My Most Unforgettable Ultramarathon

(And What I Learned From It)

Roy Pirrung

When I first started running ultramarathons in 1985 as the result of a challenge to do the Ice Age Trail 50-Mile Run, I began to read everything I could about distances beyond the standard marathon.

One race in particular caught my eye. It was called, simply, Spartathlon. This event intrigued me and lit a flame that could be extinguished only once I had finished the race by touching the foot of King Leonidas in Sparta, Greece.

THE HISTORY

Whether myth, legend, or fact, Greece has a long history of running. "Hemerodromoi" was the Greek name given to "day runners" who were used as messengers in the Greek military in ancient times. These day runners covered phenomenal distances, sometimes under incredible pressure to deliver messages on which the army's fate hung.

One of these hemerodromoi, Pheidippides, a name familiar to marathon runners the world over, is the most famous of these talented runners. According to Greek history written by Herodotus (translated by George Rawlinson), on one occasion Pheidippides was dispatched "by the Athenian generals, and according to his own account, saw Pan [a Greek god] on his journey. He reached Sparta on the very next day after quitting the city of Athens."

The Persians were about to invade Athens, and Athens sent Pheidippides to Sparta to ask for its help in the coming battle.

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Interpreting Herodotus's account of the roughly 150-mile distance that Pheidippides ran shows that he took about 36 hours to cover the distance. Several British military personnel stationed in Greece began to investigate the feasibility of retracing Pheidippides's route from Athens to Sparta from the sunrise of one day to the sunset of the following day. Egged on by British Royal Air Force officer John Foden, they put Pheidippides's feat to the test.

Of course, Greece had changed somewhat since 490 B.C. But Foden and his colleagues interpreted Herodotus as best they could; the trio of military types made the journey in times varying from 34 1/2 hours to just under 40 hours.

When word got out that the crazed Brits had made the journey on foot, the tight-knit ultra world responded with enthusiasm, as did sports enthusiasts in Greece. Mike Callaghan began to put together the organization needed to put on a race along Pheidippides's route, and in no time flat, SEGAS (Hellenic Association of Amateur Athletics) came on board and the International Spartathlon Association was founded. It hosted its first official event in 1983, the year after the Foden and friends extravaganza.

GETTING THERE

A California ultrarunner who moved to my hometown of Sheboygan, Wisconsin, heard that I ran ultras. He gave me a call, and we set up a long training run. While out on the trail, we talked about ultra adventures we hoped someday to do. I mentioned Spartathlon, and he said he had already done it.

Call it fate if you like, but for me it was a godsend. I had no idea how to get in contact with the Greek organizers or how to get an invitation to run the race. The California ultrarunner was Bruce LaBelle, and he was only too glad to give me the necessary information about entering as well as encouragement that I didn't really need. I had been primed for this for years.

Bruce informed me that I would need to establish myself with either an American record or a national championship title. The best route, he felt, was for me to run a fast 100-mile race to get into the 100-mile national championships.

The year he went to Spartathlon, it was by invitation and then selection. Organizers paid for the entire trip. But as the race grew in size and reputation, the organizers no longer provided travel funds but did furnish housing and meals, and if you dropped along the course, they would provide a ride to the finish area. Only one-third of entrants finished the course.

I had run under 16 hours for 100 miles during a 1985 24-hour track run. Bruce suggested that I enter another 24-hour race and use the event only to lower my 100-mile split time. So I went back to the same 24-hour race and lowered my 100-mile time to 14 hours, 1 minute, 17 seconds. I then applied for entry into the New York Road Runners Club/TAC National 100-Mile race scheduled for June 12, 1987.

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When I told my wife, Gail, about my plans to do the race at New York's Shea Stadium, she asked, "Do you think you can win it?"

I replied, "No."

She looked at me quizzically, and I said, "I know I can win it!" With that burst of confidence, I had her blessing to proceed.

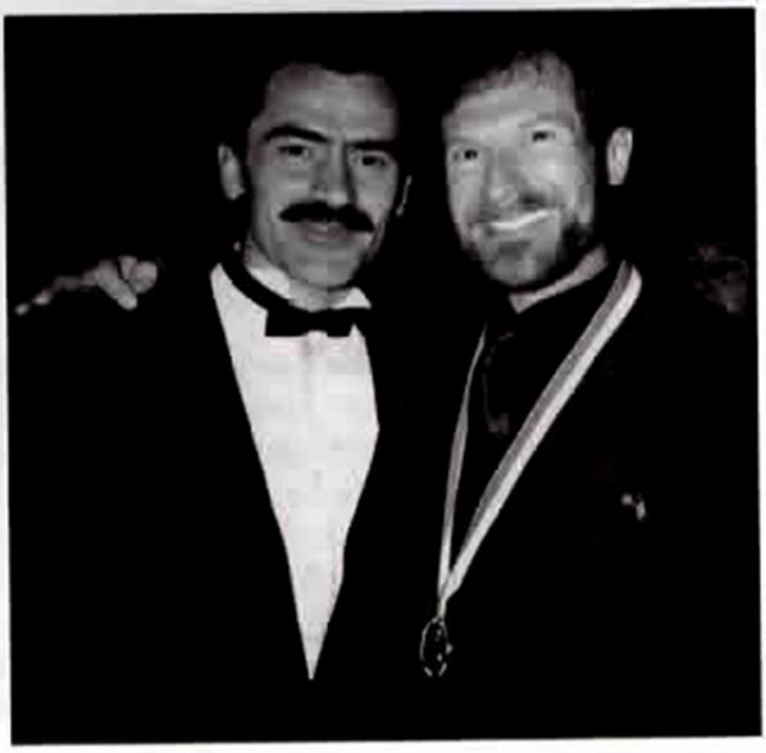
The country was in the grip of a heat wave the week before the race. I set out for the racecourse, where I was to meet a New York City friend who would be my handler. Some 20 years before, we had served together in the army. But when I arrived, he took me to his Manhattan apartment, where he informed me that he had been called away on business and would not be able to help me. He gave me two subway tokens and wished me luck.

At the race, I faced Stu Mittleman, one of the top ultrarunners of that era, and Chris Gibson, another notable New Yorker, both of whom were several times the winners of the NYRRC ultrarunner of the year award. Mittleman developed problems early, and Gibson took the lead. I followed, although not all that closely. Chris had a five-mile lead by the time he reached 80 miles.

The heat and the pace finally got to him, and I passed him, running a sub-7:00 mile for the 96th mile, and went on to win. Years later Stu commented that he thought it was the best 100-mile race ever run to that time. He felt it proved that a 100-mile race could be a competitive race. At the time, Chris and his crew hated me for coming in and spoiling things, but we have since become good friends.

During the race, I met two ultrarunning legends, Ray Krolewicz and Yiannis Kouros. Both were participating in a 700-mile race at Flushing Meadows Park, which is adjacent to Shea Stadium. Bruce had warned me long before of "Crazy Ray" and told me to say "Hi," which I did.

The 100-miler at Shea and the Spartathlon both have a high DNF rate. Only one-third of the field would typically finish either race. What helped me at Shea was that I had connected with



▶ Athens banquet—Yiannis Kouros and Roy Pirrung.

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George Gardiner, an ultrarunner, who lent me his son to handle me; after George himself dropped out, he also pitched in to help.

Crazy Ray came over periodically to check on me and encourage me, and near the end of the race he told me to run a hard mile and follow it with a strong 5K, hence the sub-7:00 96th mile. It was shortly after the sub-7:00 mile that I passed Chris to take the lead.

A guy came by riding a bike and introduced himself. "Hello. I am Yiannis Kouros, from Greece." I told him I would see him in Athens when I came to run Spartathlon. I did not know at the time whether he understood me; he just smiled. Yiannis was engaging and likable, although I did not know much about him.

Following the race, I heard that Yiannis was entered in the 700-mile event but had run only the first 24 hours. He then went to a hospital, had arthroscopic surgery on his knee, walked out of the hospital, got on his bike, and rode away.

FIRST DISAPPOINTMENT

After writing to the International Spartathlon Association, I received a race application. I was able to put my fast 100-mile time and my national championship title down under "notable performances." I then waited for confirmation of my acceptance for the 1988 event. The race is always held on the final Friday of September.

With only two weeks remaining before the Spartathlon, I started making follow-up phone calls to Greece to try to learn the fate of my application. I was never successful in getting through.

So, with a lot of valuable training waiting to be used somewhere, I called Larry Robbins, the race director of the National 24-Hour Championship race scheduled to take place at the Atlanta Water Works on September 17-18.

His first question was, "Who are you?" I told him I was the guy who had won the NYRRC 100-Mile National Championship, and he said he would provide transportation upon my arrival, free entry, and accommodations. I was impressed. Now I needed to come up with airfare—fast.

I approached my employer, Kohler Company, which was all for it in light of my win in New York.

The race went well for me, although racing on the fringes of Hurricane Gilbert provided more water at the aid stations than I or anyone else required. Having turned 40 years old a few months earlier, I won the national titles for both the open and masters and set records for the 40-44 age-group category and open (all ages) 24-hour mark with 145 miles, 1,464 yards completed.

When I arrived at my host family's home, I called home to give my wife a race report. At that time Gail said, "Guess what?" I told her the confirmation from Greece had arrived, and she acknowledged that it had. I felt a little disappointed, yet with the results of the 24-hour race fresh in my mind, the disappointment was short-lived.

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When I arrived home I wrote to the International Spartathlon Association and said that if I was expected to come all the way from the United States, I would have to receive a confirmation letter further in advance. I also mentioned my win and record in Atlanta. I received a reply several weeks later with an apology, congratulations, and assurances that I would receive the proper paperwork earlier the next year.

ANOTHER MILESTONE

With my anticipation of getting to run in Greece the following year, I wanted to do a tune-up race. I chose the Sri Chinmoy TAC National 100-Mile Championship to be held April 1, 1989, in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park in New York.

This would be only the second time that I would run the 100-mile distance, and I knew that with cooler weather I would be able to set a PR. The temperature hovered around the 40-degree mark all day—perfect for me. It was also perfect for two other runners. Rae Clark set a good pace early and was followed by Tom Possert and me.

I set PRs at 50K, 50 miles, 100K, and 100 miles. Rae broke the ratified world record in 12:12, I ran 13:15 for an American age-group record with a 90-mile 12-hour split en route, and Tom took third by coming in under 14 hours. It was the first 100-mile race in U.S. history where three runners broke 14 hours.

I felt so good that I ran a race in Central Park the next day, as did Rae. During the previous day's race, we had challenged each other to see who could run the last mile faster. Rae beat me by tenths of a second. In Central Park, he let me go ahead and beat him.

He knew it was a special race for me. I had originally hoped to run a race the day before going to New York, but it was canceled. It would have been my 300th event. Eddie Coyle, a sportswriter with the *New York Daily News*, arranged for me to do the Al Gordon 10K in Central Park when I told him of my desire to do my 300th race in New York City.

While I was receiving a post-100-mile-race massage, Eddie came in and presented me with a bib number for Sunday's Central Park race. Rae, overhearing my plans to run the next day, asked to join me. I thought it was a great idea.

Before the start of the Central Park race, we were introduced at the starting line by "the voice of the New York Road Runners Club," Kurt Steiner. Kurt had done the play-by-play at the 100-mile race in Shea Stadium and was a big fan of ultra races, as was Fred Lebow, the club president. Fred asked us to wear our 100-mile race bibs in addition to the 10K bibs.

We lined up with the 7:00/mile pace sign because that had been the pace of our last mile the day before. We ended up running 42:48 over the hilly course. We were pleased as they announced our names as we arrived at the finish line.

Our next stop in our tour of New York City was the World Trade Center. We both felt like we were on top of the world, and we thought this would be the best way

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to confirm it. The towers are gone now, but the memory of that weekend will live forever.

GREECE IS THE WORD

Arriving home from work one day, I couldn't help but notice the blaring music coming from my house. This was not what one usually expects from our household. My wife greeted me on the porch with a smile, and I asked what the loud music was all about. It was the soundtrack from the movie version of *Grease*. It was her way of telling me the confirmation from Athens, Greece, had finally arrived. ("Grease is the word, is the word, is the word . . . ") This was in the middle of May, so the ball quickly started rolling.

I contacted Kohler Company and asked for sponsorship and received an immediate yes. I also had obtained another sponsor, a large whole-foods bakery named Natural Ovens of Manitowoc. The owners were all for the race in Greece and asked whether they could go along to support me as members of my crew. That was a no-brainer, and I was happy to have Paul and Barbara Stitt accompany me for my first race overseas.

My wife, concerned over recent hijackings and shootings at the Athens airport, decided not to go. When I arrived in Athens, I took lots of pictures at the airport to show her that things had changed there. The security was overwhelming. There were helicopters above, tanks on the tarmac, armored personnel carriers at the doorways, soldiers with machine guns walking the corridors, and military jets flying overhead.

When I showed her the photos after I returned, she felt relieved and went along on the trip the following year. Unfortunately, by the following year, the jets and tanks had all vanished. I had to admit that when I arrived the previous year, a congressman had been assassinated and the airport was on high alert. She could have crowned me, but I was happy she had come.

ATHENS AT LAST

When Paul Stitt and I arrived in Athens, we had some difficulties clearing customs. We had packed a new food product that he researched and designed, and agricultural agents were concerned about foreign food products.

A biochemist by training, Paul had developed an "energy mix," which I, as an athlete, found very beneficial. It was designed for arthritics and for cardiac rehabilitation. He had proved that it reduced inflammation and reduced cholesterol but was not able to establish why it also showed remarkable improvements in athletic performance.

He had arranged to have Greek Olympic cyclists participate in a double-blind study to see what, if anything, was allowing me to enjoy a streak of personal records

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at distances from one mile to 100 miles. I had set 17 personal bests in less than nine months since I had started taking the flax-based mix.

Finally, after trying everything to convince them that there was no need for concern, I said, "We are guests of the Sparthathlon race, and I am going to use this during the race." They said, "You do the Spartathlon?" And before I could reply, they said we were free to go and take our "cereal" with us.

We rented a car, a thing called a Cherry. We later changed its name to Lemon. It was small, and the two of us and our luggage could barely be shoehorned into it. We were on a budget, and it was starting to show around the edges.

After some difficulty with directions and with the language, we arrived at the Greek Olympic training facility. We checked in and were assigned quarters in the dormitory.

In the morning, Paul asked how I slept, and I told him that he had kept me awake all night with his snoring. He said we should go to a hotel and get separate rooms. So much for the budget. But it was worth it; the next night I slept very well. The move to the hotel also kept us away from all the activity in the athletes' village, which tends to be a distraction.

We returned to the complex for preevent meetings. Each runner was assigned a number alphabetically by last name, and those with crews were given official signs for their vehicles.

George Clainos, the security director, gave instructions in Greek and English, the official languages of the Spartathlon. I assumed that Spartathlon was a spin-off of a word such as "biathlon" or "triathlon," but Yiannis recently told me that it stands for "Sparta-Athens-London." I again assume it is because of where the race starts and finishes and because of the British involvement in establishing the race.

Each year I listened to the briefings on rules of the course and course directions, and each year I learned a little more. One year we had a course briefing in an auditorium setting complete with photos of the course and maps with elevation changes and things we needed to know about problem areas. Marking a course of approximately 250 kilometers (155 miles) can be a huge undertaking.

The first year that I did the race, numerous cardboard signs were hung from trees, telephone poles, and buildings. A little rain and wind during the night caused many of them to come down. Vandals took down many more. And with a flashlight the only nighttime illumination, many went unnoticed when they were placed off the side of the road. None of the markings were reflective.

Over the years that I ran the race (1989 to 1996), course marking improved dramatically. Reflective paints were used on the roads, and signs and glow sticks pointed the way when we crossed the Sangas mountain range.

In the early years of the race, local American military personnel were used as escorts on the rugged and sometimes indistinguishable trail to the top of the mountain. This voluntary duty turned into a party, and with the spirited youths adding

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other spirits to their duties, some of the reasons they were there were neglected. Glow sticks eventually replaced the rowdies, and in the process the race lost some of its color.

ON THE STEPS OF THE OLYMPIC STADIUM

We left for the start, hoping to be there early, but in the process we left without waiting for anyone who knew the way. We got lost. I was beginning to panic as the start time drew near and we did not.

We finally managed to find someone who spoke English, and he drew us a map. It also helped that it was nearly light. Traditionally, the race started at first light, around 7:00 A.M. We arrived at 6:50 A.M. and managed to snap a few photos of the American contingent and catch the final announcements. Marvin Skagerberg and Mary (Hanudel) Larsson were there the first year I ran it. We were on the steps of the Panathenian Stadium, built of marble at great cost for the revival of the Olympics, which Athens hosted in 1896. It was at this event that the marathon made its debut with a run from the bridge at Marathon to the stadium in Athens.

In later years, my wife and I attempted to find our way around Athens and always got lost. One year I wanted to visit the town of Marathon, and I thought I remembered a sign at a traffic circle in the city. I drove from the airport, entered the traffic circle, saw the sign I knew I had seen before, and followed it—right past the airport, going in the opposite direction.

On our fourth visit, Gail developed a method for reading the signs printed in Greek. Words that are pronounced one way are nothing like the written word. The street name we always had difficulty with became "baloney sandwich." Another problem is that the street name may change in the course of a few miles; it is one name when it goes through one part of the city and another when it emerges out the other side.

Looking out from the start line, we could see the Acropolis and the Parthenon. When the race was started with the first strains of music, we leaped down the steps and into the roadway, which the police had closed down.

A MATTER OF COURSE

We entered a traffic circle that meandered near the Acropolis and eventually took us out of the city in the direction of Piraeus, a seaport section of Athens. The police escorted the lead runner, and on my first year there, I had the honor of leading the race out of the gate.

Heading down the National Road, the equivalent of a busy four-lane thoroughfare with limited shoulders, was harrowing, to say the least. Several times I feared for my life as cars whizzed by at 60 miles per hour. The congested road produced a large volume of pollution, not only along this road but throughout Athens.

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Just when I thought the gas and diesel vapors were peaking, I entered an area of oil refineries, and the additional loss of fresh air was stifling. Luckily, it did not last long. I was directed to turn from the "new" National Road to the "old" National Road. The original road along the Aegean Sea provided breezes and clear air with an added treat of less traffic and great views of the ever-changing blue waters.

The road connected numerous villages along the route to Corinth. These small towns provided tourists expanses of beaches and opportunities for sailing, fishing, or picking up a Greek souvenir. They also furnished spectators for the participants of Spartathlon. Especially appreciated was the escort the schoolchildren furnished through their town as they practiced their best English. I could still hear chants of "USA! USA!" long after leaving them behind.

As I went through one village, a group of schoolchildren lined up along a fenced-in playground and cheered. A lady gave me several olive branches to carry, signifying that I was leading the race.

As the police escort reached the city limits, it was replaced by another escort that was ready to lead the way through the next town. Most of the time the escorts stayed far enough ahead so as not to present an obstacle to running but not so far ahead that they lost visual contact. When I approached a blind curve, they provided safe passage by stopping traffic until I cleared and then zoomed past me to look for the next traffic challenge. They also warned drivers that other runners were on the road and that they should drive cautiously.

At one point I needed to urinate, and the motorcycle policeman didn't see me leave the road and go down a small embankment covered with brush and a few small bushes. When I did not come around the curve, he panicked and retraced his route to look for me. I came up the hill and got back on the road just as he approached. He shrugged his shoulders, wondering where I had been. I pointed to my "plumbing," and he laughed. Later, he went around a curve, and when I followed, his motorcycle was parked on the road but he had vanished. He came up the embankment, and when we made eye contact, he pointed to his "plumbing." We both laughed. Words in Greek or English weren't necessary.

Reaching Corinth, I crossed the Corinth Canal, described by Swedish runner and former Spartathlon competitor Rune Larsson as "one damn deep ditch." The canal, originally started by Nero, was not completed until 1893 when British engineers armed with a new invention— dynamite—made it possible. It connects the Aegean and Adriatic seas, cutting the time to go around the tip of Greece and creating an island known as the Peloponnesus, most often referred to as the Peloponnesus Peninsula.

The bridge I went across felt unstable as it bounced with every footstep and every large truck using the two lanes adjacent to me. Tourists lined the chain-link fence to view the large cargo ships making the four-mile journey from one sea to

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▲ 1990 awards ceremony, Athens. U.S. contingent, left to right: Don Choi, Marvin Skagerberg, Roy Pirrung, Mary Hanudel-Larsson, and Rune Larsson from Sweden.

the other. Some ships were scraping the sides of the bridge. I was scraping the sides of the bridge myself, trying to get through the congestion.

In 1989, I led the race to a point just short of the canal and then was overtaken by Patrick Macke of England and Rune Larsson (Mary's husband). After I returned home, I studied previous results and noticed that no one other than Yiannis had led the race at this point and gone on to win.

CHANGE IN STRATEGY

In subsequent years, I held back until meeting my crew for the first time near Corinth. One year I was in seventh place, just prior to climbing the approach to the Corinth Canal, when a truck forced me from the road and to the shoulder. Keeping my eye on the truck, I lost track of my footing, clipped a rock with my toes, and my shoe filled with blood because the toenails had been damaged.

When I reached my crew, I hid my injury. I smiled, took aid, and was off before anyone noticed the bloodstained shoe. As I moved away, I looked down and saw that the blood was being transported from the toes, along the instep, and out the top of the shoe.

For the year prior to this bloody affair, I was involved with a product-design team for Wigwam Mills. The project was called "Absolute," a name borrowed from the famous vodka and conceived in an Atlanta bar following a day at the Super Show (the world's largest sporting goods show at the time). Its goal was to create the perfect athletic sock, the "absolute" top in high-performance foot protection.

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When I described the way the blood was transported from the toe area and up and away from the bottom of the foot, they were excited. I thought my third-place finish would be a matter of joy, but they seemed to cherish the bloody sock story. Following this episode, they used colored water or tea when testing to track the flow of moisture through the sock. (The sock came to the market with the name Ultimax and eventually became the official sock of the Ironman Triathlon.)

WE RACE!

In 1990, while I was climbing the road leading to the final descent into Sparta, a runner caught up to me as I was taking care of business off the side of the road. His name was Seppo Leinonen; he hailed from Finland and had a good command of English.

Seppo said to me, "We run to Sparti together?" Disappointed to be in sixth place, I responded with a snappy, "I didn't come to Greece to finish in seventh, so I must race you for sixth." Off I went, running the last 30 kilometers without stopping. Seppo was near but never caught me.

Skip ahead two years to your humble correspondent enjoying damaged toenails and a shorter stride. Only 100 kilometers into the race, Seppo asked the same question. "We run to Sparti together?" And just as quickly as the last time, I responded. Only this time I said, "Yes, we run to Sparti together." We were again in sixth and seventh place at the time. Seppo had to ask whether I understood the question, and I said, "We tie." The pact was formed.

Over the two years since he had originally posed the question, I had told the story numerous times to different groups of people. I felt bad about not having accepted his offer the first time. I was not being a very good sport, but I think that about 24 hours of racing had elapsed at the time and I did not think of sportsmanship but only of competitiveness.

FRIENDSHIP AND SPORTSMANSHIP

He immediately went from seventh place to sixth. And then we went from sixth, to fifth, to fourth. As we passed fading runners, we realized how much our two-man team meant to both of us. When the people at the aid stations said, "You are in fifth and sixth," we responded, "We are in fifth."

As the race progressed, we spoke of our goals. He wanted to break 29 hours; I wanted to finish in the top three. I told him I would get him there in under 29 hours. Rather calmly he stated that he then would be obligated to help me finish in third.

Several times following our agreement to finish together, Seppo would run ahead, and I would think, *That's it. I won't be seeing him again.* Then, a little later, he would be sitting beside the road waiting for me.

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When we reached the foot of the mountain, we discussed the best way to get to the top and agreed that walking was just as quick as running and would take less out of us. After a long climb on the road section, we reached the trail section that would lead us to the top. Once at the top, Seppo took off down the mountainside like a man possessed. He had no lights and had been dependent on mine, so I quickly lost sight of him.

At the end of the trail, I found him sitting, wrapped in a blanket, waiting for me. He had not put warm clothes in his drop bag, and the temperature was near freezing. He told me that he had run fast as a way to stay warm.

Over the course of our run together, we talked of some of our Spartathlon experiences and how it would be when we finished together this year.

SPARTATHLON STORIES

One of my favorite stories was of the year I got caught in a hailstorm just after meeting my crew in Corinth. As I approached Acrocorinth (ancient Corinth), the temperatures dropped from the high 90s to the lower 60s and it began to hail. Golf ball–sized hail pelted my body and no shelter was in sight. I remembered some trees near the amphitheater where Saint Paul had spoken to the Corinthians, so I ran as quickly as possible to reach them. Unfortunately, they were not as large as I remembered. I crouched beneath a few branches, pulled out a Ziploc bag, and ate some energy mix while praying to Saint Paul for help.

Just as I arrived at the railroad bridge, a band of gypsies pulled underneath and stopped their truck. I had always been warned as a young boy to beware of gypsies. I treaded on through sand from the olive groves, which had turned the road to mud. Suddenly, a big black dog appeared, began barking, and approached me with the intention of taking a bite out of me. At least that is the way it seemed to me. But after hearing my voice, he started wagging his tail, and I reached down and stroked him behind the ears.

I now had man's best friend, a dog I named Blackie, to run with me. And run he did. He chose the shortest route and always avoided the deepest mud. He left me twice to chase cats, something I had seen only in Tom and Jerry cartoons.

Chilled to the bone from the drop in temperatures and the rain that followed the hail, I could not wait to change clothes, get my legs massaged, and eat something warm. That year we had a van, and Paul, Barbara, and Gail had stockpiled the things I wanted and had them prepared by the time I reached them.

As I ate, I asked them to make sure Blackie was fed also. They wanted to know who Blackie was, and I told them he was my dog. They thought I was hallucinating and started asking whether I had a dog when I arrived in Athens and, if so, where he was. I told them to call for him, and when he arrived next to the van, they were shocked. I said, simply, "Feed him."

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Blackie was still eating as I left the comfort of the van for the journey ahead. Running up the road, I turned and looked back and called for Blackie. To everyone's amazement, he trotted up to me and took the lead. Not until we reached one of the worst sections of road did he lie down. I left him at the aid station; his companionship and running skills had taken us 25 miles together; now he just wanted to lie beneath the refreshment table and rest—something dogs know how to do very well.

Seppo talked of finishing hand in hand with one of his sons. I told him that his son could run in the middle and we would each hold a hand. We were now talking of being the first masters runners to finish in the top three and the first tie in the top three.

Our dream came true, only not as we had envisioned it. As we ran up the final approach to the statue of King Leonidas, I saw George Clainos and his family—Vassi, his wife, and his children, Alex and Nikki. I called to Alex to come, and I took his hand and joined with Seppo and his son Harri. George told us that we must touch the foot of the statue at the exact moment or one would be third and the other fourth.

We touched simultaneously, then turned and hugged each other and then our young companions. The traditional greeting by the mayor was followed by a ceremonial drink of water poured and presented by two Greek maidens and then the mandatory ambulance ride to the hospital for an examination.

The year we raced for sixth, I was on my way to the hospital as Seppo came running up the final approach. This year we entered the ambulance together and found a cot and a chair. I offered Seppo the cot; he accepted and thanked me for

Courtesy of Roy Pirrung

▲ The Mayor of Sparta prepares to place an olive wreath on Roy as Seppo Leinonen catches his breath and Roy asks for more water.

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Courtesy of Roy Pirrung

◀ Seppo Leinonen and Roy Pirrung posing at the statue of King Leonidas.

getting him to the finish in under 29 hours. I thanked him for the third-place finish as the sirens blared, the lights flashed, and we were off for our checkup.

I related to Seppo my first visit to the hospital while covering the five kilometers of hilly and bumpy roads.

The first year I went sliding toward King Leonidas because the morning rain shower had left the marble platform slippery. I jumped up the two steps and went headfirst with my arms reaching out in self-defense. I stopped by colliding with the base of the statue. The mayor rushed to help me up, but I screamed to leave me alone. To be touched and helped to my feet would have meant disqualification, and all I had to do was get up under my own power and touch the old king's foot. I stood, climbed up, and kissed his foot.

I got to the hospital with Paul Stitt as my escort and was cleaned up, given a massage, asked whether I had any problems—I had a very sore throat and was given vitamin C tablets—had my heart and blood pressure checked, and was placed in a wheelchair. I was taken to a rest room and asked to provide a urine sample for drug testing.

Paul wheeled me up to the toilet, but because I got up too quickly I passed out and collapsed. Paul called for help, and a doctor came in. As they manipulated my limp body, they accidentally tipped me backward, and I hit my head on the marble floor.

My eyes opened, and a bearded man in a white coat was pulling on my beard and asking me how I was. I told him I was fine and that if he did not stop pulling on my beard I was going to start pulling on his.

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As I rested in the bed, Seppo was sleeping next to me. Vassi fed me grapes as though I was the king of Greece, and we laughed at the image. I then returned to the finish line to satisfy the spectators who wanted autographs. Afterward, Yiannis sat and ate with us at a sidewalk cafe where we enjoyed several lunches during our stay.

IT'S NOT THE RACE

Returning to Greece and seeing the country and enjoying the people I met was all part of the Spartathlon experience. Some doubt that the military messenger ever ran the route or the distance. I have no doubts.

Getting to the race was the real challenge to me. Without its stringent rules to get in, I probably would not have attempted to run in a national championship back home or broken an American record.

I was an overweight, two-pack-a-day smoker when I discovered that I needed to run to return to my former physical health. I never had any intention of competing. But things evolve, and we improve, and we constantly search for new challenges. To me that is why the Spartathlon is my most unforgettable ultra. It showed me how to get where I wanted to go and proved I could get there with hard work and determination. It is why I run the marathon—and beyond.

Courtesy of Roy Pirrung

▲ At the Spartathalon awards ceremony, seated left to right: Nikki Clainos and Gail Pirrung. Standing left to right: Alex Clainos, Roy Pirrung, George Clainos, Vassi Clainos.

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And What I Learned From It

Trust friends. Vassi Clainos suggested that her brother Peter drive for Gail when she acted as my sole crew. Her job was made easier thanks to Peter's skills driving the course.

The art of peeing on the run, including never peeing into the wind, and always off the road so that competitors following could not judge how close they were.

Expect the unexpected, and prayers do get answered.

"Most unforgettable" does not have to mean "favorite." Favorites can change over the course of years as our perspectives change.

What lies ahead sometimes is better than what we left behind.

In Greece, dogs that bark in the night as you silently run through small villages are usually fenced in or behind walls and are not necessarily attacking.

Hearing a train whistle can conjure up 100-plus-car trains, but whistles on trains only five cars long are just as loud.

Races change over the years, but the people who stay involved with the race always improve.

Dogs really do chase cats, and they make excellent running companions.

The longer the race, the stronger become the friendships that are made along the way.

Don't go near the gypsies, carry a Ziploc bag with energy mix, and don't forget the dog treats.

More is learned in preparing for or qualifying for a race than can ever be learned during the race.

I possess qualities that would never have surfaced had I not undertaken this quest.

ΣΠΑΡΤΑΘΛΟΝ

Roy Pirrung

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