

Spartathlon (2014): Race Report

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Looking back at my experience in Greece, I'm filled with so much emotion I don't know where to begin. Several days after the finish in Sparta, my feelings are still wild and scattered.

In 2010, I set out to complete the Spartathlon, arguably the hardest ultramarathon in the world. At the time, I was filled with more inspiration than experience, and more ambition than sense. Sometimes, though, you just have to jump before you know you can fly. I mean, how do we ever really know we're ready? I suppose you know for sure when you try and succeed, or try and fail.

So, in 2010, I tried...and failed. I might wish I had the perspective and maturity to recognize the temporary and educational nature of failure. But I didn't. It stung, and I felt more than a little embarrassed at the hubris of such an inexperienced attempt, and the self-doubt of wondering whether this particular dream might be a little too big.

Those feelings lingered over the next several years, even as I accumulated more experience, learned, grew, and became a more studied, patient, and resilient runner. By early 2014 I decided I was ready for another try at Spartathlon. But the self-doubt still lingered. The 153 miles from Athens to Sparta would be 50 miles and 50% further than I'd ever gone. To be honest, I had little idea what to expect beyond the 100 mile "barrier".



Drop bags and race kit. Ready to run!



Runners could leave their own supplies at any one of the 75 aid stations along the course.

Nevertheless, on the morning of September 26th, 2014, I found myself at the foot of the Acropolis, trained up, race plan in hand, and eager to embark on the journey to come. We stepped out of our buses to a light rain, which I saw as a mixed blessing. The rain would help us stay cool, but would also increase risk of chaffing and blisters. The rain stopped right at 7:00am, and all 349 starters began descending away from the acropolis on the journey to Sparta with much enthusiasm.

There were 10 Americans in the field: Eduardo Aguilar, Maggie Beach, Dean Karnazes, Dave Krupski, Andrei Nana, Jon Olsen, Donna Utakis, Rob Youngren, Bill Zdon, and myself. Jon, the current 24-hour World Champion, was clearly the favorite among us. Behind him, I thought Rob, Dave, Andrei, Dean, and I might all be similarly paced, and final placement would come down to whoever had the best day. In fact, Dave, Rob, and I discovered over the weekend that we all had marathon PRs within 5 minutes of each other (2:45-2:50)! Andrei laid down a great finishing time at Spartathlon just last year, so I expected he'd also be game for a strong finish. And of course, Dean "Ultramarathon Man" Karnazes is a professional and a veteran of the sport. Even with his limiting diet of figs, olives, and cured meats, I expected he'd be ready to throw down.

My race was largely uneventful for the first 50 miles. Rob and I started out at the back of the pack (came across the starting mat in 300 and 304th place) but gradually worked our way up, running together and then apart as one would stop for a bathroom break or drop bag and eventually catch back up.

The weather was great. Temperatures were relatively cool early on (mid 70s), and we got another rain shower for a few hours before midday. Since I had a drop bag with extra socks at Mile 40, I made a quick stop and swapped them out. I may not have needed it, but I preferred to err on the side of caution and keep my feet as dry as possible.

By the first major control point at mile 50, Rob and I had moved up to 112 and 119th place respectively) and were now ahead of Bill, Donna, Eduardo, Maggie, and Dave. The day had really started heating up, and while Dave is an incredibly strong runner, he might have gone out a little fast and was feeling a bit overheated when I passed him ~ mile 48. He was waking a bit, trying to cool down, and we parted with the typical “see you later” farewell as there is almost always a bit of back and forth over such a long race. Andrei, Dean, and Jon were still up ahead. Around mile 70, Rob stopped to pick up his night gear and since I was feeling good I pushed ahead. Dean was refueling with his crew at the same aid station, and I pushed on without interrupting.

To be honest, I was a little bummed I didn't get to run and chat with Dean a bit. His book, “Ultramarathon Man”, was largely responsible for inspiring my own entry into the sport back in 2008 and I have to admit I was a little star struck getting to see and race him in person. He was running the race on a diet he presumed Pheidippides would have eaten back in 490 BC: figs, olives, dried meat, etc. Unfortunately, it didn't look like it was helping him much.

Earlier in the race I'd gotten some gastrointestinal warnings. Just like in 2010, I was experiencing frequent loose stools. While the toilet trips were time consuming, annoying, and increasingly uncomfortable, I was still able to keep moving alright. I caught Andrei by around mile 75 or 80 and ran several miles chatting with him. He was great company, and we held a nice strong pace for a while.

That started to change, however, by around mile 90. I was feeling really good moving with Andrei, and ended up pulling away after a little while. The exertion of that push, however, tipped the scales and I was back in GI trouble. The only way I found I could reduce the lower GI symptoms was to slow down and stop consuming sugar. Any bit of sugar seemed to set it off, especially running downhill sections where the digestive organs were jostled a bit more.

Cutting out the sugar, however, came with a tradeoff. Unless you're highly adapted to fat burning (e.g. ketogenic diet for weeks of training leading up to the race) it's difficult to push the pace without taking in easily digestible carbohydrate. By around mile 90-95 I began the extended climb up to the mountaintop, and my energy was really low. Rob caught me on the last mile of the mountain climb, and we ran together for a little while. At that point, though, I was struggling and wanted to walk a bit more than Rob did, so he ran on ahead.

The next couple dozen miles were the lowest for me (miles 105-130). By around 5:30am I was really struggling to stay awake and found myself swerving on the road. I'd been trying coffee, hot tea, and Coca Cola at the aid stations, but nothing seemed to have much of an effect. I decided to lay down for a quick 10 minute cat nap around 6:00am. I'd never tried to nap during a race before, but I was falling asleep on my feet, swerving into traffic, and reasoned that I could easily make the 10 minutes up if I was able to move steadier afterwards. I rolled into the next aid station and asked a couple volunteers if I could lay down somewhere out of the way and if they'd make sure I was up again in 10 minutes. “No problem”, they said. Ten minutes later they helped me back onto my feet, gave me a pep talk, and sent me back down the road!

The nap worked well, and while I certainly wasn't feeling fresh, I was able to keep my eyes open and push on. I took another 10-minute nap a couple hours later, which had a similarly refreshing effect. I don't think I actually slept during either nap, but being able to lay down and close my eyes for that small chunk of time was definitely helpful.

While Rob was still well up ahead, Dave caught back up with me by around mile 125, and we worked together for awhile. His company really helped bring me out of a mental funk, and as we worked off the miles together I think we could both start to feel the finish line within our grasp. We'd been walking a fair bit, but still averaging around 11-13 minute miles.

With about 18 miles to go Dave needed a quick break and since I was feeling much better, I pushed on ahead. I never gapped him by much, and he told me later that I was within sight for a long while.

With ~ 8.5 miles to go, I got my first sense the race was almost over. A woman on the side of the road was clapping for me as I ran by. I can't remember exactly what she said at first, but I smiled and replied, "yes, almost there!". To that she responded, "It's done. It's OK. It's done." I welled up and shed a few tears over the next mile, realizing, that while it wasn't quite done, I was 3 hours ahead of the cutoff time and nothing was going to prevent me from finishing. Shortly thereafter we came over the last mountain pass where you can see Sparta down in the valley below, and I completely lost it.

I'd left Athens 31 hours before, and I could now literally see the finish!

Throughout the event we experienced more love and support than I've ever felt in a race. School children lined up to slap hands, give high fives, and ask for autographs. Some dressed in traditional costumes, and others threw flower petals out in front of the runners as we came through. Every village we ran through had dozens if not hundreds of Greeks in restaurants, taverns, shops, on balconies, or the side of the road all clapping and cheering. Several aid stations included grapes likely cut from local vines just that morning.

The support all seemed very genuine, as if the people were rewarding the runners for honoring their culture and history, by retracing the footsteps of Pheidippides. While many Americans experience support along the streets of big city marathons like Chicago, New York, and Boston, there were no drunks or college girls with "Kiss me I'm failing physics" posters along the streets in Greece. Respect.

As amazing as the Greeks had been throughout the race, the support only grew the closer we got to Sparta. Nearly every passing car was honking and waving or giving thumbs up. Every person on the side of the road or balcony offered encouragement and congratulations.

And as blown away and teary eyed as I was from all of this, it got even better. I was met by two young boys on bikes with about 1 mile to go, and they announced they'd be my personal escorts to the finish. As we rounded the final bend onto the main street, the world seemed to explode and my knees nearly gave out. There were hundreds of people lining the street, and a huge round of applause filled the air as I was joined by a half dozen kids would run the final 300m with me. I was so overwhelmed by emotion it was really hard to smile, wave, and thank everyone for their support.

In no time at all I could see him. The enormous bronze statue of Leonidas was standing at the end of the strip, and I made the final few strides with a swell of pride and ecstasy I can hardly describe and have rarely experienced.

And then it was done. I did it!



Almost there!



Thank the Gods, I made it!



Woohoo!

32:30:38 (hr:min:sec)

58th overall (207 finishers, 349 starters)

2nd American (7 finishers, 10 starters)

The high lasted a couple days, but faded all too soon, as the pride of all great accomplishments does.

I've spent the past several days reflecting on that. When asked about the race in the weeks preceding and the hours after, there was a light in my eyes, a quickening of the heart, and the unmistakable excitement of someone truly living. When asked about the race now, several days later, I try to recall that energy but the light has gone out.

For something so grand, I wish I could have held it longer. Embraced it, internalized it, and permanently carved the experience and confidence that comes with success into my psyche. But, alas, it's gone.

And with that, I suppose it's time to start looking ahead to the next adventure...again.

While I may not have had the opportunity I hoped to consciously internalize the experience, I know it's there. The long journey and success will be reflected in the way I carry myself and respond to every day challenges, just as well as future grand challenges. And that growth is just as much a reason why I continue to aim high and embrace challenge, as is the light of excitement that comes with each new and grand adventure.