

“Wedding Band & UMS Medal” - UltraMilano-Sanremo 2014 Race Report

Upon returning from Italy, I had mixed emotions. On one hand we had a wonderful wedding; on the other hand the race, as it happens at times with inaugural races, had a multitude of problems.

When we discussed marriage venues, Milan seemed a perfect location, especially when correlated with the race. Both Claire and I love ultrarunning and wanted to have a small ceremony representative of our lives. We made the decision to have our wedding in Milan and we started discussions with the race organizers to better coordinate the event and the race. Unknown to us at that moment, marrying in Italy as a foreigner requires a mountain of paperwork and dealing with the Italian bureaucracy. Fortunately for us, Claudia, Biba, Nicola and Riccardo Marvaldi who were part of the marketing/PR team for the race helped us navigate some of the obstacles and made the event a reality.

We arrived in Milan a few days earlier and we met with my sister Ioana and my brother in law Alex. Because Ioana was almost 8 months pregnant, until the last moment it was not sure if they will be able to join us in Italy. We had discussed the race since the Spartathlon 2013 and wished for both of them to be at the wedding as well as baby Elea. Not many children will be able to experience the Spartathlon and UltraMilano-Sanremo before being born ☺ After several medical checkups and negotiating with the airlines, Ioana was allowed to travel to Italy.

In the May Issue of the *Run South Florida* magazine I had discussed the importance of the race and the contribution to the world of ultrarunning. UltraMilano-Sanremo was born "from the desire for the human race to evolve – to push further, faster, and harder past old perceived limits. The seeds for this race were planted in 1906, when a rally was created with the idea of racing cars between Milan and Sanremo over a distance of 175 miles, crossing several mountain passes and navigating through cities on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Out of the 32 cars presented at the start line, only two succeeded to cross the finish line. The race was a failure. Nevertheless, several individuals desiring to push the limits and to save the idea of competition posed the challenge of holding the race again. However, this time, racers would race with bicycles.

In 1907, several brave cyclists accepted the challenge, proving it was possible to ride from Milan to Sanremo. These cyclists made history, creating one of the most popular cycling races in Europe. For the next hundred years, both athletes and spectators were fascinated with the competition and the continuous dropping of seconds and minutes off finish times. These cyclists demonstrated, year after year, that limits are only there to be pushed.

With the very fast growth of ultrarunning all over the world, naturally the challenge of running this race non-stop was posed, and a small group of visionaries decided to join Michele Graglia in his quest and took on the task of organizing the race. In March, 2014, 53 athletes from 17 countries received invitations to participate in what became the first edition of the UltraMilano-Sanremo foot race."

We stayed in Milan at the entrance in the city at a new, modern hotel where the traffic was not too bad. If not familiar with Milan traffic, you have to picture a city with no parking places, where most likely you can walk as fast as you drive... If the race will be held again, I fully recommend staying outside the city and organizing the packet pick up in a place with easy parking (outside the city as well).

The Friday before the race we met for a short pre-race photo shoot at the start line with world renown photographer Stefano Viti, followed by a quick change and drive to get married. Luckily for us, my amazing wife required almost no time to change from running attire into wedding attire and be as ready as she could be, with a little help from my sister Ioana. We drove into downtown Milan, heading for the Piazza del Duomo. The wedding was to be officiated at the Regal Palace (Palazzo Reale), in the same Piazza as the old cathedral. Piazza del Duomo is closed to traffic, however we received passes to drive through and park in front of the Regal Palace.

The Regal Palace and the Duomo di Milano are very impressive and on that Friday, March 28th looked even better as the outside temperature rose in the high 60s and sunny. The mayor of Milan, Giuliano Pisapia, officiated the marriage while our dear friends, Alex and Dave Krupski served as witnesses, Michele Graglia as interpreter. Several close friends joined my sister Ioana and brother in law Alex, for the event: Brandi Acree, Sung Ho Choi, Katalin Hagedus, Andras Kulcsar, Antonela as well as our Italian friends, Claudia Bergonzi, Biba Acquati and Nicola Mamo.





After the wedding, we rushed, without missing a step, to the pre-race meeting/packet pick up. However, lack of organization led to a long wait period... While there are excuses why it did not go well, an international race with a clear goal of establishing itself as an elite race should have been much better organized – possibly not in a crowded bookstore with little to no parking. Some suggestions for following years would include: pre-race meeting in a place outside the city with ample parking and space to hold the meeting; have in advance materials prepared and bins/boxes for drop bags, clear time table schedules for events.



After the pre-race meeting, we hurried back to the hotel, had a quick dinner and went for a video shoot..., we made it to bed around midnight and slept about 3 hours “getting ready” for the race and somehow trying to comprehend the day’s events, i.e. – I was a married man 😊

The next morning came all too quickly, and the race starting line was filled with TV crews, photographers, EMT vehicles, athletes and their crews. I said hello and good luck to several of my friends racing and had a small box of red wine... After the check in, the start was given and we started running on a bike path. The bike path was about 15 miles and slowly I started to find my pace, calm down and focus on the race. For weeks before the race, I had been focused on the wedding and dealing with some very stressful situations at work. The work took everything from me and 4 weeks prior to the race I broke down exhausted beyond capacity to train properly – or at all... On that bike path, however, I had to make peace with the fact that somehow I was in a 175 mile race, without proper training, *and*, I was required to finish it. Somehow though, running had the same calming effect on the mind that it always does, and after about 1 hour I started to feel confident and positive...

It all ended at the end of the bike path.

As I was running through the first city, I realized there were NO signs or directions... Streets with roundabouts of 3, 4 or 5 exits... I had to look ahead for other runners or behind for crews of other athletes to figure out the direction to take... It was OK as it was still in the beginning and there were still a few runners near me...

Just a few miles down the road, I started to run close by Andras Kulcsar and Robert Boersma. We leap frogged each other and their crews pointed us in the right direction. The first aid station/check in, CP1 was supposed to be around 31-32 miles and I was looking forward to the first re-fill of my bottles, protein drink, and the red wine in my drop bag. However, while running on a busy road a race official pulled over next to us and informed us that we had missed a turn about 4 km back. He suggested that we get in Robert's support vehicle and ride back the 4 km... After cursing the lack of signs, we decided we will run back... The race official was surprised and again told us to get in the vehicle, which we refused telling him something to the extent that "this is an ultra, we are here to run." As we turned back, Robert's crew got on the phone trying to clarify and figure out the turn point we missed. I forgot to mention that at the packet pick-up the "course directions" came in a large book in Italian only... As some people complained about that, we were told that the map posted on the web site was accurate and we should follow that... It turned out the map did not match the book, which lead to even more confusion...



As the three of us ran back, Katalin Hegedus, Andras' crew drove by, surprised that we were running in the direction we were, and asked us what we were doing? We informed her that we had missed the turn and we had to go back. She showed us the GPS and informed us we WERE running the right way, as a matter of fact, Szilvia Lubics has already passed CP1 and she took the same road (she was in communication with Szilvia's husband, Gyorgy who was crewing her). At that point, the 3 of us decided to listen and follow Katalin's directions and ignore the race "official." As we once again turned around and started running towards the "elusive" CP1 the same race official passed by screaming something to us. I gave him the international sign of friendship (the middle finger) and continued running. A few minutes later he passed us again and informed us we were in-fact running in the RIGHT direction and apologized for the confusion... When I reached CP1 my GPS showed 35 miles (3-4 more miles than where it was supposed to be on the map). There, Robert and myself started to scream at the Race Director, Franco Ranciaffi and inform him that there are NO signs. We ask him to fix the problem down the road...

Next, I ran side by side with Sung Ho Choi and we were guided by his crew, Brandi Acree. She attempted to stop for us at every intersection and point us in the right direction, however in several cities the roads were so narrow there was no place to stop. At some point, we found ourselves at an intersection where the road was closed and we started running on a road which seemed to be parallel. As I have ran many races with Sung in the past we started talking about life and several miles later we realized there were no other athletes or crews passing us. We knew it, we were LOST, *20 miles LOST*. Luckily I started to remember Italian enough to ask for directions. We knew we had to go to Genoa before turning North on the coast. At this point, we had only my water and some protein bars in my camel pack. I had some cash with me and purchased some Coke and snacks for Sung, but soon after, there were no more stores, gas stations, or anything resembling civilization. We ended up knocking on some doors at the few houses we passed to ask for water...

After about 20 miles we started to see some hand-made signs (white paper marked with an arrow and the UMS letters on) taped with scotch-tape at several intersections. It was not much, but it signaled to us we were back on the course...

Next, a race official saw us and informed us they were looking for us for several hours and that CP2 is just a few miles ahead. What a relief..., or so I believed... Brandi flew by in her car and stopped, panicked, trying to offer us help as well as to make sure we were OK. She also informed me, Claire was pulled off the course because she did not make the cut off time... Police apparently closed the road used by the race and the race officials directed her to run on an alternative course... It turned out by the time she reached the check point, it was too late (more specifically 45 minutes late)...

I was *fucking* furious ... What kind of "officials" would fuck-up so bad to have a race with no signs, change the course in the middle of the race and then disqualify an athlete who traveled from another continent, in good running shape for something outside of the athlete's control...

When I reached CP 2, my sister and Alex were there with Claire. I lost it and started cursing at the race director who was there near a TV crew. What pissed me off even worse was the comment of a volunteer who, seeing my rage, told Franco in Italian (without knowing I understand Italian) that he is doing a fantastic job at "directing" the race. For the first time in years I felt like physical violence was needed to rectify the situation.

Fortunately Claire realized my predicament/anger and succeeded to calm me down. She was sad, angry, frustrated, ashamed, but she managed to put aside her emotions and focus entirely on my well being. Soon I was back on the road, running towards the finish line once again trying to find my inner peace, to stay calm and to focus on the task at hand.

From that moment on, the 3 of them became my crew... I felt better about the race knowing I will have more chances to find the path to Sanremo...

Next portion of the course went pretty uneventful as I approached Passo Del Turchino. There, in the mountains, the chances of getting lost were lowered. My crew also started to drive forward and take notes at every intersection and give them to me on a paper (next city, distances, exit number at round-about(s), etc), I still got

lost, however, only for shorter distances. Coming down the mountain, I caught up with Andras and ran together with him for a while, being directed by Katalin. My crew had to find a hotel and check in my sister for the night. For someone almost 8 months pregnant she was an amazing crew for the day.

I reached the 100 miles check point behind schedule... Originally I wanted to reach it between 16 and 17 hours... I made it there in a bit over 19 hours... My GPS watch was dead (battery only lasts 18 hours) so I am not sure how many extra miles I ended up doing. By that time my feet started to hurt and I was looking to change my Sauconys to HOKAs, and use the extra cushioning as "medicine." Unfortunately, my drop bag never made it to the Check Point 3. After 20-30 minutes on the phone, trying to figure out *where* my drop bag was, I realized I will just have to adapt... As Claire was out, I took her HOKAs and her supplies and moved forward with the promise that my drop bag will be found and picked up by my crew later.

The next part of the race was the worst for me. Having not trained for night running, I started to get very tired and sleepy. My ankle started to swell as it looked like I had pulled some connective tissue and, very quickly, it became harder and harder to run. Luckily, Sung caught up with me and then a bit later, Andrea Zambon and Jovica Spajic. We took a run/walk approach and spent the night discussing our lives, ultrarunning, races, and everything else. Over the night Brandi was our "guiding star" pointing us in the right direction. As the traffic was reduced, it was easier for her to stop at every intersection and turn on the blinkers showing us the direction to follow.

Towards the morning, my ankle was hurting bad enough where I had tears in my eyes and could not put any weight on it. While Sung insisted on continuing our walk/run scenario we were in danger of not making the next cut off time. I asked him to go ahead and leave me behind as I knew at my pace we will both fail. At the same time I knew I had to find a way to overcome this situation if I wanted to finish. I met with my crew and after realizing I had no significant amount of calories for the past 40 miles, Claire forced me to eat a ham sandwich and asked me if I was ready to quit... The look in her eyes said it all and I knew I would never quit, but the time was running against me. She sat me down and massaged very hard the ankle, gave me some Ibuprofen and Coke. It was a great combination as the food gave me calories and prevented my stomach from acting up, the Ibuprofen reduced the swelling, and the caffeine increased the circulation of the Ibuprofen, speeding the numbing effect.



I started moving, and soon enough started running again. Endorphins kicked into place and gave me confidence and energy. Soon, I figured out the pace I needed to make the remaining cut off(s). Yet, reaching that pace I

started pushing, cutting down seconds every mile. Soon enough, I was catching the athletes who still had a chance to make the cut off and as I passed by Marco Mazzi and Michele Notarangelo, I exchanged greetings with their crews and moved on. Interestingly enough I noticed the Italian Carabinieri pulling off several crew vehicles and asking about the event. Luckily the vehicles pulled over were Italian crews who explained the race to them... It seems hard to believe that there was no coordination between different enforcement agencies to ensure that everyone "working" in the cities would know about the race.

Right before CP4 I passed Sung who was in a pretty bad shape himself, down mentally and physically. At the CP4 my crew waited for me with wine, burgers and more Coke. I ate two burgers and decided to run the remaining distance on Coke and water (mixed in my camel back -- half Coke and half water). There, I took more Ibuprofen and asked Brandi to apply the same treatment for Sung. Claire gave him a burger, some Ibuprofen and some coffee/energy drinks. After some resisting, Sung followed Claire and Brandi's strong advice – albeit cursing and cutting up his shoes.

As the sun rose, the food started to give me enough energy to move forward and I again started to push the pace, this time with clear goals in mind. I was playing "number games" trying to beat my time with each mile and reach my next stopping point faster than my prediction. The “stay focused” strategy worked like a charm and soon enough 10 minute miles became possible once again. Going through the small coastal cities was OK as there was a sidewalk or some type of shoulder where one can run almost safely, however, crossing over the hills, the S shaped roads became very narrow with no shoulder... This was the most dangerous part of the course. The Race Director failed to take any safety precautions (at least to have some signs to warn the drivers of “athletes on the road” and to have race officials or police signal the speeding cars to slow down). My arm was repeatedly swiped by side mirrors from passing cars – at least 20 times. That, in my opinion, was the most dangerous aspect of the race and was the first time in my life that I was afraid I would be killed by oncoming traffic – *while running a race*.

Approaching the CP5 I was surprised to see two runners with cell phones waiting for me about 1.5 miles away. They guided me to the check point, and called in advance to have the requested food prepared. They told me this was supposed to have happened at all CPs during the race... CP5 was a truly professional CP, run well by amazing volunteers. As I walked in, they gave me statistics about time, position of other competitors, etc. Michelle Tronconi, a volunteer runner from one of the local running clubs, not only helped me find the CP but also ran with me for several miles once I departed the CP, to make sure I followed the correct path to the finish line.

The last part of the race was pretty simple once the bike path was reached. Before reaching the bike path I passed Robert who was running strong but stopped for ice cream (his crew offered to buy me one as well but I was afraid it might mess with my stomach and the Coke I was drinking). On one of the hills leading to the finish I caught up Szilvia who was almost walking at that point. She was limping badly and it was obvious she was in horrible pain. Szilvia fell the day before the race and injured her left leg and knee badly. I slowed down to see if she wanted some Ibuprofen but she refused. Szilvia, at that point, was the only woman left in the race and a better runner than I. It felt wrong to see her struggle so badly and to know she will finish in a time not representative for her athletic capabilities. Nevertheless, I knew she will finish as she is one of the toughest women and athletes I have ever met.

Thankfully, the final 15 miles or so were on a bike path, away from the traffic. Yet there were no clear signs as to where to get onto the bike path, and, at some point, I noticed it on my left and jumped the fence separating the path from the road. My amazing crew went forward to find the finish line which was not clearly marked on the map or in the race book. Wanting to be sure I found the finish line, Claire waited for me about 1.5 miles out and we ran together, carrying the American flag over the finish line.



My time was 38:22:19 and I finished in 6th place -- a race of *over* 175 miles. It was a bitter sweet finish. I was happy for my accomplishment, yet I was disappointed with my slow performance during the night and also disappointed with the Race Director. Although expected for inaugural races to have *some* problems, this inaugural race was a fiasco. Only 18 of the 46 athletes who started the previous morning reached the finish line. While the race was difficult and elite, so were the selected 53 athletes who accepted invitations to the race. *The finishing rate should have been much higher.* Nevertheless, the race has potential and the 18 athletes who finished demonstrated this. I can only hope next year the race will have a different Race Director. I hope this kind of “organization” will never, ever, happen again in any ultra race no matter where it takes place.

The race while it had serious organizational problems, succeeded to add to the world of ultrarunning. The Public Relations team/ the UMS Group (Claudia, Biba, Nicola, Riccardo and writer Luca Ammirati) did a fantastic job -- unmatched by any other ultra event in the world. They succeeded to publish over 100 articles in magazines and newspapers, to officially announce the race on the official websites of the many cities involved, to give radio and TV interviews. I give them a BIG thank you for a phenomenal job. The EMT teams were present during the entire race and several vehicles patrolled the course on the regular basis offering help and encouragement to the athletes. That was another very well coordinated effort. The volunteers at the race had the traditional Italian enthusiasm and positive attitude which helped to somewhat mitigate the problems. Ultimately, as seen in the photos, the course is breathtaking and the views spectacular. And, the country is great and the food fantastic.

After the race we stayed at the Uliveto Saglietto, a B&B in Imperia where Tiziana Gugliemi took perfect care of us and we had two days of royal treatment. At the return in Milano we stayed at another B&B, the Cascina Aguzza near the Malpensa Airport, just a great simple, clean place with great hosts and phenomenal food. If in Milan I highly recommend trying the small restaurant Latteria on Via San Marco, specialized in traditional home made regional cuisine, where for the first time I tried raw meat. By raw I do not mean cooked rare, I mean raw meat with a home-made sauce. Heavenly meal for this carnivore :-)

Congratulations to Michele Graglia who not only won the race, he was the idea behind this race. Congratulations to Szonyi Ferenc for 2nd place, Dave Krupski for 3rd place, Stefano Montagner for 4th. They

all had great races and performed flawless. Congratulations to all the finishers, especially to the amazing Szilvia and the guys who pushed hard all the way to the end, Sung, Jovica, Andrea, Andras, Marco, Michele. Thank you to my wonderful wife who made this finish possible for me as well to my sister Ioana and brother in law Alex.

While the race was more an adventure race rather than the intended ultramarathon, the potential is there to create a truly elite/world class ultramarathon in the following years. Personally I learned a lot about myself in the race, once again I experienced lows never imagined possible and once again figured out a way to overcome them. I learned my training was not sufficient to perform as well as expected and that too much stress at work is a mistake. Italy will be remembered as a trip from where I returned with a "Wedding Band & UMS Medal" and where I experienced the kindness and power of my wife, Claire.