

## Namibia Ultra Race Report - SteveTidball

The defining point of my race came at around the 22 mile mark. I was chatting to another competitor about the just how hard the event was. As an experienced ultra marathoner he was asking me, a first-timer, what someone would have had to say for me to have fully understood just how tough it was going to be? My answer then was the same as it is now: nothing would have convinced me. Some things you just have to experience for yourself.

The fact that we were having this conversation in an air-conditioned 4x4 having both already been beaten into submission by the desert tells its own story. Back in England I consider myself a pretty good runner. I regularly run over 30 or 40 miles without a problem. I'd done my heat training. I knew from experience that I was prepared to tolerate pretty high levels of pain. And yet out here in Namibia I appeared to be finished just two hours into a 24 hour race.

The reality is that I came into this race simply wondering how long it would take me and what place I'd come. Not finishing hadn't even entered my head as a possibility. The other thing I'd never really considered was the possibility of heatstroke. I knew what symptoms to look for of course, having been thoroughly briefed by Amy, one of the race doctors. But I also assumed I'd be ok having trained and raced in the heat plenty of times in my life.

My problems started just 50 minutes into the run when I noticed I'd got goose bumps. Given I was in the middle of a desert, and I was running, and the temperature was in the high thirties it did seem a bit weird, but I thought nothing more about it. 10 minutes later I started to lose a lot of the power in my legs and was reduced to a walk. Soon, even sustaining any kind of moderate pace was a real effort.

I was briefly revived when the doctors poured freezing water over me, and managed to break back into a little trot. However this didn't last long and pretty quickly I was walking again. I was also ragingly thirsty now, and added to that I'd stop sweating. My skin felt like paper and yet I felt as though I was burning up inside.

The other thing I had to consider at this point was that I was racing as part of a team with my twin brother Nick and best mate Darren. We'd planned to stick together for the entire race, but my condition was forcing them to walk when both were eager to run and not lose ground. I felt pretty bad for holding them back. I'd spent the last 3 days telling them we'd cruise through the first marathon in under 4 hours! Yet here I was literally shuffling along in the dust with them kindly encouraging me on.

By the time we reached the next set of race doctors I felt pretty rough. My heart rate was way too high – more like what I'd expect racing 800 metres on the track than from walking at what was a pretty conservative pace – and I'll admit I was starting to panic. You read about athletes who push through stuff like this and are never able to race again. I categorically didn't want to be one of those people.

The doctors at this point were brilliant. I was having trouble expressing what was happening, but it didn't really matter, they'd already consulted Nick and Darren to get an accurate picture of my condition. Corbus, one of the local doctors explained what they thought was happening – that I was displaying all the early symptoms of heatstroke – and that they would like to take me out of the race. It was all very calm, and I didn't resist. To be honest I felt overwhelmingly grateful.

After another dosing in iced water they stuck me in one of their race vehicles, stuck the air-conditioning on full blast, and told me to rest. For a minute or two nothing happened. But then my body started shaking, like I was shuddering with cold, before every part of my skin broke out in one giant sweat. It was at this point that I felt justified in agreeing to withdraw. Out on the race course, however ill I'd been feeling, there was still a small part of my brain telling me that I was just making it up, being weak.

Over the next 6 hours I ate the majority of my race food, drank litre after litre of water filled with dehydration mixes and electrolytes, and looked out over the desert as our 4x4 struggled across it. We passed all of the racers several times in this period. No-one looked particularly good. It was 42 degrees, and even our race vehicle was struggling to make ground in the soft sand and rock. However it was only once we reached the 2<sup>nd</sup> check-point that marked the end of the first marathon that the scale of the damage was apparent. The leading athletes arrived with their clothes covered in thick waves of salt. Some of them looked visibly haunted. Others rolled in barely able to walk upright.

It was at this point that I decided that if the doctors were agreed to it, I would start the race again. There was something supremely motivating about seeing fellow athletes, already close to their limits after 6-8 hours of running that made me want to rejoin. It mostly came down to the feeling that I hadn't come all the way to Namibia to go for a 10 mile run! I genuinely wanted to share their exhaustion. If I didn't, I wouldn't have come out here in the first place. My mind was fully made up when I saw my brother come into the checkpoint. He and Darren had parted a few miles back when Nick started to feel ill, and I could see he now needed the company if he was to finish. All I could think about at this point was helping him through the next 52 miles as efficiently as possible. I felt fresh, in good spirits, and with the sun going down, happy to continue.

What we experienced through the night will undoubtedly stay with me forever. The overriding memory was just how surreal it all was, the two of us running and walking through a desert in Africa in the middle of the night knowing that we would still be running and walking by the time the sun came up. If anything the desert was more beautiful at night. Lights played tricks on you, seeming to be just 100m away before disappearing behind a mountain range a 20 or 30 miles ahead. There were enormous cartoon-like cloud formations in the sky that seemed to encourage the idea that all of this was actually just a bad dream. The checkpoints were small oases of reality in the middle of the nothingness.

By 4am Nick was hallucinating. At 4.30 he was starting to fall asleep as we walked. Sensing I needed to do something with him if he was to finish I started talking non-stop about how good he was going to feel when it got light, how it would be the start of a new day, about how much he loved running in the morning, getting him to imagine how strong and awake he was going to feel when the daylight arrived. If he'd had the strength I'm sure he would have hit me! It must be pretty annoying to be that tired and have someone in your ear telling you you're about to feel amazing.

When the light started to appear however something in him changed. And the elements were in our favour. We were reaching the coast, and were suddenly hit by the most refreshing sea breeze I have ever had the pleasure of experiencing. All of my favourite runs have been on the coast. We both train on beaches as much as we can, and suddenly this cool salt air washed over us. We started running within seconds, and within a few minutes were running at a good 10k pace. It was totally reckless given how tired we must have been,

yet it felt the most natural thing in the world. We felt like we were flying over the sand. There was no pain, just the sound of our feet hitting the ground.

We raced through checkpoint 5 and out onto the melted tarmac road towards the finish. By now we'd been running hard for a good hour and a half, and it was starting to catch up with us. The adrenalin left, and the reality of two very tired bodies kicked back in. The next 2 hours consisted of us hoping every rock and mountain was in fact a row of tents marking the finish. None of them were. The sun was up properly now, and my heatstroke symptoms were returning. Eventually race organiser Steve Clarke met us on the road. At first we thought he might be a hallucination. But given we could both see him, we decided he must be real. We couldn't have been happier when he told us that Darren had won, and talking about how he must have done it occupied our thoughts during the final mile or so.

At the finish line we were met by the 5 who'd already finished, those who'd been forced out, as well as the race staff. To see them there and to stop moving felt beautiful. To celebrate I lay under a large military truck, on a dusty blanket and shook with cold. I'd imagined there'd be all sorts of grand feelings in my head at the end of an event like this but in reality there was nothing of the sort. I was concerned with basic child-like things. My thoughts consisted of the following: I feel cold, I need the toilet, I feel a bit sick, it's nice to lie down.

Of course once I'd started to recover the magnitude of what we'd been through began to kick in. We met people out there who'll undoubtedly be friends for life. I learnt that the desert is not to be underestimated; it is an awesomely intimidating place capable of destroying you. I loved every minute of the camp, and the opportunity of being surrounded by people who are just like you and like a bit of pain with their running. And finally I feel unbelievably grateful to the doctors at Across the Divide, first for saving me from doing anything reckless with my health, then secondly for letting me rejoin the race. It allowed me to take away invaluable experiences that will last with me forever.