

Running on Sand and Determination

Nicola Dudley is taking on the Marathon des Sables (MdS) to raise vital funds for Harpenden Mencap in 2026. The MdS is a legendary 270km ultramarathon across the Sahara Desert. Over 7 days, she'll race in searing heat, completely self-sufficient, carrying everything she needs except water and a tent!

We caught up with Nicola to find out her motivations for this challenge:

What made you choose Marathon des Sables and why take on this challenge now?

I have always seen the MdS as the ultimate endurance challenge. I have completed multiple marathons, Ironman full-distance triathlons and long-distance bike rides, but always thought the MdS was beyond me.

That is, until recent years when, inspired by stories of people who have completed it, I allowed myself to wonder whether I could do it. And now I'm committed!

I've just turned 50 and am currently taking some time out between jobs. With opportunity to train and prepare, it seemed a good time to take the leap.

Knowing I am fundraising for the valuable work of Harpenden Mencap will give me extra motivation when the going gets tough.



Nicola running in the Swiss Alps

What is your personal connection to Harpenden Mencap?

I have grown up very familiar with the charity. My sister, along with her husband, is incredibly well supported by the team. Their help with independent living, social activities, and the community of friends has enabled my sister to truly thrive.

I remember as a student spending my holidays doing bank work in the short-stay respite care flat for children - in what was then Stairways. As a family, we are hugely grateful to Harpenden Mencap. I am delighted to be able to use this opportunity to fundraise in aid of your excellent work.



What's the most unexpected thing you've learned while training?

It always amazes me how the body adapts. Until my training for the Mds, I had only ever run a full marathon distance (42.2km) in an occasional event. Now, half and full marathons are part of my regular weekly training.

I still have more learning to come with some focused training to prepare for the heat and sand of the Sahara Desert. I will be joining heat chamber sessions and a training weekend in the dunes of Merthyr Mawr (South Wales) - the second largest dune of its kind in Europe.



What's one item in your kit you couldn't live without (and any luxuries you're sneaking in)?

A lot of thought is going into my kit to optimise weight and keep it close to the minimum starting pack weight of 6.5kg. I have to carry everything I need for 7 days, except water and a tent.

One item of kit I couldn't live without is my trainers. I will be wearing them on the plane, and they won't leave my sight until the start line.

They have to be taped with Velcro to attach the sand gaiters. I have also had to size up to allow for swelling in the heat. I am practising taping my feet to manage the risk of blisters.



Nicola's trainers with attached sand gaiters

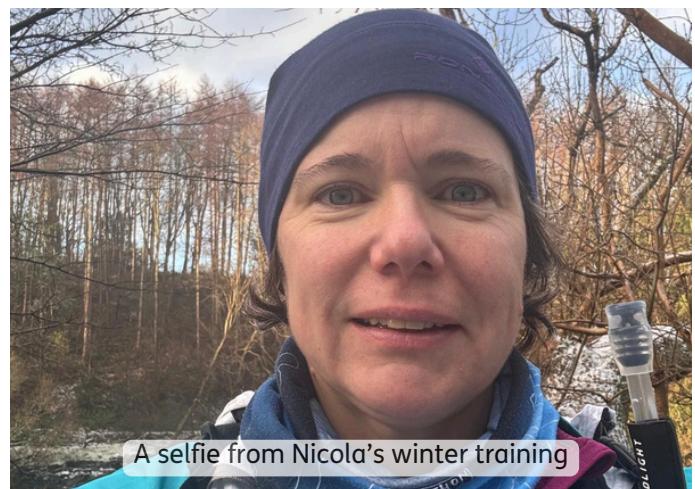
I will be going without my phone but will sneak in my old lightweight iPod. I'll save this for the longest stage (100km over 2 days) when I think I'll need some uplifting music to keep me strong through the night.

If Harpenden Mencap had a cheer squad in the desert, what would you want us to shout to you?

'Keep smiling!' This is always my mantra in races when the going gets tough, but sometimes it's good to be reminded.

Smiling gives us all a boost. When the going gets tough, I will be focusing on putting one foot in front of the other.

It makes it that much more meaningful to be supporting a charity where I am very familiar with its direct impact.



A selfie from Nicola's winter training

What do you dream about most when crossing the finish line?

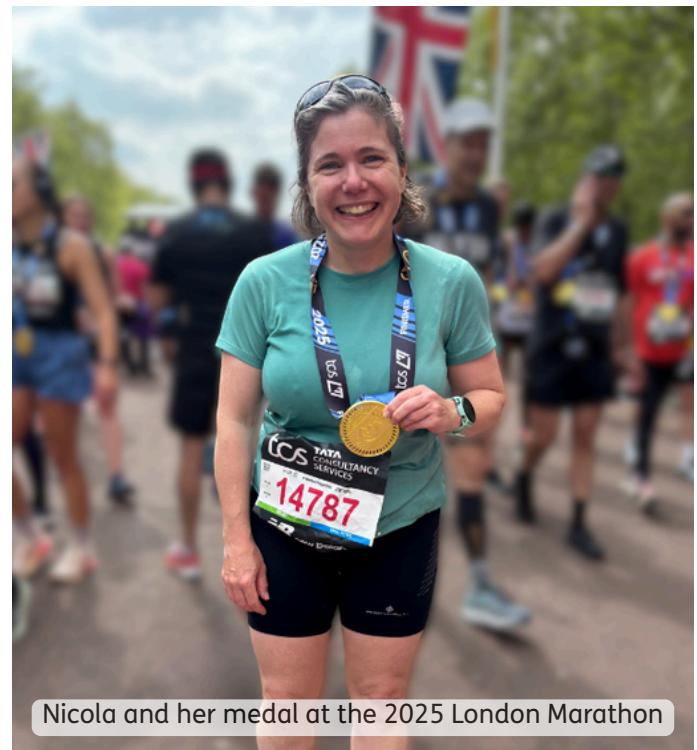
Taking off my trainers, enjoying a good shower, clean clothes and a cold drink. Well-deserved after 7 days competing in the desert. The finish line is always an emotional moment, when the enormity of the challenge and overall experience catch up with me.

What difference will this challenge make to you and to Harpenden Mencap?

I am sure that this challenge will leave me with memories for life and, naturally, a huge sense of achievement (so long as I make it over the finish line!)

The camaraderie in endurance events is always one of the most special aspects. You meet incredible people all with their own stories and goals.

I am pleased the money raised will go toward supporting some of the social opportunities, clubs and activities run by Harpenden Mencap to enrich the lives of adults with learning disabilities within the community.



Maybe sharing my story will have a ripple effect and encourage others to take on a challenge this year for Harpenden Mencap - it doesn't need to be an ultramarathon!

If you'd like to sponsor Nicola's wonderful challenge, visit:
<https://tinyurl.com/Nicola-JustGiving>