

## **In the Realm of Raccoons**

By Jovica Spajic

When all physical resources have been exhausted, when the body is fatigued and languishing, injured and bruised, when all-pervading pain like a severe tyrant has conquered the body, what remains?

Are our spirit and ‘psyche’ enough to get us through the danger while we are standing on the edge of the abyss that ominously threatens to swallow us and we are fighting like a fish out of water for every breath searching for motivation, motivation- the Holy Grail, motivation which will keep us on the surface, motivation which will give us hope that we can overcome the adversity and rise again like the Phoenix from the ashes and prevail over our own apathy?

We might find the answer to these questions, but it must be done through our personal experience. The quest is long, perilous and challenging, covered with thorny paths without visible signposts. I began my quest a few years ago running the ultramarathon across the burning Sahara sand, continued crossing picturesque and precipitous slopes of the Alps, I ran through vast forests and climbed down to Azure Coast and my last stop was the place nearby Miami called Fort Lauderdale in the US state of Florida where I took part in the continuous six-day ultramarathon called "ICARUS FLORIDA ULTRAFEST". I got the invitation from a famous American ultramarathon runner Andrei Nana whom I met at UltraMilano-Sanremo in Italy.

It was a great honour and responsibility to be one of the participants of the race which involved genuine legends of ultramarathon world, experts for six-day races, real ‘beasts’: Jesper Kenn Olsen, the Dane who is the only man ever to run around the globe twice and ran over 63 thousand kilometers in last six years, who has won almost all ultramarathons he took part in; Michele Notarangelo, the Italian who has run four six-days ultramarathons and who holds several records in the most extreme long-distance running; Rimantas Jakelaitis, the Lithuanian who has run dozens of six-day ultramarathons, 1000 and 3100-mile races, ten-day races; Charlotte Vasarhelyi, the fantastic Canadian ultramarathon runner of supernatural endurance...

There were many other great and experienced runners, esteemed, respected, with accomplished biographies full of extreme races, competitions, tough, mature, both psychologically and emotionally stable, trained to overcome drowsiness, thirst, hunger, pain and suffering which a six-day ultramarathon entails, ‘gladiators’ whose ‘pilgrimage’ to the toughest world ultramarathons has lasted for years, who were eager to prove themselves, to set new records, to broaden the endurance limits. One can assume their determination to put ‘the youngster’ from a faraway Serbia in his place, to teach him that he is still ‘green’ for this kind of races, that he has to be patient, to spill sweat and blood and wear out hundreds of trainer soles until he deserves an equal opportunity to share the adventure...

Before every ultramarathon, I always try to find new motivation, new incentive which will be my lodestar at the worst of times when I am unsparingly struggling with my ‘demons’. I sometimes

draw motivation from historical novels about epic heroes and their daring exploits, at times from music that soothes me and cheers me up. However, my greatest motivation lies in the stories of the common people around me, in the story of my neighbor master-cobbler Jova, hunched tiny old man, who goes to his small seamy shop behind the corner at each dawn and repairs old shoes all day so that he could afford good education to his grandchildren who lost both of their parents at an early age, and now all the burden rests upon old Jova's shoulders. Oh, my dear Jova if you knew how many times I remembered you during the race in Florida! Your willpower was my incentive, thank you old man for being there for me.

One more legend has been deeply engraved in my heart and at some moments when the night fell and menacing silence took over it seemed to me that I could imagine the heroes of the story running with me towards the finish line. Believe me, I am not making it up – when you start thinking about giving up, when the spirit becomes restless, thoughts scattered and vague, eyes absent-minded, when everything is annoying and you blame everybody for your feelings, the food is unsavory, the drink bitter, when you are beside yourself with despair, when your trainers become uncomfortable, your gear too tight, your sweat cold, your breathing without a rhythm, when you feel frequent pain all over your body, when a volcanic eruption of pessimistic thoughts threatens to destroy the very last hope to finish the race successfully, then you clutch at straws, pull the ace out of your sleeve, try to remember the motivating stories and events which help you overpower yourself, a smile comes back to your face, you laugh at the adversity, optimism prevails and the aim is clearly visible...

And the legendary tale says: In the Copper Canyon, which intersects the mountain range Sierra Madre Occidental in Mexico, there is an Indian tribe called Tarahumara whose members call themselves Raramuri', i.e. 'running people'. These people can run up to 250 kilometers a day hunting to provide food for their family. Their endurance is fascinating if we consider modest living conditions, lack of any kind of high-tech sports equipment or supplementation, their ignorance of plyometrics, proprioception, crossFit and cross training, treadmills, ergometers, GPS integrated watches, balanced diet, massages, saunas, 'dormeo' mattresses and other facilities for achieving good results. They run over in worn-out leather sandals across pathless ground and rocky mountain gorges; they run with a smile, towards the horizon; they run because running is their way of life, their credo, their faith, hope; they run because they enjoy it, because they love it, without burden, without expectations, without pressure, without fear, there is no aggression and tension in their pace, and yet even the best world ultramarathon runners could not keep up if they were to come face to face with them...

And what did I look like immediately before leaving for America? It did not look promising... Gracious Virgin Mary, help me... I hadn't had a decent run for over a month as I was afraid that the serious injury that I suffered at my last ultramarathon, up there in the harsh precipitous cliffs of the Italian Alps while running in the race 'Tor des Geants, would recur. Memories and images of agony I went through in the Alps running with ruptured tendon haunted me like ghosts denting my sub-consciousness with the fear of failure; fear that another disaster and disappointment would destroy my love for running, for ultramarathons...

I tried to think positive, to keep being motivated and soothe my family and friends since I could see serious concern in their eyes – I was to face six long days of continuous running in one kilometer loop with the additional challenge of time difference, high air humidity and sweltering

heat. Daily training in stressful situations and under pressure, strength trainings (based primarily on various exercises with kettlebells) flexibility trainings, demanding field trainings in heavy equipment and tactics all of which require outstanding motor control and agility, team work, the work activities and dynamics in The Special Anti-terrorist Unit (SAJ) to which I belong, brought me back the mental acuity and focus, self-belief, and the support of family and friends lifted my spirits and roused new enthusiasm. And then the things started happening at lightning speed – the arrival in Florida, time zone adjustment, last moment preparations before the race, meeting the other competitors, the lead-in tension and anxiety just before the start, euphoria soon to be followed by the feeling of indifference, then a kind of ‘tranquility zone’ where I caught my own rhythm and tried to keep concentrated on taking in enough liquid and food, on more economical running technique without pushing myself right from the start. I tried to convince myself that I should enjoy everything since I was doing the thing I like best – running so I should just run. I often thought how easy it was to say that.

Legendary Swedish ultramarathon runner K-G Nystrom, who has run more than 1,200 long distance races, smiled at me whenever I went past him and advised me to slow down since a long race was ahead and to keep my strength for later on. Of course, I would thank the kind Scandinavian but I would carry on in my own rhythm. As an anonymous ultramarathon runner in those circles, I caused quite a surprise since I was in the lead after the second day.

No one, including myself, expected that of me, but I felt ‘comfortable’ and fresh. I tried not to think of others as competition, on the contrary, I made friends with them, talked to them about my country, people, history and tradition, and inquisitively asked them about their homes, culture, motives. This helped me ease the pain that slowly started to set in. I was well over 300 kilometers, my feet were swollen and I had pain in the lower back, hips and knees. I knew it would happen sooner or later; concrete is a cruel enemy at such long distances, the body experiences strenuous effort and suffers great pressure. In order to facilitate running, I had cut the front part of the trainers allowing the feet and toes to spread which would in turn prevent blisters. This ‘new model’ of trainers caused sympathies and aroused the interest of other competitors so many of them did the same thing.

High air humidity and rain that followed us at the beginning as well as the plant and animal diversity around the track, gave the impression that you were running through the famous “rainforests- jungles.” Then when the night came, everything would gradually become silent, the runners would somehow slow down and everything would wrap up the gloomy picture. During those long nights, I started struggling with myself. The greatest crisis came on the fourth and fifth day of the ultramarathon when I ran out of motives and there was a long way still ahead of me.

One-kilometer loop was now so long, as a kind of a massive and impregnable fortress, the pain was getting more and more pronounced and thoughts about giving up started to overwhelm me / I was overwhelmed with the thoughts about giving up... My great hope, my pillar of strength and support, my friend Aleksandar Djakovic who has followed me on various competitions and ultramarathons, was with me again. He constantly cheered me on, fervently and unpretentiously in his own way, he prepared food (for the other competitors as well, whom he generously made and passed around pancakes, could make use of his culinary skills ), changed socks, massaged,

took care of equipment, prayed honestly and keenly for me, encouraged me in my darkest moments and shared my pain and happiness. His presence gave me the necessary tranquility.

If you were to finish a six-day ultramarathon successfully, it is crucial to have a reliable person by your side whose role is exceptionally significant and challenging. A smile appeared on my face and I was overwhelmed by positive energy when I imagined Aleksandar as Sancho Panza, a devoted friend of Don Quixote's (in this case me) who fights against windmills (in this case the kilometers still ahead). It was the thing I needed; I finally realized the essence of it. I had to keep positive and think only about pleasant things and kilometers would quickly go by...

Thoughts about my family and friends kept fleshing in my mind, I repeated Jesus' prayer, sang my favorite songs out loud, though the repertoire wasn't very wide – I don't know why, but I could remember only a few songs... Oh, my God, how I love my country – I would think at those moments, I do all of these because of my Serbia, so if the price is acute pain and suffering, I shall endure, I have to, I cannot let down my country, family and dear friends.

Energy highs and lows are component parts of these kind of races so it happened that, no matter how hard I tried, dark thoughts would prevail over my mind, and there was no chance I could remember anything positive, I would wonder why I need all of this, I would think of my unsightly rented apartment with a shabby wardrobe and an old bed, the bank loan, unfortunate infatuation with a girl called Marija, all my unfulfilled hopes and wishes, my smile would become unnatural, the running pace would decline, I would lose my breath again, my eyes would turn red, I would get frustrated and one of the world best ultramarathon runners, the Dane Olsen took advantage of it and took over the lead and won the race.

What is impressive about Olsen is his composure, the way he runs which seems somehow unreasonable, and yet he is extremely efficient, he brims with experience and determination. I am truly honored with the opportunity to share the race track with such a legend. At the end of the race, he admitted that my performance made him do his best and that he thanked me for it. Exhaustion was evident in case of the other competitors, most of them faced various injuries, breathing problems, vomiting, dizziness. We mutually supported each other, but it seemed somehow feeble and quiet, we had all burnt ourselves out.

The fourth night of the race, well after midnight, I was so exhausted that I wanted to lie down on the ground, fall asleep and wake up on the sixth day when everything would be over. But just then I heard a sound coming from the bushes by the track. I saw several silhouettes sneaking around and I thought I was hallucinating since I could tell they were raccoons. Oh God, what are raccoons doing here, I must be seeing things?! I had heard a lot of stories from experienced ultramarathon runners that at the time of physical exhaustion and effort you can start hallucinating. That would be the last straw, I thought. It turned out that the raccoons were the regular guests in that area. I couldn't help laughing when I heard that, 'forest thieves' smelled food nearby so they came to investigate the territory on a night patrol.

Days passed in constant highs and lows, ups and downs and what is even more important kilometers passed as well. With the sixth day approaching, my self-confidence rose, a smile brightened my face again, the weather got better and the ranking was unexpected, I firmly held the second place and I was slowly moving towards breaking the national record in six-day

ultramarathon which was 677 kilometers. The body was only a tool that followed the instructions of the head, and I had learnt that the limits of physical abilities are where we lay them. Pain eased off, as if it had never existed, the body functioned at its own automatism while the spirit and brain were the initiators of the whole story.

It seemed to me that I could run for days more, the pace was rhythmic, moderate and soft, similar to the one of Tarahumara Indians I saw in my dream. I started feeling chills and surge of emotions with the end approaching. I did not run for money, I did not run for glory, title, prestige, or self-promotion. I ran for my country, my people, for all the people who believe, try hard and work every day in order to make the world a better place for all of us. I ran for hope, for motivation, for the proof that you can always do more since ultramarathon is so much like life – a continuous struggle. The epilogue is a new national record of 682.7 kilometers and the second place overall. However, this epilogue is not the end as usual, this epilogue is just a beginning and as long as I am surrounded and inspired by ‘tiny’ people with a big heart.