

2013 Spartathlon – Race Report

By Andrew Morton

I'll do my best to give a brief recap of my Spartathlon experience. First let me say it is a great time and the atmosphere is awesome. I enjoyed every part of the trip (except the flight home!) and it was a very stress free race. Before I detail my race I want to talk about the race itself.



The Greeks are great hosts to say the least! The entry fee for the race was 400 Euro's or about \$550. That fee covered all lodging and plenty of food for the weeklong festival. The lodging accommodations are four runners to a room and it can be a bit loud so I opted to get a hotel room at a hotel next door for 55 Euros a night. I recommend arranging for your own accommodations so it is more enjoyable. The down side is there is no opting out of the lodging the race provides. I can understand a bit of why that is though, it would get very confusing trying to coordinate special arrangements from 350 runners from all over the world. If you choose to the race will make arrangements for your crew, they offer a couple different "packages" in the early correspondence. If you are alone and want to do the race as cheap as possible then embrace the international feeling and room in the provided lodging. The food provided was great for me, plenty of high fat options including meat and dairy options and my favorite, REAL Greek yogurt. I think it would have been just fine if I was eating a high carb diet as well, plenty of fruit and bread! All the prerace logistics were stress free and the schedule was fairly relaxing. I had time to do some light runs the days leading up to the race and there was a nice beach I walked to just to get a coffee and relax

I need to correct some of the information about Spartathlon. The lodging provided by the race is for two persons per room. When I went to my room there were four beds but the race directors only put two runners in each room. I did not stay long enough in the room to find out how many folks showed up. Sharing a room with

another runner would make the entry fee a bargain to say the least! I think Spartathlon is the deal of a life time for an ultra runner! You are joining a family if you do this run!

The run has 75 aid stations and if you have a crew they can meet you at several aid stations after the first 50 miles. I placed drop bags at four of the stations. It was well organized and when I arrived at station 11 a lady promptly handed me my drop bag! I grab my VESPA packets and was thankful she handed me my bag because I had forgotten I put one that early! The aid stations have good provisions; water, soda, butter cookies, fruit, chips and some chocolate. I was pleased with what they had but I'm not very picky when I'm racing. Bottom line is they have a good handle on putting this race on and the whole experience is wonderful, even if your race don't go as planned!

Race Day:

Race morning breakfast opened at five and I put my bag on a truck so it would be in Sparta upon my arrival (if your crewed they take it with them). It was cool to eat and hang out with other international runners and relax prerace. Around 6:15 we boarded busses for a short ride to the start, very easy and painless! The only thing I didn't like was there was no porta potties or restrooms at the start and it felt horrible to pee on a tree at the historic Acropolis! The race starts with a ton of media and it is very festive! My plan was to start off and settle in a comfortable pace and that is what I did. There was a good size lead pack that was being led by two Japanese. I didn't see any markings so I followed them hoping they knew where they were going. Of course they didn't! We made a small detour but quickly got back on course. The course leaving Athens is a bit crazy but an adventure! You are running the streets and the daily life of Athens is going on around you. Greeks are cheering you on from their cars, trucks, mopeds, and the street sides. It was pretty cool. After a couple miles it was myself and a runner from the Netherlands out front. He stayed on my left shoulder, literally on my left shoulder. I have never run so close to another runner in an ultra! I felt like I was in a road marathon! I was actually getting annoyed and stopped to pee to get a gap between us but that tactic failed, he stopped and peed as well. I then tried the stall tactic at the aid stations but he would find a reason to stop and get right back on my shoulder. We had some casual dialog about plans, he told me he was just trying to beat his time from 2010 when he came in second. He also reported that Scott Jurek went through 50 miles in 6:04 and we were running to fast, I told him to slow down then...

The route was very scenic the whole way out of the city. Some of it was on very narrow busy roads though, I don't think you could assume that kind of liability to run a large race in a large U.S. city. I never felt the course was boring because it was a rolling route and presented some variety. The Fella from the Netherlands and myself went through the marathon in roughly a 3:10 which is pretty standard pace for myself under the conditions we were running in. It was not much more that forty minutes or so that right after departing an aid station we were running on a narrow road that the trees and vegetation had grown very near the edge of the road. A stray dog shot out of the growth right in front of me and I jumped left around him, where I landed was about a foot lower that where I had been running and it was just one of those times where you expect to land much sooner than you do. I knew immediately when I landed by the pain in my lower back that I had just compressed my lower back. I got back on the road at first I thought that things were not as bad as I thought but I think that was just adrenalin! At the next aid station just about 2K up the road as soon as I stopped and tried to stretch my back I realized how bad it was. I had a motrin with me and took it hoping it might help and continued to move on.

I had slowed down significantly in an attempt to let things work out but eventually I was compensating pretty bad and my left hip started to hurt. Over the next couple of hours I was able to plug away but the compensation began to really crush my form and just prior to hitting the 50 mile mark I started to get some shooting pain down my left leg upon striking the ground. Chad Ricklefs's crew asked me if I needed anything and I was more than happy to get some Advil from them at the 50 mile aid station. At this point I was still hoping to pull out and salvage things. A lot goes through your head when you have trained hard and spent thousands on a race and you are facing serious issues!



Chad's crew, unknown to me, was comprised of some of the most amazing people in the crewing business! His wife Sam and an amazing couple from Boulder, Co Mark and Shirley Plaatjes. Mark is the 1993 Marathon World Champion and a Physical Therapist to boot. His wife Shirley is a massage therapist and she hooked me up with a great massage! I probably would have stopped at 50 miles if I knew that but I took the Advil and compensated my way down the road. It was during that next section that I had a board meeting with my mind and body. It was time to start being an honest broker and take a serious assessment of the situation and possible courses of actions. I knew continuing to run was not a solid plan with the pain I was getting in my hip so I decided to walk a bit and see how that felt. I had stopped several times to lay down flat and try to stretch everything out but nothing was helping and even walking hurt the hip. Walking and thinking about dropping is never a good time for a runner! I went through another aid station and decided I would walk to the next one and look at the options if I dropped out, I didn't have a crew and I was over 90 miles from the finish in the Greek country side!

Lucky for me Chad's crew was at that aid station, they had already taken me under their wing and came to my aid again. Chad was due in at any time but they immediately began helping me. Mark got a pad and went to work on my back. Once he adjusted my lower back the pain there went from a 7 to about a three. He said my hips were out of alignment and when he pushed on my SI Joint it hurt. Like any good support crew they provided encouragement but like I told them later, I don't need to get knocked the out to know I'm losing the fight! The cards were dealt and it was time to fold. Shirley gave me a massage and it worked wonders for the hip! We always hear stories about runner's crews helping out the competition. Chad's crew is the gold standard of sportsman! They were helping every runner that came in before or after Chad. They help Ivan Cudin from Italy who is one of the coolest guys I ever met running. Ivan has won the race twice, he just floats along and looks so relaxed when running. They went into overdrive to get a headlamp for the eventual winner when they heard he might need one. They even clothed me! What amazing luck to meet such great people!

After finding out that I would have to wait hours and hours for the sweep bus to come and get me to go to Sparta I was invited to join them crewing Chad. Other than a very sore hip and back I was fine and feeling good so I jumped at the chance to stay on the course. I would get to watch the race unfold and see the course (for my return!). We had a good time at the aid stations because each one is unique. At this point on the course we were in the wine country and it was really scenic. I felt like I had known Chad's crew my whole life, it was a special

day for me. Unfortunately for Chad it was not his day either. He pushed through some rough times until just before the 100 mile mark before he called it a day. Once again being under the wing of Chad and his crew, I was on my way to Sparta rather than sitting at an aid station waiting on a bus.

Upon arriving in Sparta we found the hotel where the Americans were assigned to stay. By now it was past one in the morning and everyone was tired and ready for a shower and bed. The hotel staff would not give me a room without a voucher so I had to track down a race official at the finish. Sam offered to go with me to find it and we made our way to the city center. Once we found the race headquarters it was like clockwork, I had my bag and a hotel room. The race staff was great!

The next day we just hung out and watched amazing runners from all over the world finish the race. It is a special race for sure! Amazing to see finishers start crying when they touch the statue at the finish! The field is a huge international field and it is a spiritual time amongst all the great runners and crew you meet. Out of the 350 entrants there were only five U.S. runners this year. Blake Benke, Brenda Carawan and Andrei Nana were the other three. They all ran amazing races and accomplished their goals. All three have inspired me through their performances. I enjoyed meeting their families/crews, great folks!

I need to finish the “Dutch connection” piece. The Netherlands runner (I have to confirm his name but can’t seem to find it right now) found me Sunday morning at breakfast. I knew he had dropped out with around 25-30 remaining due to being disoriented. He gave it a heck of a run, even more amazing is he is 55 years old and started running ultras at 48! He is a VERY competitive man (I think he may even be more competitive than my hero Dr. David Horton!). He wanted me to understand that he was trying to stay with me because his coach had instructed him that the only way to win the race was to stay with me. We did have a language barrier but that is what I walked away thinking. He was very gracious and told me that I HAVE to come back next year and win! He also told me that he along with his crew would come and crew me should I not have one! I know some will lay criticism to his shadowing tactics and a degree of a mental attack but at the end of the day it is a race and runners will use tactics that others might not. In the end he was a true sportsman and we shared a special runner’s embrace at breakfast. On a side note: if people will pay me to coach them and all I have to do is say “stay with the fast guys” I’m in! If you read that you owe me \$200 this month!

I should not fail to highlight that this race is a weeklong festival. After the 36 hour limit is up the event is not over. On Sunday we had breakfast and then checked out of our hotels. A bit later we were on busses headed to a lunch with the Mayor of Sparta. It was a good time with some good food. Even though it was tough to sit that long I’m glad I went and have the memories I do. Once the lunch wraps up we began the long bus ride back to Athens. For me that was the worst part of the trip! The sitting was painful but I was sitting with the runners from the UK so the conversations made up for the sitting. I talked with James about races in the UK. There is a great website to look at if you are interested in doing a UK race; www.centurionrunning.com.

I received a ton of supportive messages and emails! I appreciate that people are remotely interested in me abandoning my family and responsibilities to goof off doing what I love. I feel obligated to say that never did I get angry, angry about the missed opportunity, the dog, the money and time invested. I was disappointed that my goal would not be accomplished but I never once felt anger. And if you ask my wife, anger is my standard state of mind! At a race I don’t feel anger, even on a bad day. Once I get on the start line everything becomes clear and it is like the seas just calm and I know what I need to do. I always think of what Eric Clifton told me over 16 years ago. He said “as runners we are artist and our performance is what we create and leave behind for eternity”. I think about that every time I find myself standing on a starting line. We all have the chance to create our own masterpiece that is defined by ourselves. I need to start everyday with that thought and maybe I would be so angry; each day is an opportunity to create a masterpiece! I don’t want to have to run a 100 or 153 miles every day though!

Every runner knows how expensive races are. Yet we always find the means to get our goals into a reality. I am extremely thankful to have the help of someone who cares as much as they do. I'm going to keep this person anonymous but without their efforts the burden would be much greater on me and my family financially. I'm a very lucky and loved runner. Also I have to give a huge thanks to Allied Van Lines who asks nothing of me other than chase my dreams and wear a logo doing it. Spartathlon prohibits advertising on "jerseys" though! Hoka ONE ONE is also due a big thanks for some great shoes. I began running in them after Western States and I appreciate a spot on their team that is comprised of some ultrarunning legends that I read about and admired during my break from racing.

As I sit on the plane typing this, my only regret of the whole trip was that I didn't have my family with me! Julie recently started a new job and could not take time off. The plan prior to her getting a job offer was we would all come, next year that will happen for sure!

Also the email address on the website has not been forwarding emails to me. If you have sent me an email I may have never received it! Please email me at: mjmorton1@yahoo.com