FREE MARATHON DES SABLES PREPARATION GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

There are many things written and said about desert multistage events, with differing opinions and often, just too much over complication. It can be very easy to over think it when so often, going back-to-basics is all you need. My motto is 'keep it simple', and 'fail to prepare, and you prepare to fail'. So here, I provide a simple guide to preparation to help you to make the most of your race.

MENTAL PREPARATION

Preparing your mind is crucial. The reason people fail to complete, or do as well as they could is often because they haven't prepared mentally. Success in extreme events is 70% mental, 20% mechanics, and 10% nutrition. With so much of the success riding on the mental aspect, it would be foolish to overlook it. Here are some important considerations:

Know your 'why'
What is your goal? Is it to compete or complete? What are your motivators and who are you doing it for?
Actions:
Write down a short paragraph on why you want to do this challenge. Every time you write something down, ask why. For example, if you write: 'because I want to challenge myself', ask yourself: 'why?' and then write down the answer. Then ask yourself who are you doing this for. It is for you? A badge for the collection? Or is it for others; your friends, family or a charity. Write down your answer.

It's interesting to note that when building up your reasons, the ones that will drive you more when it gets hard are the ones for other people, not yourself. When it is for a charity, family or friends, you will not want to let them down. They will keep you going subconsciously!
Work on your answers, then when you are happy with them, write them on a piece of paper or card and keep it in your pack – ideally laminated! You could also get family, friends, people you love and respect to write messages on the back of the card. This will be one of your anchors when it gets hard, and it will be something you read every morning and evening on the race.

"KNOW YOUR WHY"

Build mental references of success.
In Neuro Linguistic Programming or 'NLP', mental references for success are called triggers or anchors. They might be previous race successes, distances covered in training, songs, phrases or even body movements that remind you of success. It's important to gather a good arsenal of references, triggers and anchors before heading out to do an extreme challenge.

PHYSICAL PREPARATION

Your specific physical preparation depends on how far out from the race your training begins, along with your fitness levels. But in all cases, there are are some tips for training that should be followed by everyone.

Train with your kit
Train with a weighted rucksack from day 1. Once you have decided on your race rucksack (see kit section), load it up with 8–10kg of weight and start walking or running with it on all your runs, except your speed sessions. You will hear mixed opinions on this, but I learned in the army many years ago that you have to train specifically for the task you are taking on.

Running with weight uses your body differently and your body position is different. So you need to get used to it and get your body ready for what is coming. How you load your rucksack is up to you, but my advice would be to load it with the food you will take on the race, your clothing, your first aid kit and emergency kit etc.

Simply put, train with the backpack and the kit you will be taking. This helps you prepare physically, but it also allows you to make sure the rucksack is comfortable and the contents does not bounce around. Train in the clothing and shoes you will wear in the event. Testing all the kit before hand is critical. You need to be confident and comfortable with everything you are taking.

Where to train
Training Runs should all be off road so you can to build up foot, ankle strength and core stability.

Run as many miles as you can during the week, but always do 2 long runs at the weekends. Time on feet rather than distance is the key, so try and get 4 – 8 hours in back to back at weekends. Remember, always with your kit on!

'ALWAYS TRAIN WITH YOUR KIT ON.'

Build in at least 1 full week of training away from home. I have always gone to the Alps to train for a week and just gone out and done 6 – 8 hours of running / walking everyday to get the body used to hard exercise each day with short recovery periods. If you can't get to the Alps, book a week in Wales, or go to a hot country for heat training. If you cannot get away, stay at home for a week and run each day all day.

Do multi-day training events
In the desert you will be running, sleeping, getting up and running again and doing this on repeat over 6 or 7 days, so you need to train your body accordingly.

When I was training for the MDS there were very few multi-day long distance events in the calendar. This was one of the reasons we set up XNRG. The Druid and Pilgrim challenges were put in the diary specifically to get ready for the MDS. Many people use our other races to get prepared for their desert or multistage events, learn from colleagues and build tent groups.

Even if you don't come to one of our events, make sure you do back to back long runs of at least marathon distance in full kit, two or three times before you get to the start line.

Heat training
For the Marathon Des Sables I did two sessions of heat chamber training at Silverstone. For the Kalahari I didn't do any. If you can afford it, do it, as it cannot do any harm, but don't worry about it if you can't.

Walking training
When I started my training for the Marathon des Sables I wrote to a very experienced MDS veteran. I took him through my marathon CV, my Ironman CV and my achievements in the army. He wrote back with one sentence – 'learn to walk'. I didn't understand this at first but I soon realised that walking is a key part of any endurance athlete's tool kit. At some point in any extreme event, unless you are one of the front running athletes, you will probably need to walk, moreover, you need to plan walking into your race routine. Let's be clear on walking – it isn't a rest, you need to learn to walk at a minimum of 4 miles per hour (15 minute miles). Walking does a number of things:
It gives you mini goals to aim for: I have always used the 25:5 rule - 25 minutes running, 5 minute walking.
It changes the use of your muscles, reduces fatigue and increases endurance performance.
You can use it as an opportunity to eat something and take a salt tablet.

EQUIPMENT

You could fill a large warehouse with all the information that is available on what kit to take to the desert! In my opinion it really falls into a few simple categories:

Clothing – race and post race
Shoes – race and post race
Rucksack
Sleep system
Emergency / First Aid / Hygiene and Compulsory Kit
Luxuries

Let's talk about weight - there seems to be an obsession with reducing it. Whilst I am an advocate for not taking more weight than you need, I would advise against taking so little that you have a miserable race.

I know of people who have not finished the MDS, or been in the medic tent for hours because they are carrying nuts and lightweight snacks instead of proper food just to save a few grams; they did not have enough energy in the tank to finish a stage!

'LOSE THE OBSESSION WITH WEIGHT REDUCTION!'

Having the lightest rucksack on the start line is not the goal; finishing the race is. People seem to forget this. I started both the MDS and the Kalahari with about 10kg weight including water - I was very comfortable with this because I had trained with it. I also knew that each day the weight would go down by 1kg so I knew that I would get faster each day, and did not comprise on the energy I needed.

CLOTHING

Shorts: Compression or loose fitting. I prefer loose fitting Fusion Shorts.
Shirt: I've always worn a desert shirt, the X Bionic kit, or just a technical t-shirt. Long sleeves and technical clothing reflect the heat, whereas skin absorbs heat. Whatever you plan to wear, test it and be comfortable with it.
Socks: I always used Wigwam trail socks and take 4 pairs, so that they can be changed, washed and thrown away. I've never had serious blisters, just a few hot spots.
Calf compression sleeve / calf guards: this is a choice depending on how you want your suntan to look! In addition to the recovery aspect, they give a little extra protection to the calves from sharp bushes.
Gaiters: test what works for you. I have used long gaiters made from parachute material glued and sewn to my shoes, and Salomon debris gaiters, both worked fine for me. I would probably go for debris gaiters again - Raidlight do some good ones for the desert.

Hat: you need a good white hat with a cover for your neck. Raidlight do a good one with detachable neck cover.

After the race

- **T-shirt** short or long sleeved.
- **Compression tights.**
- A very small light **windproof** as a nice to have.
- Optional - white Tyvex decorators overalls that people seem to enjoy wearing and MDS sell! I had one in the MDS - never again!

SHOES

During the race:
Race shoes are very personal, you need to go for your own comfort over other's recommendations. I used road shoes at the MDS because they are light, and Salomon shoes Speedcross (normal size) in the Kalahari.

After the race:
Flip-flops: I have seen everything from people using their shoe insoles with elastic to make flipflops, to people wearing swimming pool overshoes! Personally I took flipflops to the MDS and Hitec Zuuk shoes to the Kalahari. One thing to consider in the Sahara is that the terrain can be very rocky, and stubbing your toes can be pretty unpleasant. In the Kalahari the main issue apart from rocks are thorns. So there is no right or wrong, they just need to be very light and able to pack small.

RUCKSACK

Your choice of Rucksack is really important and very personal. I have always used the Raidlight rucksack 30L which can collapse down to 15L by pulling on the various small bungee cords.
There are other great backpacks around now, from the MDS specific one, to the WAA new system, to the OMM classic pack. All are good. Whatever you do, make sure you fill it up and train with it. I bought the MDS New Balance rucksack to start with. I trained with it, and it slowly started to rip at the shoulders. I swapped it for the Raidlight. When I was in the desert one of my tent buddies had the New Balance pack and it ripped at the shoulders and he had to fix it during a stage and it never was right for him again.

Water: I'd recommend water bottles on the shoulder straps rather than a bladder. There are two reasons for this.
You can fill up bottles quickly and without taking off your rucksack
Bladders have a reputation for splitting or leaking where the pipe attaches.

Front pack vs. no front pack: For the MDS I took a front pack, for the Kalahari I didn't. Personally I wouldn't take one again. The new Raidlight rucksacks have enough pockets to put all the food you need for the day's stage. You want everything available, food, anti bacterial gel, sat tabs, electrolyte tabs etc. that you need for each stage without taking off your pack.

SLEEP SYSTEM

The balance you want to look for is weight vs. warmth. You need a good nights sleep, and you need to be warm. The desert can be very cold in the evening. I have used the same bag for all my events; an OMM mummery 0.5, without a zip, plus a RAB silk liner, which adds about 2 degrees warmth. It has lasted two deserts and many other trips, so I would recommend this system. I also always take a sleeping mat. You are spending a lot of time lying down, so you want to be comfortable and it also adds warmth. I use a cut down army roll mat.

COOK SYSTEM

Many people will tell you that carrying a hexi bock stove is extra weight you don't need. Ask them again when you are having a coffee or hot meal and they have mixed cold water with freeze dried food and are trying to heat it up in the sun… The tiny fuel block / hexi block stoves you can get now weigh virtually nothing, and the fuel is not much more. You need to get the fuel in-country because you cannot carry it on the flight.
Personally I would never miss out on having a hot drink and hot meal for the sake of saving a few grams, the negative effect on morale will be far greater than the 2 or 3 minutes you may save over six days.

Emergency and compulsory
There is a list provided from the race organisers on this. Take exactly what they recommend - they know their stuff!

HYGIENE

More people fail to complete the Marathon Des Sables due to stomach issues than fitness or physical problems. It's crucial to clean your hands with antibacterial gel before you put anything near your mouth, so you need hand gel available all the time. You also need to be prepared for the filth of the desert! It's one huge bacterial area. Not everyone knows this, but the desert is a dirty and brutal environment. Small cuts can get infected easily and hands with sand on them can cause stomach issues. Good use of hand gel is critical. You need the following:

- Antibacterial gel
- Wet wipes (small packet of make up remover or baby wipes)

these can be used to give yourself a wash and then double up as looroll.

First aid

Some racers rely on the first aid from the Doctor's tent. Personally, I like to be completely independent, able to deal with blisters, sickness, upset stomach, dehydration, cuts / infection etc. myself. This doesn't mean a huge first aid kit, but some carefully chosen bits. I recommend:
Blister kit – in the Kalahari I came across these great blister kits where you have a needle pre attached to cotton. You pull the needle through the blister, drain the fluid and leave the cotton in to drain and seal the holes. I also carry a small scalpel and small pot of iodine (which can be difficult to get hold of).
Tablets – Immodium, Ibruprofen, Paracetamol,
Rehydration sachets (e.g. Diarolyte) I have one of these at the end of each day's stage with 500ml of water.
A few plasters.
Antibacterial gel and cream.
Sun block. Don't forget this! I use P20, you need very little of it and it lasts all day once applied.

Luxuries

Many people don't take any luxuries, I think this is a huge mistake. You want to enjoy not just endure your experience - you may never do it again! So pack yourself a few small luxuries, for example:

- Coffee – I always take coffee for the morning and afternoon. This is a treat for me.
- Camera – you want to get a few pictures of the experience. You can take your phone as a camera, but be aware there us no signal in the Sahara! You'll also need to ensure that whatever you are using to take photos can cope with sand.
- iPod – you have a lot of time in the tent, so listening to music is a great way to chill out. I also listen to hypnosis and meditation tracks to relax me.
- A special food treat – like a Kendal mint cake, olives or something you save for the tough times.
- Note pad and pen to make notes at the end of each day. It's a great way to remind yourself of the experience, or to help you prepare for a blog post, presentation or book.

Nutrition

The minimum you are supposed to take is 2000 calories per day. Aside from the obvious fuel benefits, food is also a very good psychological boost to your morale. I recommend the following:
2 x Expedition freeze dried 800cal per pack, savour food – chilli, curry, spag bol per day. One in the morning and one in the evening.

A cupasoup after each stage - it's something with a bit of flavour (I break oat cakes into it too). This gives you something for the stomach and hydrates you at the same time.
Race food for each stage (the amount below is based on a standard stage of 18 – 28 miles, double it for the long stage, and remember you don't need race food for the rest day)

- *2 x pepperami (billatong, jerky is also good stuff)*
- *2 x sports beans*
- *2 x 9 bars or similar 150 – 200 kcal per bar*
- *Electrolytes – I like to have one bottle with water and one with electrolyte. Nuun tablets are my preferred choice.*

Recovery drinks and gels:
Personally I don't take them. Recovery drinks are to heavy for the benefit you get, and gels when hot and sticky are horrible and they weigh a lot.

Utensils:
All you need is a very light spork. Use the bottom of your water bottles once drunk and cut them into a cup shape for your soup, tea / coffee etc. There is a small pen knife on the compulsory kit list for such reasons!

Remember that on the first day you can eat a double breakfast, because you don't have to carry it. On the long day you really need an additional exped pack for lunch to recharge, and on the last day you don't need an evening meal.

One thing you can guarantee is that in your tent will be someone who is carrying more than they can eat and will be giving it away after day one. Take it and eat it!

Racing

You need a plan for racing, but you also need to be in tune with the situation and what is going on around you. Your plan needs to start with your goal in mind.

Are you competing or completing? Where do you want to finish in the event? Etc. It is key to have a strategy for any multistage event that you have planned in advance and practiced. Here is a typical strategy I have for desert races:

- Run 25 minutes at a pace that feels about 70 – 80 % of what you could do. (Remember it is a multistage. The goal is to finish the whole event not get a great place on day one.)
- Then walk fast for 5 minutes.
- Repeat.
- Continually sip water and electrolytes throughout the day.
- Every 30 minutes take on food.
- Never stop at a checkpoint, just fill up with water and if you need to stop for a few moments do it after the check point.
- Stay with this routine from the start to the very end.
- Salt tablets – the recommendation is to take one every 30 mins in the Sahara.

When you are running well and positioned well, and then you start your 5 minute walk phase only 25 minutes in, it's not easy - it takes psychological strength and discipline.

In both the MDS and Kalahari I adopted this approach from the start of each stage and in both events I slowly overtook people either during the day as they tired or during the week as they tired. The strategy needs to suit your goal, and this one worked for me. The key is to have the strength of mind and discipline to stick with it.

CHECK POINTS

Remember that getting to a check point is not your goal it is just a water refuelling point. I have seen so many people sit down at CPs, chat to their colleagues and waste 20 minutes. That may be relevant to your strategy if you are out to complete not compete, but be careful, it is difficult to get going again physically and psychologically once you have stopped.

'STICKING TO YOUR RACE PLAN TAKES PSYCHOLOGICAL STRENGTH.'

PERCEPTION

You can learn a lot by looking around you and watching the people ahead. For instance, on day one of the MDS, we headed into the dunes. The markers followed a route that went up and down the dunes, which is where most people were going, but I also noticed some people just to the right who were staying on the ridge of the dunes and saving the effort of climbing up and down - smart people, I followed them. Paying attention to what's going on around you and also to how you're feeling is important to doing your best and finishing.

NEIL'S DAILY ROUTINE

- Wake up – set stove and boil water Coffee, Expedition Food meal and waterPack everything away and set up pack ready for racing
- Take time to make sure your shoes and socks are on properly with no debris in either. Do it once and do it right – your feet are the 2 things that will get you through the race.
- Keep out the sleeping mat until the last moment
- Sit or lie with eyes closed and visualise the day ahead
- Minimise walking around, save energy – sit or lie down
- Race
- Get back to tent
- Drink a rehydration solution such as Dioralyte, heat water and have soup / oat cakes
- Deal with any feet issues – clean feet
- Mat and sleeping bag out – lie down and minimise movement
- Mid afternoon – boil water have a coffee
- Late afternoon / early evening have evening meal – Expedition Food

SUMMARY

Whatever your goal and your strategy you need to make sure you practice it in advance to ensure it works, but also be aware enough to adapt the plan if you need to.

Taking part in a desert race is a fantastic experience and great challenge. It should not be under estimated, but should also not be over complicated. Remember to keep it simple - prepare thoroughly and early to ensure that you are ready.

Most of all – enjoy every minute from when you get on the plane to when you have a celebratory beer or glass of wine or a coke in the bar at the end.

Good luck! - Neil.

ABOUT NEIL

Neil Thubron is the founder of XNRG, a multi-day ultra marathon company in the UK. In 2009 he completed the Marathon Des Sables placing 19th British finisher, and in 2013 finished the Kalahari Augrabies Extreme Marathon in South Africa as the 1st British finisher.

ABOUT XNRG

XNRG (Extreme Energy) provides races in the UK to aid preparation for the Marathon Des Sables. Here, founder Neil, who completed the MDS in 2009 as 19th British finisher, shares his tips on preparing for the world's toughest footrace.
xnrg.co.uk

Join us at the MDS preparation events. Any questions? Get in touch with us on Twitter: @ExtremeEnergyUK

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