

Spartathlon 2013 – a race like no other, the greatest race on the planet.

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despite a crass lack of talent or resources~

By Andrei Nana



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Going to the Spartathlon I did not know what to expect. Most ultramarathons use in their marketing phrases such as “the toughest race on the planet,” or “the most difficult ultramarathon in the world.” While it is impossible to compare any two races as no two races are alike, many of these claims are just false. The Spartathlon is considered by most elite ultrarunners as being the greatest race on the planet and the most elite event in the world. After having ran it myself, I now understand why all those claims are valid. Sparathlon is like no other race, it is the greatest.

Two years back I decided to run the race. I was captivated from the first seconds I heard of it. At that time I was new to the ultra life style. I had started running long distance just two years prior to that moment and just started running official races. I had never cared much about races shorter than 100 miles/160 kilometers because somehow those races did not match my idea of ultrarunning. In my view, only a race where an athlete goes through repeated ups and downs, where the physical pain is present, where the desire to quit was prevalent was worth racing or investing in it. I had never cared about winning, or glory or anything of that nature. I wanted from the beginning to feel that with every race I was a stronger, better person with a clearer mind and spirit. It turns out my intuition was right on spot and my decisions allowed me to move on this path very fast.

After having my first official race where I committed the mortal sin of DNF (did not finish), I was tormented by the idea of failure. It was my failure and I knew it, I went to that race without knowing what I was doing, without being sufficiently prepared and I failed. That evening I made a promise to myself to never, ever DNF again. NO EXCUSES. I had no rational understanding of my decision, but now looking back I can see clearly why that decision was perhaps the most important decision I had ever made. If there was a “secret” to ultrarunning, then that secret was “NO EXCUSES.”

I kept my promise for the next 19 ultramarathons and raced many times in very bad shape. I had started races with sprained ankles, swollen knees, and in situations where my Achilles tendon was so swollen and bruised that would not fit in the shoe. I had started races with food poisoning, I had run sick, passed out due to pain in races (but always got back up and continued), experienced lows both physical and mental where any idea of rational hope was completely gone. Each time I finished and each of those races made me much stronger physically and mentally but most of all they instilled in me the “habit to succeed.” Without knowing in the beginning and then later realizing the profound effect of such an attitude, I succeeded to understand the only difference between the ultra athletes who always perform and the ones who perform only on “good days.” Somehow the ones who never fail are the ones who understood the importance of the “habit to succeed.”

Spartathlon was the 20th ultramarathon that I finished, and I knew I would succeed way before I started. As the famous Muhammad Ali stated “The fight is won or lost far away from the witnesses, behind the lines, in the gym, and out there on the road; long before I dance under those lights.” The ability to predict your performance in a race is possibly the best exam one can administer on himself and it demonstrates a realistic understanding of the self from a physical to a mental point of view. Only a balanced athlete can give 100% and make it to the finish line. Ultimately the ultramarathons are not competitions with others, they are instead competitions with ourselves, a test of where we are in life at that moment and an understanding of who we are. If we believe we are better than we really are, we fail. If we believe we are less than we really are we fail. Because we either push too hard and “have accidents” or we do not have enough confidence to reach the finish line, the result is the same, an excuse of why we failed.

To be successful in an ultramarathon one needs three things: a strong physique, a very strong mind, and the habit to succeed. Most ultrarunners have the first two but they lack the third. In my opinion, the habit to succeed is the most important one, followed by the very strong mind, and to a certain degree by the strong body. It is important to notice, talent is not a relevant factor for success, neither is age, gender, socio economic background, race, religion, diet, or equipment. The ONLY factors which will make or break an athlete in an ultramarathon are the three discussed. It is worth repeating them: habit to succeed, very strong mind, strong body!!!

The Race

Spartathlon is a race which has its origins in the history of Greece and the history of running. It retraces the legendary run from Athens to Sparta of the famous Greek messenger, Pheidippides. In a way it is the history of ultra running. For many years it was considered humanly impossible to run over 153miles/246kilometers in less than 36 hours through high heat, over mountains with strict cut off check points. It was “impossible,” until 1982 when a few British athletes did it. Since then, every year at the end of September this phenomenal race is held bringing some of the best ultra athletes in the world to the starting line. Even if the starting line is filled with the best, less than 50% reach the finish line.

The race organizers provide housing and meals for the athletes during an entire week of events, check points every few miles/kilometers (75 aid stations) all included in the participation fee. On top of that, there are three different celebrations at the end, each one more impressive that the one before.

The Course

The course is well marked with paint arrows on the ground, some signs and starting with this year, large SPARTATHON permanent signs posted at intersections over the course of the 153 miles. One can only agree that when a race reaches a level where cities over the course of over 153 miles allow permanent street signs to be installed, that race is part of the culture of that country.

If you have not done the race before I highly recommend to study the elevation profile. At a first glance it does not seem very impressive, but it is important to be taken seriously. A continuous change of altitude gain and loss will break down the body and requires specific training. You cannot expect to go there and do well if you are not trained to run on flat, uphill and downhill terrain. Then there is the “mountain”. No video or picture does justice to the obstacle at mile 100 or kilometer 160. The best way to describe it is to say that almost nobody (including the top finishers) runs it. Perhaps if you can go in advance and train there on the mountain, then it will be somehow “runable”.

My Training

I decided to train specifically for the Spartathlon for 4 months. Looking back it was a mistake and now I believe 2 months of intense training should be sufficient (as long as the athlete has a very strong base level of fitness). During the 4 months prior to the race I ran somewhere around 3000 miles/4800 kilometers at an average of 150-200miles/240-320kilometers per week. I burned myself out and paid a price by experiencing some severe lows. Part of my training was also to incorporate tire dragging over the Key Biscayne bridge in Miami while dressed in black winter thermal gear (raised my body temperature by about 20F). I did this over the summer when the outside temps were in the upper 90s F.



Unfortunately Miami does not have hills or mountains and I was hoping the tire training on the bridge will substitute for the lack of mountain training. It did and it did not. It did in a sense that I was able to fly over the small/short hills no matter if steep or not. It did not in the sense that I crashed at the mountain. I will explain why shortly.

Logistics for the Race

My team composed of Claire, my sister Ioana and her fiancée Alex -- who ended up with the driver position -- and I decided to stay in the center of Athens before and after the race. The race headquarters and hotels are in Glyfada which is outside of Athens and a different city (for the purpose of directions/GPS).

Ioana and Alex arrived in Athens 2 days earlier and waited for Claire and I at the airport. They rented a car and had their own GPS. It is important to note that the names of the places, streets, addresses are in Greek (which is using a different alphabet), Athens is a hard place to navigate and if not familiar one should use a GPS, however it is important to

make sure it has the Greek Alphabet option, otherwise will be difficult to use.

Claire and I made it OK to Athens -- our luggage not so much. Due to an abundance of caution, I packed in my carry on the most essential things: running shoes, shorts, shirts, sun glasses, hat, and salt pills. I knew I would be OK either way but it is a pretty bad feeling when you realize the bulk of your stuff might not make it in time for the race. Fortunately for me it made it a few hours later. I notified the airport I will personally return to pick up our lost luggage as soon as they arrive, which happened that night. Crisis avoided.

After checking in next day and attending the official briefing, had some meat based dinner and went to bed.

Day of the Race

Tried to sleep, however the cigarette smell in the hotel room caused my throat to be very irritated and I was coughing frequently. Soon I realized my body was going through dry heaves and could not really rest. The alarm clock sound at 4am caught me wide awake. It was time to take a shower and get ready for the race. I stood up and was dizzy, coughing and feeling “hot” (not in a good way). Without saying much to Claire I made the decision to run faster than originally planned which was to reach the 50mi/80km check point in 8 to 8½ hours. My rationale was simple: not knowing what was happening to me, I concluded the most likely scenario was that I had some type of virus or bacteria. The best way to deal with that was to increase my body temperature to “fever levels” in the hope it will kill whatever I had. A second reason was to gain as much mileage as possible in case I crashed later, to have the least distance possible to cover if in bad shape. I knew one way or another I will finish the race -- nothing will stop me.

The start of the race is in Acropolis, and the scene was surreal with a huge crowd of athletes, supporters, and media crews. The Japanese athletes were everywhere with cameras and seemed the most excited group to be there. It looked like ultrarunning is the national sport in Japan. After taking some photos and saying the usual “hello and good luck” to many of my friends racing while having my “traditional” pre-race beer, I noticed people pushing together towards the end of the square. I realized the start was given.



Without wasting another second I started running following the crowd. Going down from the top of Acropolis, the course took us on a cobble stone paved road where people cheered us. The road was not very wide so it forced most of us to run together as a group. Several minutes later we reached the bottom of the hill and continued on the streets of Athens. There I started to focus on finding my rhythm and getting comfortable with the idea of extended mental focus. I would not meet my crew for 50 miles (the first place where one can receive help from the crew) so I had nothing to worry about except calming my mind.

Running through Athens was both exciting

and interesting. Most drivers knew about the race so pretty much everyone in cars or on motorcycles would cheer, so were the pedestrians. Some spectators would be very excited, others would shake their heads ☺

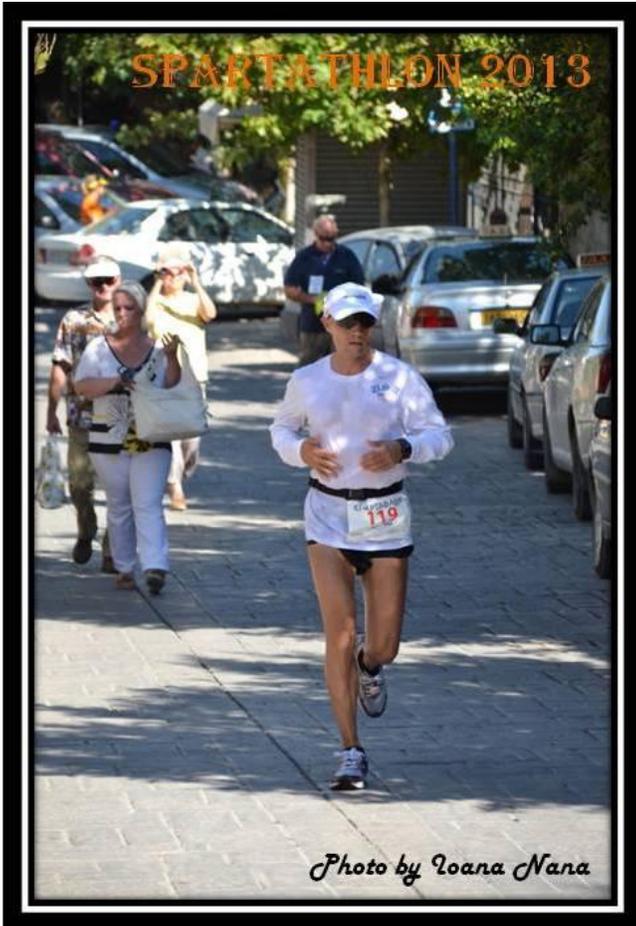
Towards the exit from the city I ended up running with Ivan Cudin from the Italian Team. Ivan has won the Spartathlon in the past (finished 3rd this year, even if just coming back from an injury) and to my surprise he was running at my pace. We spent quite a bit of time discussing anything from different races to nutrition to ultrarunning organizations. He was not only very pleasant to talk to, but also very humble. During this time he asked me how much I knew about the “mountain” and what was my plan? I told him I did not know much, only what I’ve seen on some YouTube videos and had no plan other than to take it one step at the time. He informed me that the mountain is very tough terrain and that I should walk it, including the downhill as the rocks were very loose and the chance of injury was high. He was absolutely right.

After a few more miles I ended up running with Szilvia Lubics. Szilvia is an amazing athlete, and she too, had been first female at the Spartathlon in the past, as well as this year. Like most ultra athletes, she was pleasant and impressive to run with. While we did not speak much, the time passed much easier running with her.

I did not stop almost at all at the aid stations. My plan was simple, have about 200 calories/hour (either from some gels or protein bars I had with me) and about 700 mg of salt (2 pills of S!Caps). Drink water only when thirsty, and during the morning use the water from the bottle I was carrying with me to save time. My plan worked well and my body seemed to like the pace I decided to follow. After a few miles the dizziness and lack of energy dissipated and was able to enjoy the course.

After running alone for a while I started to go back and forth with Kai Nakayama a super strong athlete from the Japanese Team. We traded places many times and pushed each other for quite a few miles. It was not a lot of talking, nevertheless we shared the miles. After we somehow separated I ended up running next to Florian Reus from the German Team. Florian was running the Spartathlon for the first time as well and had very little experience with races over 100 miles, however he looked strong and efficient. I learned that while he is a student, he used to work in the wine industry. I knew I liked him for a reason -- we discussed races, organizations, and drinking while running. He was a bit surprised when I told him about my habit of drinking beer/wine/vodka during ultras, and I was not sure if he really believed me at that point. Florian ended up taking the 2nd place this year which was a huge accomplishment. I also enjoyed the company of Luc De Jaeger-Braet who is a strong Belgian Team runner.

Around 10am the temperatures started to rise -- I would guess to high 80sF. I decided to stop at the aid stations where there was ice to put some in my shirt (my shirt was a dry fit and had the belt with the bottle on top). That combination allowed me to throw a fist full of ice in the front of my shirt or in the back which would help my core stay cool. I was surprised to see the unfamiliarity with this approach. At several aid stations I was told it was dangerous to do so and wherever I took a bit more time to refill my water bottle I tried to explain that living in Florida this is the way to race. I was not sure if I changed any minds though. ☺



As the temperature rose, I could feel my hamstrings tightening up on the uphill. I had the option to slow down my pace or increase my salt intake. I decided to go with the second option and increased my salt intake to 3 pills/hour. That helped and I reached the 50 miles aid station/check point in a bit more than 7 hours. During this entire time, my only concern was not directly race related. Three months prior to the race I decided to use the Spartathlon as the location and time to ask Claire to marry me. I had also decided to carry the engagement ring with me during the run. Unfortunately my bottle carry belt had only one small pocket filled with salt pills, protein bars, gels and my race ID (which by the way identified me as a British athlete, not sure why). ☺ There was the only place to carry the ring and I was pretty worried it might fall out when I opened the pocket for something inside.

At the 50 mile aid station I refueled my salt pills, water bottle, had a protein drink and without wasting time, I left the station. As many of the athletes who ran Spartathlon before put it, the race begins at that aid station. The next few hours went uneventfully, and I was passed by Stu Thoms, a veteran of the Spartathlon who this year took 4th place. We did not talk, but just exchanged greetings as his pace was different than mine. As the course made a turn inland, leaving behind the amazing views of the sea, steeper

hills became present. I decided to run the uphill at a slower pace and then make up by accelerating the downhill. It worked and I continued to run without stopping more than a few seconds at aid stations.

The light started to get dim and I decided to take my night lamp out as well as put on the reflective belt. I never felt in danger running on the roads even if cars were passing by very close. I guess being a road runner I am so used to cars, that I don't have anxiety when one almost brushes me off the road. At the station where I took my head lamp, I received a leg/shoulder massage from Ioana and Claire while drinking a beer. The break helped and after a few minutes of trying to find my rhythm, I was able to run effortlessly again. As the night came, I reached an aid station located in a restaurant. The aid station was a restaurant table at the edge of the terrace. There I took another longer break to eat. My crew was able to find some meat and I had another beer. As the restaurant was full, the crowd was very excited to share cheers with every sip of the alcoholic beverage. Again my phenomenal crew massaged my legs while I finished my meat and drank my beer. I did not sit down at all and was still feeling OK. As the steeper hills came more often my heart rate became higher as well, but was still under control and I was able to eat and hydrate well at this point.

The next few miles consisted of roads through small villages and the altitude slowly increased. On these roads I ended up running with Blake Benke and Robbie Britton. Blake is a strong ultra athlete part of the US Team and former Marine, Robbie is part of the British Team. We ran together quite a while chatting about life. Both Blake and Robbie were struggling with severe nausea and vomiting, however they kept pressing forward at a fast pace. Talking to them I realized, neither one was willing to accept the idea of defeat and one way or another they will make it to the finish line.

As I approached the base of the mountain, the hills become very steep. I was slowed down to walking and my heart rate went up fast. While my tire training prepared me for increased HR endurance, with the tire I would reach the top of the bridge in 10-15 minutes. Running down on the other side of the bridge was not easy but it was easier than going up and my heart learned to rest during that time. On the Spartathlon hills there was no break -- just going up all the time. There I was passed by some athletes and as the road was very steep in a S shape I could see the head lamps for many others approaching.

I reached the base of the mountain -- approximately mile 100 -- in just a bit over 17 hours. It was a PR for me and was happy with that, however my heart rate was above 180. I knew I had to slow it down before starting on the mountain. This was also the first aid station where I sat down. Due to the increased HR it was difficult to drink or eat, yet my crew forced me to have some peanut butter but that was all. It was more or less the last time I ate before finishing. I also chose to get dressed in long pants, got my hat and gloves and a jacket.

The mountain was rough. It was steep, rocky and it was not a surface where one can run easy. The race organizers had enough volunteers on the rocks to somehow make me feel safe, even if one wrong step could easily lead to a long fall down which would certainly mean the end. Reaching the top seem to take forever and there on the top there was a small tent with mountain rescue volunteers and a lot of wind. I never stopped, just moved forward and started my descent. While it is less steep than the side going up, the rocks are loose and moved when I stepped on them. My only advice here was to take it easy, and be very careful.

It felt so good to be back on the road a few miles later. ☺ The next few hours were spent running in the dark in cold weather. At another aid station I was able to eat some potatoes as my heart rate went down. There, I changed my shoes and took off my hat and gloves. The last part of the night was not easy, however, towards the morning I started to feel better again. I had felt exhausted, hungry, but unable to eat, thirsty, but unable to drink and was looking for motivation to push it harder as my pace slowed down quite a bit. I knew it would get better because in life and in ultras there is a certainty to getting better as long as you push forward. I kept repeating in my mind the famous monologue from the movie Rocky Balboa: "... the world ain't all sunshine and rainbows. It's a very mean and nasty place... and I don't care how tough you are, it will beat you to your knees and keep you there permanently, if you let it. You, me or nobody, is gonna hit as hard as life. But ain't about how hard you hit... It's about how hard you can get hit, and keep moving forward... how much you can take, and keep moving forward. That's how winning is done. Now, if you know what you worth, go out and get what you worth. But you gotta be willing to take the hits. And not pointing fingers saying: You ain't what you wanna be because of him or her or anybody. Cowards do that and that ain't you! You're better than that.."

Many of the overnight miles ended up being completed in the company of Andras Low from the Hungarian Team and Wilfried Sourice from the French Team. Andras is a strong ultrarunner who completed Spartathlon 16 times. He has a very even pace and his attitude is very calm and relaxed. Running next to him at that pace I knew it will only get better once the sun is up and I trusted him with the pace to know we were making good progress.

Jean-Phillipe Brunon from the French Team caught up with me during the early morning hours and we ran together quite a while. As we entered the last stretch of rolling hills the 3 of us ended up in the company of Vagelis Bakas, a great Greek athlete. He was somehow familiar with the course and his crew had a nice military personality with fit well with my attitude. He would scream at us to pick up the pace, push us out of the aid

stations, etc. While I know not many respond well to that crewing style, it worked for Vagelis as he did an amazing job.



The last few miles of the race I ran almost shoulder to shoulder with Andras. He gave me a quick overview of what to expect from the last 15 miles or so, where to push the pace and where to slow down. On the way to Sparta the road was wide for the most part, and people were cheering from all the passing cars. The last few miles entering the city were mostly downhill, then suddenly, I hit the city - two last aid stations left then the finish line. At the last aid station before the finish line I was informed a police motorcycle officer will provide escort through the last few streets. I was not sure if they told me it would be close to the finish line, or I just assumed, but after running what seemed like forever I saw the motorcycle. I was relieved, the finish line must be close... It

was not... While the officer was clearing the road I could barely keep up with his pace, I had now over 150 miles on my feet and felt like I was sprinting. Nevertheless, the streets were decorated with flags, flowers, posters, banners, and filled with spectators singing, dancing, having a good time on a Saturday afternoon. Children on bikes or on foot joined me for the last few hundred meters.



A few turns later I could see the end of the boulevard and slowly distinguish in the distance the statue of the Great King, Leonidas of Sparta. I was overwhelmed with emotions as that moment, once seemed impossible to imagine, then it became a dream and after two years of intense training I realized it was happening. It was then and there, it was Sparta...

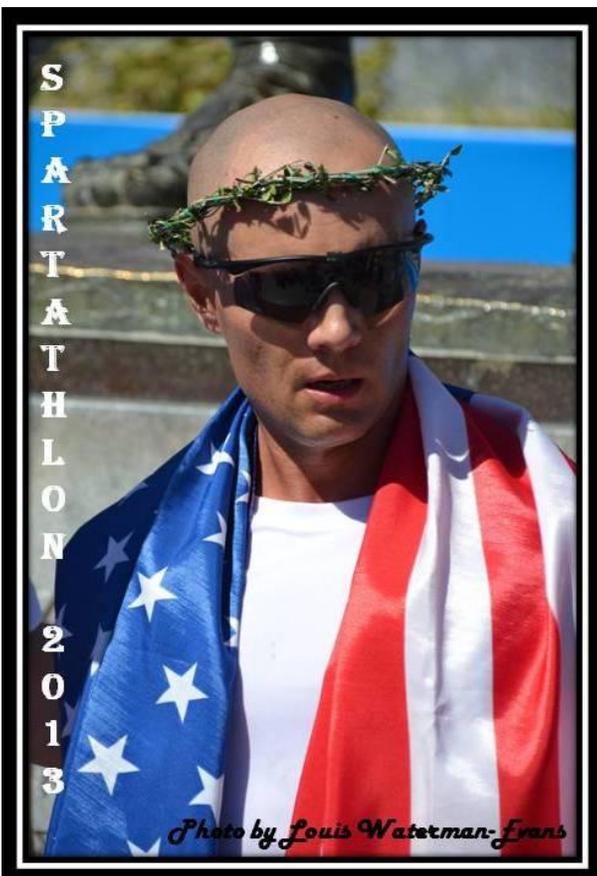
I rushed through the crowds to touch the feet of the Great King (the official end of the race) and there I experienced something so amazing, so powerful. As I was at the bottom of the statue I felt humbled to touch the feet of the greatest King who ruled. King Leonidas put his people ahead of his

own well being, ahead of his own life and decided to lead in combat a small group of soldiers in a suicidal mission to protect his country. His efforts succeeded and to date the Battle of Thermopylae remains one of the most impressive battles of all times. In a world ruled by corrupt politicians, that moment at the feet of King Leonidas brought peace, serenity and hope.



Prior to the race I was a bit worried regarding the post race feelings. Having read numerous reports of athletes feeling depressed at the end of a successful quest, I wondered if this would be me once the goal was reached. It turned out my worries were not founded as in that moment, realizing I completed my dream I saw my life as a beginning and not an end. I am not sure why I felt that way, but for some reason I was filled with a strong belief that somehow then and there, in Sparta, was the beginning...

The finish line was different than what I am used at most races. I was greeted by several Spartan women dressed in traditional attire who offered water, a race official placed an olive wreath on my head, shook my hand and offered me a plaque. There were dozens of photographers and cameramen around. I especially have to say thank you Louis Waterman-Evans for the photos and cheers during the race, a British ultrarunner who came to document the race. I was then taken to the medical tent, offered a bed to sit down and volunteers to wash my feet. A beautiful Spartan physical therapist named Poli assessed my legs and worked on my calf strain, which was the only “injury” suffered during the race. That and a small blister ☺



There I was offered more water, beer and the medics kept an eye on the finishers as the temperatures were in the 90s F. Heike Bergmann from the German Team who ended up finishing 3rd female was there as well smiling and acting as if she had just run a 5K. ☺ After chatting with her a few minutes, I rejoined my crew and drove to the hotel. We decided to stay at a hotel on the water a few miles away from Sparta. The hotel was great, and the restaurants on the water had amazing food. There was a celebration in Sparta that evening, however my crew and I decided to just drink and sleep as we were exhausted.

The following day, all athletes and their crews were invited to have lunch with the mayor of Sparta before returning to Athens. We skipped the lunch as well because my plan was to ask Claire to marry me that day. Staying about 40 minutes away from the city I wanted to go back in front of the statue and propose there while it was less crowded. I knew that after lunch most athletes might go back to take photos at the statue so I decided to wait until evening.

We returned to the statue to take some photos and while my sister kept pedestrians away I asked the question.

She said YES!



The next day was the official awards ceremony and was in Athens. It was just different. The location was a beautiful mansion with a large pool. Tables were set up around the pool facing a stage where each finisher was called and awarded the medal and certificate. For the most part everyone was dressed in elegant evening attire. Ambassadors from the countries with finisher athletes were invited to present the awards. While the American ambassador was not present we shared the table with Brenda Carawan and her crew, Ross Carawan and Amanda Strasburger McIntosh. Brenda is an amazing athlete and she was there to finish. Even if she had trouble during the race, just like as Blake and myself, she pushed through the problems, overcame the obstacles and completed this historic race. Her crew was always very supportive during the race, and they always cheered and encouraged me when our paths met. I could not have been in better company carrying the American Flag than with Brenda and Blake.

mission to cross the finish line. Gilles and Angel Pallaruelo finished together as father and son. Angel was the

youngest finisher this year and for Gilles this was Spartathlon finish number 12. They were crewed by Francoise Pallaruelo, an ultrarunner herself. What an amazing family!



At the award ceremony I briefly spoke with Joao Oliveira from the Portuguese Team who had won the race. He runs an average 300 km/185 mi a week an indication that high mileage is important in ultrarunning. The food was amazing and there was plenty of wine so it was a great party.

Over 350 athletes received invitations to participate, 321 athletes started and 148 ultrarunners finished within the maximum of 36 hours allowed. My time of 30:52:19 put me on the 27th place. Before the race I predicted a finish time between 30 and 32 hours. I was hoping to have a great race and finish under 30 hours, however I was not sufficiently trained for that. My assessment was right on spot and the race both humbled me and taught me where I need to work to improve. I was happy nevertheless for reaching my goal, for spending time with my family and for getting the YES from the woman I love.

If would be to find one critique I would have to say the live tracking software was not user friendly for the many friends and family who stayed all day and night in front of the computers to track our progress. Everything else was ideal. Sparta and Greece now hold a special place in my heart. The people are warm, kind and supportive. The volunteers were everything you can ask from at such events. The race was wonderfully organized. The food was fabulous and the weather warm. I can only recommend this race with all my heart and join the group of athletes who call it the greatest race on the planet.

Next, I will focus on work, family, write an ultrarunning column in the *Run South Florida* magazine, and continue to develop the *International 100+ UltraRunning Foundation* and the more selective *International 100+ UltraRunning Club*. I have also started to prepare for my next major race, the UltraMilano-SanRemo on March 29th-30th in Italy. It is the first edition of a race which started in 1906 as a car rally. After the weak performance of the cars that year (only 2 out of the 32 cars starting reached the finish line), in 1907 the race became a cycling event. Since then, the race is perhaps one of the most known cycling events in Europe. In 2014, the race will make history again and become an ultramarathon. 175miles/280kilometers from Milano to San Remo in under 42 hours should be an elite event and a challenge for the Spring, and I am looking forward to see my ultrarunning family there.

THANK YOU again to the organizers, volunteers for such an amazing experience. CONGRATULATIONS to all the finishers. THANK YOU to my amazing crew, Claire, Ioana, and Alex. Thank you to Chris Twiggs, my first mentor when I stumbled by mistake into ultrarunning, and to the two ultrarunners I consider the best in the world and the most inspirational: Jesper Olsen – ran twice around the world, and Liz Bauer – the world record holder for the most races of 100 miles or more in one calendar year, 36 races in 2012.

Photos by: Louis Waterman-Evans and Ioana Nana

For more information on these races, please visit their official websites.

Spartathlon Web Site: <http://www.spartathlon.gr/home.html>

UltraMilano-SanRemo Web Site: <http://www.ultramilanosanremo.it/>