

Les Marathon Des Sade

WARNING:

The following are blogs originally entitled 'The Daily Pain' published online during Oliver's planning, preparation and participation of the Marathon Des Sables. The author takes no responsibility for what was going through his head during these days of suffering. Any similarities to people, places, events or nationalities mentioned in these writings are purely accidental. The author would like to apologise to anyone who reads this.

PLANNING:

On the 7th day, God rested. But when God rests, the Devil plays. The Devil twisted the purity of life by adding pain. It was his first and most pleasing invention.

Never leave home without a lawyer. Whilst Will was not qualified, or even knew at that time he was going to be a lawyer, he still behaved like one, providing rarefied advice to the criminally insane. Following Will's advice, I found myself lost, along with Will, in the Wadi Rumm desert of Jordan in the summer of 1996, without food or water, but with a Frenchman in tow and in search of inspiration from one of this desert's lost souls, T.E.Lawrence. Like Lawrence we were saved by the indigenous Beduoin. The Bedus had a problem pronouncing his name, 'Lawrence', and instead bestowed him with 'Aurens', a name befitting the romantic hero of adventure that he was to help cultivate. The Bedus still suffered pronunciation problems and unable to get the hang of 'Oliver', kindly bequeathed me with 'Colin', and thanks to Will, 'Colin of Arabia' was born. That sadly was my first desert.

In the summer of 1999, I met my second desert carrying the mantel of Colin of Arabia, except then I was to become 'Colin of the Gobi'. The adventure is the unknown and invariably a sign of bad planning. This trip was an impeccable display of bad planning, in fact, no planning at all. The result was that I had to lead a team of 3 more than averagely annoyed friends on a 1200km walk across the Gobi. Everything that we hadn't planned for inevitably went wrong - we ran out of food and water, and amongst other delights enjoyed the four-walled comforts of the Gobi Hilton, a Mongolian prison, when arrested on charges that included spying and being criminally lost in a strategically sensitive area of desert where nothing seemed to happened. The expedition became known as 'Oops - Across the Gobi In Search of Dung'. We of course had no fuel to cook on, so relied on the fragrant fuel of camel dung, a precious commodity that was to save our lives. That was my second desert.

So why do I tell you these stories? It may perplex you, as it does now me, where rationality was lost along the way, and why, in light of my instinctive capacity to cause harm to myself in hot, sandy places, why running 6 consecutive marathons across the Sahara desert could ever seem like such a good idea.

Mid January was unseasonably clement and a good time to start training. Some people train for a living. If they were a shoe, they would be a trainer. As they are humans, they become Personal Trainers, a unique breed of homo-sapiens intentionally overlooked by the hedonist Charles Darwin. They glow like a protein drink, flex like a yogi, and grin with an enlightened all-knowing smile. They are my mortal enemy. I call them Jim. They call their homes gym. We speak different languages. So Jim had to become my friend.

"If you were running 1 marathon I would suggest 9 months training. For the 6 you're attempting I would suggest a minimum of 18 months. You have 3 months. We have a professional term for this in the industry: 'madness'." Jim knows how to scare you. His boss is Beelzebub and his job is to cause you to give yourself a mental enema. If you're scared enough you'll keep paying him to make you less scared. That's how it works. There are two ways out - join Jim and the darkside or join a Church. It's the black and white morality of good versus evil. Jim trains you to think differently, to look at those who don't know the joys of

causing intense physical pain to yourself as 'them'. It's becomes a battle of wills: US versus THEM.

So I briefly joined the darker side of humanity and started running, running away from Jim. Long distance runners always talk about the loneliness and solitude. It's little wonder why runners are lonely - they don't have friends. Whenever you want go out for a drink with them, they invariably run off. To these people I simply say, stop running. Unless you have voices in your head to keep you entertained when you run then why bother? On a 20mile training run through the February sleet I passed Kew, a place of inspiration for a two-hour discussion on the merits of being a household fern with a panel of imaginary expert horticulturalists. This is the mind required to enter a desert. They (the voices) say that the desert is like a capricious lady and can send men crazy. But if you enter the inhospitable terrains of the desert already crazy, then by my simple deduction, I will be one step closer to surviving.

Physical preparation is another way to survive. Prior to the Marathon Des Sables I'd completed one whole marathon, and that was 4 years ago. Ultra-endurance racing has about as much appeal as being circumcised by Edward Scissorhands. But I entered the race with one secret weapon – rest. Forced rest to be more exact – 4 weeks prior to the start I had ripped my calf reducing my levels of physical exertion to the realm of petty sports - table football, darts, even occasionally pool.

The toughest part of preparing for prolonged periods of self-loathing that inevitably falls out of causing yourself continuous unnatural physical harm, is of course the mental preparation. For this I turned to an S&M 'submissive' for advice. 'Submissives', I learned, are people that encourage 'the dominatrix' to inflict severe physical pain upon them, in other words they are the perfect tutors for long-distance runners. My 'submissive' helped me visualize the race, and helped me to accept wearing lycra running shorts. Whoever invented lycra was a sick, depraved lunatic who had some fetishes they should have kept to themselves.

The Marathon Des Sables is an exercise in logistical and organizational precision. You have to be totally self-sufficient for the week. Before you enter a hostile environment, you need to have tested everything. Luckily I managed to buy my equipment the day before I left - dried food, blister kits, rehydration salts, power bars, jelly babies, Earl Grey Tea and my one comfort a Frisbee. So long as you have your Frisbee and ignore the lack of water, the sun and sand can make you believe you're on a beach. Then a walk in the desert becomes a walk on the beach - a much easier proposition. Keeping weight down is key to any beach-comers success. As one former competitor told me 'one kilo weighs one kilo over one mile but over 150 miles it weights 150 kilos'. If there is method in this madness, this is was apparently it.

So dear reader, tomorrow I fly to Morocco and on Sunday begin what's billed as the 'toughest footrace on earth'. I have every confidence I will be the most unprepared, most injured and most sane of the competitors. My challenge is to try to understand why a lunatic fringe want to endure such pain. There must be something to be found either within or beyond the pain...

Let the Games begin and may household ferns be with you all...

Colin

DAY 1:

I am number 715. That's all you need to know. After one day, names, identity, nationality mean nothing. We are numbers. This is a race.

So let's start at the end. I finished in the bottom 15% taking 7 hours. The Morrocans that won finished in less than two. This tells you two things... firstly that there are many bionic freaks taking part - I am working on a theory that these people are genetically modified and that once a year this breed of cyborgs meet in the desert (more on that theory as the desert fries my brain); and secondly, my state: I finished today!! That was all that I wanted - the injury to my calf is already causing significant pain and the lack of training caused by the injury is already taking its toll: it's going to be one step at a time. Tomorrow is Monday and tomorrow they treat us to a 38km day. Today thankfully was a mere 30 - the heat is already cooking the spirits and reminding me why humans do not live here. The question 'why' I am here has already reared its ugly head and no answers have yet been found.

One more thing - I have my first blister that I have named Louise as a reminder why I am doing this - every blister afterwards will be named after one of my incredible sponsors - you all give this horror so much worth.

I give you one word of advice: stay at home and don't do this. I will not be leaving home after this for some time: and its only Day One. If there is a God I'm hoping to talk to him tomorrow

DAY 4

The last few days have been solely about self preservation. First things first - I am still in the race if a little off the pace. If it wasn't for the incredible generosity of my bastard sponsors for giving so much money I would have committed Hari Kari by now. Despite volunteering for this madness I hold them all personally responsible for the agony I am in. I will distribute the pain I'm suffering across all my sponsors in measure equal to their donation. They should prepare themselves.

As a measure of the torture I am in I have just completed 76km in 25 hours dragged the last bit by my two noble tent companions who spend their hours quoting from the film 'The Guns of Navarone'. Visibility is down to 5m and my tent has turned into a sand tunnel for flight testing aircraft. I thought Day Two was the worst day in my life but sadly did not foresee Day Three. Day 2 is when the real horror began. My achilles tore again whilst I was precariously balanced half way up a 800m sand mountain then had to hop the rest - my walking polls have become my crutches - overcompensating for the injury I have developed blisters on my hands developed from a delightful mix of grinding sand and sweat.

Check points every 10 kms may sound like a heavenly break but I am greeted by "Ca va?".....the race is organised by French and if I hear another "Ca va?" when its quite clear I'm not fucking 'Ca va', then death will become them... to take thoughts of pain away I've enjoyed thinking of new ways to slaughter French people - nothing in particular against them but they are an easy target. Today I reached number 46 - death by dishwasher. I will spare you the graphic details. Household appliances have been a constant thread in my dehydrated, delirious state, this is no place for dreams and visions just survival. The backpack and kit have been another unsuspecting joy; some competitors seem to be running with crisp packets stapled to their backs. I, on the other hand, carry 3 Berber families and their household appliances and, unable to be grateful for the free lift, express their thoughts through sores that periodically exhale puss.

So I've learnt that my body can hurt in new ways that I never thought possible. Before this I was agnostic but now I think I might turn to God, just in case there may be a hell.. for if there is, then its going to be like this. Fortunately, I am not alone in my suffering - one of the few sick solaces I have is knowing that the person behind me is probably suffering more. Sadly there is no one behind me, except some marbles I lost on Day 1. The only highlight of the day is crawling into my sleeping bag, cooking up some food; smoking a fag (oh I started with 200 Marboro) then falling into a delirious sleep where I pretend I'm playing darts in a pub in Dartford. The joy is waking up and having to do this again - after this I'm strictly staying to petty sports: darts; ping pong, pool, smoking and bowls.

DAY 6 & 7

Reports of my demise, I'm afraid are grossly premature. The final few days of the race have passed in a joyous state of relaxation and inner calm. I have been skipping a 80ft pleasure boat around the Marianas Islands south of Japan. As the only man with a cross cultural crew of bikini clad nymphettes, it was, I'm afraid, my duty to deal with a French stowaway that was found this morning; unfortunately he was forced to walk the plank. Not much else to report from HMS Anthrax. In my absence, my alter-ego Colin has agreed to file the report from the remainder of the race:

In amongst the sandstorms that regretfully raged after completing the 76kmstage, rumours spread around the camp of a French official brutally attacked with a cooking stove and 'ca va?' scrawled in his own blood across his shirt. He remains in a critical condition and apparently has said only 715 715, 715 to investigators. A feral looking crossbred gorilla/Albanian refugee was seen fleeing the scene manically screaming 'cheese eating surrender monkeys'.

Anyhow, back to the race. One of the more difficult aspects of living in Hades is dealing with the people who inhabit it. Appropriate to the prison like nature of the conditions, we have become nothing more than numbers. Two numbers to be exact - your race number and your tent number.

The tents: I inhabit tent number 67 - an open black bedu canvas affair, which can either be a sanctuary of hope in a desert of despair or else you just stay in your desert of deluded, depraved, despairing, sandy insanity. My tent is cleft down the middle: on one side I have 2 mid-forty year old Irishmen from the Northern Irish Prison Service. One who goes by the name of Allcock - a name that obviously brings out the highest forms of humour, and on the other side the Brothers English, Godfrey and Roger, who are lost somewhere in their mid-forties midlife crisis who communicate ingeniously through quotes from the Guns of Navarone.

There 3 types of people in this race:

1. the genetically modified human looking cyborgs (thetop 50 racers);
2. the criminally insane humans - these are people, like the Irishmen who are running away from something, invariably the law; and are a group of deluded sado-masochists who take some strange pleasure out of the pain and tedium of long distance running in unpleasant conditions.
3. the Mistake makers - people like me and the brothers English who made a terrible mistake and signed up to the wrong holiday at the travel agent.

So back to our camp..... apart from our black (black obviously signally evil within) tents, there are also some white tents beaming in pure brilliant honest white. These tents should not be entered; they are the tents of Doc Trotters - a breed of torturers from the Paris suburbs that hide behind the façade of their white coats and surgical gloves and call themselves doctors. They are not doctors, they are butchers. These tents are abbatoirs and inside you find the skeletal remains of former runners. Their implements are crude as you may expect - instead of popping blisters as any rational pain fearing human would do, these doctors of death take a scapel and cut off all flesh to leave nerve endings exposed and your feet bleeding. And that's if they're feeling funny.

I digress, so back to the race - there's nothing more I like after 76km than getting no sleep in a sandstorm and having to chomp down cold sausage and beans then to complete another marathon in exceptionally unpleasant conditions. But before the daily running torture begins - I am forced to witness another crime - the speeches. Allcock sadly suffers from a delusional Churchillian complex and feels obliged to deliver a daily 'fight them on the beaches' speech to raise our spirits. They usually go something like this. In the Pantheon of the Gods we are not just mortals, but heros, Gods amongst Gods, we are life, we are death, we are masters of the universe. When we run into the valley of death dear soldiers, look pain in the eye and fear no evil .. bla bla bla...Allcock is a man who likes to be hated and likes to hate himself and I have

found myself growing fond of the blisters that are causing him so much pain. He has lost some of the skin off his feet and is running on raw stubs and for some reason I am taking some sick rare joy that at least Allcock is suffering more than I am. More worrying Allcock is enjoying the pain.

I digress again - I gotta stop doing that, back to the speeches::

During the brief moments I've been able to study Group 2 (the criminally insane runners), I have drawn one conclusion: in the joyous state of nature when we were apes living in the trees something happened that changed the evolution of homo sapiens forever. There were two apes: One ape fell out of the tree causing severe neurological damage (these are the pain lovers) and the other, seeing what had happened to his brother ape, carefully climbed down the tree to follow a process of evolution focused on comfort and avoiding pain. So when the days racing finally begins the brain damaged apes run off leaving the more evolved primates to trudge on slowly behind. As the pain increases so the primates start popping pills - and I heard today of neurologically challenged monkey popping a sleeping pill instead of pain killer and quickly evolving into a zombie at the back of the race.

Covering the daily marathon is as tedious as it is painful. I shut down the mind to override the body and think solely about making the next step - that's the only way out of this horrible mistake; when your head is down trucking through the miles, the ground starts to talk to you, slowly divulging the meaning of life. The secret is there is no meaning, no answers, no question, nothing; dust to dust; that's it. When you realize this everything is hilarious, especially finding new ways to kill French people. Apart from race creator Patrick, I've had my target eye on another particular French person, a woman as small as Kylie, and as old as Joan Collins. She jumped the dinner queue in front of me the night before this hell began and when I finally caught up with her on the last day, my walking stick accidentally got stuck between her legs and she unfortunately fell over in the sand. In my defence, I'm not usually this unpleasant and I blame Patrick, the desert, and being British for turning me into this sadistic French hater.

So anyhow, after 160+ miles through conditions fit only for camels; carrying 3 Berber families and their household utensils, a torn achilles, a negligently small amount of training, seeping back sores, cracked bottom lip, a mouth of sand, a mind of new ways to inflict harm on our cousins across the channel, and shoes of blisters I could finally see the finishing line. Unfortunately between me and a return to normality and out of this state of nature I have been reduced to, stood my nemesis, the cause and inventor of all this suffering – Patrick. I had it all worked down to the final detail of inserting the emergency flare he had kindly given us to carry around the desert into his rear but as I crossed the line he grabbed me, seemingly knowing my plan, kissed me and hung a medal around my neck: he had masterfully constructed the race so that I had no energy left to implement my dastardly plan and he lives to fight another a day. One day when he's least expecting it, I will get him though.

Many competitors talk of an overriding elation, an enlightened rebirth and forever philosophising about the haunting beauty of the desert. For me it was an incredible sense of relief to have completed something so gruelling and finally be back in a town where I could buy some more smokes. The whole thing had been a terrible mistake. There's a one letter difference between compete and complete and I had completed it. Without the dark humour of Tent 67 and the Guns of Navarone quoting brothers, I probably wouldn't have made it and to them and the Irish nutters I am eternally grateful; It was not the Marathon Des Sables but the Marathon Des Sade and I feel I've become the Marquis.

Thanks for that Colin. Should any of you still be considering entering the Marathon Des Sade, may I suggest seeking immediate professional psychiatric help and strong medication. Feel free to join me on HMS Anthrax: We sail for Tahiti tomorrow.