally self-sufficient, with a rucksack weighing 35kg and containing water and food, he set off on a journey which was to last 12 days. It was the starting point of what was to become the Marathon des Sables. In 1986, the 1st edition of the race was created with only 23 participants.



When I asked him to take a picture of me with the camels, I did not know that he is none other than Patrick Bauer, the Founder and Race Director of the world famous Marathon des Sables. His staff took the picture instead.

Since then, MdS has been considered to be one of the most challenging ultra-running events worldwide. The race takes place in the Moroccan desert where multiple stages of different lengths have to be completed within seven days. The stages are between 20 and 40 km, plus one single long stage which is approximately 80km. Once registration opens, all available spots are often filled within an hour. Unsurprisingly the race has a 2-year registration waitlist. Not only does this race seriously challenge the body's physical abilities and will, but the \$4,000 entry fee challenges most people's financial will as well.

Sports nutritionist and accomplished athlete Sunny Blende once said that, "Ultras are just eating and drinking contests with a little exercise and scenery thrown in," and this is especially true of the Marathon of the Sands. The course leads the participants through dry river beds, over sand dunes, and stony and rocky surfaces at temperatures up to 40°C.

Runners battle sand storms and incapacitating heat. They endure torturous chafing and blisters down to the bone. Maintaining adequate hydration and electrolyte balance is not only crucial to finishing the

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race but to surviving it. Runners are responsible for carrying all their own food, typically around 14,000 calories a person. In addition to carrying their own food, each competitor must also carry their extra clothing, shoes, medical supplies and a sleeping bag on their backs. All racers are required to pack safety items like an anti-venom pump, distress flare, and aluminium survival blanket. The Sahara is home to more than 20 types of venomous snakes and scorpions, but luckily most of them are nocturnal. Each racer typically carries a backpack that weighs between 7 and 14 kg.



Checking in our luggage for storage. We won't see it for the next 7 days.

Checkpoints are found every five to ten miles where racers pick up their water rations and are heavily scrutinized by the medical staff. The race staff has no problem pulling people from the race if they look unfit to continue. In 2007 an Italian racer got disoriented during a sandstorm and was lost for nine days before rescuers found him alive yet 30 pounds lighter than his former self.

Racers sleep in communal Berber tents at night. The tents are open-sided and can be harsh, unlike the plush bivouacs where the race directors and members of the press call it a night. A medical tent is

available for urgent care and is utilized by most racers needing serious blister attention.



From left: The two Korean runners Lim and Lee, Ralph Dixon, Angela Chong, me, Michelle and the Asian representative for MdS.

The number of contestants from all over the world is usually restricted to approximately 800 participants every year. But in 2010, for its 25th edition, the number of participations reached a record high of 1,013 runners from 44 countries. It is to be the longest MARATHON DES SABLES. It spanned 250 kilometres with a course considered by former entrants to be the most difficult ever organised. That sounds like a proper challenge in the desert.



Runners' formation of 25, signify the 25th anniversary of MdS.

	Ditance	My Time	My Daily Ranking
Stage 1	29k	5:54:05	839
Stage 2	35.5k	7:41:16	686
Stage 3	40k	7:50:25	630
Stage 4	82k	20:34:46	550
Stage 5	42.2k	7:54:46	680
Stage 6	21.1k	3:14:02	599

Every day, the other 1,102 participants have been scattered kilometers ahead or behind me between the checkpoints, each on their own journey to complete this grueling course. So far, I've been by myself for nearly all of this multi-stage race, battling heat and sand and thirst in solitude. Starting out with an injured right calf, I do not want to burden other runners with my slower pace.

Now, reaching this particular checkpoint at night on this 82km Stage 4, I can make out the silhouettes of others hunched around cook stoves among the tents and finally let my heart and legs stop their fluttering and rest, however briefly. I drop my gear and bask in the relief at having ticked yet another checkpoint off my to-do list. My calf is still a little sore, but it's feeling much better than it had on the first day of the race. Leaving the starting line that morning, I had barely even been able to walk, let alone run. As MdS's theme song, "Highway to Hell" by AC/DC, blared over the loudspeakers, just as it did at the start every morning, quickly I fell behind. Hundreds of runners passed me left and right as I hobbled off into a land of orange sand dunes and huge, open sky. More and more of them passed me by, carrying backpacks and water, their sunglasses flashing in the brilliant sunlight. They also carried trekking poles, which made them walk much faster. See them zipping by me, I realized I was obviously a novice to this ultra game. At the time, I'd wondered why we would need to use poles

at all. I thought it's a foot race, relying solely on your own two feet and it looked wimpy to me.



An inspirational start for this American athlete, but he quit after missing the cutoff time on Day 1.

But I wasn't upset about falling behind. I wasn't even too worried. I knew that by entering a race this intense with an injury, I was resigning myself to fate. Either I'd recover at some point during Marathon des Sables and feel good enough to finish it, or I wouldn't. With that mindset, the totality of the experience itself, rather than the race, took precedent. It took all the pressure off me. Despite the pain, it was easy to lose myself happily in the wonders of the Sahara and to enjoy my race, regardless of the outcome.

Left in the dust, I walked through the desert alone. But not once during these last 3 days did I ever feel lonely. Before and after the race each day, I had the great company of my tent mates: Ralph my fellow Malaysian, Michelle from India, Angela from Singapore, and Lim and Lee from South Korea. And during the days, I sang to myself as I strode through the sand. I let my thoughts spools themselves out until the hot sun burned them off and they disappeared. I felt at peace and free. The only thing I was really paying attention to was the state of my calf. It's not like I didn't care about finishing the race; I definitely

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wanted to, and to do so, I'd have to reach various checkpoints within the allotted cutoff time. Thus, whenever the pain in my calf became more manageable, I'd pick up the pace a little. When the pain returned, I'd back off and marvel at the sky.

Somehow, this system had been working. After an agonizing first day in which my injury held me back and I almost vomited from nausea, I powerwalked or jogged my way from checkpoint to checkpoint over the next stages, never once missing a cutoff and always reaching the last checkpoint well before dark. Indeed, just as my Amazon comrades had said, the sandy terrain of the desert is much easier than the technical and hilly terrain of the Amazon Jungle. As the days went by, my calf improved and soon enough I was running. Once I'd begun to run, I really started to have fun alone in this barren and spectacular place. At times, there may not have been many runners around me, but I had a pair of new friends I'd brought along for MdS, and they were proving to be excellent traveling companions. On my feet, in place of the heavy-duty, high-tech footwear I used to swear by and that adorned the feet of basically every other runner here in the Sahara, I wore my new Vibram Five Fingers shoes for the first time in an ultra race. Barely 4 months into wearing this stuff, I was really excited and intrigued at how I would fare in the coming seven days.



Five-toed, super thin, and highly minimalist, Vibram Five Fingers are as close as you can safely get to running barefoot in a race like MdS. Every footfall becomes light and precise, providing my feet with comprehensive feedback on terrain—its angles, content, and hardness. Thanks to their minimalism, these unconventional shoes connect me with the earth, and in such an awe-inspiring place I want to be as connected as possible.

Even hobbled by the calf-injury, I was having a lot of fun getting to really dig into this new style of running. Which isn't to say the long days in the desert weren't hard; they were vicious. Try running a marathon a day, day after day, in the bone dry, scorching hot Sahara Desert. It's no picnic for sure. But with the Vibrams on my feet, all by myself in this wide-open landscape, overcoming the challenges that each mile presented, I felt prepared.

At the checkpoint, I grab a couple liters of water from the aid crew and then start looking for a place to sit down and cook my supper. As this is a self-supported race, water is all you get at the checkpoints; just like in the Amazon, all my meals for this week-long race are of the dehydrated, expedition-ready variety, and have been traversing the dunes with me inside my rucksack. I scan the shadows cast by electric lights and small campfires until I find myself a nice spot a little distant from the other runners, in which to set up and start cooking. I do so as quickly as I can, in swift and deliberate movements. This is the only stage of the race that extends throughout the night. I have to fuel up and get back on the move.

But there isn't much that I can do while my water boils besides wait and survey the scene around me. Some racers are either resting in the tents set up for this big checkpoint, or sit grouped together in tight cir-

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cles, sharing stories from the day over their meals. They laugh about their triumphs, commiserate about the many aches, and pains they've collected over the ultra's many kilometers, and tell stories about their lives back home. Watching them share a moment of connection before they return to the solitary task of running, I feel the first pang of loneliness I've experienced since the race started. I feel set apart, isolated, like the kid at school who has no one to sit with at lunch time.

But then, hearing the water bubbling, I reach down for my food and catch a glimpse of my shoes, which with their individual toes, still look pretty weird on my feet. I'm not isolated, I realize. I'm not disconnected. This race, this epic race that I've been dreaming of for over a year is an opportunity for me to connect with myself, not with others. There have been and there will be plenty of other times and other races in the future in which I'll make friends and build bridges with other runners. But here, for these few glorious desert days, my goal is to build one between me and the Seow Kong of my past, the boy who ran his first race barefoot, so many years ago.



1981 cross country race in Permatang Pauh. My barefoot idol has kept his hair in this second edition which I won. He finished as 2nd runners up.

BACK TO BAREFOOT BASICS

“I was wondering, have you ever heard of ‘barefoot running’? Do you think you’d ever try it in a serious race?”

The words stopped the coffee cup on its way to my lips. I looked across the table, the late Malaysian ultramarathon runner Ngae Koh Hieng, whose kindly face smiled at me while he patiently waited for a response to his question. My eyes began to go out of focus and the little breakfast coffee shop (“kopitiam”) in Kuala Lumpur faded away as my mind carried me back into the past. I could almost hear the cheers of the tiny crowd that had assembled for Permatang Puah’s first race, could almost see the callused feet of The Barefoot Runner lifting off the dusty streets just ahead of me, his bald head glinting with sweat. My chest swelled with a mix of nostalgia and excitement as the feeling of freedom, which had given me my first inkling that I loved to run and loved using no other tools than my body and my mind to do it, washed over me.

“Hmm,” I said after a moment. “I’ve run races barefoot before. But not for many years. When I first started to take running seriously in New Zealand and enter actual marathons, I gave it up. I thought I’d need shoes in order to run properly, just like everyone else.”

Ngae shrugged. “You can do whatever you set your mind to. With enough time and training, anything’s possible, right?”

Coming from him, the words carried extra weight. In 2007, two years before our meeting over breakfast in Kuala Lumpur, Ngae and Dr. Tan Tah Ming had become the second and third Malaysian runners

to complete the Marathon des Sables, after a Malaysian woman called Vanessa Tan did it 3 years earlier in 2004. When I heard about their accomplishment, I'd been impressed and had hoped to someday meet these trailblazers of Malaysian ultrarunning. After two years of following Ngae's progress and of looking up to him as an example while I began my journey down the long, hard road of running world-class ultras, my friends Mohan and Tey Eng Tiong who I knew from the running community set up a meeting between Ngae, Dr. Tan, and I.

At this point it was July 2009. I was training for the Amazon Jungle Marathon, and with quite a few ultramarathons under my belt, not to mention my POLES races, the tight-knit Malaysian running community probably saw us as something like equals. But I still thought of Ngae as my idol, and his suggestion, coupled with my memories of running free and light as a boy, stuck with me. For the next few days, I couldn't get it out of my head. I'd become obsessed by the idea of going back to barefoot running again. Before long I knew I had to see if I could take on Ngae's challenge for myself.

Thinking back to my days on the town's basketball court, I knew it had to be possible. Back then, and during the period of time that I was running barefoot on cross-country teams in Penang, the bottoms of my feet had been hard as granite. Years of shoeless basketball games had turned them into little machines, nearly impervious to heat or gravel. At least I wasn't conscious of the elements at the time of playing. Getting into that sort of condition would only take time. If I trained enough my body would respond, just like Nage had said. Physically, I'd be able to do it.

But the biggest barrier between myself and getting back into barefoot running again didn't come from my body. It came from my mind. This

is exactly why so many other runners are not running barefoot. Either they don't see the point, or they just can't go through the painful experience transitioning from shod to barefoot running. So I felt alone pursuing it. To pretty much any other runner in 2009, it would seem crazy. Why run without shoes? Who's masochistic enough to put their feet through that kind of painful punishment for even 10km, not to mention a 42km marathon? I knew then that distances like 100km and 250km were completely out of the question and something I've still never done. Shouldn't we runners wear the most advanced, high-tech shoes that will theoretically help us to run faster, longer and better? Why do something so different from what thousands of runners stronger and more experienced than myself always did? Shouldn't I be following their example in the hopes of imitating their success? Why did I need to be different?

All those questions disappeared, or were pushed into the background, when I picked up Christopher McDougall's bestselling book, *Born to Run*. In it, McDougall writes about the Tarahumara tribe, an indigenous group from the remote Copper Canyon in modern-day Mexico. Famous for running distances of 100-miles or even longer in the most minimalist sandals imaginable, the Tarahumara rarely ever suffer the injuries that we in the running world take for granted. *Born to Run* attests that the unnatural foot position modern running shoes force on us is to blame for these injuries, and that our physiology as humans developed with specific traits that make endurance running natural. Our legs, feet, and lungs are all literally built for running. We don't need technology to help us to do it better; we are the technology, the running machines that nature designed. Reading McDougall's words, I couldn't help but smile. That was exactly the feeling I'd had 20 years before as a 19 years old boy running in Permatang Pauh: that my body was made for this. There was my proof that it wasn't a crazy idea. I

in love with the sensation. My confidence grew at the same pace as my addiction to the way barefoot running felt. Finally, I knew I was ready; I had remade my feet into something like what they'd been when I ran the first race of my life 20 years ago. Only another barefoot runner could truly understand and share my inner joy at such a liberation.

But there was still one problem, one that even the Tarahumara—the masters of barefoot running—had needed to address. No matter how tough your feet get, very sharp rocks, broken glass, and the superheated surface of a desert floor are the enemies of the barefoot runner. The cuts and infections they can cause are risks on certain types of terrain. Similarly, one of the perks of ditching running shoes is an end to blistered toes and feet. But if the ground is so hot that the *bottoms* of your feet erupt with blisters, well, then you'll end up with an even worse blister problem than you started with.

The Tarahumara fixed this issue by fashioning themselves simple sandals, made out of a thin slab of rawhide and some twine. I fixed it by purchasing myself a pair of Vibram Five Fingers shoes while I was in Singapore running a marathon there in Dec 2009. The spur-of-the-moment decision was inspired by two fellow Singaporean ultrarunners introduced by my good friend, Mohan. They happened to have just tested out the VFF before meeting up with me for the breakfast. Besides the VFF, it was from them that I got to know even more about the 100 miles trail race in France, the Ultra Trail Mont Blanc. In fact, I first learnt about this race from the French doctor runner who injected my blistered feet on Day 6 of the Amazon Jungle Marathon. Everything seems to lead from one step to another, as fate would have it.

Back to these VFFs things. No, they aren't quite as minimal as rawhide sandals, but on my first runs in the VFFs back in Shanghai, I was overjoyed to find that they provided nearly the same sensation of freedom as running totally barefoot while offering my feet some protection. Problem solved, I decided to put my barefoot skills to the test. Without the almost mandatory transition time in order to comfortably run in VFF, I still ran the Singapore Marathon in normal shoes. But I took my VFF on a 30km run in hilly San Francisco, and completed the Xiamen Marathon in Jan 2010 in my Vibrams. For the record, it was my first outing in a race in VFF, and also the first time VFF appeared in a race in China. Without a doubt, I caught a lot of attention from the running public in Xiamen. I loved every moment of it. Not only had I liberated myself from clunky running shoes, I was running great, too. After putting in a sub-4-hour time in Xiamen, I decided that this settled it: minimalist running was the road I'd follow.

I hadn't been able to even consider running the Amazon Jungle Marathon barefoot. While that race's terrain, as well as its unique hazards—scorpions and barefoot running are not an ideal pairing—made barefoot running too dangerous, VFF would have been ideal. But until I heard Paddy from the UK talk about this great book called *Born To Run* while resting on Day 6 of that race, I hadn't even heard of VFF. But as I prepared myself to take on Marathon des Sables, the race that through my admiration for Ngae's achievement had set me on the barefoot path, I decided that MdS had to be my first minimalist ultramarathon. I trained hard for it, slipping on my VFF and clocking in increasingly high mileages. I hardly had to push myself to do so. Running in them was such a joy and the VFF were so light that I could run faster and faster. But my excitement over this new running modality ended up costing me. I got greedy. I just kept pushing myself running

faster every day and finally, during a particularly big session, I snapped my right calf muscle in mid-January 2010.

There were less than 3 months to go before MdS, and I knew I'd need to strike a delicate balance between letting my calf heal and staying in shape. After a month of rest, I gave the Hong Kong Marathon a try, but the calf was just too painful for me to really run it well. Discouraged, I took another month off and this, finally, seemed to allow my body to heal. With a week to go before Marathon des Sables, I ran the Zhengzhou Kai Feng Marathon—one final tune up before the ultra I'd been looking forward to for years. I felt better, I ran faster and further than Hong Kong Marathon before, but to my horror, my muscle snapped again.

Now, I was really in trouble. At first, I thought I had an agonizing decision to make: run the ultra of my dreams injured, or don't run it at all. But once I started thinking about it in those terms, the decision became easy. I'd run as best as I could. I'd give it a shot. If I had to drop out of MdS, at least I would have tried. The thing is, MdS is not just any race, not just any ultramarathon. As anyone who's ever run it will tell you, there's a good reason why "Highway to Hell" is its theme song: running it is downright hellish—and that's in perfect racing condition. Doing so with an injury, and in minimalist footwear no less, would be like throwing myself straight into the fiery jaws of Cerberus.

As I made my way to Morocco, I did my best to let my mind settle into a calm and centered state of focus. It was much more difficult than usual. Would I be able to make even the first cutoff? Would my Vibrams be tough enough for the hot sand? Eventually I relaxed, realizing that asking these questions was a waste of time. I was about to find out the answers to all of them for myself.

MARVELOUS MINIMALISM

Finishing up my meal, I stand up and take a good look at the night sky. Out here, with no light pollution, millions of stars fill it like so many tiny diamonds. It seems so surreal to be just standing there in the middle of Sahara Desert in the middle of the night. How blessed I am to fulfill another childhood dream to be in a desert, running an ultra-marathon. I take a deep breath, drinking in the beauty of the stars for one more moment, and then get going. More than half of the race is already behind me, but I still have a long way to go. A few quick steps away from the checkpoint and I'm back on the Highway to Hell.

With the exception of the stars, night in the Sahara is absolute, total darkness except the powerful laser beam shot up into the sky that marks the next checkpoint. It's an amazing feeling to be guided by this beam of light and moving under it. Still, it's too dark to even run, and so I walk through the darkness for hours towards the next checkpoint and the finish line of this 82km stage. The sight of a big, brightly lit tea pot balloon at every checkpoint can be seen from a very far distance, and never fails to thrill me throughout the whole night as I move from one checkpoint to the next. I don't have to push myself too hard; I'm doing surprising well on time. The even better news is that my calf feels looser than it has ever throughout this whole race. It still hurts, but it's barely getting in the way of my walking stride. I hope that if I can get to the next checkpoint with sufficient time to rest, I'll be able to really let loose to end this race.

As the checkpoint gets closer and closer, I'm feeling optimistic. So far, my condition and my placement in the race have been steadily im-

proving. After the struggles of Day 1, Day 2's more technical terrain—brutal sand dunes and a rocky mountain that put my Vibrams to the test—had actually seemed easier. By the end of that day, I'd managed to move ahead of almost 150 runners, finishing with a rank of 690th out of the 1013 racers, after having placed 839th on Day 1.



At one of the checkpoints in Marathon des Sables, which means The Sand Marathon in English.

On Day 3 it had really felt as if we were running through the fires of hell itself. The mercury hit 52°C. No drip of moisture was safe in the arid desert. My lips cracked and my throat grew parched. The section that took us through a dried riverbed had been awful, with the dark silt surface trapping the heat and reflecting it back at me. It was like running inside the Devil's bathtub. At the end of that blistering day, thirty runners dropped out. But the challenge had taught me some good tricks for running in the desert. I started putting my head scarf over my lips and wetting it with some water. This kept them from getting cracked and kept the front of my face much cooler than it had been. And the fact that the race organizer rewarded all of us with free ice cream when we finally reached that day's checkpoint worked wonders to ease the burn of the Sahara.



Now walking nearer and nearer to the end of the race's longest stage, I try some more singing. But my voice sounds strange and wrong cast out into the expansive black of the Moroccan night, and after just a few songs I stop. I walk on in silence, letting the sound of my Five Fingered shoes in the sand provide the soundtrack to my race. Finally, just before 6am, I reach the checkpoint. The section has taken me 20h34m46s to complete, and although I am bone tired, I am nowhere near as exhausted as I was after my overnight journey in the jungle. Somehow, even though I've only maintained an average speed of 3.98km/h, I've moved up to 572nd place.



As more runners arrive, the mood at the checkpoint turns celebratory. There are still two days to go and tomorrow we'll have to run a full marathon distance, but the worst is definitely behind us. Still, I was glad to have arrived so early. I had the entire day to stretch out on the red and black patterned blanket in the Bedouin style tent I shared with five other runners, to chat and nap, have coffee, and cook some food. As with each of the preceding race-days, the earlier you finish a stage, the more time you have to rest and recover. With each day, this becomes more and more important. As the race has progressed, the line at each subsequent checkpoint's medical station had grown longer and longer. There have definitely been more and more sightings of heavily bandaged feet hobbling around the campsite too, much to the amusement of me and my tentmates. Thanks to my VFF, I was lucky to be spared any visit to the medical tent. I didn't have any serious blister issues with my feet at all.



The routine every morning during the race where we cooked and ate our own breakfast while the tents were dismantled and carried to the next checkpoint.

When I wake up the following day, I feel wonderfully refreshed. My body has toughened up to the point that I'm ready to handle whatever the Sahara has to throw at me. My rucksack has got lighter after the previous few days of consuming my food supplies. Although my cup, pot and little stove still provide a little unharmonious noise on my back during the run, it's getting less and less annoying. As the 42km to the next checkpoint fly by little by little, I start to flirt with full-on running speed. The calf is holding up well, taking the dunes with relative ease. By the time I get to the last checkpoint about seven hours later, I'm almost certain that I'll be able to really run on it on the race's final day.

At the start of the race, I'd heard rumors that I wasn't the only runner taking on this year's Marathon des Sables in Vibrams. Supposedly there was one other person who'd taken a minimalist approach to this juggernaut of an ultramarathon. For five days, I hadn't come across this person. But here, as I collect the day's ration of water, I look at the feet of the guy cuing up in front of me and see that I'm standing right behind another member of my newly adopted barefoot tribe. I'm not alone after all! He glances back at me, checks out my shoes, and we share a knowing laugh like comrades in arms. He tells me that his name is Daniel, and we make a pact that we'll take a photo together when we finish the race the following afternoon.

The last day of Marathon des Sables begins with a windswept morning. Sand swirls around us as we participants leave the campsite in three separate waves to ensure that everyone reaches the finish line at roughly the same time. The sight of the masses of runners from the first and second wave setting out to cheers and waves from the rest of us while the tents are being dismantled and the wind plays havoc with fabric,

clothing, hair, and anything that isn't tied down, is downright epic. What a sendoff from the desert! It has a feeling of finality, and as my wave is flagged off and I set out, I realize that tomorrow I'll be back in civilization and this magical week will be behind me.

At first my steps are tentative, each a test of the calf. So far so good. A little farther and still no pain. Could it really be? Is the nightmare of running MdS injured finally over? I dig my five-toed shoes into the sand and break into a sprint and, yes! No pain. No tightness. Just freedom. On and on I run. I can't stop. It's too satisfying a feeling to even think about stepping off the gas. All of the frustration I'd felt during the first days of the race turns to rocket fuel, propelling me through dry river beds, over towering sand dunes, and all the way to finish line of the 25th edition of the mighty Marathon des Sables.

The race's founder, Patrick Bauer, is on hand to distribute the finishers' medals. I bow my head for him to place the ribbon around my neck, and catch another glimpse of my Vibram Five Fingers shoes. Finishing the MdS at all would have been a dream come true. Doing so after overcoming an injury would have been an epic challenge to be proud of. But having done both while embracing my true running identity for the first time in a race of this caliber is a sweeter feeling than I could ever have imagined.

I find Daniel and we take our picture: the two-man minimalist team. I may have been physically alone for most of the race's 250km, but really that was quality time spent getting to know my true self. It was many miles and moments of connecting with the spirit of barefoot running, which courses through a few crazy runners in the world, and which I now know has always lived inside of me as well.

FOLLOWING THE FOOTSTEPS OF GREATNESS

Runners, especially ultra runners I suspect, always suffer somewhat from the post-race blues syndrome. When an Australian runner came to our tent on the last day of MdS to bid us farewell and asked, “What’s next?” I clearly remember my reply to him: “After the Amazon Jungle Marathon and MdS, no more stage races for me.”

Yes, they were both tough, and I’m glad to have completed them decently enough. But my next challenge certainly would be something even harder and tougher. This particular race that I had heard about from the French doctor I’d met in the Amazon and the two VFF runners from Singapore, Ultra Trail Mont Blanc (UTMB), seemed interesting enough.

Little did I know at the time that an Italian legend by the name of Marco Olmo actually ran among us 1013 participants at Marathon des Sables. He has run all editions of MdS since 1996, placing as high as 3rd (achieved three times). At the 2010 edition, Olmo was 61 years old, and he was 47 when he first participated in the famous desert race. That’s not all, at the age of 57 and 58, he crossed the line as the champion of the 2006 and 2007 editions of UTMB.

UTMB is a 100-mile ultra trail race! A non-stop, continuous, single-stage ultra trail race! I did not succeed in my 1st 100-mile trail race at 2011’s UTMB. It was a devastation, but one that I soon recovered from one and a half months later in Oct 2011 when I finished my 1st 100-mile ultra trail at the Magredi Mountain Trail 100 miles in Italy. In some mysterious way probably unbeknown to him, that’s where I finally met Marco Olmo in person, when he gave out the finishing medals as the guest of honor of the race.

I was ONLY 50 years old then! After MdS, my life as a minimalist ultra runner had just begun!



With Daniel from UK, my Vibram Five Fingers comrade.

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