

# Spartathlon 2015 Race Report When The Masks Come Off

By Andrei Nana



One of the paintings in our bedroom is an original piece by famous European Artist, Valerian Paraschiv. It is called Masks. The symbolism behind the painting is the truth of everyday life. We all have many masks which we wear in different circumstances. We have one mask for our family, we have one mask for our work, we have one mask for friends, and so on... The explosion of social media sites makes it easy to distinguish and understand an individual's ability to juggle multiple masks and to balance their use. There is absolutely no one in today's society who is 100% authentic. We all use those masks with or without ill intent to better function in a group and to just move forward. We use those masks to make ourselves believe that somehow we are more (x) or more (y) depending of what we want to accomplish.



Nevertheless, even in a world where truth has so many nuances, there is an absolute truth. Some people call it God, others "the Holy Spirit." For me that truth is the Spartathlon. It is an ultrarunning race, considered by almost everyone who ran it, the most elite in the world. It involves running from Athens to Sparta, a distance of around 153 miles/246 kilometers in less than 36 hours. It was created based on one of the most pure and selfless actions. An Athenian soldier was sent to Sparta to ask for military help from King Leonidas following a sudden/unexpected attack of the city by the Persian Army.

Pheidippides, the messenger-soldier, ran to Sparta and delivered the message. There was no entitlement, no complaining, no glory. It was his duty and he did it. The modern Spartathlon is a test of reality, an athletic moment of truth. Following an application process, some of the best athletes in the world are invited in the last

weekend of September each year to retrace the footsteps of Pheidippides and to run from Acropolis in Athens to the statue of King Leonidas in Sparta. All athletes selected have demonstrated time and time again why they are worthy of such an honor. After they receive an invitation, they still have several months to prepare exclusively for this race. Then, on a Friday morning at the gates of Acropolis the moment of truth shines upon them. They have ONLY ONE mission – to cross the finish line in Sparta by kissing the foot of the King Leonidas' statue.

An army of expert volunteers provide all that is needed and more to complete such a test. The only factors determining one's success or failure are the athlete's body, mind, and spirit.

In 2015 I was blessed to return to the Spartathlon for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time. For me it was the greatest honor and the culmination of yet another year. I first ran Spartathlon in 2013, then returned in 2014. The exact same race, two very different experiences. In 2013 the race went well and while having some challenges as anybody else in the race, I finished well. The 2014 was a different experience as I raced with a severely injured leg. While the race lacked the "first time experience" it forced me to approach it differently and to experience the same amazing emotions at the finish line although having taken a different path.

I did not know what to expect from 2015. It was a hard year with lots of stress on a personal and professional level, with some major changes in life.

My wife, Claire Nana and I arrived in Greece two days before the race. In hindsight it was a mistake. Leaving directly to the airport from the world of work related stress lead to a "less than enough transition" to enter the Spartathlon mind set. This approach led to an arrival in Greece stressed and very tired. Then in Greece a failure of the car rental company to have a GPS for the car as requested lead to even more stress next day trying to find, buy, and program a GPS to help us navigate in a country where we were not familiar with the alphabet or speak the language.

Back at the hotel seeing friends from many countries helped with stress. It was like a huge family reunion -- where you see the favorites. We hugged, caught up with our lives, wished each other success and took photos.



With Don Winkley and Lauren Booker



With Claire Nana distributing U.S. Spartathlon Team shirts



With Michael Wardian

For the first time, the U.S. Spartathlon Team had shirts. I distributed the shirts to the athletes, crews, and to the athletes from other teams who requested to trade team shirts. When all was completed I realized it was time to go to bed and sleep before the race started in the morning... But it did not happen...

Traveling on a minimum budget leads to purchasing the cheapest tickets possible with the most changes and composed of multiple flights. During one of these flights or airports I caught a virus and the night before the race, like in the first year, I developed light fever, I started coughing and sweating profusely... My wife concluded that perhaps I slept less than 30 minutes the night before the race... Nevertheless, I was ready to start running. At that point I knew that once the start is given, there will be only one goal to focus on - to run. I knew that all my stress, worries, and problems will “go away” at least for the duration of race. I knew I will have peace at last.

Acropolis looked great in the morning. The U.S. Spartathlon Team had a banner, shirts and 20 great athletes. I wanted to take some photos with the Team and get moving. Not many of the athletes were wearing the shirts and some were not present for the photo, but we managed to get a few good shots in before the start was given. After I had my “usual” beer at the start line I started making my way towards Sparta.



During the first part of the race I talked to many friends from different countries. Gilles Pallaruelo and Jean-Philippe Brunon form the France Team, Florian Reus and Heike Bergmann from the German Team, Ivan Cudin and Andrea Zambon from the Italian Team, Ilias Karaiosif and Giorgos Panos from the Greek Team, Noora Honkala from the Finish Team, Johan Steene from the Swedish Team, Szilvia Lubics and Andras Law from the Hungarian Team, Mimi Anderson, Debbie Martin Consani, and Paul Ali from the British Team, Aykut Celikbas from the Turkish Team, Sung Ho Choi from the South Korean Team, Aly Venti, Lara Zoeller from the U.S. Team, and many others.



With Gilles Paraluolo (France Spartathlon Team)

As the temperature was increasing, I started to sweat quite a bit. I knew that if I wanted to reach the finish line I had to increase my body temperature to “high fever” levels to neutralize the virus. I have done it in the first year and it worked, so without much thinking I started to push the pace and keep water intake to a minimum to “overheat.” The race plan was simple: reach 50mi/80km in 7 to 8 hours, reach 100mi/160km in 17 to 18 hours. Finish as strong as possible.

I reached my first mark in 7 hours and 15 minutes. The pace I kept worked well and I started to feel better, perhaps a bit dehydrated, but at 50mi/80km I felt strong. I did not stop, took some food from Claire and kept moving. The next 50 miles stretch I had some tougher times as congestion was building into my throat and made it difficult to breathe or talk. It was also a sign that my plan was working. I started to spit “chunks” of dark congestion and after a few more hours I was clear again.





I reached the base of the mountain – approximately 100mi/160km in 18 hours and 7 minutes, just slightly behind the schedule. I felt still strong but the exhaustion was setting in and the weather was getting cold, calling for rain... Not exactly my type of weather, but then again the race was not supposed to be easy and without challenges. As I went up the mountain it was still dry, however by the time I reached the other side, it started raining. In the beginning the rain was light, however the temperature dropped more and more until it seemed freezing to me... It was not that cold, however after running an entire day in 90 degrees F when the temperature drops to 40's F you feel it...

The next few hours involved many “plays” with the gear: running in a compression shirt and freezing, or putting on a very wet “rain jacket?” At times the rain was torrential and the light rain jacket I had with me did not stay dry. The water got in around the neck area and after a while through the material... I tried to improvise and use a garbage bag and a shopping bag to stay dry but the plastic made me sweat not to mention made me look like a homeless person.



Towards the early hours of the morning I started to have difficulties in staying awake. I wanted to take a short nap after the mountain, but it was a very loud aid station. Instead, Seppo Leinonen worked on my IT band who was increasingly tight due to a shoe change. I started to run the race in my favorite Saucony shoes, however the inserts after being wet from perspiration started to wrinkle under my arch, so I had to switch to my Hoka way too early in the race. The “heel to toe drop” is different from the Saucony to the Hoka and it was putting too much pressure on the IT Band.

Before I met Claire next, for the first time I experienced hallucinations... I always heard of runners reporting hallucinating during races but I never did it myself. I first realized I was hallucinating when I attempted to “jump a white fence” in the middle of the road. Then I saw someone on the side of the road wanting to give me a hug, I walked over only to be brought back to reality when I walked in the branches of a tree... Then down the road I was “walking and talking” to other runners only to be brought back to reality by the honks of a car. Apparently I was walking in the middle of the road. I started to worry as I realized I had no control over my mind...

Luckily I reached the next aid station where we could meet our crew and as soon as I saw Claire I told her I need to close my eyes for a few minutes. It was still raining and I was drenched but I had to take care of the exhaustion/hallucination issues. The aid station was in front of a small restaurant who had a cover at the door. Claire was able to borrow a mat from the volunteers and I laid down. It was cold and rainy..., I fell asleep fast and the next thing I know Claire tells me 20 minutes have passed and it was time to get back to running.

My mind was screaming for sleep but it was lucid again. Getting up after sleeping in cold wet clothes was not easy. It sucked, but I started to move slowly and my friend Andrea Zambon (the Italian Team) just reached that same aid station. We started walking and running together, still trying to figure out the best way to deal with the rain... As misery likes company, we ended up together for many miles chatting and encouraging each other.

After a while my mind was awake. The 20 or so minutes did the job and I was “like new” again. I took off my wet jacket and started to run in my compression shirt. I was cold but it was a “brand new day” and mentally I felt good again. Soon, my body followed and my pace increased to what it was during the first day. It is an amazing feeling to realize you just passed through a very rough period and now you are going to finish strong. It is what Spartathlon is all about. Overcoming the challenges and reaching the finish line, taking one more step forward without DNFing.

Having finished the Spartathlon in 2013 and 2014 gave me all the knowledge required to finish it again. Running it on a severely injured leg in 2014 gave me the conviction that my body, mind, and spirit were trained for the task. Nevertheless, it did not mean that I did not want to give up... Many, many times I thought about the comfort of a shower, dry clothes, and a nice hotel room. Like in the previous races, I reminded myself of the Spartan mentality of No Retreat, No Surrender. I thought of Pheidippides, I thought of Leonidas... They did not

give up, they had character, conviction and subscribed to a certain life philosophy soooo dear to my heart. I kept moving because there was NO other option but to cross the finish line.

Entering Sparta was as emotional as during the previous two years. Once again I had tears in my eyes just by letting it all sink in... I was finishing the greatest race in the world for the 3<sup>rd</sup> consecutive time... Finish time: 31:44:46... I was honored to be a 3<sup>rd</sup> time Spartathlete. The race once again removed all my masks and forced me to see myself in the most pure/unaltered light, to once again understand the meaning of life, love, and perhaps even God...



This race would not be the same without a large number of volunteers. They are the best of what this world has to offer. They are humble, dedicated, professional, kind, and strong. During the entire race they endured the same conditions as we the athletes did without complaining, always putting up a smile on our faces, encouraging us and making sure we are on par to accomplish our dream of touching a statue... From the bottom of my heart, THANK YOU to you, Spartathlon volunteers.

Many thanks to my wonderful wife Claire who for another year crewed me. She stayed awake the entire time by doing pushups... She decided to do 10 pushups for every mile I run. She ended up doing 1530 pushups during the 31 hours time span. Needless to say she was very happy to let me drive after the race ☺

Thank you to Drew Farretta who's acupuncture treatments got me back to training after a horrible 2014 year and allowed me to feel confident about the race.



Congratulations to all finishers!



Now, I look forward with excitement to the next year, when once again I hope to have the honor to experience the Spartathlon one more time. Nikolaos Patalas (the Spartathlon statistician among many other functions) tells

me the chance of finishing the race 4 consecutive times is about 1%. As I made a promise to Kostis Papadimitriou (the ISA President) I guess I will start preparing to race on a 1% chance ☺  
At the same time, I can only hope the 2016 U.S. Spartathlon Team will have more finishers than in 2015. While Katalin Nagy and Aly Venti finished on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> (female), the total of 9 finishers of 20 starting athletes was only on par with the general finishing percentage rate... We will also have to work on having at the starting line all 25 invited athletes...

Off course before then, the Icarus Florida UltraFest takes place, a race organized by the International 100+ UltraRunning Foundation, Inc (which is inspired by my life philosophy and drive).

For more info about the Spartathlon, the U.S. Spartathlon Team, and my life please see:

Spartathlon Website ([www.spartathlon.gr](http://www.spartathlon.gr))

U.S. Spartathlon Team Website ([www.spartathlon.us](http://www.spartathlon.us))

Spartathlon 2014 – Andrei Nana – Race Report (<http://www.spartathlon.us/Spartathlon%202014%20Race%20Report.pdf>)

Spartathlon 2013 – Andrei Nana – Race Report (<http://www.spartathlon.us/Spartathlon%202013%20-%20RR.pdf>)

Icarus Florida UltraFest ([www.icarusfloridaultrafest.com](http://www.icarusfloridaultrafest.com))

International 100+ UltraRunning Foundation, Inc ([www.internationalultrarunning.com](http://www.internationalultrarunning.com))

Nana Endurance Training ([www.nanaendurancetraining.com](http://www.nanaendurancetraining.com))

Interview with Drew Farretta (<http://www.internationalultrarunning.com/running-200m-week>)

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