

## **PACK LIGHT – MY GEAR FOR 7 DAY RACES**



We need so much less than we think we do. The greatest delight for me on these 7-day self-sufficient races is that we get to test the outer boundaries of minimalism.

The less we can get by with, the greater our feeling of emancipation.

It is in the spartan that we experience abundance.

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## MULTI DAY RACING GEAR

This section is for the aspirant multi-day racers out there.

If you are planning to run a multi-day race the next few pages may be of good use as it imparts the insights from 20 years of endurance racing experience and the thought-process that decided every last gram of the 6.2kg in my KAEM backpack.

### Kalahari Extreme Marathon Race Pack - 2019

#### Compulsory equipment list

**Backpack** I raced with the smallest backpack I can manage, a Salomon 20 litre day pack from which I have stripped the chest straps for carrying bottles, the waist belt and hip pockets and 6cm of unnecessary strap. Every gram counts. I have raced with this bag for 5 years. It needs an upgrade. I will seek a similar minimalist design but with a large stretch pouch in the front which is very useful for kit-overflow.

**1.5l water container** I used a lightweight 1.5l capacity hydration pack – which we call water bladders in SA - and a 750ml soft shell plastic water bottle which I mostly carried in my hand for easy and quick filling at water points. The soft shell is also fantastic as a hot water bottle at night to treat neck spasms and muscular tightness in the legs and lower back. It is a real treat falling asleep with a warm, soothing hotpack across aching shoulders.

- \*note to reader This is the last race I will do with a hydration pack. I will replace it with two hard-plastic bottles fitted with hydration straws.

#### Drawbacks of Hydration Packs

Being stored on the inside of one's overfilled backpack they are awkward and time consuming to fill at water stations. It may seem like nothing to lose 90 seconds to fumbling in one's pack, but over a 7-day race with on average 35 check the math reveals a total cost of 53 precious minutes.

The other damning characteristic is that one has no way of checking the water level in the bladder and can easily run dry on long stages. A final fatal flaw is that one can't very successfully clean these bladders in the wilderness. Over the race days they become tepid hotbeds for bacteria and all sorts of nasty growths that could very quickly result in a bad tummy. One can detect the bladder-gremlins as a kind of sliminess in the water and as a slight green hue that builds up in the hydration pipe. Nasty stuff.

**Water – the elixir of life** How much is enough? At checkpoints I make sure to drink like a bushman, ingesting 500ml to 1 litre of water depending on the distance to the next water station. I do this to avoid lugging a kilogram of weight with me for the next 10km or more. I also fill my soft-shell shoulder bottle with 750ml for the journey. I use the remaining water allocation to wet my head, the back of my neck just beneath my skull where my brainstem begins, as this is the most effective cooling point in the body.

I also wet my ears. Elephants have very large ears with a great big, fanned network of capillaries running across them. When these large mammals flap their ears back and forth, they create a cooling airflow that rapidly cools them down by as much as 6 degrees Celsius. Wetting our ears and allowing the breeze to rush across them works just as well for humans, as our earlobes happen to be the coolest part of our body.

At all times I carry 500ml of water in reserve for emergencies such as longer than expected sections, challenging terrain, getting lost, getting ill or passing out along the way.

“Life is simple. Just add water and a little love.” I read in a book the name of which I had long forgotten. Without water all hope of life withers. But one can also overdo it. On desert races the greatest danger is undoubtedly heat stroke, heat exhaustion and the sneakier hyponatremia.

Heat stroke and heat exhaustion are caused by a failing of the body to cool itself during prolonged physical activity in extreme temperatures. Symptoms include excessive body temperature above 40 degrees Celsius and delirium. Heat stroke can kill. The way to deal with it is to cease activity, find shade, remove constricting clothing, cooling the body with a wet cloth, and taking in water.

Hyponatremia, which make up 10% of heat-related endurance event emergencies, presents similar symptoms, except that the body is not overheating. What is in fact happening is that the body's sodium levels have dropped critically low, and if left unaddressed can cause brain damage, seizures, coma and eventually death. In this case do NOT add water, but rather increase sodium intake. Always carry enough salt. I carry two packets of salt sachets for every stage, and typically ingest at least one for every 50km raced.

**Sleeping bag** Instead of a sleeping bag I bought a high-quality fleece liner and had the excessive length trimmed off much to the bafflement of my tailor in Sea Point. She tut-tutted disapprovingly while cutting a third off the expensive garment, saving me 200 grams in weight. A liner risks the fine line of being too cold on desert nights that could easily drop to 10 degrees Celsius or below, but it weighs a mere 250g.

A too-warm sleeping bag is a poor option when squadrons of blood-hungry mosquitoes descend in an all-night-long feeding frenzy, leaving racers wrecked with sleep deprivation.

**Head torch and spare batteries**

I use a Black Diamond 300 lumens. I was forced in Utah at the start of the Grand to Grand Ultra in 2017 by zealous kit-check marshals to upgrade my 270 lumens light. The Black Diamond is light-weight and casts a strong double beam to illuminate the path directly ahead as well as the surrounding environment – so one can see where to step while at the same time not missing route markers in the distance.

**Spoon**

One wooden spoon given to me by Usgar Tolken – race director of one of the best races I have ever run – the Lycian Way in Turkey. The wooden spoon was a gift because I had forgotten my spoon and ate my noodles with whatever twigs I could gather during the Turkish race. It weighs 2g and is my talisman reminding me of the kindness of people from all corners of the world.

**Eating receptacle**

My strategy here is to use whatever water containers we are given on these races. At KAEM I carry a 1.5l bottle from the final checkpoint of day one. Back at camp I cut the plastic bottle in half and use the one half to serve as tea-cup and noodle pot, and the other half as bathtub and laundromat. Every evening back at camp I sacrifice 250ml of water from my precious 5-litre allocation and as best I can wash my body down and rinse my running shorts, bra and shirt. Socks only get a wash every third day, not because I am lazy, but because the cumulating dirt and sweat coagulates in the socks fibre to create a fine, silky film that prevents blisters.

**Cup** See eating receptacle as above

**Aluminium foil blanket**

This is by far my favourite piece of equipment. This rectangular miracle of 1.5m x 0.5m space-age, reflective material has saved my life on more occasions than I can count.

In my younger years, when I was racing for team Cyanosis, at that time undoubtedly South Africa's top adventure racing team there were many races where the threat of fatal hypothermia was real. On one particularly brutal winter race in the bitter cold Eastern Cape's Sneeuberge, all three the men in my team developed hypothermia on an 80km night paddle on the Sondag's River.

Our captain had fallen asleep numerous times in his kayak and his paddling buddy was simply not responding to any of my shouting. My own paddling companion had lost his mind and in a foul-mouthed rage snapped his oar and cast the two halves far away into the darkness. We were in dire straits, out in the wilderness 30 miles from the nearest civilisation, at 3am in the morning, minus a captain, minus one paddle, and the temperature continuing to plummet until ice started forming under our splash decks. Every last piece of our emergency clothing was soaked.

I pulled my failing team from the river, desperately gathered icy twigs and branches and built a fire. We stripped out of our wet clothes and huddled naked around the fire, using our reflective blankets like a

dome to trap the heat. It saved our lives. In the morning, we dunked our stiff-frozen clothes, dressed and resumed the race. We harboured no thoughts of quitting, because we knew in the words of Lance Armstrong, that “Pain is temporary; but quitting lasts forever.”

I carry an emergency blanket everywhere I go, cycling the streets of London, doing a mundane 45-minute dash up Lion’s Head in Cape Town, on long-haul flights. You never know what could happen and I intend to never die feeling cold.

**Whistle** Always pack one. Keep it within easy reach. And hope you will never need it. When lost it helps to attract people as the whistle’s high-pitch sound carries further than the human voice, especially when one’s throat has become hoarse from shouting for help.

**Mirror** As above. Hope you never need to use it, either to signal your location or to keep from dying lonely.

**Knife** I use the smallest Swiss army knife which my mom bought for me. It is a special little knife. The blade is sharp. It sports a small pair of scissors, toothpick and a tweezer which is invaluable when a long thorn has become lodged in one’s shoe or foot.

**Blister kit** This differs from race to race. I am a minimalist, and optimist and my kit reflects this. I take a few waterproof plasters, a small pack of micropore strips, one big plaster for a large wound, one packet of alcohol swabs, a roll of duck-tape, and a bandage. Duck-tape is a miracle substitute for stitches in the event of deep and long cuts.

**Antiseptic ointment** I favour Bactroban, taking 2grams of this miracle anti-bacterial ointment in a mini Ziplock bag. Apply on any cut, insect bite, minor infection, small wound or burn for remarkably quick healing. Don’t take the whole tube – it weighs 50 grams!

**Sunscreen** There is sunscreen – the stuff that washes off within the hour and at the smallest sign of sweatiness; and then there is sunscreen – the stuff that the military uses and that binds with one’s skin and that needs only one application for the entire day. I use SP50, an alcohol-oil-based spray used by the British military. The stuff is so effective I carry only 50ml for the entire 7 days. It also seems to deter midges, mozzies and aspirant horse flies. Don’t get it in your eyes.

**Buff** A buff is a tubular piece of semi-elastic, polyester, microfibre cloth, about the size of a large rectangular facecloth.

It took the endurance racing world by storm in 1992 when the company BUFF launched their ingenious invention. You can barely run a marathon these days without a race-branded buff making up part of

your race goodie bag. It is probably the most versatile piece of clothing around. It is wind-resistant, breathable, wicks moisture and is most forgiving of wear-and-tear abuse.

You can wear it as a scarf in cold; in the heat wet the buff to serve as a wonderful neck-cooler or wear it on your wrist for the same effect. It can be twisted and folded double to be worn as a beanie for heat or as a balaclava against the midges. Wear it as a headband to keep sweat and sunscreen from pouring into your eyes, or a scrunchie to secure your ponytail.

It has a thousand uses. On desert races I use it as my face cloth, towel and changing room to change in and out of shorts. I have seen some girls use it as a skirt and even as a boob-tube, much to the delight and appreciation of their fellow racers. Fantastically versatile.

**Warm clothes**                      The first secret is maximum warmth for minimum weight. I carry a lightweight down-goose puffer-jacket from Uni-qlo. It has a hood and weighs 110g. It has saved me on many nights when the desert surprises with sudden cold spells.

The second secret is to make sure one can get cleaned up and dress in a set of fresh clothes at the end of the stage – it is critical for morale. I carry a pair of lightweight Lycra shorts that double as running shorts just in case of chafing or in case my shorts get blown away in the wild desert winds or in case of a very bad stomach.

I carry a lightweight sleeveless shirt with mesh sides that allows for maximum airflow. When I get into camp, I wash and shave legs and underarms (every single day), do my laundry, get into my clean clothes, wet them and lie down beneath the baking tent canvass to begin the afternoon of socialising and food consumption.

**Racing clothes**                      I favour comfort over brands and run in the clothes I train in every day. When it comes to clothing, I suffer a small case of claustrophobia, needing my clothes to be so loose and so minimal that I feel completely free and unobstructed, ideally simulating a feeling of being stark naked without causing social discomfort for others.

I race in a simple pair of oversized black Nike shorts from which I have hacked out the inner lining. I also race without underpants as do all female runners who have experienced seven days of death by small cuts - the agony of deep-cut panty-chafe in those soft tender spots.

I wear with pride a dry-wick polyester Teach a Girl To Fish vest, that says on the back “Adventures that will change your life – heart, body and soul”. It reminds me to bring all of myself to the race.

All my running shirts are sleeveless. I can't bear sleeves. Not in the desert and not in the boardroom back home. In the Kalahari where the ambient temperature peaks at 48 degrees one can get away with

not covering up. In the Sahara, where the temperatures can climb well above 55 degrees Celsius, I race like a Bedouin, covered from head to toe in long sleeve white reflective clothing. There it is a matter of life and death to keep the skin covered and out of reach of the brutal desert sun. I learnt this lesson the hard way on my first ever Sahara race in 2009.

**Socks** I wear no-name brand, five-in-a-pack, white ankle cotton socks from Pick&Pay (or Tesco of the UK or Walmart-equivalents in the US). Cheap, thin, minimal. I have found that these socks perform best over the long distances when our feet begin to swell to one-and-a-half times their size because of the extreme heat and exercised-induced water-retention.

In the afternoon you will invariably find athletes scattered all around the camp like tipped-over beetles, feet aloft against a tent pole or elevated across backpacks or any manner of platform to raise their legs above their hearts for accelerating lymph drainage. In the absence of observing this daily discipline of elevating it is near impossible to get one's swollen, black-toed, blister-threaded fritters back into one's shoes for the next stage. I have on occasion even seen a racer cut her shoes open and still fail to get them on – she raced the remainder of the Atacama in flip-flops. Anything is possible.

**Shoes** Oh well oh well! Go your own way they say. And in shoes I have taken this to heart. I started my endurance racing life twenty years prior in iron hard, stomp-heavy, unbreakable, steel-toed Salomon trail shoes. One could stop a monster-truck in its track with these beasts – they made us feel invincible, Samurai warrior-like – and slow. In a three-day adventure race in the wet and damp of the Kwa Zulu Natal river valleys the unyielding shoe caused septicaemia in my big toe and nearly cost my team the race for the resulting infection that coursed feverishly through my veins.

As the years wore on and the miles of experience accumulated my shoe choice imperceptibly shifted in favour of flexibility, softness, malleability, and responsiveness to terrain – to feel what was underfoot rather than being buffered against it.

My Zen coach says, “Anything fully experienced turns to bliss.” These races are about feeling more rather than feeling less. I now race in 10km Adidas Adizero Boost road racers – super responsive, flexible, super lightweight shoes with minimalist construction, light breathable uppers and just enough traction to keep one sure-footed in dry conditions. For me these shoes are adequate for distances up to 100 kilometres, but beyond that a little bit more cushioning is required.

I wear my laces so loose that I can flip my shoe off without much effort. I find that tight laces constrict my circulation and make my feet feel tired even over short distances. I have only ever raced in gaiters once, in the Sahara, and never after that. I find that 90% of the time the terrain does not necessitate the burden of these shoe-socks that make one's feet swelter, swell, cook and sweat profusely in your shoes.

I have found that running with a small amount of sand (up to half a cup of sand) is quite do-able. One only has to scrunch one's toes a little and distribute the sand around in the shoe until one's foot sits comfortably within it. Acceptance is the way. Resistance costs precious energy. I almost never get blisters on a race.

As for heel-to-toe drop, I believe it is every racer for him/herself. I have a high arched foot and my feet enjoy a steep drop. I look good in heels; I feel great in 10mm drop shoes, like Ryan Sandes who races in an 8mm drop, quick as a deer.

**Hat** In very hot deserts like the Sahara I race in a full white cap as it is essential to keep the sun off one's sun-soaking hair. In cooler deserts like the Kalahari I race in a peak. My favourite is still my Iron Man peak which I bought at the inaugural Iron Man Wales in 2011.

The Iron man Peak is super comfortable, with a soft broad elastic band that distributes pressure well around a larger head-space, preventing pressure headaches and broad enough to comfortably cover the earlobes that are prone to first degree sunburn on these long races, for who remembers in the heat of the battle to sun-cream their ears?

### **Luxury items**

These are far and few between, but really serve to elevate the desert race from a brute, animal feat of survival to an experience with some measure of human dignity.

**Razor head** Lightweight disposable razor minus it's stem. Sweat does not stink. One can run for miles, get drenched in sweat and not have any body odour. The smell arrives when the bacteria that live on our skins break down the sweat produced, especially by the glands under our arms.

Underarm hairs trap sweat and bacteria creating a fecund hot-bed that soon leaves one smelling ripe and pungent. A daily practice of shaving under my arms strips my skin of sweat and bacteria and enables me to arrive at the finish line virtually free of body odour. That is what I believe anyway. Perhaps we simply get accustomed to each other's wild rancid smell and don't notice when outsiders gag in our presence.

**Face cream** 10ml for seven days in a super light aluminium lip balm tub. There is nothing more luxurious than applying soft, silky, apricot-and-almond smelling face cream to parched cheeks and a sun-crisped nose.

**Soap** A small coin size piece in a small zip-lock. Use sparingly as soapy residue can cause more bacterial activity even than sweat. It is equally bad for the fragile waterways of the desert.



**Toothpaste** 7ml airline edition, and the mark of civilisation. I couldn't imagine running 250km whilst foul-breathed and woolly-mouthed.

**Toothbrush head** By removing the stem one saves an additional 2 grams of weight, but leaving enough handle so one doesn't have to put one's hand into one's mouth to reach the back molars.

**Sleeping mat** Everyone has their own preferences, some people favouring blow-up mats. Deserts are often thorny, shrubby and sharp-stoned. One unfortunate puncture could result in seven nights of no sleep. I still prefer those old school roll-up thin foam mattresses. They are super light and super versatile, easily converted into a shade tunnel or a foam roller across which to stretch one's lower back. I reduce my mattress length to accommodate my body from shoulder to heel, and trim off a third of the width, bringing total weight to 120 grams.

The secret with these thin mats is to dig a little cavity in the sand and rock to fit one's hips and one's shoulders. The first two nights take some adjusting, and after that my body is in bliss. Sleeping on a hard surface is superb for the body's natural alignment, easing stress on the joints of the vertebral column and reducing muscle tension that arises from preventing the sag that happens on a traditional western mattress. The hard surface also allows for excellent ventilation and regulation of the body's temperature which is so vital for a good night's sleep.

**Talismans** Then there are the power-banks of energy far greater than any food source could provide - it may be a card from your husband saying he is proud of you, a photo of your dogs, date-balls made by your daughter for the long march, or a bracelet with four leather strands representing each of your lovely children. These talismans of meaning are the dynamos of the heart and keep us going long after our bodies have surrendered.

**Pencil and paper** A stub of pencil and one sheet of A4 paper – folded up small. The poet Mary Oliver said to always carry pen and paper, “how else could one expect the muses to come sit in one's shoulder.”

### **Post-race Kit Review**

After every race I tap into the bleak moments of discomfort, the cold, the hunger, and the small irritations that destroy my sense of equanimity. These reminders of discomfort help me to make the necessary adjustments for the next event, to be incrementally more prepared than every previous race. Such is the art of mastery – one small micro-change at a time.

*“Success depends upon previous preparation, and without such preparation there is sure to be failure.”*

*Confucius*

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### **Final thoughts**

What you pack is personal. It depends on how much comfort you need and what you are willing to sacrifice in the interest of speed. My kit list is very minimalist, and typically my race pack weight is one of, if not the lowest weight among all competitors' packs.

Decide what your ambition is for the race and strike the right balance. But in the end, no matter your strategy, I believe one of the greatest opportunities of multi-day racing (and even multi-day hiking) is to pack less rather than more and to taste that wonderful freedom of realizing how little we need to be happy.

Pack light.

Have fun.

May the winds be behind you.

And may there be wings beneath your feet.