

Spartathlon 2014 Race Report – Return to Center

By Andrei Nana

My participation in this amazing race took place two weeks ago. As an ultrarunner I cannot be more humbled and honored to have received an invitation for the second year in a row. The Spartathlon represents everything that is pure and great about ultrarunning, simply put it, it is the Center of ultrarunning and my own personal Center...

After a great performance last year, life took me on a less than ideal road. Tremendous work related stress, the growth of the International 100+ UltraRunning Foundation, Inc and Club, publication of several articles, the organization with my wife Claire Nana of the Icarus Florida UltraFest as well as a nagging injury in my tibia/left calf lead to less than sufficient training.

If for the 2013 Spartathlon I trained up to 200 mile / 320 kilometer weeks, used thermal gear to increase my body heat in the middle of the summer, and ran 9 races of 100 miles / 160 kilometers or longer in the previous 8 months, for the 2014 Spartathlon I ran only the UltraMilano-Sanremo race, and my peak weeks of training barely reached 100 miles / 160 kilometers. The last 3 months before the race most weeks totaled less than 50 miles / 80 kilometers. Basically, I was only able to run every 3rd day as, after a hard run, my left leg would not hold weight for the next two days. Luckily I was able to at least train with a tire, pulling it back and forth over the Key Biscayne bridge in Miami (tire training is very low impact and it was the only exercise which allowed training more than 1 day in a row).

In 2013 I finished in 30:52:19 securing 27th place. This year I finished in 33:57:58 finishing on the 101st place. I am both happy and disappointed with my performance. I failed and succeeded at the same time..., nevertheless the race once again bestowed its grace upon me and helped me Return to Center.

The Race

Spartathlon is a race born out of a legend. It is revealed in the texts of the well known historian Herodotus that in 490BC an Athenian messenger-soldier was sent to Sparta on foot to ask for military help from King Leonidas to prevent an upcoming Persian invasion. Herodotus describes in details the journey of Pheidippides who left Athens one morning and reached Sparta before the night fall following day, however the distance of 246 kilometers / 153 miles left most historians and sport enthusiasts to believe the story was just a legend, probably an exaggeration of the writer. It was believed that no human was capable of covering such a distance in less than 36 hours...

In 1982, five British officers working with professors from the Cambridge University – History Department decided to put the story to the test. After a careful study of the landmarks described in the texts, the most likely route was chosen and the five officers/endurance athletes started to run towards Sparta. Three reached Sparta and one succeeded to finish under 36 hours. The “legend” suddenly became reality.

Since 1983, every year at the end of September, 350 of world's best ultra athletes receive invitations to participate in this historic race after a rigorous application process. While all the athletes participating at the race are very well prepared, many of them do not reach the finish line. A string of intermediary time cut off points force the athletes to run the fastest pace during the hottest part of the day. Rolling hills, high humidity and temperatures, and a very steep mountain to be crossed at the 100 miles / 160 kilometers point, lead to a finishing rate of less than 50%. Only in the few years where temperatures were lower than usual the finishing rate was over 50% but – even then -- was less than 60%. 2014 was such a year with a little bit more than half of the athletes starting the race reaching the feet of the King Leonidas statute, the symbolic finish line of the race.

The race is organized around the Olympic creed, maintaining the highest level of purity. No advertisement is allowed, no monetary awards are offered. All athletes are treated equally and supported by the hundreds of volunteers present at the 75 aid stations as well as the local communities along the route. Children line up the streets in cities and villages giving “hi fives” to the athletes, ask for autographs or just throw flower petals over the head of the passing runners.



The Participants

This year a very strong field of athletes was present. Many countries had superbly organized teams with full support, coaches, photographers, film crews, doctors, etc. Japan, Greece, Germany, France, Hungary, Italy, all had very large teams. The American team was the largest ever to compete in the Spartathlon's history as well. 10 Americans stepped up to the starting line and 7 finished the race.

Over the course of the race I had the pleasure of running with friends from many different countries and had the honor of meeting new ones. From the US team I shared quite a few miles with Dave Krupski, Robert Youngren, Bryce Carlson, and Dean Karnazes. They all had stellar performances along with Maggie Beach and Eduardo Aguilar. Dean Karnazes ran the race as part of his research for an upcoming book. He attempted to recreate as close as possible the hydration and nutrition conditions available in 490BC.

From the United Kingdom I had the pleasure to share quite a few miles with Sam Robson who was at his first Spartathlon attempt and not only he performed well, but he succeeded to be the first British athlete to cross the finish line. Sam started running to raise money for a funeral, to overcome adversity, and in 2014, became a Spartathlete, one of the most elite “adjectives” offered to any ultrarunners.

Aykut Celikbas also was a strong representative of his native country, adding Turkey to the list of finishers.

Miha Podgornik of Slovenia started running ultramarathons to honor his mother who passed away. She had also run the Spartathlon and in 2014; a 25 year old Miha pushed his limits to touch the feet of King Leonidas statue himself. While his performance was super strong, running with him made me realize his maturity and humility are that of a much older soul.

Four athletes from Portugal finished the race as well. Running with them was an honor and a pleasure. Fernandes Fernando, Daniel Cardoso, Joao Oliveira and Miguel Araujo are true athletes and gentleman.

Six athletes from Poland crossed the finish line. One of them, Piotr Kurylo ran to the starting point from his home pulling a small cart behind him with his equipment. He made the journey from Poland to Greece to raise money and awareness for a charitable cause.

For several miles I had the pleasure of sharing the road with Kim Allan from New Zealand. She was the first athlete from New Zealand to ever participate and finish the Spartathlon. A true lady, animal lover and my wife’s favorite, after learning about Kim’s former career as a racehorse jockey.

The Italian team had 10 finishers. The Spartathlon winner was Ivan Cudin with an impressive sub 23 hour finish. During the race I had the pleasure of running several miles with Ivan whose pace is always very calm and steady. I should mention also that Ivan always has a smile on his face – and certainly put a smile on mine. He was followed by Marco Bonfiglio who had a super strong performance as well. Other Italian friends with strong performances were Andrea Zambon, Federico Borlenghi, Carmelo Nucifora and Marco Mazzi. I had the honor of sharing many miles with Marco Mazzi as well as the opportunity of crossing the finish line together.

As usual, my friends from the Hungarian team did a splendid job this year as well. 19 Hungarian athletes finished the race. My dear friend Szilvia Lubics managed to win the female race once again and this time in under 27 hours, making her the fastest woman in the Spartathlon history. Katalin Nagy, a fellow Florida resident finished 2nd female with a time under 29 hours, a

spectacular job for her first Spartathlon participation. Andras Low who helped me last year during the last few miles, finished his 17th Spartathlon, while Andras Kulcsar with whom I shared many miles at different races had a great race as well during his 2nd Spartathlon. Attila Toth, Szonyi Ferenc, Matene Edit and Attila Deak also reached the finish line becoming Spartathletes.

The Greeks did not disappoint and 27 athletes followed on the steps of Pheidippides leaving Athens one day and reaching Sparta before night fall next day. I had the pleasure of sharing some miles with Georgios Panos and my friend Ilias Karaiosif with whom I share a similar work background and correspond regularly.

26 German athletes crossed the finish line in 2014. Florian Reus and I shared several miles together last year as well as this year. Last year Florian wanted to finish in under 24 hours at his first Spartathlon participation. He missed that goal however he still took 2nd place. This year he reached his goal and finished under 24 hours taking 2nd place once again. I consider Florian a super strong athlete and a great friend. Stu Thoms, Heike Bergmann, and Antje Krause all had great performances last year and all struggled this year. They finished the race knowing that sometime things do not go your way, however the test of the ultras is the ability to overcome adversity and cross the finish line. Having ran many miles with Heike and Antje, it become clear why they are such great athletes. No matter how hard the race was for them, they kept a positive attitude and pushed forward. Gerald Baudek recognized me at the starting line and politely informed me he was inspired by the race report I published last year. With that he became one of my favorites as he confirmed he was the reader of my report ☺

As always, the French team was represented by some of the best runners in the sport, with 11 finishers this year. Angel Pallaruelo, the amazing 21 year old decided to run his second Spartathlon solo, leaving his father Gilles behind and did a spectacular job, gaining confidence and concluding a year of ultrarunning successes. Gilles Pallaruelo finished his 13th Spartathlon, well on his way to a goal of reaching 20 finishes. Juan Carlos Pradas had a great race as well and miles spent with him on a course only highlighted his elite runner class. Once again I felt adopted by the French team when becoming an “honorary member” by receiving a “Spartathlon – Team France” t-shirt from Francoise Pallaruelo.

Finland had 11 finishers. Jari Tomppo was the first one in his team to cross the finish line. He too, struggled a bit this year, however he kept a positive attitude and encouraged me during the few miles together. Noora Honkala is only 22 and the youngest female to finish the race. She had a strong race and can only foresee a great future for her in ultrarunning.

Denmark had five finishers. With Claus Rasmussen I spent quite a few miles during the evening and night. What made his race so special is that Claus ran the entire race in sandals... I can only imagine the pain tolerance and endurance required to complete such a race in sandals. While there were moments when he cursed every step, he pushed forward and accomplished his goal. Personally I do not support the idea of running in sandals or barefoot, however running with Claus made me respect him beyond words.

Three athletes from Belgium finished the race including my friend Luc Dejaeger-Braet. I shared many miles with Luc last year, however our pace did not match this year as Luc had a very strong performance.

Five athletes from Argentina finished this year, including my friend Martin Cordoba.



In total 205 athletes officially crossed the finish line and three others were allowed to finish unofficially. A huge respect for the two Japanese athletes who finished just a few minutes after 36 hours and to my friend Behnam Kamrani representing Iran who after missing one cut off point, was disqualified but allowed to continue. He managed to have a negative split and finish under the 36 hour final cut off, unfortunately his performance not being officially recognized.

I can only consider these athletes my family, a family forged on a common interest, a common passion and the tenacity of prolonged training. They and their crews were supportive and a clear example of what ultrarunning is. Special THANKS to Katalin Hegedus and Zoltan Lesi for all the help offered pre, during, and after the race and for being awesome friends.

The race would not have been possible without the support of my lovely wife Claire who encouraged me during training, pushed me during the race, worried for me during the lows of the night all while driving and being ready to keep me moving for over 36 straight hours.

Thank you to all the organizers and volunteers who did an impeccable job at supporting and managing such a difficult event. Some of the volunteers return year after year to support the athletes and share some of the emotions of the event. Nikolaos Petalas is such an example of volunteer who during the past year made sure I was keeping my promise to return to Greece and greeted me with a big smile at one of the aid stations during the middle of the night. A huge thank you as well to Mr. Kostis Papadimitriou whose presence and professionalism makes this race a reality.



Why Return to Center?

First of all the Spartathlon is the Center of all ultras. It is the known beginning of ultrarunning where a legend was transformed into reality and the human spirit shined immortal. The presence of the athletes mentioned above as well as many others I had not yet met only demonstrates the class of runners who, year after year, choose to return, choose to Return to Center.

On a secondary level, the stress of the past year explained in the beginning of this race report lead me on a path away from the pure form of ultrarunning. I lost sight of what is important, I allowed stress to take over my life, I allowed fear to creep into my dreams. Running the 246 kilometers made me realize once again that anything and everything can be accomplished, that the human spirit is immortal and that small worries, stress and fear have no place in life. It made me Return to (my) Center when after about 24 hours of running, my pain was high, my energy low and speed inexistent. With every step I took I rationalized that I cannot make the cut offs anymore... From being up to 2.5 hours ahead of the cut offs, I reached a point of being just minutes ahead and moving at a "lighting speed" of 2 miles / 3 kilometers per hour walking in zig-zag across the road, losing my sight and at times not knowing who I was or where I was. Nothing could rationally predict a change..., but it happened. During the morning hours of Saturday a hail storm started to dump ice the size of marbles on my head. Something about the pain caused by the ice striking my head brought me back to live... From running 2 miles per hour I started to run 6 miles per hour and to make time up. I only remember my wife cheering

me, feeling alive, having confidence and race officials driving up and down the road offering rain parkas to the athletes caught by surprise.

From there on, my spirit, my mind, and my body worked once again to push me over the finish line. Running through the streets of Sparta, approaching the statue of the great King Leonidas, once again brought tears to my eyes. Humility, Honor, and Gratitude, all together formed one of the most powerful emotions ever experienced. That was topped only by the knowledge that at the statue I will celebrate the victory with Claire.



I did however fail in accomplishing my goal of under 30 hours. While there are many explanations why, there are no excuses. It was my failure and I accept it. Nevertheless, I succeeded to finish the race, to honor the legend of Pheidippides, to “ask for help” at the feet of King Leonidas, to Return to Center and celebrate with my wife the one year anniversary of our engagement.



Thank you, Greece! Thank you ultrarunning family! As my wife already announced, I am “required” to heal my legs, train and repeat the performance next year if I will be honored to receive once again an invitation to participate in the greatest race.



Until then will continue to grow our *International 100+ UltraRunning Foundation, Inc.*, the very selective *International 100+ UltraRunning Club*, to write/publish and to organize with my wife the *Icarus Florida UltraFest* in November in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Hope to see many of my fellow Spartathletes there.

International 100+ UltraRunning Foundation, Inc.: www.internationalultrarunning.com
Icarus Florida UltraFest: www.icarusfloridaultrafest.com