

RETURN TO THE ULTRARUNNING MECCA **2016 SPARTATHLON RACE REPORT**

By Andrei Nana

"Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on those accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime." -- Mark Twain



Almost all cultures and religions across time and space share the ritual of purification and spiritual growth involving long voyages with obstacles to overcome, the body pushed to extremes, the mind tested by negativity, and the spirit/faith challenged by existential doubt.

Some of the most known pilgrimages are: to Mecca (Saudi Arabia) in the Muslim faith, the Camino de Santiago (Spain) in the Christian faith, Machu Picchu (Peru) in the Inca faith, Mount Kailash (Tibet) in the Hindu and Buddhist faiths, the 88 Temples (Japan) in the Buddhist faith, the St Olav's Way (Norway) in the Christian faith, or the Sun-Dance ceremonies in the Native American traditions (participants are required to dance non-stop for several days while abstaining from drinking water and eating) etc. If so many religions and cultures across the world have historically believed enlightenment, purification, and spiritual growth can be achieved through pilgrimages, perhaps the argument can be made that ultrarunning is a sort of voyage – one that has the same benefits as the spiritual kind.

No other race on the planet represents as much for me as the Spartathlon in Greece. Last year I returned for the 4th time to test my body, mind, and spirit, to challenge myself and honor the “Gods.” While I am not a religious person per se, I believe in humility, honesty, love and the benefits derived from overcoming adversity and transcending pain.

For the reader interested in course descriptions and training, please see the 2013, 2014, and 2015 race reports (links at the end). I've decided to focus more here on the *meaning* of finishing -- in light of running the race for the 4th time. While the Spartathlon is the “same” race, the statement “running the same race” cannot be further from the truth. The distance, weather, time cutoffs, supplies and equipment are the same, perhaps for most athletes even the physical training does not differ too much, however the mental training and spiritual attitude

change every year as we ourselves – the athletes – go through life. While we may worry less about defeat the race, it may be our own internal demons we face – often in a new, and previously, unrecognized form.

If the first year I wanted to prove to myself that I can finish it, and now that motivation was no longer there. I also realized there is nothing else to prove to either myself or “the rest of the world.” During 2016 especially during the 2016 Spartathlon, I had made peace with where I am in life, in my career, in my relationships, and in my ultrarunning. Of course I have future goals, but I reached a level of peace never experienced before. So during training and during the race the insistent question became: *Why I am doing what I am doing?*

The year started with a 24H race in France, the Brive 24H, followed by the Vol State 500k in Tennessee. Results were mixed at both races. At Brive I took 1st place in the Open race but missed my goal of 135 miles. At Vol State I finished the race in much longer than expected after having to deal with some issues which forced me to improvise and adapt on the go (the ultimate purpose of ultrarunning).

After finishing that race I took several days off and resumed training beginning August 1st, quickly learning that Vol State took *a lot* more from me than expected. By the end of August I was still not able to run long distance or at my regular speed. I was also having problems going up the 3 flights of stairs in our building. While this didn't incite panic – I knew I could finish the race – but now I was *seriously* questioning my ability to perform well.

Claire and I made it to Greece on Monday as we decided to take more time off before the race and allow our bodies to decompress from work and travel in order to be in better shape for the race day. It worked as we relaxed and enjoyed the days around Glyfada. As the check in process commenced I was happy to see many of my friends who, over time, have become my ultrarunning family. As Giorgios Panos, Juan Carlos Pradas, Ilias Karaiosif lined up to check in, such an unbelievable feeling came over me. These are my kin, driven by the same feelings, following the same path even if coming from such different backgrounds. If there was ever an argument to make for destiny, this would be it – powerful emotions and experiences draw people together – and keep drawing them together -- no matter where they are from.



At the pre-race meeting the following day I met the rest of the US Spartathlon Team and handed out the team shirts, took photos and had the last conversations about logistics. The day before the race I also met Florin Ionita who was the sole representative for

Romania. For several years I've tried to inspire and help the growth of ultrarunning in that country through the International 100+ UltraRunning Foundation. At times I had high hopes, at times I was disappointed with the direction the athletes were taking. No matter how I felt, Florin's presence was a huge step forward.

As the Friday morning arrived I was ready to start my journey. 246 kilometers from Athens to Sparta, crossing places with so much history and so much spirituality. Religions always talk about enlightenment, illumination, growth, and change. We seem destined to discuss them – especially change – to ask for it, and to try to inspire it. We use philosophy, arts, psychology but fail to apply their very concepts in everyday life. Over the years I've

become more and more convinced that people cannot change. I wish it was true and change was easy, but for the most part it is just cosmetic. Our own existence and life style is threatened by our inability to change. However, every religion, philosophic trend, and the base of psychology recognize something that ultrarunning embodies: change happens only on the brink of destruction, when we face the precipices of our finished existence we can allow ourselves to change.



The race start was magnificent as always, the volunteers such as Kyriaki Balioussi, Nikolaos Petalas, Elias Pergantis seemed to be even more excited about the race than the athletes. Despite hard economic times they have fully stacked aid stations, they smile, they are cheerful and helpful, they are everything beautiful about people.



Running the race was as expected, extraordinary. Talking to fellow athletes, seeing the crews, seeing the sights and breathing in life like energy itself. Yet after a while, the physical body starts to give up and pain becomes the new reality. It is the moment we switch from running to ultrarunning and our minds have to start exert control, to take charge. It is the time when you have to know *why* you run, why you are there, and just what you are made of.

But then the minds tire too. As the hours and kilometers pass the mind starts to fail and the only thing left is our own spirit to guide us. Very few are the athletes who can keep it together at this stage, it is the place where the “child must leave and the adult must emerge”.

Knowing that my fellow Spartathletes are on the course, that they must go through the same experiences makes the pain somehow lighter. Marco Bonfiglio, Joao Oliveira, Pablo Barnes, Ivan Cudin, Ian Thomas, Marcus Istvan Ocsi, Tobias Lundgren, Olivier Chaigne, Luc Braet-Dejaeger, Noora Honkala, Matene Varju, Virginia Oliveri, Aykut Celikbas, Ricarda Bethke, Jens Vieler, Antje Krause, Sung Ho Choi, Luigi Dessy, Andras Low, Doukas Tsiakiris, Gilles Pallaruelo, Kei Nakayama, Mizuki Aotani, Robert Miorin or Christian Dal Corso are just some of the few brothers and sisters who pushed themselves during that day. No excuses spared them the journey or the pain as it did the others who took reprieve in what their justifications might offer – that they are better off quitting. They were my fellow Spartathletes who made the decision to keep going no matter what, to keep pushing through the pain, adversity and at times overwhelming odds. They too would be the ones to embrace the fruits of their labor – to kiss the feet of Leonidas, to transcend themselves, their limits, and perhaps their own desires at time to stop. They are the ones who understood ultrarunning and they would be the ones to be blessed by this journey.

Things did not go as planned – or by any definition well – but pushing forward was the only option. When one removes ego from a race and becomes the mission, himself, there *is* no other possible outcome but success. The mission of every ultrarunning race is simply to cross the finish line. To do so we must remove our masks, let go of our façade and face the truth: change doesn't start when life unfolds neatly as we plan. Rather we must fight for it, not tomorrow when we feel better, but today when the race is upon us.



Ultrarunning is about pushing one's limits, about breaking the barriers of self-imprisonment. The race becomes the stage upon which to test yourself – there is never a better time to see who you really are *except* at the time when everything you do is failing, when you are in so much pain you cannot comprehend it, when there is no hope and no light at the end of the tunnel. That, to me, is the true test of positivity. Are you still able to move forward or you will fail and seek excuses? That is the beauty of the Spartathlon.

The race “owes” no one anything, it does not care about Facebook comments or likes, it does not care about how much someone thinks they deserve it, it does not care who you are. The race is the *ONLY* true test of self, the perfect moment in time where no matter how much one wants to lie to others or self, it does not make any difference. The difference is made by one's spirit, the drive to keep pushing forward to reach that magical moment of bliss – of true humility. Here is an athlete who has accomplished so much, bowing down to kiss the foot of a statue. Yet he is more than a statue. Leonidas represents courage, loyalty, and bravery – perhaps something we all wish for ourselves.

And it is here that I wonder. The U.S. Spartathlon Team had a sub-par performance. While Katalin Nagy and Pam Smith took 1st and 2nd females, only other 4 athletes finished. When athletes from other countries have a 100% finishing rate such as China Taipei, or only one DNF such as France we have to ask ourselves *why* the Americans feel so entitled as to go into the most amazing race in the world unprepared, undertrained and so ready to give up. Perhaps like with our politics, economy and other aspects of life we need to fail

catastrophically to wake up and see that we need to change. Or maybe there is just a more simple fact, we need to be more humble to be in the grace of the Gods... Congratulations to the U.S. Spartathlon Team finishers (Katalin Nagy - 25:23:52; Pam Smith - 27:13:31; Bob Hearn - 27:33:08; David Niblack - 27:42:13; Phil McCarthy - 30:52:04; Andrei Nana - 33:50:12) whom carried the American flag to Sparta, as well to all the other finishers.



My own introspection revealed that running the Spartathlon is not a matter of reward in the sense that you can get something back from the investment of training and racing, it is a matter of existence. I feel at home during the race, I am myself when pushed to the limits, I am my true self when broken down to nothing, I am alive when facing mortality. So running the Spartathlon it is not “just running” a race, it is not like any other event. While I care about the performance of the Team and be part of the Team, the rest it does not matter to anyone else but myself because it is my EXISTENCE, it is my LIFE..., well

perhaps it matters to my wife Claire because it was the place where in 2013 she said YES to me, but that is something for her to disclose or figure out. I can only hope that through my own selfish need to feel alive, to question my existence and perhaps even change, somehow there is a positive outcome for others.

A friend and fellow ultrarunner summarized my feelings in a piece about the meaning of life. "But in the end, perhaps it's the impact that we make on the people in our lives that matters most. I contend that it's our quiet, small, and largely uncelebrated actions that comprise who we are, and determine in the end the meaning of our days, which becomes the meaning of our lives, which others, woven into our paths, notice, appreciate, and narrate for us." – Jodi Weiss

I am beyond grateful for being able to participate these 4 years, I will be honored to return but I also know that I received so much from this race that under no circumstance feel I deserve more. Yesterday the application process opened and I, of course, applied, but for the first time I feel at peace with life and myself. I know if the Gods decide to test me again, I will be there in September, I will be ready and I will look forward to bow my head in front of the King.



Thank you to my doctor Andrew Farretta who “fixed” me after two years of running in pain, thank you to all the volunteers for an amazing job, thank you to my family for their support, and thank you to my amazing wife Claire for sharing this moment and this life with me.



Spartathlon 2013 Race Report: <http://www.spartathlon.us/Spartathlon%202013%20-%20RR.pdf>

Spartathlon 2014 Race Report: <http://www.spartathlon.us/Spartathlon%202014%20Race%20Report.pdf>

Spartathlon 2015 Race Report: <http://www.spartathlon.us/Spartathlon%202015%20Race%20Report.pdf>

Photo Credit: Sparta Photography Club

U.S. SPARTATHLON TEAM

Email: spartathlon.us@gmail.com

Phone: [865-414-0362](tel:865-414-0362)

Twitter: [@spartathlon_us](https://twitter.com/spartathlon_us)

Website: www.spartathlon.us

FB Page: www.facebook.com/spartathlon.us