

Spartathlon 2014: A stranger in a strange land following in the footsteps of Pheidippides.

By Robert Youngren



[USA Spartathlon Team! Who will be next?](#)

Summary

I definitely was feeling a bit apprehensive as the final ten seconds were counted off by the throng of 349 fellow Spartathletes; my heart was definitely beating hard; could feel my pulse throbbing in my neck; butterflies in my stomach. After all it had only been 66 days since I finished the Badwater 135 in strong fashion. It was anybody's guess how I'd be able to handle another 200km++ race so soon after.

However, I had no reason to worry. I had a pretty good race overall. Had some stomach issues mid way through the race that gave some scares about my ability to keep under the strict cutoff times but I rallied and finished well. Honestly had no expectations going into this race other than to survive to the finish. My final finish time was 31:46:50 (12:26 pace) and 49th place overall and a healthy 4h 13m 10s under the 36 hour cutoff. By virtue of Katalin Nagy, a dual US-Hungarian citizen who finished in 28:55:03 and 16th overall, choosing to represent Hungary I was technically the first finisher from the United States, and first from the Western hemisphere (North & South America). Not too shabby!

Read on for more detail about my race. Warning: it is quite lengthy in my traditional stream of consciousness narrative kind of way!

Spartathlon Primer:

To understand the Spartathlon, one must understand its historical importance. Most runners have heard of Pheidippides, who, according to legend, ran from a battlefield near Marathon, Greece, to Athens in 490 B.C., bringing news of a Greek victory over the Persians. Supposedly he collapsed and died at the end of his historic run, thereby setting a precedent for dramatic conclusions to the marathon. However, this story is just a legend, for no record of this run was documented until about 600 years after the event by Plutarch when he was trying to prove to the Romans that Greeks had a history as great as their own. Therefore, historians doubt its accuracy.

However, historians do agree that Pheidippides did exist, he was a messenger for the

city/state of Athens, and that he had the important job of securing the Spartan's help for the Athenians in the Battle of Marathon during the Persian Wars of 490 BC. The events of the Persian Wars, which included the deeds of Pheidippides, were recorded by the historian Herodotus in his records, called *The Histories*:

And first, before they left the city, the generals sent off to Sparta a herald, one Pheidippides, who was by birth an Athenian, and by profession and practice a trained runner..... he reached Sparta on the very next day after quitting the city of Athens.

Historians agree that Pheidippides probably ran bare foot, wearing only a loin cloth, if anything. He might have carried a leather bag over his shoulder for some food, but would have relied on drinking from streams. As a government courier he would have been able to demand food from the farmers and slaves as he passed. It may well have been that he had run to Sparta before and knew the way, but, regardless, he would have known the way to Korinthos (Corinth) for sure (about 100k).

Beginning in 1980, in an effort to prove the validity of the historic run of Pheidippides, John Foden, a member of the Royal Air Force in Britain, decided to test Herodotus to see if a run of such a distance could really have been completed in 36 hours (Herodotus stated that Pheidippides began at sun up in Athens and got to Sparta before the sun went down the next day). By researching the route Pheidippides used, Foden recreated the most probable route from Athens to Sparta which has an elevation range from sea level to 1,200 meters (3,937 ft), over tarmac road, trail and mountain footpaths which totaled 246 km (152.85 miles). In the end Foden and several other ultra runners were able to cover the rough route from Athens to Sparta well within the time line dictated by Herodotus thus proving that such a run was possible.

Today, the route takes a runner through the ancient and modern cities of Corinth, Nemea, Lyrkia, Nestani, and Tegea. Due to the strict cut-offs the initial qualifications that must be met before an application can be made for the race include completing a 100k race in under 10 ½ hours or completing a race of 200k in under 36 hours, both within the last 2 years. Realistically if you can't run a 100km under 10 hours you'll have incredible trouble finishing the Spartathlon. The qualifications are strict, for historically, in the 32 years the Spartathlon has been contested approximately only 1/3 of those who start actually finish the race each year. Despite the distance, the strict time limits really make this historic race challenging and stressful, but bring some of the best long distance runners from all over the world to Greece for a race following in the tracks of an ancient runner.

Pre-Race

I flew over solo to Athens Greece a couple of days before the race (actually left the States on a Tuesday and arrived Wednesday morning, but close enough). I met my buddy and Badwater crew member, Bryce Carlson in Amsterdam and we traveled the rest of the way to Athens together. After some confusion on how to get to our Best Western Hotel Fenix in Glyfada we finally found the correct bus and arrived at the race headquarters about an hour later.

We checked into the hotel, went for a short run to shake out the rust in our legs then waded through athlete check-in. I ended up rooming with David Krupski who I'd met at the Long Haul 100km (where Bryce and I qualified for Spartathlon). The three of us then generally just bummed around and chilled out and relaxed and prepared our drop bags and gear over the next day and a half before the big dance.



'Merica Representing!

Acropolis to Corinth (80km)

At 7:00 a.m. sharp, under overcast skies and light rain three hundred and forty nine would be Spartathletes sped off down the slick marble walkway leaving the slopes of the ancient Acropolis behind. I tried to settle into a comfortable pace with Bryce and together we cruised through the bustling and busy streets of central Athens. Unbelievable to me that some of the main thoroughfares of this city of 3+ million people were temporarily closed to morning commuters just to allow the Spartathletes to pass through. Amazing! While I'm sure some of the honking was out of frustration and anger, more often than not though I saw motorists outside their gridlocked car clapping and cheering "Bravo, Bravo!"

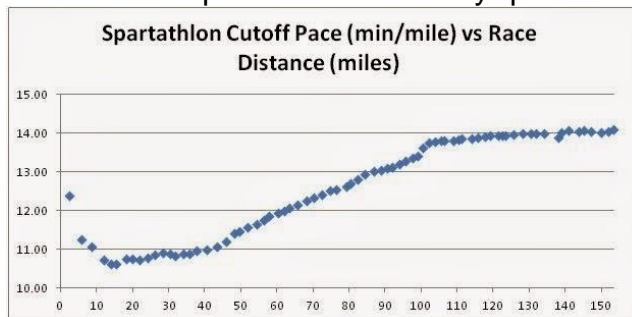
The early miles, even now are a blur to me. With a race this long it's no wonder a lot of the details get eroded away. However, I do recall feeling very tense and a bit overwhelmed for the first half dozen miles. I was a nervous wreck to be honest. I was thinking too much about the enormity of the task ahead and not just living in the present. But what a rush! After a couple of checkpoints though I felt much better and finally settled into comfortable long run pace as we passed through Dafni, Skaramangas and the busy and more industrial outskirts of Athens.

Somewhere on the long stretch to Elefsina, Bryce pulled ahead and out of sight. I split the first timing station at Asproyrgos (mile 12.1) in 1:54:17 (9:27 pace) and was in 220th place and a mere 16 minutes ahead of the race cutoff! Once we reached Elefsina (mile 14.1) we finally left the busy highways behind and emerged onto the bit more placid old coastal highway that runs along the shores of the Aegean Sea to Corinth. We'd really caught a break in the weather. The early rain showers had stopped not long after the race started but the overcast skies and cool breezes continued. It seemed as if the sun would have a great difficulty emerging today and I wasn't complaining! Race temperatures along this stretch to Corinth sometimes exceed the mid 90s Fahrenheit! Today the forecast called for a more mild high of mid 80s with chance of rain throughout the morning hours. One hilarious episode that I recall from this section just after passing a couple more refineries outside of Elefsina involved the use of CocaCola in my water bottle. I rolled into this

particular aid stop and was reaching for a tall bottle of Coke to pour into my bottle with the intention that was going to water it down, 50-50 with water. Well as I was about to pour the Coke into my empty bottle an elderly race volunteer slapped my hand and chided me, saying in broken English that that's very bad for me, that I shouldn't be drinking Coke. Too dangerous she said! Ha! Hilarious. Too bad I didn't have time to communicate the fact that I consumed over a case of Pepsi during my recent Badwater race! Anyhow, she eventually relented and I got my mixed drink and was out of there. Sheesh!

I pretty much ran solo most of the rest of the way to Meara (marathon mark) just soaking in the exceptional beauty of the coastline views. The route up to now had been mostly flat with occasional rolling hills that were easily run up. By now I'd settled into a routine of quickly stopping at the frequent aid stations (average every 2-3 miles) and grabbing a sip of water diluted Coke, a couple of biscuits and perhaps a drink of juice. Along the road I kept up my steady intake of salt pills and pure sea salt every half hour or so. Around 24 miles or so the dark clouds opened up once again and poured down rain with some ferocity. While other runners scrambled to don rain jackets or ponchos I relished the cool refreshment from the sky and just kept trucking. My kind of weather! Split the marathon in 4:01:29 (9:13 pace) and 123rd place, now 44 minutes ahead of the race cutoff, as the rain continued to hammer down.

The rain finally ceased a couple of miles later but the skies still stayed overcast and the temperatures nice and cool. I was still running solo at this point but was feeling very good and comfortable with the quick pace. The route continued along the coastal highway and now became a bit more hilly. Nothing crazy but now there were hills steep enough to consider taking some short walk breaks which I did. I figured now was as good a time as any to begin a run-walk schedule. I decided on 10 minute interval of running for 8 minutes then walking for 2; set a countdown timer to keep me on track. I recall passing through the unofficial 50km mark in just under 4:50 and not long after spotted fellow American Maggie Beach just head. Maggie and I had run together during the early miles of Badwater just nine weeks ago. Maggie is also a Skechers Performance Ultra Elite athlete. We were both running in the [Skechers GoRUN Ultra shoe](#). Maggie seemed a bit apprehensive about the looming 80km cutoff time of 9:30. I assured her that the way the checkpoint closures (cutoff times) are set up the first 50 miles are the quickest and most stringent but that after that the closure times ease up significantly and that as long as you can maintain a pace faster than ~14 min/miles after 50 miles you'll steadily grow a buffer on the final race cutoff time of 36 hours. Over the first 50 miles it's tough to build a buffer on the cutoff times as the pace set is relatively quick.



The cold hard truth...

Anyhow, as I was dedicated to my run walk schedule, Maggie and I would drift apart or come back together as we traded running and walking at various times. A few miles later I caught a glimpse of Bryce just ahead walking as well. We soon linked up once again and passed the next ten miles or so together trying to stay on the same 8-and-2 run/walk schedule. Maggie would join us on occasion when our pacing worked out. Along this ten mile block the overcast skies were finally burned away by the sun and the humidity steadily crept up as well. Overall I still felt pretty good. Yes it was getting

warm and humid but nothing like running back home in Alabama. Still, I kept pushing my salt intake and external cooling as much as possible. Luckily every aid station had a bucket with sponges and cold water that I used repeatedly to dump water down the front and back of shirt and head. Some check points even had a limited amount of ice which I'd toss down the front or back of my shirt; the small [UltimateDirection Jurek Essential](#) waist pack I wore synched snug over my shirt kept the ice from falling out. Nice!

Somewhere near 40 miles Bryce had to stop to take a major pit stop and change socks so I continued on ahead solo once again with Maggie not too far behind. We were now approaching the outskirts of Corinth and the peaceful coastal highway with quaint sea side villages were being replaced by oil refineries and other industrial activities. A bit ugly and stinky! I kept on and soon spotted Dave just ahead of me looking a little worse for wear. I slowed my pace a touch to chat with Dave. He soon, begrudgingly, settled into my run-walk schedule as well. I think we both just wanted to get through Corinth, and the busy and hot roads as soon as possible. In mile or so before we crossed the Corinth Canal the route was forced through a construction zone. The narrow single lane we ran on, our backs to oncoming traffic including large trucks, was very dangerous! A truck mirror just missed clipping Dave's head by mere inches and I nearly traded paint with my shoulder and a panel truck. The height of lunacy occurred when Dave's feet got tangled up in some loose barrier netting and crashed to the ground, reopening a pre-existing scab on his knee! Thankfully no traffic was barreling past at the time as he would've fallen right into it! Nuts!

At the next aid station Dave decided to linger a bit while I pressed on over the deep cut Corinth Canal and sped the rest of the way uphill to the Corinth checkpoint at mile 49.7 which I split in 8:12:11 (9:54 pace) and 112th place and 78 minutes under the cutoff. The Corinth checkpoint is a major support crew meeting place and as such the checkpoint was a complete zoo; scene of utter pandemonium. Runners were all sprawled out on the ground on cots being attended to, crew running frantically this way and that, media and photographers snapping pictures like mad. Wow! So I didn't stay long. Just long enough to hammer down some more fluids and calories and I was gone!



The King Leonidas statue; to reach it is the goal of all Spartathletes!

Corinth to Sagas Pass (162km)

The character of the race changes significantly once runners leave Corinth. While the first 80km are mostly flat and run largely West along the coast of the Aegean Sea, the remainder of the route heads far inland and South into the mountainous Peloponnesian Peninsula. Also while the first 80km would be characterized as urban or industrial the balance of the race course would be best described as rural or agrarian. Honestly there are sections in the final 100 miles of the race where you feel like you've been transported back in time; Greeks living in simple rock dwellings, goat herders herding their flock of goats and mile after mile of olive, grape, lime, apple or pomegranate orchards. It's a much more peaceful stretch compared to the first hellish 50 miles. Traffic is much less frequent; often the only cars and trucks you see are those from race officials and crew support.

While the running is a bit more tranquil, the course does ratchet up the intensity by throwing down a lot more frequent steep hills culminating in a long, seven+ mile and 3500+ foot climb to Sagas Pass right at 100 miles and the middle of the night.

Anyhow, I left out of Corinth still feeling on top of things. I was tired to be sure but not worn out by any means. Just a half mile or so out of the Helles Can Factory checkpoint Bryce caught up to me. He said that Dave wasn't too far back as well but that he might be taking some time at the checkpoint to regroup. It was nice to link back up with Bryce; it's always far easier to pass the miles with company than solo. We kept up the run-walk schedule but began to slip it to seven minutes run, 3 minutes walk. At this point on basically every mile we could average under ~14 min/mile pace we'd continue to build time on the final cutoff so there was no reason to push any harder than we had to. Bryce was still entertaining thoughts of a sub 30 hour finish but honestly I didn't think much about it. It's true I had a schedule in my pocket with sub 30 hour splits but realistically that was there to keep me from running too fast early on. No, my only goal was to finish this bear of a road race and even finishing wasn't guarantee. After all, historically only about a 1/3 of starters finish the Spartathlon; a sobering statistic!

Bryce and I passed the next several miles together, chatting about this and that and otherwise just appreciating the amazing countryside we were running through. Not far out of Ancient Corinth though, Bryce complained of some intestinal discomfort and said he was going to stop at the next checkpoint to take care of it. Ironically, at the 2010 Spartathlon, Bryce stopped at the same place, Mrs Screech's Villa for the same reason! During the melee I kept trucking down the road sure that Bryce would catch me up sooner than later. In the mean time I passed through the villages of Assos and Zevgolatio where the towns folk were all turned out as if for festival. Several young children came running up to me asking for my autograph. I obliged as best I could. Unbelievable, who'd want my autograph? What an adrenaline boost though! Just a bit out of the village of Soulinari (mile 68) Bryce caught me up once again and we both spied fellow American, and ultra running household name, Dean Karnazes just ahead. We didn't attempt to speed up to catch him just yet; we were content to just cruise along the narrow, winding road as it wandered deeper and deeper into the valley as the sun dipped behind the towering mountains. Absolutely beautiful. So green, so peaceful but also utterly quiet; not even a bird chirp or a squirrel chatter. Weird. More on this later...

About a mile out from the Halkion Village (mile 70) where I'd placed my night gear drop bag, Kim Allan from New Zealand caught us up followed closely by Heike Bergmann from Germany. The two women definitely had a race going on at this point. That final mile is up a fairly steep hill and both

women were climbing it fairly well as they caught and passed me and Bryce. I decided to jump onboard that train and pulled ahead of Bryce by a little bit. I figured I was going to need a bit of time to get my night gear together anyhow.

At Halkion I tried to efficiently gather up my night gear and get going. I picked up my headlamp, some gels and a Patagonia Houdini Jacket (which I never used!). But it must have taken me a bit of time to stow all my gear and get going because in the interim, Bryce had moved ahead up the road and out of sight. It was twilight now as I marched out of the small mountain village and on up the snaking single lane road. I just happened to be leaving as Dean was so we ended up running-hiking the next mile or so together. Dean was attempting to do the race on a limited diet that Pheidippides would have had during his famous run from Athens to Sparta in 490 BC; olives, cured meats, nuts, etc... Dean was not a happy camper at the time, but then again nobody was feeling particularly great at the near half way point of the race as darkness fell. Dean had to stop for a break and I told him I'd see him in Sparta and kept shuffling up the steady uphill grade.

A little while later, now fully in the dark, Kim caught me up with another new face, Sam Robson from the UK. Together we ran the next few miles up and up the winding road. The two of them were trying to pick my brain about the route ahead. While we were all Spartathlon rookies I'd at least driven the entire course as crew support for my wife Kathy four years ago. However, those details were hazy. All I knew was that at some point we'd have a pretty good downhill into Malandreni Village (mile 87) before beginning a long steady climb to Sagas Pass. I just failed to remember how long a climb we still had at the moment! Seemed to pass by much quicker in a car for some reason!

Anyhow Sam and Kim's pace seemed a bit rich for me so I slowed down and let them go. Still so far to go! So I pretty much continued solo a good ways though I seem to remember being passed and passing other runners up on occasion. Finally I emerged into the chaos that was Ancient Nemea (mile 76.6) in 13:42:57 (10:45 pace) in 91st place and 2h 18m under the cutoff. The small village square was bumping to loud, live music, folks trying to talk over other folks and television crew and media trying to get interviews from runners. I smartly dodged a few cameras, quickly resupplied and got the heck out of there! I did see that Kim got cornered by a tv camera crew. Tough luck! Not long later as I ran down a pretty good downhill on a well lit, wide road (outskirts of Nemea?) I remember catching up to Bryce once again. It was before we transitioned off the pavement and onto a rough gravel road. Bryce said that fellow American Andre was just ahead and that he'd been running with him some but that Andre was in a lot of pain from a knee injury sustained in the weeks before the race.

So once again Bryce and I continued to run together though, little did I know, my wheels were about to fall off in a big way. We weren't on the gravel road long, and rapidly catching up to Andre when I told Bryce to go on ahead, that I needed some time regroup. I believe that Sam was also running with us at the time as well though I could be wrong. So foggy. My stomach had grown very sour and I felt like throwing up. I even attempted to several times along that lonely dirt road to no avail. Just dry heaves. I decided to just lay off all food for a while and just take sips from my water bottle on occasion. I got very scared. While I had a good buffer on the cut off times, all I could manage at the moment was a fast walk as any running instantly set my stomach off in a bad way and I felt like vomiting. Sucks! So many folks passed me at the point as I strove to just keep my head down and moving smartly as best I could. No, the 80s (miles) weren't kind to me and by Malandreni (mile 87) I had hit rock bottom. I felt utterly alone sitting, dejected, at that bustling aid station. Nobody seemed to pay me any attention sat, deeply hunched over; burying my head further into my hands. I didn't even realize that Sam was there, sitting right next to me, going through similar woes. My willingness to

continue suffering was being extremely tested at this point. While I never thought once about quitting I just honestly didn't know I was going to be able to get out that aid station. I was light headed, nauseous and unhappy. Bu this is one of those moments that you're tested; that can make or break your entire race! So I fought back. It's all I could do. I asked for some salty soup and got to my feet and headed on down the road. Sam joined me as misery loves company. I knew if I could just keep moving, get some more salt and simple calories in me that I'd be alright after a while. Sam soon left me behind as I needed some time to just walk.

Finally my head stopped spinning and the nausea abated somewhat and I felt like I could attempt running once again. By Lyrkia (92.2 miles) I was firmly back on track and actually feeling pretty darned good! Wow! I decided to mainly stick to water in my bottle and consume calories only at the aid stations or grab some sweet biscuits to go. After Lyrkia the road began to trend uphill but I was in the zone! I suspended my run-walk schedule for the time being as I wanted to make up a bit of time that I'd lost during my sickness. I wasn't hard pressed either, it felt great to be back running and climbing up the mountain. I could see the well lit national road (A7) far up above me. I knew that the course would climb to and cross under the road before beginning the final super steep climb to Sagas Pass at the 100 mile mark. As I continued to run and climb I soon caught up to and overtook several of the runners who'd passed me earlier. It was good feeling to be back on pace. As I entered the lower reaches of the switchbacking road I caught up once again to Sam and together we caught up to Andre a short time later. Andre was hiking steadily up the switchbacks and I took a breather to talk with him. I hadn't had a proper walk break in probably over an hour.

Andre was in good spirits despite his obvious limp and knee pain. He'd been here before and knew what I had to do to finish. Soon I was itching to move on and so slowly pushed ahead of Andre and Sam. Eventually I got back to shuffling uphill. Climbing is my forte and it was my time to shine. I kept climbing and climbing and caught up to many more folks before finally crossing under the A7 and emerging at the Mountain Base checkpoint (mile 99.1) in 19:22:56 (11:44 pace) in 73rd place and 2h 48m under the cutoff. Again I didn't linger and quickly sped off up the mountain in the search of the god Pan who was said to have visited Pheidippides at Sagas pass near Mount Parthenon.



Hardrock 100 has "The Rock", Spartathlon has "The Foot".

Sagas Pass to Sparta (247km)

Leaving the mountain base the route is a rough, loose rock and dirt path that climbs steeply up to the high mountain pass. This trail is probably largely the same as it was 2500 years ago; nothing but a mountain covered by rocks and bushes. While the footing is steep and poor the route is well marked with flashing lights, reflective tape and an army of volunteers at every switchback! Incredible! Just a quarter mile or so to the summit I heard Bryce a couple of switchbacks above me and quickly closed the distance to him. Bryce said he'd been experiencing some increased intestinal distress recently and had slowed a bit. I told him that I was back from dead as well having had a horrible time many miles ago. Together we split the unofficial 100 mile point at the pass (100.5) in just under 19h 50m. The wind was really whipping at the pass so we didn't stick around long at the lonely aid station.

The route down off the mountain was a cruel sick joke! While I normal love running on challenging terrain, negotiating the steep rocky road after running a 100 miles was just wrong! But I loved it never the less. Luckily I remembered to tighten up my oversized Skechers GoRun Ultras before I left the mountain base so I was ready to handle all the ankle rolling and pitching that was to come. The route kept winding down and down the mountain, switchbacking often. I pulled a bit ahead of Bryce at this point but only by a short ways. I could hear him cursing the rocks as much as I was. Ha! Soon we were back on the pavement (thank heavens!) and pulling into the Village of Sagas (mile 102.2). We now "only" had 50 miles or so to go! Woot! I was actually quite excited even though it was still a long way to go! I got some soup to go and we fast hiked out of the village trying to get the calories down. Soon we were back on to our run-walk schedule; now something like 7 run, 3 walk and back into the dark, moonless night. Wow it was dark out there in this valley. Utterly pitch black except for what our flash light beams illuminated. On the flip side the night sky was brilliant! The total lack of light pollution allowed us to clearly see the Milky Way. Beautiful!

Eventually, after several run-walk cycles we found our way winding down into Nestani (mile 106.6) in 21:20:54 (12:01 pace) in 62nd place and a firm 3h 10m ahead of the cutoff. Bryce had indicated that he needed some time to get off his feet at this checkpoint so he lied on the ground with his feet propped up on a chair for five minutes. He was also feeling a bit cool so I gave him my unused jacket to wear, I still felt very comfortably warm. Five minutes later we were back on the road to Sparta. It was obvious that Bryce was still struggling a bit so he soon told me to go on. I told him that as much as we were back and forth that I'd soon see him again.

I just kept plugging away and feeling reasonably good. Since I felt like running more I went back to something like an 8 minute running, 2 minute walking schedule. This stretch from Nestani to Zevgolatio (Arcadia Area), around nine miles, was the longest stretch of the entire race where I didn't see another runner. I was totally alone running along dark road after dark road with only the occasional crew or race official vehicle passing me by. It was also really difficult to judge distances to things. Several times I thought I was getting close to an aid station only to realize that I still had some distance to run. It was also during these wee hours as dawn approached that I began to hear frequent and irregular shots or small explosions. At first I thought it might be hunters but the sheer number of shots both somewhat close and far away soon dispelled that notion. To this day I'm not exactly sure what I was hearing though I now suspect, as I was mostly running through an agrarian area of various crops and orchards, that [propane cannons](#) were being used to keep the birds away. Don't worry, I didn't know what a propane canon was until I did some google searching about them. Modern day scarecrow tactics apparently and also very controversial. Would also explain why I hadn't heard a bird chirp in a very long time!

Anyhow I had quite a scare when one of the explosions went off probably not more than 100 meters away. Scared the heck out of me, which was good because I was probably falling asleep and wandering all over the road anyhow!

All I could do was keep soldiering on, all alone until finally emerged into Zevgolatio (mile 115.6) just as dawn was breaking. This short stop was pretty cool as one of the volunteers had gone to school in the United States and actually knew the area where I live in Alabama. Neat! I truly wanted to take the offered coffee but feared the intestinal ramifications; instead I opted for some more soup and headed down the road.

With the sun now rising, so did my spirits. I wasn't in a funk but I find the hours right before and after dawn to be a real mental challenge; especially running all alone. Real brain fog! By now several runners had caught me up just as I'd caught up to several more ahead. So while we couldn't exactly communicate because of language barriers we all knew how each other felt; that our journey while still formidable was winding down. We were getting to the point of the race were, barring any huge tragedy, were we knew we'd finish. We were almost to the point where we could quite legitimately "walk it in" if we had to. It was a good feeling and I could tell by the various grins on the other runner's faces that they were probably thinking the same thing!

A group of us all arrived into Alea-Tegea (mile 121.4) in 24:51:51 (12:17 average), I was now in 50th place and was 3h 19m ahead of the cut off. My morning drop bag was here (I only had 3 drop bags total, one for my night gear, one in the middle of the night with extra layers if necessary and this morning bag to drop off my night gear) and so I sat and took a little time to stow away my night gear and ponder if I wanted to change my shirt or socks. I did neither but grabbed all my gels and headed out. I started with this race kit and I'm going to finish in it! Why not? My feet felt fine and I already stank to high heaven so I doubt a wardrobe change would help!

I "only" had a long 50km to go and nearly 11 hours to do it. Piece of cake! Ha! I forgot about the route that lay ahead. Ahead was a decently long climb followed by a rolling and somewhat busy highway before final long downhill into Sparta. Still not out of the woods just yet. And yes, I was also getting very tired! I did remember there was going to be a good climb ahead so I tried to run as much of the next few flat miles as possible before we turned onto the highway. It was easy to stay motivated and run as there were runners just ahead to be caught and runners just behind to try and hold off!

Soon we were on the long climb to Manthyrea (mile 125.7). I honestly thought about hiking the whole way but the runners around me, several Japanese, a Taiwanese and Heike Bergmann from Germany (who I hadn't seen in probably over 12 hours) were all trying to shuffle up the merciless grade. So I tried to match their short and quick shuffle and hang on. I soon discovered it really didn't hurt any worse trying to run up the hill than it did trying to hike it. In fact as my Achilles was still giving me fits since Badwater (and before) it really did hurt more to walk! So I ran. And ran. In fact I would end up running most of the last 30 miles!

I soon discovered that the Japanese runners around me would NEVER walk. Instead they'd run every step between check points and then linger there a bit to adequately refuel and rehydrate. It seemed

like a great way to break up the distance to go. After all how does one eat an elephant? One small bite at a time! So I fell into the same pattern of trying to run all the way between checkpoints and then hydrate and calorie up, rinse and repeat. We'd wordlessly take turns pulling hill after hill. I was mostly successful maintaining the run but after a few aid stops I had to take care of my morning constitutional and so my happy Japanese train left me at the station. So I was again on my own for a long while. Did I mention that this road was kind of dangerous? There were a lot of blind turns and narrow shoulders; often encroaching vegetation forced you to run off the shoulder and into oncoming traffic. Thankfully I'm sure we had runners stretched from Sparta to well past me so drivers knew there were runners on the road. Surprisingly there were no close calls that I experienced.

After some time and many blurred together miles, I eventually arrived at the Heros Monument (mile 138.8) in 29:24:50 and 49th place. I was 3h 1m ahead of the cutoff. Heike and her fellow German running companion arrived just ahead of me after we'd traded places quite a bit over the previous 10 miles or so. There was now only one more significant climb before the long descent into Sparta. I left out of the Heros Monument fairly quickly simply wanting to get done! I was tired and the novelty of the whole experience was wearing off. It always seemed so much further to go every time I arrived at an aid station. Never seemed to get any closer! I knew my attitude would change once I crept into the single digits to go.

I hammered my way up the long road grade catching a guy reduced to walking it in. He seemed in great spirits so I pulled on ahead saying I'd see him in Sparta. I just kept running. As much as I could I ran. The course started to trend more downhill now with less than 15 miles to go and my quadriceps didn't like it one bit! The next several checkpoints were a blur as I barely paused to just top off my water bottle. At last though we were leaving the high way and heading for the small, back road to Sparta. It was a bit of a shell shock to go from a somewhat busy road to a virtually free of traffic. I had to keep checking for the yellow painted arrow and "SP" marks on the ground to be sure I was indeed going the right way as I saw virtually nobody! Weird. I just kept pushing the pace as best I could. I had less than seven miles to go when Heike and friend again came storming by me! I couldn't believe it. I'd looked behind me several times; looked way back down the road and saw no other runner! They sure rolled me up pretty fast! Wow!

We passed through the 10km to go aid station together but I didn't have the heart to race them anymore and just let them go. I knew I was going to break 32 hours at this point and really just wanted to relax my pace, cruise in and just soak in this whole experience. My "race" was done at this point. With about five miles or so to go the small town of Sparta finally comes into view. From my vantage point still several hundred feet vertically above the town in the still air of the quiet early afternoon I could almost believe I was seeing the village through Pheidippides's eyes some 2500 years ago. I thought I could see the smoke from countless cooking fires drifting freely into the sky between the white stone buildings with orange terracotta roofs. Timeless! That was a very special moment for me. More so than the pending finish line antics that are well celebrated and described by countless other Spartathlon finishers. I honestly felt I was indeed running in the footsteps of Pheidippides at that moment; carrying a message of great importance from the Athenians to King Leonidas; seeking support against their pending battle against the Persian invasion of Attica. This was my Spartathlon moment; it was very real to me and something that is hard to describe to the uninitiated.

The rest, as they say was history. I felt like I just floated into down and around the final couple of turns leading to the finish at the foot of the statue of King Leonidas. It was amazing to hear all the cheering

and support from just about everybody I ran by. From folks passing by in cars, to people on the side walk, to people in cafes and relaxing on elevated balconies above me; all stood up to clap and cheer "Bravo, Bravo!" as I passed on by. Unbelievable and unlike any race I've ever finished up. I honestly felt like I was winning the entire race and not just surviving it. Wow! At last I turned the final corner and I could see the statue perhaps a quarter mile away ahead. The bistro next to me on the corner exploded with cheers and clapping. Behind me children on bicycles and some older boys on motor bikes began to escort me the final distance to the finish; some young kids even started to run with on the final stretch. So cool! And then it was over. I ran up the final few marble steps to the raised dais and slammed my hand down on King Leonidas's foot. FINISHED! I won't lie, I was tearing up pretty good over the last mile or so. It was a very emotional moment; something that other Spartathletes can understand! At the finish I was crowned with an olive wreath and drank a sip of water from the Evrotas River presented by a young Spartan girl in traditional costume. I was then presented with a finishers token by the mayor of Sparta and after standing and posing for photographers I was taken, arm in arm to the medical tent. I must have looked pretty bad (though my finish photos don't look all that bad) because I was almost carried by two gentleman, one under each of my arms off the dais and into a waiting wheelchair where I was rolled no more than 30 meters to the medical tent! Ha! The staff bravely took off my shoes and socks, washed my feet and put slippers on. I was then released after answering a battery of questions about my condition. I really did feel just fine. My final finish time was 31:46:50 (12:26 pace) and 49th place overall and a healthy 4h 13m 10s under the 36 hour cutoff. By virtue of Katalin Nagy (who finished in 28:55:03 and 16th overall) choosing to represent Hungary I was technically the first finisher from the United States, and first from the Western hemisphere (North & South America). Not too shabby!



Final meters of the 246km Spartathlon!



And...TIME! Done!



Re-hydrating from water of the Evrotas River.



Every finisher is treated like royalty!



True Olympic fashion, Spartathlon finishers are crowned with olive wreaths just like in ancient times.

In the end there were 207 finishers out of 349 starters (a new record); over half of which finished in the last 2 hours. Seven of the ten official US starters finished:

- Robert Youngren, 31:46:50, 49th
- Bryce Carlson, 32:30:38, 58th
- David Krupski, 32:43:51, 67th
- Maggie Beach, 33:25:41, 83rd, 8th female
- Andrei Nana, 33:57:58, 101st
- Dean Karnazes, 34:45:27, 131st
- Eduardo Aguilar, 34:59:03, 147th

Some other interesting trivia, there were three of us who finished both Badwater and Spartathlon this year (The Bad Spartan):

- Robert Youngren, BW 28:03:35 + SP 31:46:50 = 59:50:25
- Maggie Beach, BW 33:16:01 + SP 33:25:41 = 66:41:42
- Zbigniew Malinowski, BW 42:57:31 + SP 33:42:08 = 76:39:39

For reference, the fastest "Bad Spartan" is none other than Valmir Nunes who in 2007 ran BW 22:51:29 + SP 25:37:40 = 48:29:09!! That's the course record at Badwater and Valmir went on to

finish 3rd at the Sparathlon. Unbelievable! (see the [Compare Races feature on RealEndurance.com](#) for more information)



The original Bad Spartan!

Post-Race

After I checked out of medical I generally bummed around with fellow American Bill Zdon (who got timed out by the Malandreni Village (mile 87)) and waited on Bryce and Dave to finish which they did not long later. Together we attempted to locate our bags that we'd prepared to be delivered to Sparta. Unfortunately there was some mix up and not all the bags were either at the finish, at the local hotel in Sparta or the hotel near Gythio on the coast of the Aegean Sea. Long story short our bags were finally found not far from the finish but it's still a mystery why there were some bags there, some bags at other locations, etc... This was about the only negative thing I can cite in an otherwise flawlessly executed race. Think about it, 75 checkpoints spread over 153 miles. Think about all the logistics involved in pulling this race together. I've heard numbers like 3-4 volunteers per Spartathlete and I believe it!

Anyhow, after the fiasco with the bags we ended up getting to our awesome hotel, the Belle Hellene Hotel near Gythio, Laconia Greece. The place was amazing. Right on the beach, rooms were nice and the food excellent! Wow! While Dave passed out early in the room, Bryce and I rallied and took the bus back to Sparta for the civic ceremonies taking place honoring the Spartathletes. We got there kind of late so missed most of the ceremony dedicated to the athletes but we did get to hear some pretty authentic Greek music and choir. Pretty cool! Eventually it was time to leave and so we returned back to the Belle Hellene by midnight.

Over the next couple of days the Spartathletes were treated to two more post race banquets. The first was lunch with the Mayor of Sparta at a winery on the outskirts of Sparta where in addition to a fine meal we all received a goodie bag full of locally made olive products; soap, canned olives, olive cooking spray, etc...



Top three finishers from the USA. L-R. Rob Youngren (1st), David Krupski (3rd), Bryce Carlson (2nd)



Location of lunch with Mayor of Sparta.

Then it was a long bus ride back to our hotel in Glyfada (a sea-side suburb of Athens). Pretty amazing to drive back through the route we'd just finished running barely a day earlier! The next morning Bryce, Dave and I headed on the tram into Athens to go visit the Plaka and the Acropolis. It felt good to stretch out our stiff and sore legs. We eventually made our way back to Glyfada and after a swim in the refreshing and crystal clear Aegean Sea just right across the street from our hotel it was time for one last banquet. We were taken to one last awards banquet back in Athens where we received a finisher's certificate and medal, one at a time. Again the food was excellent (after Dave engineered a revolution to get to the buffet ahead of time, Thanks Dave!).



Acropolis



More Acropolis



Can't enough of Acropolis.



Race was so tough I lost my beard! And yet more Acropolis



And a cat on a door! Wait, what?



Final awards ceremony in Athens.



Receiving my finishers certificate and medal.

And sadly the 2014 Spartathlon and associated activities came to an end. The next morning our fellow Spartathletes went the separate ways. Bryce and I ended up staying an additional day in Athens, staying at the Athos Hotel in the heart of the Plaka before flying out the next day. We just bummed around and walked all over central Athens visiting the gardens by the parliament and a few new neighborhood districts I'd never visited. Even cranked out a hard $\frac{1}{4}$ mile around the [Panathenaic Stadium](#) track (hit it in 73 seconds!). The next morning started very early with 6 a.m. flight out of Athens. Another 24 hours of "up time" until I finally went to bed, thankfully in my own bed at home with my lovely wife and 3 dogs. Was good to be home!

Now what?

I honestly have no idea at this moment about what will be my next GHAG (Big Hairy Audacious Goal). It's too soon to say. For various reasons most likely my race goals in 2015 will be more local and regional in nature. But down the road I'd love to return to do another Spartathlon as well as head back to the San Juan Mountains to attempt my 5th Hardrock 100 finish. May even consider going back to Barkley Marathons for a shot at The Real Deal. Who knows? But whatever I do I know it'll be exciting! Stay tuned...