



“The Toughest Footrace in The World”

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Two years ago, I entered, ran and completed the Marathon Des Sables. I was very proud of my achievement and knew I would do it again some day. Two weeks before the 2008 23rd edition, I got photographic accreditation to cover the event and so here I am back in the desert but with a comfy seat and no road book to sweat over. However there is a certain amount of envy running through my veins right now.

The race takes runners over the highest sand dunes, along dry plains, through soft sandy wadi's (dry river beds) and over high jebels (small mountains). It is a relentless journey that slowly takes its toll on the most hardened runners and they start dropping from day one. Those who remain in the race invariably need to address foot blisters or sores on their back from the rubbing of the rucksacks. Many just need to rest from the exhaustion. The sun beats down relentlessly and reaches highs in the 40's, sometimes 50's. This is the toughest foot race in the world.

Sophie is a delightful bubbly girl with a huge personality. I have known her family for many years, since we all worked in Oman in the early 90's and Sophie was just six.

She is now a 24-year-old girl with a dream to complete the Marathon des Sables. She first told me about it a few years ago. Before I ran it. She wanted to do it and when I returned I said I would sign up with her. Instead, I am following her progress for other journals.

My circumstances changed but Sophie, however, stuck to her promise and is now one of only 24 British female runners and the youngest female overall.

My journey back to document it brought back many

memories and to be honest they are mostly good. Yes, it was a tough race, hard every day with the effort increasing and the pain sometimes beyond the imaginable. Now I was watching Sophie go through the same. Did I really encourage this? I want to know what motivates people to do this. What motivated me?

“I am nervous, Mark. Can I really do this?” The phone call came after I had put my daughter to bed the night before departure, and she really was nervous. I tried to imagine me at the same age. I could barely remember that far back let alone, imagine it. She is a very brave girl, that there is no doubt.

“You have no choice now Soph, well you do but I know you are not going to back out. Of course you can, and you will do it for your dad.” I could not think what else to say really, as I knew she could do it and would. As for her motivation I still don't know.

I have now asked the question to a few runners. Why? The answers are much the same. No one knows and everyone is different. I am sure there are some underlying common traits but they are not too evident. Most seem very content, though. They are happy, confident and just wanting another challenge. For some it was a discussion in the pub, for others just a “want”. Some have done marathons and lots have not. Many have a story but also many don't. I feel the spectrum of people is almost as broad as that you might find in the local pub.

I also know a psychologist will insist on something more academic but most of us are not psychologists and don't think in such a way. Essentially the desert is raw. Its life in its rawest form and strips us of our perceived identity and exposes the real us.