

The Spartathlon 2011

By Michael Arnstein

The first time I heard the word ‘Spartathlon’ was from my longtime friend and training partner Oz Pearlman.

Together, Oz and I have shared wild adventures and accomplished extreme challenges. We’ve both had our fair share of *crazy* ideas that we’ve dared on each other. Ultra running for many years has become the main challenge for both of us. We’ve progressed from running greater and greater distances each year, and now Spartathlon was our latest *ultimate* challenge.

Spartathlon is a race held in Greece. The race probably has more historical meaning and history than any other sporting event in the history of mankind.

Athens and Greece as a nation was the first modern society. The foundations of modern science, government, mathematics, astronomy, literature and more were all largely developed in ancient Greece. In 490 BC Ancient Athens was under siege. Democracy and the principles of how our modern society exists today were being threatened to extinction by *‘the barbarians’*, armies from Persia that were ruled under Totalitarian oppression.

The Generals of Athens desperately needed help from their neighboring state. They needed immediate reinforcements from the greatest warriors the world had ever known: The Spartan’s.

Sparta is located in central Greece, in a dramatic valley surrounded by high mountains towering from all directions. Getting there from Athens quickly in 490BC was a monumental challenge, and hence the story of Pheidippides begins.

Pheidippides was a messenger of the Athenian army. He had mythical endurance and speed to run huge distances in very short period of time. The Generals of Athens summoned him in desperation and asked him to *run* to Sparta and plead for help; to deliver a message that Athens and all its modern achievements could be lost if the Spartans didn’t come to their aid.

The events of Ancient Greece were very well documented. The accountability of recorded events is considered factual in most instances from famous Greek scholars. The famous Greek historian Herodotus wrote, ‘Pheidippides left Athens for Sparta and arrived the next day’.

Fast forward to the early 1980’s AD. A British RAF military commander named John Foden who was an ancient Greek historian and long distance runner reviewed maps and the route details to try and study if it was truly possible for Pheidippides to run from Athens to Sparta in less than 2 days. The distance was staggering; the terrain was mountainous, inhospitably hot in the Mediterranean valleys and treacherous climbing over cold and windy 4000 Ft. mountains. The distance was surely over 150 miles, and to do this in such a short period of time *seemed* impossible.

So in 1983 a team of highly trained long distance runners from England took on the challenge to see if it was possible to run from Athens to Sparta along the same route that Pheidippides ran it himself almost 2500 years prior; to deliver a message to King Leonidas, the King of the Spartans, that he should summon his troops *‘so that Athens and Greece would not fall’*.

5 starters left Athens on the morning of October 8th. RAF military commander John Foden arrived in Sparta in front of the statue of King Leonidas, he had done it having run the distance in 36 hours. Two other comrades reached the finish under 40 hours. It *was* possible to run from Athens to Sparta in less than 2 days! The distance of 246km (153 miles) and route was established with a 36 hour cut off time requirement. The event was coined ‘Spartathlon’, *a challenge, a distance and a pace* that few humans could achieve.

Yet if they could, they would match *the incredible* feat of Pheidippides, to *deliver a message* to King Leonidas, to summon the great Spartan warriors, to *become a Spartan!* The run of Pheidippides could clearly be attributed to saving modern mankind as we know it today.



King Leonidas, The Hero Spartan King (Statue in the center of Sparta, Greece)

For years Oz and I talked about developing our running abilities to the level needed to attempt Spartathlon. We both clearly understood how difficult this challenge would be. We had both run difficult 100 mile trail races, even 24 hour running races. So we felt we had better odds of actually having a chance of completing Spartathlon. The significance, history, and ultimate challenge of the race drew us in, we were fixated on the glory we wanted to achieve. It truly was *a challenge of a lifetime*.

So in early 2011 we both decided that we were going to sign up.

The event website was very limited at this time; we had trouble learning more details about the course elevation, route, and aid that the race organizers would be providing. We were surprised that so few Americans had ever been involved in the race itself. The previous year there was only one American finisher. Most years there were never more than a few entrants from the United States, and few of them ever finished the race. There was generally a 70% DNF (did not finish) rate, the highest of any race either of us had ever entered by far.

The one shining American star in the history of the Spartathlon race was Scott Jurek. Scott had won Spartathlon 3 years in a row, a staggering achievement, and in times that almost seemed impossible to me and Oz. Scott's best time of 22 hours in my mind was probably his single greatest achievement in his ultra running career, a better performance than his Western States 100 wins, or even his American record which he set in the 24 hours (165.7 miles).

Both me and Oz had run with Scott at various ultra races over the few years and were at a communication level where we were able to gain some insight from him on the race. Youtube had some limited clips of the event, yet most were posted by Japanese runners who offered little more than showing us some scenes of the course. In hindsight we both left for Greece with little understanding of what we were about to attempt.

September 2011, Greece was literally going through the worst financial crisis of its entire history. If Pheidippides was around today he wouldn't have been able to do much to stave off the dire situation that the country was facing. I arrived at a deserted Athens airport. Every union and employee was on strike, no information, no taxis, no buses, no trains, no-nothing. I got off the airplane and might have had to start my run right from the airport to the hotel!

I walked around outside the airport with my suit case. I really didn't know what to do. For about an hour I stood out in the road hoping that something good would happen. A strike-breaking taxi driver in an unmarked car pulled up; he's a sleazy looking guy, trash in his car everywhere, smells like smoke, this is a pretty bad option to get to the hotel, but it's my only option. I negotiate the price down from triple the normal cost and I get in. I figure my adventure was starting now...

(skip if you don't need crude nonsense experience)

The strike breaking taxi guy was classic Euro-trash. He had some really bad Greek music playing, his hair was a mess, half shaven face, ratty clothes, probably been up all night driving people from the airport since the strike started. He's asking me in broken English all kinds of questions, none that I want to answer. My mother's warning about *people like this* is replaying over in my mind.

I tell him I'm here for a race, he asks what race, and I tell him Spartathlon, but he doesn't know about it and doesn't seem to understand what I'm saying.

He keeps asking me questions about why I'm in Greece; I try to explain to him that I'm running

in a race from Athens to Sparta. He keeps asking me where is 'Spart-a'. I say it's south west, 246km from Athens. He says over and over 'Spart-a?' 'Spart-a?', yea, I say, Sparta. Then he says 'oh, oh, Spart-E'. (I just learn in Greek the city is pronounced with an 'e' at the end not an 'a'.

He thinks it's a motorbike race and asks me what kind of bike I ride. I tell him it's not a motorbike race, it's a *running* race. He still thinks I'm riding a regular bike, and asks me about the Tour de France. I tell him again that I am *running* to Spart-ee. He doesn't get it, but then he looks at me again, up and down he looks at my legs, and it hits him. "You RUN to Sparte!??", I say, 'yea yea yea, I am Running'.

The guy nearly runs off the road as he starts reacting to understanding the distance and the fact that I am going to try and run there. You had to be there to appreciate this guy's reaction, but I can tell you that it was an experience. He goes on and on about asking me how I can do it, how I can be so strong, and then he stops and collects his thoughts and then blurts out to me in broken English. "How long, waow, wow, how long you, you?" and he makes a fist and hits his hand over and over in some crude body language to convey the act of sex. You do for week!??"

We're nearly at the hotel and I can't wait to get out of this guy's car, he's on the phone telling his friend about me and 'SpartE' this and 'SpartE' that, the guy was the first of many unique experiences in Greece!

(back to the event/race:)

Arriving at the Spartathlon host hotel was like arriving at an Olympic gathering of international ultra runners. Alpha-male/female warriors; I was in the presence of an elite group of humans. I could sense the incredible power in each and every person around me. Hardened warriors from every part of the earth and culture had gathered here. The faces of each runner had untold stories of mind numbing tales of perseverance, these were the best of the best, they were here to become Spartans!

Normally these days I feel like I am truly *strong*, truly *accomplished* and having the ability to push myself through immense physical and mental challenges. My many years of ultra training along with my strict fruitarian diet has built me up to a level of deep strength. I have confidence in myself that is not superficial; I've worked hard to attain this level of *life*. Yet when I begin talking with the other runners, when I start hearing the stories and accomplishments of the others around me, I am truly humbled, truly intimidated, truly in awe at what the human species can achieve at the highest levels.

The Spartathlon Association is heavily subsidized by a grant from a billionaire Greek shipping magnet name Stavros Niarchos. When you sign up for the Spartathlon (there are strict and difficult running performance requirements to apply for entry), you are given a 'package' deal for the 6 days of the event and race. For 400 Euro's (\$550USD) you are provided with all hotel accommodations, all meals, all race day aid and support, all transportation and a ton of *extras* and more. It's by far the best value in a race entry that I've ever experienced.



The hotel accommodations in Athens were a bit like military barracks, certainly not anything to write home about. What did we expect for 6 nights, food, transport and more, for only \$550.USD.

The reason the sponsoring organization offers so much to the runners is because they truly believe in the *purity* and *significance* of the event. The race is a national and historical treasure; to the purists this event and the runners who undertake the challenge signify *greatness in Greek sport*. The race reaffirms Greek culture, and recognizes the importance of how it affected modern humanity. To the supporters of this race, we *the runners*, 'in the footsteps of Pheidippides' are keeping alive what *is important*. I felt as if we were being given a hero's welcome, and it would continue all along until I left back for America.

Socializing with Ultra UltraRunners:

Oz and I meet up at the hotel eventually and we check in with the race organizers. We both joke a bit about the Greek financial crisis; we can see why the country is in such a mess. To be kind, I'll say that that registration and management on check in was *challenging*. It was all in good fun trying to communicate with so many different people that spoke so many languages. It was amazing that anything got accomplished efficiently.

We settle into our 'shared' room with loads of laughs about boot-camp accommodations. The jokes and stories about all things from modern Greek culture to the running lunatics we were meeting around every corner, it was immense fun!

My diet is a priority in my life. I honestly prefer raw fruits and vegetables over any other food. No longer do I *struggle to stay-away* from cooked or processed foods. I honestly enjoy a fruitarian diet over any other way of eating. So I was quite worried about sourcing high quality produce at this event. Yet I was shockingly surprised at the salad bar that was offered at each meal. The variety was extremely limited, I think I ate about 10lbs of tomatoes for breakfast, lunch and dinner, yet they were some of the best tomatoes that I had eaten all year! Truly fantastic, I absolutely loved those tomatoes!

Over the next 1 ½ days before the start of the race Oz and I met the most incredible *characters* you could imagine. Each story was better than the next.

One of our roommates was a 58 year old man from The Netherlands, a Yacht builder, a guy who slept 2 ½ – 3 hours a night his entire life. He was built like the statues depicting the ancient Greek Olympiads. He'd done countless ultra running races, amazing challenges and accomplishments, a true warrior of the sport. But the scariest thing he told us was that he'd started Spartathlon 5 times previously and only finished twice!

The stories of terrible finishing odds were repeated to us over and over as we met other runners who again and again were back to take on the Spartathlon challenge. Oz and I looked at each other with fright over what this race was going to be like.

The Japanese and German's were in big numbers at this event. The stereotypical character of these cultures was in full effect. The Germans were built like indestructible human military tanks, they spoke with force and exactness had worn skin and weathered hands. They were tough!

The Japanese were at Spartathlon like as a well-organized team, always huddled together, refined to a level of exactness that made me feel like a poor slob. We witnessed ultra runners packing chopsticks in their drop bags for the first time; it was a very cool vibe at the pre-race hotel!

The level of intimidation was great, but so was the surprising friendly atmosphere of all the runners. We exchanged stories, training regimens, asked questions about the looming challenge and compared notes on just about everything. Oz and I heard about races we had never heard of before. We laughed at how impossible they seemed, yet also gave each other a look of worry that we might someday go after new insane challenges.

We met a German named Hubert who seemed to take on Spartathlon as a *fun-run*. He told us about his recent Yukon challenge. Just last winter he and 40 other competitors started out on a 440 mile course through the Yukon artic, in the dead of winter, completely unsupported, pulling a sled with all the gear and food to survive, in temperatures that averaged -40F. He was one of only 4 finishers after 10 days and nights. He said he didn't sleep for a 4 day stretch because it was 'too cold to stop'!

We met Chisholm Dupree, another one of the few Americans in the race. Chisholm was a Badwater finisher, a 24 hour runner, an 11 time Leadville 100 finisher, a veteran ultra running American, yet he also confided in us saying he felt *like a newbie* going after the Spartathlon challenge.

The Brits were in good numbers at Spartathlon too. They told us about the Themes run, a 250 mile loop around the British island, with only a 100 hour cut off. We met Mimi Anderson who had done a quad crossing of Badwater, unsupported she held the treadmill world record (she ran for a week on a treadmill!) Then there were the countless cross country, and cross continent runners, all from multiple nations. The 6 and 10 day specialist runners, the endless incredible achievements of these super humans made all of what Oz and I had done very humbling.

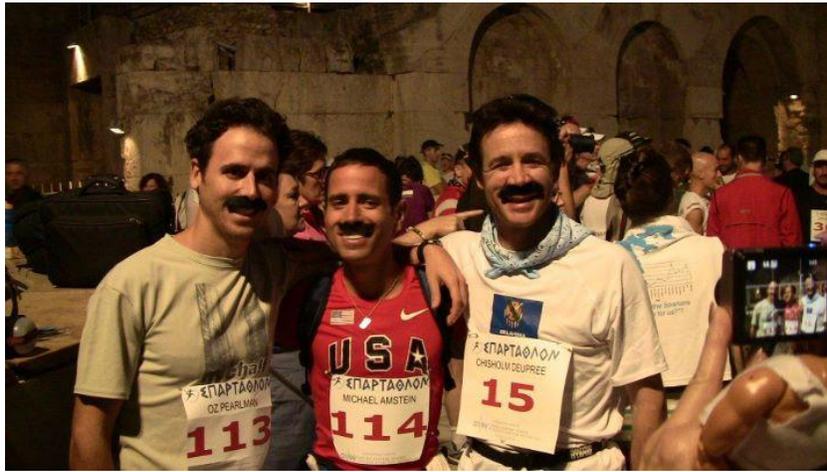
The rest of the world had no idea about these people, an entire underground, a micro population of super-humans existed.

Yet most of these older more mature runners tried to give us confidence. They told us to use our *youth, our speed*, that we could do amazing things on race day if we dig deep. Oz and I kept saying to each other that we had to deliver the message to King Leonidas on race day!

The next 24 hours fly by as we socialize to our hearts content, swim in the Mediterranean Sea 2 blocks from the hotel and try to adjust to the 7 hour time difference from our home in New York.

It's On! Time To Race!

Race Morning is here, it's 4am. I struggle to accept the last 2 nights of sleep being satisfactory at best. Jetlag and the excitement of the race leave me with little more than 4-5 hours of sleep prior to setting off on a 153 mile run. I clearly understand the odds and challenge at hand, me and Oz decide that we are going to stick together, run the first 10-12 hours side by side at a conservative pace. Our race plan has moved to 'we just want to finish' from prior months when I had aspirations of trying to place top 5 overall. I knew very well that I was in new territory and that my previous 100 mile run accomplishments were equal to a half marathon runner starting their first full marathon.



3 Americans at Spartathlon

In the spirit of the greatest ultra runner to ever walk on earth, we put on fake mustache's to salute Yiannis Kouros before the start of the race with the Acropolis behind us.

The start of the race is in the center of Athens, at the Acropolis, one of the largest ancient Greek architectural wonders. It was lit up in the early morning darkness, all the athletes were buzzing around in anticipation for the start of the race. It was a super electric moment, one of the best I've ever experienced, on par with the start of the Hawaii Ironman, the 100th Boston Marathon, my first Leadville 100, this was a moment in life that I deeply cherished and appreciated.



Dozens of countries were represented, media abound, lights, camera, action, it was about to begin. Me and Oz line up with the other 400 warriors and get ready to begin the journey. None of us will be running for less than 24 hour hours, none of us will be running for less than 30 hours, we will see the sun rise twice, we will run all day, all night and all day again, we will deliver our message to King Leonidas as if humanity depends on it. We are literally running in the footsteps of Pheidippides.

Bang! The gun is sound and we all run off into the early morning darkness.

The cheers of the spectators line the ancient cobblestone street as we leave The Acropolis behind, the energy in the air has my hair standing up, I have goose bumps, the challenge at hand is mind numbing, yet I can't wait for every minute of it!

Me and Oz stick to our plan and run side by side through the city streets. We joke, we worry like never before, we plan, and we run. Soon we are far from the start and the miles are clicking by. The run through and out of the main city of Athens is less than beautiful. The city is bustling in early morning rush hour traffic (the race starts on a Friday morning), the air quality is less than ideal, and the amount of trash on the roads is deplorable, it's saddening to see and has me wondering how soon the conditions will improve. We are soon running on the shoulder of a highway that is jam packed with traffic, trucks, passing factories and other industrialized zones, beauty-less areas of Athens that I wouldn't recommend seeing as a tourist. Very luckily there is a strong cross wind blowing all the vehicle exhaust away from our direction, so although the sights were sore to see, the air quality wasn't bad. Had the wind been blowing in the other direction the 10 miles running out of Athens would have been almost unbearable.

One interesting note that I must comment on: Although the traffic and trash laden city streets of Athens were difficult to accept as part of Pheidippides run, there was the most unusual sight of female traffic police at every corner. Not only were the traffic police women, but they were absolutely stunningly beautiful women. I kid-you-not, standing in high-heals, with clean crisp uniforms, long styled hair, dark eye make-up, lipstick, fit and young, women out of fashion magazines were directing and holding traffic for us as we left the city. We (us runners) were astonished as we passed by beautiful Greek maidens holding off horrific trucks and buses as we headed for Sparta, truly a quizzical experience!

It's a long long run...

Before we know it we're out of Athens and about 13 miles into the run. The air is clean; the views are getting really spectacular as we head up and over hills out and away from Athens. We're overlooking the profound Mediterranean Sea with large mountains far out in the distance. The countryside is reminiscent of what I've seen in northern California and parts of Italy, very nice, at time spectacular.

Oz and I are running comfortable, yet we are running fast. We go through the ½ marathon distance in about 1 hour and 50 minutes. Normally this would be 'jogging' for us, but we have 140 miles to go and too-slow is almost not possible in this race... if it wasn't for the cut-offs!

What makes Spartathlon so impossible isn't just the massive distance to cover, but rather the cut-offs that you must reach each check point/aid station. The mission of the race is to complete the run in the same time that Pheidippides did himself. We must reach Sparta 'the next day' within 36 hours of leaving. That leaves very little time to go too-slow. We must run, and stay ahead of the cut off times at each check point.

The early morning temperatures are comfortable, about 65F-72F, yet very soon the temperatures will rise up to 85F and no cloud cover. Most years we are told the temperatures go into the 90F's and it can be oppressively hot for the first 80 miles of the run. Oz and I push the pace in the cooler morning temperatures to make up as much time as we can before the heat slows us down later in the day.

We hit the first marathon distance in 3:48 (Spartathlon is about 6 marathons in a row!). The countryside is spectacular. We are running on the side of cliffs overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, on quiet roads with few cars. There are lots of rollers, ups and downs, but nothing too steep or long. It's starting to get hot. We cover up with sun screen, ultra-running hats with tails, douse our heads with water at each aid station to stay cool. We're really enjoying the experience, I'm extremely happy about how the run is going and how fantastic it is to be in the moment.

There are 75 aid stations in the race! Literally every few miles is another aid station. I've never been in a race with such support. It made it extremely easy and convenient to hydrate and fuel, plus mentally running from check point to checkpoint in such little time was a breeze. The aid stations weren't nearly as well stocked as aid stations in the ultra races I've run in the United States, but they weren't bad. Loads of dried fruit options were there for me. I had figs, dates, raisins, fruit, water, but no ice – ice would have been much appreciated in the hot weather hours.

About 30 miles into the run Oz wasn't talking much anymore. I knew he was going through a low point. I pushed him to eat more calories and we slowed down and walked some of the up-hill climbs. I tried to keep his mind occupied and I kept myself from getting to anxious about us slowing down so much.

Normally when you have a low point in an ultra run it can last as long as you didn't make the effort to correct the problem that caused the low. In this case I thought Oz wasn't eating enough calories and the heat was getting to him. He ate a lot, we slowed down a lot; the problems should have gone away. Yet they weren't. 3 hours later and still less than 50 miles into the run Oz was having a really hard time. He was running with 'the lean'. This is not a good sign so soon into a 153 mile race!



At the 50 mile check point we decide to take a forced break together. Oz lies down on the massage table and we agree we'll take a 10 minute break. I'm feeling really good from taking it so slow the last few hours and I talk to all the support crews and other runners who we've been getting to know over the last few days. I'm having a blast; it's a running party for me so far. Yet Oz is a mess, he looks like hell and I really don't know what to do about getting him back on his feet. Ten minutes is up and I'm trying to be as kind and patient with him as possible about getting along down the road. He literally wants to drop out at 50 miles. I push him hard and almost literally push him out of the aid station and down the road.

About a mile later we're running well, in fact Oz is coming around in a big way. We both get really excited that the worst is over and that he's finally getting back to form. We're running with good form, a good pace, the miles are going by fast again. I'm really starting to think with confidence after we pass 53 miles and we *only* have 100 to go!

But then about 100km (62 miles) Oz is back to feeling really bad, in fact he's been throwing up for the last thirty minutes over and over. He's *leaning* again, it's worse than ever. Oz literally stops and lays down on the road, a complete melt down, throwing up repeatedly; an awful situation. I get a few pills from a support crew that is supposed to help an upset stomach. Oz throws up the first pill, I give him another, he gets up off the ground in less than 2 minutes after literally collapsing and throwing up. He's literally back to running. It was very inspiring, it was right out of round 12 of Rocky. Oz was a wreck, but he wasn't giving up even when his body was completely breaking down.

The next aid station had some fresh bread, Oz ate a lot of it, and it settled his stomach. Within 10 minutes Oz was back *again!* We are running! The race is all about Oz right now, as I can't believe that he's bounced back after looking and feeling so so bad for *so* long. I know we have a long way to go, but the idea of only having to run 89 miles feels almost *easy* in my mind at this point.

We're running, but we're going a lot slower than I want. It's starting to get dark and running over 10 minute miles is wearing me down mentally. I'm getting nervous about how much time has been lost due to the slow downs, the cut off check points are getting closer and closer as we lose time mile after mile. Oz and I had a pact that we'd stay together for the first 10-12 hours, and I was about to fulfill that agreement. I worried about leaving him, as he was in a venerable state. I thought about how bad I would feel if he dropped out when he really didn't need to, I felt like if I stayed with him that I could get us both to the finish line with some super human efforts.

It's dark, we're moving a lot slower than I want, it's been 13 hours and the time cut offs at each aid station are getting too close for comfort. I realize that I could have a low point at some time in the race and I worry about not having enough of a cut off time buffer later in the race if I need it. I hastily tell Oz that I think I need to go on. I would love to run the entire race with him but I want to finish the challenge more. He understands, he really does; and we embrace in a man to man hug of honor, we're trying our best to deliver the message to King Leonidas, we want to achieve power like the mythical Spartans of 490 BC. I press ahead alone up over the hills ahead.

I run alone for a long time. Soon I'm at 17 hours and experiencing my own low point. I ran at a conservative pace since leaving Oz, but with little to no walking, and a lot of climbing. The downhill are beating up my quads. My feet are starting to hurt; I'm not so thrilled to be feeling this way *just* at 82 miles. I start a run walk strategy. I walk all the steep uphill, I force calories and try to think positive.

Few runners are with me, it's dark, getting cool, I'm bored and frustrated that I am not running at a steady pace. I'm getting negative to the point where I need to mentally slap myself a bit. I start to talk to myself, I entering a stage of ultra running that is a necessary evil if you want to have a *full* race experience. When things are too easy, they aren't ever really appreciated fully. I focus on that and press on and on.

Then about mile 90 I'm really in pain, my lower back and feet are really bothering me, it's very uncomfortable. I know I need to take a forced break. I make an agreement with myself that at the next aid station I will lay down for 5 minutes and give myself a rest. I push myself hard to not stop until the aid station at mile 92, I get there exhausted, really feeling trashed. I crash down on the foam mats that spewed out around the ground near the aid station. The volunteers ask me what I want to eat, I say I just need a rest. They ask me where my drop bag is for the next big climb up the mountain.

"Mountain, What are you talking about?" Apparently I was about to learn a hard lesson in not doing proper research on what was necessary to navigate this course properly. I knew there was about a 4000ft climb between mile 94 and 101.5, but I didn't realize that frequent rain, sustained winds and much lower temperatures were involved. In fact I was told that without proper clothing the officials at 'base camp' aid station wouldn't let me continue. I lay on the ground instantly thinking that my race just ended, that at mile 92 I literally had no

choice but to drop out. Other runners coming into the aid station were putting on leggings, jackets, hat, and gloves!

I am talking with the race officials about what my options are and that I don't have any clothes other than a light jacket waiting for me at the top of the mountain. They tell me that I can drop out if I want to, it's my decision. That's when I have another experience that I'll never forget.

Another runner was sitting in a chair across from where I was laying on the ground like a severely wounded warrior. He was putting on tights and arm warmers. He was listening to me talk to the race officials and then interrupts me from staring off into space. His English is terrible; he knows he can't really communicate with me using language. He throws a long sleeve shirt at me that he had in his bag, he gestures to put it on, he points to the blanket that the volunteers had wrapped around my legs after I crashed to the floor when I entered the aid station, and makes body language movements to wrap it around my legs like a bath towel. He says in broken English, 'No stop, never!' He bends down low to the ground in front of me, knees on the ground, he raises his arms up like he's a drowning victim trying to survive, and he cycles his arms towards me in a large crawling motion. He points to his knees and arms, he is showing me that *I have to crawl* to the finish; the look in his eyes, the weathered and tired body that encased his spirit was ground shaking. He shook me to my core.

I immediately get up. I brush off logic and emotional distress. I think of Oz and his round 12 Rocky scene earlier that day. The aid workers clap and cheer, yet I almost hear nothing, I'm in a time warp suddenly; I'm having an ultra running experience, my *heart* is taking over.

I wrap the blanket around my legs, I put in the long sleeve shirt and I literally run off fast! I run out of the aid station as fast as I can as if fear and self-doubt are chasing me. I left them on the floor at mile 92, but I could sense they were after me; they were right behind me if I turned around to see them. I pressed hard to focus on a steady pace, to block out the 18 ½ hours of running behind me. I had a mountain to climb and nothing was going to stop me.

The mountain was big, really big. In fact I literally thought that the small lights I could see low in the sky were stars, yet they were headlamps of the runner's way ahead of me, the headlamps moving up the mountain, I thought they were stars!

For six miles I climb, climb, climb, the temperature drops considerably. The wind picks up at times and I am really in shock at how massive this climb is literally 100 miles into the run. Wow, this course is no joke! I laugh out loud as I see how much higher I have to go and how far away the summit seems. Finally I get to 'Base Camp' aid station at the 100 mile mark, it's 20 ½ hours on my watch. The wind is blowing, I am wrapped in a blanket, full toga style, it's comical, and people are wondering what the hell I am wearing. I grab my light jacket from my drop bag. The race officials repeatedly ask me if I am ok before they let me push up and over the summit 1 ½ miles away. They ask me if I'm sure I am ready to go on as I stand over the aide station smashing raisins into my mouth big handful after handful. I drink a cup of water and half of it overflows around my mouth, I reply to them with projectile snot and crewed up raisins flying out of my mouth, "Where's the fuckin top of this thing!?"

The last mile and a half to the summit is insanely steep, it's probably a 1000 ft. per mile vertical climb, extremely shitty footing with large loose rocks and tight switch backs, it's dangerous after literally running over 100 miles and doing this.

The wind is blowing, my blanket is whipping around like mad, my legs are like pistons, yet my feet feel like a pit bull has been crewing on them for days. It's definitely a bad ass moment, I love it and make an effort to really enjoy this rare experience of hell on earth, I can't get enough!

The top of the mountain is intense, it's a sharp ridge. A crew of race officials are at the top dressed like they are going skiing (in winter they actually ski on these mountains). I crest the summit and start the awful rock slide

running down the other side. It's very steep, my quads instantly go from pressing upwards for the last few hours, to taking in reverse pressure as I run down a very steep grade.

Soon my shoes are filled with small pebbles, I slide on the extremely loose footing and crash down a half dozen times, my quads are killing me, I slow my pace as much as possible to preserve the precious muscle fibers in my legs from being overwhelmed. I focus on the fact that I've made it past the 100 mile mark, that I made it over the mountain, that the hardest part was over, that within a few a few hours the sun would rise and I would hopefully have renewed energy and life.

I reach an aid station at a false base of the other side of the mountain in short time and take another break on the foam pads strewn out on the ground. My feet are killing me. I empty the rocks from my shoes, eat more raisins, I try to lay still for a few minutes, but I want to move ahead, I have 49 miles to go and want to get to King Leonidas.

I get up after a few minutes, there's a gentle decent on a good paved road ahead. The wind is gone, my legs are warm, I drop my toga blanket and take off. It's dark, very few runners are around, I wish Oz was with me, I need some distraction. In all the other 100 mile races that I've done pacers and crew support was involved. Yet here in Greece, I don't have any crew, no pacers, and the few runners that I do interact with don't even speak English. It's a lonely time, and I focus on the difficulty of the event, how meaningful it is going to be to accomplish the goal.

I focus my efforts on monitoring every detail of my physical body and mind. I think good thoughts, I implement a run walk strategy for a few miles until my feet start to feel better. I consider taking caffeine, but hold off until there is some emergency need for it. I calculate time and distance, I try to break up the distance in smaller segments in my mind. I realize that I will probably be running for 32 to 34 hours if I can maintain my current pace.

For the first time my watch turns to 24:00. I have never run for 24 hours previously, I'm at 111 miles on my GPS watch and proud of myself. I marvel at the fact that I actually haven't been sleepy anytime during the run. My feet are really killing me but everything else seems to be ok considering I've just run for 24 hours up and over mountains at 111 miles.

The sky starts to turn from dark to light. I'm seeing the sun rise twice during the same run. I'm eating the experience up in a big way. As much as my feet are killing me, my spirit is extremely high, I really love life, this is awesome!

But then things get really bad really fast. My feet feel butchered; I'm in a lot of pain. The bottoms of both feet have shooting pain with each step. I get to the next aid station at 112 miles and crash to the foam mats again. I put my feet up against a poll to drain the blood from my poor feet. I get up after 3 minutes; I feel a bit better I try to run but am forced to walk due to the pain from the running impact. I accept that I need to walk for a while, to give my feet a break. I walk, I walk, I walk slower, the pain isn't going away or subsiding, this is a serious problem. I don't know what to do. I am in agony, each step is awful.

I sit on a rock on the side of the road. Runners are steadily streaming by me, I'm demoralized. I shake my head in disbelief that I'm having this foot pain problem, I say to myself that I *only* have 39 miles to go. In my mind 39 miles is an *easy* medium length run, no problem...yet I have a problem. I calculate that I need to walk 3.5 miles an hour to make the 36 hour cut off at the finish line, yet my last mile took me 32 minutes.

I get up, I press ahead as if I'm walking on broken glass, I just keep hoping the pain will subside, but I have experience in this situation. I know the pain is almost impossible to break. This is a serious longer term issue that won't go away after a 5, 10 or 30 minute break. I need a full 4 hours or more off of my feet before the pain

will subside, but I don't have that kind of time, the cut offs at the next aid station is coming and the race is slipping through my fingers.

I can't take another step; I can't stand on my own two feet. I literally lay down on the road. Runners trickle past me every few minutes. Each of them look worn and beat up after running for more than 26 hours. They look like hell, but they probably are very grateful after seeing me literally laying in the road in a fetal position.

I'm a broken man. I have literally run myself into the ground. I lay helplessly as the clock clicks away at 26 ½ hours, 114.2 miles.

Athens is going to fall into the hands of the barbarians, King Leonidas will not get the message, and the Spartans will not be coming to help. I have failed, it's very hard for me to accept, yet it is my reality.

About 20 minutes go by, my feet are throbbing. There is no chance I can finish this race, I'm going to miss the cut off in less than 10 minutes, the clock has taken me out now. A sweeping cut off race vehicle comes by and the officials pick me up off the road, they take my number, they radio in Greek to other officials and I hear them say my name, it's official, I'm a DNF. "Oh Fuck!" and then I kind of black out in the back of the van.

I really think I passed out because I don't remember anything during the time I *slept* until about 4 hours later when I was shaken up by medical staff asking me if I was ok, that they were trying to wake me up for a while. I slowly worked my way out of the van and tried to stand up. My feet were still killing me; it was absolute agony to walk as I got out of the van to a transfer bus that would take me to Sparta. I was really happy that my feet still hurt like hell, because if they didn't I would have been furious that I wasn't able to continue on.

I fall back asleep on the transfer bus. Hours later I get to Sparta and enter the 1960's era host hotel where dozens of runners lay on the steps and interior areas of the hotel. It looked more like a triage war veterans operation than a hotel lobby. Everyone there was a DNF (did not finish). Then a runner slowly enters the lobby, he looks different than all the other runners, he's walking slow, but very tall. He is wearing an olive wreath around his head, he is glowing, *he* is a finisher. He had just reached the intimidating, the glorious, the mythical bronze statue of King Leonidas in the center square of Sparta, this runner delivered the message, he was the reincarnation of Pheidippides, a warrior, a Athenian mythical human who summoned the great Spartan warriors.

I stood in awe as he walked across the aged hotel lobby, I was in an old movie, time slowed, I was witnessing greatness in a man, a dream accomplishment before my eyes; yet by another, not myself.

I hung my head, I could see many others in the lobby doing the same. We all had visions of greatness and it the suffering in our bodies was little compared to the humility in our hearts.

My sadness gets pushed aside quickly as my eyes jump open wide when I see Oz in the next room. "Oz!" He gives me *the look* of a DNF, I give him the same, it's somehow comforting to us both that the race had beaten us. We talk about how we both were crushed, how we dared greatly and tried our best. We were depressed for sure, but enriched by the experience all the more. My depression lingered, yet we were energized watching the last few finishers come in just under the 36 hour cut off. The look in their eyes, the emotion on their faces, the atmosphere was beyond inspiration, the emotion coming from the runners was far above dramatic. I was among giants, men and women of such respect I cannot put it to words.

The entire town of Sparta puts on a massive celebration for the event later in the evening. The entire city's population gathers in the main square for a presentation to honor the runners. The energy is euphoric. A true respect and astonishment is given to all of us, we are modern day warriors to the Greeks, and to the people we are keeping history alive and keeping the legacy and purity of *Sport*.

The next day all the runners are treated to an amazing feast in an idyllic setting overlooking the tall mountains that surrounding Sparta. The mayor of Sparta and other officials attend and talk to us with the utmost regard and respect; we are truly treated as heroes.



The salads and tomatoes are sensational; I'm enjoying myself very much in what is now a massive social scene. The British runners, the Germans, the other European runners, we're all talking and having a blast comparing everything from lost toe nails to collapsing on the road, great great fun!

The accolades and praise go on and on from the presenters and visitors that have come to acknowledge our run. We are showered with mementoes and gifts; we are given tours of the area and told about the rich history. We are given first class treatment and it's much appreciated.

We board the buses back to Athens where we see the magnificent sights that were lost in the darkness from the run all night from the day before. We stop along the way to see some impressive sights before we arrive back at our hotel in Athens for yet another round of all inclusive meals and more.

The next day I leave for the airport, a day earlier than the other runners who are staying for the masterful awards ceremony with the mayor of Athens in a historic setting among the remnants of the ancient Greek city that stood over 2500 years ago. Next year I will return to this event, and I will deliver the message to King Leonidas, I will run in the footsteps of Pheidippides once again, and I will reach my goal of running 153 miles in less than 36 hours from Athens to Sparta.