

Marathon des Sables 2008 – The Story

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

Part I – The Road to Morocco

When I decided, after watching TV coverage of the race in November 2006, to participate in one of the hardest foot races on this planet, I had no real idea what was lying ahead of me ... apart from lots of sand.



Dedicating the race to The Fred Hollows Foundation made this a worthwhile project. Never before did I run a race and get hundreds of friends and strangers involved and interested in helping a great cause! http://www.hollows.org.au/Markus_Joshua/

The following is the story about my biggest running adventure yet and tells about the ups and downs all the way to the finish line of the famous desert race in Morocco.



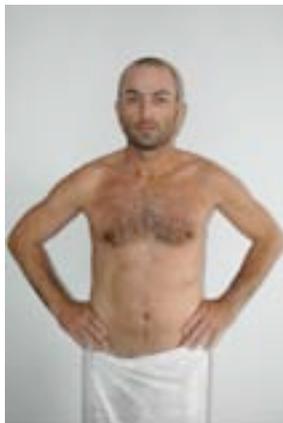
In late 2006, I spent a lot of time to find out more about the race itself, so I went surfing the net for forums and previous MdS runner's websites. I prepared my own training plan, mixing together several training methods that I had found on the net, and adding my own little bits and pieces of wisdom.

By January 2007, I had my running plan ready for the first 6 months. Needless to say that most of my friends still thought that this was all a crazy idea over a bottle of wine and that it would never happen!

Training Plan		The Road to Morocco						Comments	
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03-Jan	90:15	90:15	90:15	90:15	90:15	90:15	90:15	90	Work treatment from New Shoes - wide 40 - Mizuno - 20 size
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Before MdS



After MdS

You should give it a go and try it yourself – run a couple of times per week for an hour or so, and you will see amazing results in a short time.

In April I took part in the BWR Corporate Triathlon. I hate swimming, and after almost drowning and getting out of the water as last in my group, my mission of the day was reduced to make up as much lost time as possible.

Using my friend's dodgy bike, which made so much noise that people in front of me actually got out of my way, I managed to make up good ground and, hey – the running was my domain to show off. I was not as fast as a few years ago, but at my age, 43 min. for a 400 m swim, an 8 km bike and a 4 km run seemed to be a good start into my racing season.



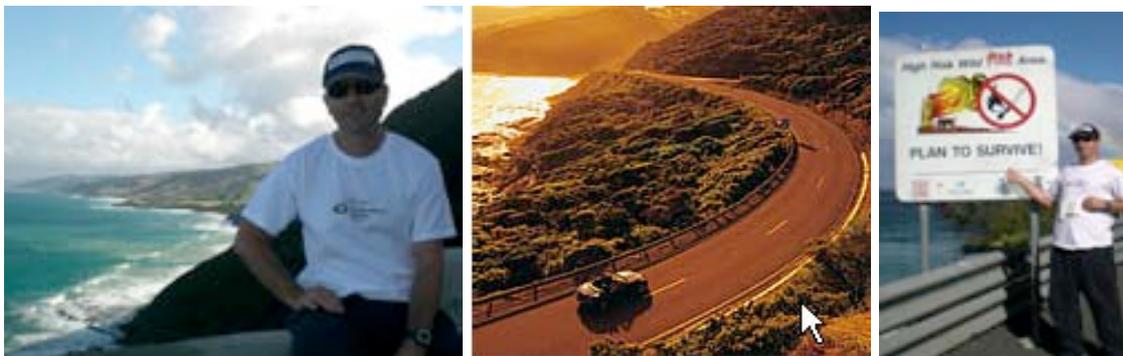
The Accor Team

Four weeks later, my next stop was the [Sydney Mothers Day Classics](#), a fun run to raise money for breast cancer research. I managed the two rounds (8 km) in just over 38 min.



Trying my best to promote my new website.

I was now ready for my first big test – [The Great Ocean Road Ultra Marathon](#), a beautiful 45 km run between Lorne and Apollo Bay in Victoria.



Pre-race inspection of the Great Ocean Road

My motto for Morocco!

Together with my running buddy Denis, I flew to Melbourne and drove to Lorne. Our first task was to place our own drink bottles and snacks for the race along the road – so we enjoyed a slow drive to Apollo Bay, with stops every 10 km, before we could join the Pasta Party at Lorne.

From this point onwards, I had to drink my own brew during such races. I needed to test all the options and brands before leaving for Morocco, and I wanted to make sure I knew – and liked – the drinks and food I would eventually take to the Sahara.

Again, this was a great run along one of the most beautiful roads in Australia. I tried to go slow, something I still needed to learn. I was already planning ahead for the multi-stage race in Morocco where I would not expect to have too many fast days.

Denis soon was off and gone. Funny enough, he went so fast that he forgot all about his drinks along the road, and I found his bottles next to mine always untouched. I finished in just over 4 hrs, which was according to my plan – ‘slow and steady’.



Happy finisher in Apollo Bay, Victoria

I definitely felt much better after the race than Denis, who had a great run finishing in 3.45 hrs but was hurting afterwards. There is always a price to pay for a hard effort!

To finish off the month of May, I participated in the MS Charity Fun run, another 8 km sprint in 39 minutes in the Domain in Sydney.



Training on Coogee Beach, Sydney, May 2007

By mid-June, I had covered over 1000 km in training and racing. I was using two pairs of shoes: an older pair of Saucony that I had for too long and only used on the treadmill in the gym, plus a pair of New Balance which I had bought in January – both very much used and needed to be replaced soon.

The weather was bad this winter, and most of my running was done in the gym. On weekends however, I did my long 3- and 4-hour runs outside.



Stretching in Cronulla after a 35 km run from Clovelly

Now I needed to check for weight loss during runs, so I ran one day without drinking or eating, and the next day I ran with checking my intake prior and during the run. It is amazing to see the difference! I would easily lose 2 kg (2.5% of my body weight) by simply not drinking at all during a 3-hour run. I knew how important it would be to adequately hydrate and eat in Morocco if I wanted to be sure to manage all 7 days of running in the desert comfortably.

In early July, I bought two new pair of shoes: a very comfortable Asics DT2120 and an Asics Trail shoe as well. I had decided to go for a wider and slightly larger (1/2 size up) version. This was important for Morocco, as in the heat the feet will swell up, and to avoid blisters and pressure, a bigger but still well-fitting shoe is essential.

I was up for my next test by the end of July – the [Westlink M7 Cities Marathon](#) between the Sydney Suburbs of Liverpool and Blacktown along the new M7 Freeway, a fairly flat run.

When I left home at 5:30 in the morning and at the start an hour later, it was freezing cold, but once the sun came out, I could get rid of my old jacket and the running became smooth and relaxing.



I had a great morning in the West and finished in 3.48 hrs – negative split and happy that for the last 20 km nobody overtook me and I rolled ‘them’ in one after the other all the way up to the finish line!

During the race I bumped into a guy who I met on the Cool Running forum. I started a new tread about the MdS and pretty soon over a dozen Aussies signed up, all fellow runners for the 2008 MdS. This became a great forum to swap stories, ask questions and find out more about the

gear and food we all would need to survive in the desert. The site's address is www.coolrunning.com.au – look for 'Ultra', 'Marathon des Sables 2008'.

Thanks to all the hard training, I reached the 2000 km marker by the end of August 2007. I was feeling my strength building up, and with mixed feelings, I was looking forward to a new challenge as I had signed up for the 100 km of the Glasshouse Mountains Trail.

However, before heading to Brisbane, I had to organise my big fundraising evening, a movie night in the local [Ritz Cinema](#), showing the premiere of Matt Damon's 'The Bourne Ultimatum'.



The evening was a big success – more than 140 people came to support my project and I managed to raise over a \$1000 for The Fred Hollows Foundation. Gabi Hollows, widow of late Fred Hollows, showed her personal support by bringing her whole family to the movies.



And the winner is ...



Nine months into my preparations, it was time to update my training plan and in addition, I also decided to join an Eastern Suburbs running group. Becky O, a fellow MdS runner, introduced me to [SWEAT](#). I started to include specific hill and speed work into my training and during the upcoming months this made a huge difference to my performance.

The week after the movie night I used to rest, and on the Friday I flew up to the Sunshine Coast to get ready for the [100 km Glasshouse Mountain Trail](#). Never before had I attempted such a distance – the last big ultra I had run was in 2003, when my friend Josh and I went to South Africa to finish the 89 km [Comrades](#) ... but that's another story altogether.

The Glasshouse Mountain Trail run is a gathering of people who all share one goal: to allow for every runner to have the best race they can possibly run. It must be one of the best-organised, physically challenging and scenically beautiful runs in Australia if not the world – everyone was looking after each other – a big running family.



When I arrived and picked up my car at the airport, I already wished I had stayed in Sydney. It was bucketing down, and I could not see myself running a 100 km through rain, mud and forest. The briefing that night confirmed my deepest fear – there were warnings about mud, deep waters to cross and we were urged to be careful here and there due to the wet ground. With great anticipation I went to bed, only to wake up the next morning to a wonderful clear sky and sunny weather. Yeah, bring it on!

I believe I prepared well for this race. I had all my food laid out along the course at the different checkpoints and I had a plan – to finish in 14 hours. In the early morning, the sun just started to creep over the horizon when we set off. Some of the runners started for a cruel and long 100-miles-race, and the rest of us hoped to finish the 100 km before it got too dark.

The first 10 km I kind of used to settle in – to find my rhythm, but as soon as I was warmed up, the first huge hill up Beerburrum was here to climb. There was no way to run up this bugger and getting down was even worse ... whoo, if that was a sign of things to come?

After a fairly flat section through woods and along fire roads, we had to get around The Twins – and then up and down it went for the next 40 km until we hit the famous (or infamous) 'powerlines' – a cruel section where you had to follow the powerlines through a muddy and hilly part of the run. If you had tried to keep your feet dry so far, there was no chance that they would look anything clean after this section!



10 km



60 km

I was a bit overwhelmed by this, but since I was well ahead of my schedule I took the luxury and stopped for almost 20 minutes at checkpoint 8 and 'refuelled' and rested before tackling the last 40 km.

Soon we were running into the sunset, and I was wondering how it would be to race in the dark, as I had never done that before. At the last checkpoint, I had some warm soup and prepared my torch for the final stretch in the dark.

It is quite an experience to run in the dark – headlamp on, swinging the head from left to right to check for the white markings along the path and in the trees. Only once did I almost lose the track, but thanks to a fellow runner who caught up with me, I got back on the right track. I had a great finish and 'sprinted' back to the school grounds of Beerburrum a few minutes later than my planned 14 hours – very, very tired, but happy. I started to feel ready for Morocco.



During these months, I developed a pain in my left foot, and after the Glasshouse 100 kms, I finally went to see a podiatrist. He inquired about my shoe(s), and when I showed him my two pairs he was a bit surprised that these were the only ones I had! Constantly running with these two pairs did not allow their cushioning to rise again, and this was what had caused the pain in my foot. Needless to say that I went straight to Kenso and bought three brand new pairs of Asics DT2120.



Now I had more 'tyres' than Michael Schumacher and nothing was going to stop me.

The following weeks, I kept up my training with SWEAT, and during one of the sprint sessions I pulled my hamstring – pang! I was very angry with myself, as I never really understood the merit for those fartlek and sprint sessions. After all I was training for a 7 day / 250 km long-distance race. Anyway, there was not much I could do other than resting and seeing my physio. The days without much running gave me good time to look into at all the gear that I would eventually have to buy for Morocco, and so I did some shopping on the net.

I had two big races coming up, one being the [Fitzroy Falls Marathon](#) in early October.

My physio had given me the advice to go easy with my long runs, but he never said how short these long runs should be! So off I went and enjoyed a (very careful but good) 42 km run in some beautiful bush and forest in the Southern Highlands.

I finished in 4 hours, so no complains here, and after all my hamstring was holding up great! Again, a good sign that I can pace myself and overcome some hardship.

The Maroubra Beach Octoberfest was on, so to finish off a great week, I could not resist and, on the very next day, joined my friends Tasman and Aly for the Maroubra Fun Run, a short 8 km jog around my local beach.

Both were kind of new to racing, and since I had tired legs from the marathon, I was more than happy to take it easy and decided to pace Tasman to a new personal best, covering the 8 km in 39 minutes! German beer, sauerkraut and sausages well deserved, mate!

In October, my wife Uli and I went to Magnetic Island for two weeks holiday – Uli reading at the pool and I running with my new backpack twice a day. The weather was hot and humid, so I got a small idea of what to expect in the desert – at least temperature-wise. I did 100 km each week running up and down the island's hills including a night run chasing koalas up the trees.



Getting ready to test the new backpack

At the end of our holiday, I had a big one coming up – [The Great North Walk 100 Miles](#) – a run through some tough rain forest between Newcastle and Sydney.

The Terrigal Trotters put on this great race with incredible volunteers along the long route. I also got my own support crew, complete with campervan and all. Uli and Warren were to meet me at each checkpoint, helping with food, drink and gear.



Unfortunately, it looked like another wet race. For two weeks the weather had already been very wet, and at the start in Terrigal it was again raining and miserable. 100 miles or 175 km exactly, is a daunting distance and I had really no clue of what to expect.

I had completed a 100 km race in 14 hours the month before, and for this race I had 36 hours until the cut-off time to make it to the finish. But the route was much harder and not marked apart from the usual National Park markers, so navigation was required as well.

I started slowly but once the sun managed to creep out from behind the clouds, I felt much happier and off I went – up and down, up and down ... following some runners in front of me through the forest ... until big shouting behind me made me stop.



Wrong way?

I had followed runners on the wrong track! Lucky me – saved for this time. About 5 or 6 others went off the track for quite a while and if you have to run for 175 km, running any extra miles is not really what you need.



Well, I thought I had my directions all sorted, when after a while I suddenly found myself alone in the woods running on a road I still believed was the right way. 5 kms later I knew I was wrong, and I was fuming! 10 km extra and 1 hour lost – and this after 9 long hours running already!

I was not a happy man, and after finding some fellow runner back on the right track, I knew that now I was on the edge of pushing the time limit.

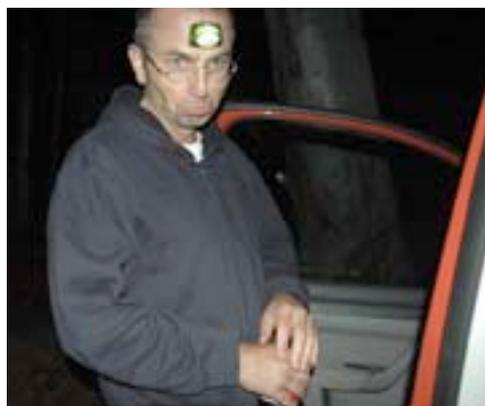
I spent a lot of energy and strength just to get back on track. It was soon sunset so it was going to be a tough one.

It started to get dark. I was already tired and not able to see the track properly. There were no markers or indications along the way. Because of this, combined with the risk of twisting an ankle on the uneven and wet rocks, plus the fact that I need to keep going hard to stay within the time frame given, I started to ask myself if that is what I needed to get ready for Morocco.

Arriving at the Basin after 15 hours and having covered 90 km plus 12 additional kms, I decided to stop. I did not want to risk an injury or accident in the dark just a few months out from heading off to the desert. Disappointed, yes – but I was also glad it was over, YEAH.



Exhausted



I'll be back!

Warren got very interested in this long distance running. He is a keen bushwalker and maybe we have found a new runner?

In December 2007, I started to run regularly with my backpack. Sometimes to work and back, or on the weekends I carried it on the long runs. All worked well and after initial pains and chafing, I sorted out all the straps etc. and had it set up perfectly.

My last race in 2007 was a 'Fat Ass' run from Ottford to Bundeena through the Sydney National Park – a beautiful area and well worth a visit even for a hike. The running conditions were perfect and my friend Denis and I enjoyed a great day out.



With Denis



Sand!!

The 30 km were not easy with a few steep climbs and a couple of sandy beaches to cross, but I finished with my 6-kg-backpack in 4 hours. This is definitely a run we will do again in the future.

I also using running a new shoe – the shoe I planned to race in Morocco.

Before Christmas, I had started to feel some regular and dull pain in my right knee, which my physio initially attributed to the new shoe I was using. Admittedly, it was a tight fit and it may have altered my stride, so for the time being 2 to 3 sessions a week of physio were the solution.

During the Christmas break, I kept up my weekly running regime of 100+ kms and in January, I flew to Paris for work. I had decided not to do any running in 0°C winter weather, however, the good part was that I could go shopping and buy almost all my missing running gear in France – a country where running is a national sport and the shops cater accordingly.

What a great choice of running gear and food I found! I came home with a suitcase full of stuff and now I was 100% ready for Morocco. At least gear-wise.



Shoes, bag, gaiters & survival gear



Upon my return from Europe, I finally decided to have a specialist looking at my knee and received the bad news: a small meniscus tear! I was shattered for a while, but the doctor said that I could keep going as long as I made sure to run in good shoes.

I did big weeks of 130 km and 150 km without too much pain, always making sure to run mostly on soft ground. Also, lots of massages and supplements helped to get over the initial shock and pain. I got used to it, and with my newly ordered, wider version of the Salomon XA shoe from the USA, I felt confident that to make it to the finish in Morocco – maybe not running as fast as planned, but finishing I would!

Apart from training and gear preparation I spent many hours organising and raising funds for my charity. At a fundraising dinner I met a fellow MdS runner, Trent Morrow, who was a bit behind in his preparation, but with some help and good advice he became a very vocal MdS ambassador. 'The Marathon Man' was born and he talked in a couple of TV shows and radio stations about the forthcoming MdS, which help not only his project but made more people aware about ultra-running in general.



*The Marathon Man meets
run4vision at the beach*

I was very lucky and grateful to have so many generous friends and supporters attending my Moroccan Feast Night. Apart from having found many sponsors for my gear, I was also able to transfer a big sum of money to The Fred Hollows Foundation.

Gabi Hollows and her son made a quick appearance to show their gratitude, and the 45 supporters enjoyed a great evening with delicious Moroccan food, a belly dancer and my run4vision presentation about the race and The Fred Hollows Foundation.



For the first time, I had the opportunity to present running gear to the public.

There was only one more month to go until the race start in the desert, and the final test with all the Marathon des Sable gear was to be done running the famous 6-Foot-Track in the Blue Mountains.

Stephen Jackson, a fellow MdS runner, invited me to come along with him as a sweeper, an offer I gladly accepted, as I did not expect to run any new personal best with my damaged knee.

Sure enough, the frequent step ups and downs did not do any good to my knee, and sadly I had to hand in my broom to Stephen halfway into the race. I kept walking another 10 km with my backpack. Walking was something I would have to do lots in Morocco, so I thought I may as well train a bit. 5 hrs and 34 km later, I was ready to pack my bags and head off to Casablanca!



Sweepers