

# Spartathlon 2016 Race Report

*David Niblack*

For the long distance runner, the Spartathlon is a kind of Matterhorn. It has the ingredients of an epic: a finish line that stretches a long, long way from the start; 153 miles, almost six consecutive marathons. There is a big mountain at the 100 mile mark, a big city at the start, a big cold night in the middle, and a big percentage of runners who don't make it. The race has international prestige and gathers runners from all corners of the world. To top it off, the course claims a remarkable history. According to Herodotus, in 490 B.C the Athenian runner Philippides left Athens and arrived in Sparta the next day. His legendary run was for the purpose of asking the Spartans for help against the invading Persians before the conflict that would lead to the battle of Marathon. It was a run to save democracy, a run to save the foundations of Western culture.

My entry into running was unexpected. The Chicago Marathon course paralleled my college campus and gave me the idea to give it a try. Previously, I thought runners were weird, always talking about their "training" and seeming to enjoy going out and running 20 miles – not normal!

I reluctantly signed up for the marathon and finished seven minutes away from the Boston qualifying time. That tempted me to try to qualify, how cool to be able to run THE Boston Marathon. It took me two more marathons to qualify. By that time, I was starting to enjoy (most of the time) training and the excitement of marathon day. A few years later, an [Economist article](#) introduced me to the Spartathlon and left me laughing – "There is always another level of crazy!" Hearing of the impossible training regimens combined with the fact that many of these world-class ultra-distance runners gave up midway evoked a sense of awe at the race.

I live in view of the Mont Blanc in Geneva, Switzerland (where I teach the New Testament at a small Protestant school). Early this year, my friend – who would become my brother-in-law— and I had tried to sign up for the Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc (the UTMB) for summer of 2016 – as a "huge challenging experience". Unknowingly, my friend was not qualified, so we didn't make the selection. That led me to look around for something else and I ended up putting my name in for the Spartathlon drawing, not really expecting to make the American team. I was selected and after some soul-searching and hesitation (Am I really going to pay *that* much money to run *that* far on the pavement in *that* heat?!) that awe I had for the race won me over. I signed up.

My schedule and injuries trimmed down my grandiose training plans. I taught for two weeks at our Dakar, Senegal extension campus, which gave me an opportunity to run in humid, hot West African weather. Running 250 miles through a bustling African city in two weeks is an experience: weaving between massive trucks stuck in traffic, getting lost through the maze of footpaths in a fishing village, and running alongside the windswept beach passing horses, sheep, and mopeds.

Unfortunately the experience came with an injury. While running on the angled camber of the beach I pulled a groin muscle. I nearly panicked reading the online forums about such an injury – “6 to 8 weeks recovery and if you push too fast, you can injure yourself for the long-term.” I held out a week without running. After feeling better enough to run, I discovered that while it felt uncomfortable, after a long warm up it didn’t really bother me. I tried to “catch up” and hit 130 miles over the next seven days– my highest mileage week ever. But overall things were uneven. Many other weeks I was lucky if I hit 60.

The training goals of other American team members, as well as goals in a variety of race reports, scared me. Nine out of 20 original American runners had finished in 2015 and put the pressure on for 2016. Andrei, the USA Team leader, was frank; we can do better than last year and runners better take this race seriously. I had the least experience of any of the runners – and I had only experience on one 100 miler course. My last 100 miler finish was back in 2014, well over two years ago. I had never DNF’ed a race but knew that the Spartathlon was a strong candidate for a first-time experience in not finishing. The fact that my training has not gone as well as hoped and that I could still feel my adductor complain when I ran, didn’t reassure me.

One blessing to the trip was that my brother-in-law Sam and my sister Amy agreed to come out from Chicago and crew for me. It was a good excuse for a visit and they came first to Geneva. Unfortunately, Sam had broken his foot while summiting Mt. Lyell in Yosemite and he was just getting out of the soft cast. He had to limp around Switzerland, but had a great attitude.

We arrived in Athens on Wednesday, glad for the two hours flight from Geneva. Getting the rental car took longer than expected and we went out for a Greek dinner overlooking the Parthenon. It was warm and felt like a California summer.



*The view from the restaurant Wednesday evening*

It was fun meeting the other runners. I've never been in a group of such high-caliber running talent, chatting with them increased my sense of privilege just to participate in the race, but also increased my apprehension at how I would do. Talking to them, I felt like the 100 miler was the new 5k — small potatoes. It wasn't interesting to share which races you had run, but which 100 milers you had *won* and which races you directed. Runners had stories of 24 hour races (how many miles you could go in 24

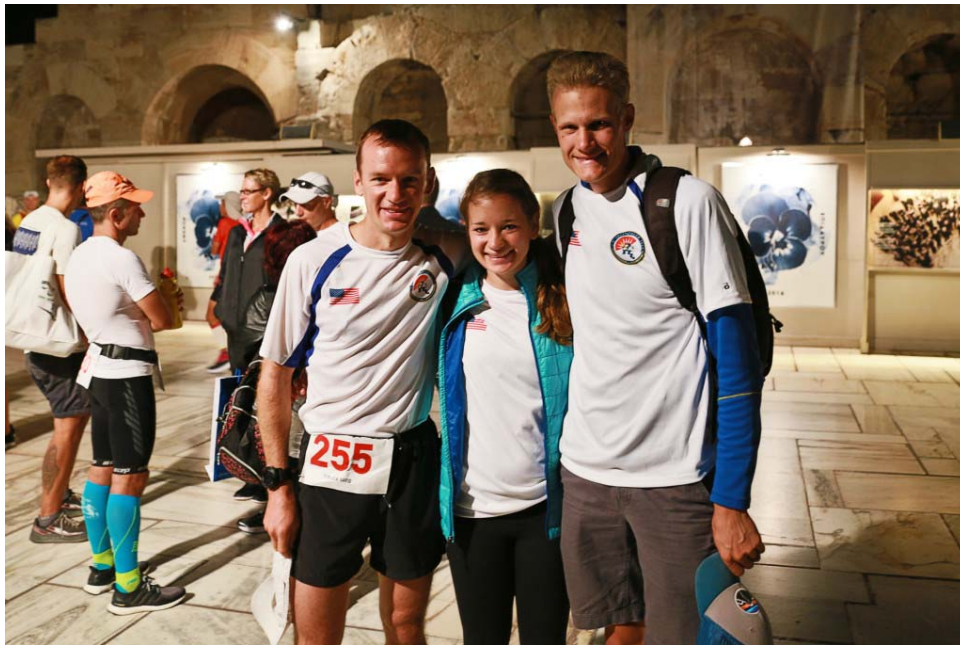
hours). But that was pretty small scale. More interesting were the stories from 48 hour races and 72 hour races. I casually asked Pam, one of the woman on the US team, "And have you run Western States?" (The Boston Marathon of trail races). "Oh, she won Western States," Bob Hern clarified for me. What an achievement!



*The American Team, with crews*

The day of the race, I woke up early to see my roommate Paul – also on the American team- lubing his feet next to me (a special, handmade sauce that he kindly shared). Between ultra marathons and marathons, he had finished 180 races and gave the concept of “race experience” a new meaning. We got our gear on and went down at 5 am for a quick breakfast. I kept it pretty simple, a piece of bread, some Greek yogurt and a coffee (with Starbucks Via poured to make it taste decent). While driving on the bus, I made a last minute decision to change to my USA shirt. It was a little baggy, but I figured it would be neat for others to see what country I was from.

I was worried about finding Sam and Amy at the start, which is at the base of the Acropolis. As the bus pulled in and we unloaded, I waded into the general pre-race fray of runners. I followed the crowd up to the start, on a stone esplanade beneath the Acropolis and easily found Sam and Amy. We took some photos with the US team, wished our best to the other runners, and gathered in a clump waiting for the gunshot. The moment was surreal – I was here. I felt a tightness inside, wondering how long I would last. I stopped, prayed, and remembered how grateful I was to be here. Looking around, everyone looked so fresh, so eager.



*Right before the race, with my amazing crew team!*

The shot went off. As a pack we jostled forward, stepping gingerly over the (very minimal) cobblestones. I was surprised to see so many with packs, some guys had big Camelbaks shaking, swinging, and rattling with every step. We quickly descended in the fray of Athens starting to wake up and get to work. At moments it was peaceful, at other moments, we had a surround-sound chorus of honking, scooter whines, and cheering.



*The race starts!*

Bob Hearn's race report was the best thing I'd read on pacing strategy. This year, he had sent around a spreadsheet that laid out time estimates for each aid station based on an overall time goal. I figured I would keep with the overall general advice I had heard: start slow and aim to hit Corinth around 8:30 hours or so. For me, that meant starting around a nine minute mile pace with time for walking hills.

The human body – at least mine – is general pretty fussy while running. The smallest rock can make the feet hurt, pre-warm up stiffness quickly turns to post-warm up soreness. With lots of runners whizzing by me and the excitement of the race pulling me forward, I kept telling myself to slow down. "This is a 100 mile race with a *really* long warm up to the start line" I said. "Don't get serious until well into the real race."

As we moved through the city, I felt relatively good. The beginning of races are always hard for me. It takes me about eight miles to warm up, especially at marathon pace, and the massive amount of distance ahead of me intimidates. This was nicer since I was able to start slower – in fact, constantly telling myself to slow down! The the distance was very intimidating.

Spectators, while relatively few, were exuberant and friendly. Plump, older women walking down the sidewalk hauling their shopping strollers would stop, wave, and shout "Bravo!" with a smile.

At a number of intersections you could see a growing line of cars we were blocking. Some honked and I wondered if they were "cheer honks" or "mad honks". As we hit one of the big intersections, it was clear it was not a cheer honk. As the horn wailed on, the



policeman holding back the cars gave quite an eye roll and an exasperated Don Knotts expression.

It felt like it took a long time to get to the first aid station, but after that they started ticking by. I was running among a spread out group and didn't feel like I was at the very back of the pack, which meant it didn't occur to me to look at the cut-off times indicated at each checkpoint.

The aid stations were fun. Usually they consisted of a small table with a spread of local items surrounded by cheerful, energetic volunteers. My nutrition strategy was pretty simple: "Eat what you find at the aid stations that looks good." It was fun how much of the food seemed Greek and I enjoyed munching on raisins, sesame bars (which I had not had before) and yoghurt with honey. Someone once described an ultra-race as an "eating contest with a little running thrown in." Maybe a better description for the Spartathlon would be an "eating contest with a lot of running thrown in." In any case, a variety of food makes the eating contest more interesting.

I was looking at my pace and noticed (if my newly purchased refurbished Garmin Fenix 2 was working right) I was around an 8:45 minute mile. I was aiming for 9:00, so not too bad.

Around this time I caught up to Bob Hern. He was wisely walking some of the rolling hills. I joined him for a tiny bit as people ran past us. He looked like he was having a good strong start.

The aid stations are one of the remarkable things about the Spartathlon. There are 74 of them, run by volunteers. One effect of having so many is that I usually didn't stay with the same people too long. If we were together while running, we usually got separated at the stations.



*Running along the coast before Corinth*

As I started approaching the marathon mark, I could feel my hamstrings start to quiver. The feeling is hard to describe – a weird, tremor-like feeling deep down below my quad that says “Whoa!- Fragile!” when I land. It didn’t really hurt, but didn’t reassure me.

The sun had been out for several hours and while I was not sweating heavily, I could tell I was getting warm. Most of the aid stations had ice, so at the next station, I tried putting some in my hat. The first time, the ice felt so cold it gave me an sharp headache – brain freeze from the outside? – so I tossed it out. I figured it would be good to get more salt and checked my pocket. The salt pill I had stashed there had long ago disintegrated since I couldn’t find a plastic sandwich bag to store it.

As I came up on the marathon mark, I saw my crew for the first time; Sam and Amy cheering and waving. Sam’s tall blond head was easy to spot from a distance. I hoped they had had time to go back to the hotel and grab breakfast.

“What do you want?” they hollered. “Salt pills!” I yelled. They laughed – “Ah! That’s the one thing we left in the car!” No problem – they handed me one of the Swiss “salty bars” and a cold Gatorade with ice. Ahhh, the cold Gatorade was wonderful. I stayed a minute or two before hitting the road again.

The miles ticked by. It was fun to see kids out cheering. “*Kalimera!*” I shouted and waved. “*Kalimera! Kalimera!*” smiling faces cheered back. Hearing them made me think, “I studied Koine Greek for two years in seminary. Bummer! It’s hardly doing any good here!”

I was using Sam's ultra-hat – which already had some war stories to tell striding atop his head. The bill was permanently warped and the edges a bit frayed, but it fit well and the white color worked in the heat. It was getting hotter so I tried the ice again. This time I happened to grab a really big chunk and kept bumping it around inside the hat to change positions – with the bent bill and ice lump, what style!

We continued running along the coast. The deep, aqua water of the Mediterranean rippled with gentle waves to our left. I noticed that everything seemed to have a yellowish tint, just like in the photos I had seen before of the Spartathlon. It gave everything a retro, 1970s feel.

Then it happened – the classic cramp. It was like I had a rope inside my leg and someone gave the order to cinch it tight with a truck winch. It stalled me into a crouch; I simply couldn't move. I had seen it many times happen to others, often in the last two miles of a marathon. A runner woefully bent over, clutching at a leg, probably watching his PR bleed away. I always felt sorry for them. Now, as runners trickled past me, I was that guy! What to do? I tried to extend my leg but the pain grew, threatening worse. After a moment, I grabbed the ice from my hat and as hard as I could rubbed it along the muscle. It worked magic. The winch man released. I gingerly stretched it out; no re-cramping. I started running again and things felt relatively normal.

The next aid station had salt – a big pile in a Styrofoam bowl. I took a pinch straight – yuck! As I continued to run, things held up. But my leg felt weak and shaky, like it was going to go at any moment. It added a stress.

I made my way past the famous oil refinery – a maze of pipes, smoke billows, and tanks. The shadow from the smoke coming out of the towers had an unearthly look to it as it danced on the pavement.

We could finally see Corinth in front of us. It was a city I was familiar with, at least from reading various books about the background of the New Testament. But this was my first visit; arriving on foot, like the majority of people in the ancient world (though, doubtful they were running with big squishy running shoes !) We came to the isthmus, a seven kilometer land bridge which connects the Peloponnese peninsula with the mainland of Greece. A canal cuts through it, providing passage for ships. The runners cross a bridge that allows a view into the canal. Looking down made me think, “No wonder it took into the 1800s to finish this project!” It was deep. The project had been started by the Roman Emperor Tiberius, continued by Nero, and even though Nero has 7,000 slaves on the project, they made little more than a dent. It was finally finished with modern excavating



technology in 1893. The narrow gorge plunged nearly straight down, with a ribbon of blue water, straight as an arrow, at the bottom.



*station stop - Gatorade, salty bars, whatever else looks good*

After Corinth, while running slightly uphill along a highway, the cramp returned. Same feeling; same frozen position. This time the ice didn't work. I tried stretching and ended up able to hobble a bit. One woman - I think on the British team- stopped to see if I was ok. I wasn't sure what to say, but said, "Yes, I'm fine, just a cramp!" Fortunately, it let up and I was able to return to a slow run.

The route wound around and eventually left the busy roads - a relief from noisy traffic. I found myself on country roads, winding through olive groves. I felt tired, hot, and my legs kept getting heavier. I continued to downshift further into "plod mode". A few runners passed me and I tried to stay steady. This was one of my low-points. Thinking about the mileage, I realized I was not even at halfway. I was tired and could feel I was slowing down. How would this continue?

This is one of the remarkable things about endurance running. Not only do "second winds" exist, so do third, fourth, and fifth winds. Bleak stretches often don't stay bleak (There is a life principal here!). The sun started to sink into the horizon and I hit another big aid station. Sam and Amy cheered me on. I ate some soup and fruit, stocked up on salt pills and washed it all down with cold Gatorade. Thirty minutes later I was feeling much better. The air was cooler and I felt recharged.

The sun was setting as I was running along a quiet road that wound up through hills nestled with olive groves. The light dancing in the trees was beautiful. I felt alive.



*Leaving Ancient Corinth as the late afternoon sun starts to sink into the sky*

It got dark as the road starting going uphill. At the next crewed aid station, Sam and Amy told me that Phil, on the American team, was not far ahead of me. Although I had not trained intentionally a lot on hills the six weeks before the race, I did have an advantage of living in Geneva: the Alps. I had done several trail races this summer and between training and races had a handful of days of over 9,000 positive feet of climbing. I felt good going uphill, slow, but steady and comfortable. I passed Phil at one of the aid stations and wondered when I would see him again.

Finally, at kilometer 160, I came to the mountain base. In reality, it felt less imposing that it had seemed in the race reports and the photos. We left the road and scrambling up the goat path, I felt like I was back in the mountains, something I was more familiar with. I passed a few people going up. My Adidas Boost shoes were not trail shoes, but have pretty good soles and slippage was minimal. It was still very steep and with a hundred miles already in my legs, I enjoyed the chance to switch to hiking. At the top, the wind was blowing and I grabbed a handful of food at the aid station before heading down. Downhill, the route followed a fire road, with patches of loose gravel. I slipped around a little, but didn't fall. One thing I discovered this summer in a trail race was that I'm better at downhill than uphill. Sure enough, I was able to jog down at a reasonable pace, passing

a few other runners. Kilian Jornet says to run downhill fast is to learn to dance with the trail.

After the mountain, the road to Sparta is flat, long, and empty. I was running mostly by myself and starting to struggle with sleep. I don't recall much except for a lot of flat, lonely road. As one point, two dogs started running behind me. I turned and shined my light in their eyes – they stopped, with that “dog in the headlights” look. As soon as I turned around, they ran back, following me. Finally they held back, fading away in the darkness.

At moments, I switched off my light. The night was clear, dark, and the stars shone hard and cold against the darkness. The Milky Way sparkled across the sky. The silhouette of the mountains created a rugged frame. I remember thinking, “this is really beautiful but I'm almost too tired to enjoy it.”

I struggled with another wave of sleepiness, this time I felt dizzy and wobbled a bit. I shook my head and squirted some water on my face. The cold helped perk me up.

The temperature kept dropping and about 3 am I started getting cold. I was glad to have a long-sleeved insulated shirt but was still uncomfortable. I could tell the difference when I ate and tried to keep eating even though I was starting to feel mildly nauseated, with less and less at the aid stations looking the least bit appealing.

It's largely uphill to Sparta. I had looked at the elevation profile, but had not studied it carefully and the uphill rolling hills seems to last forever. I passed one runner slowly walking – he was wearing just a t-shirt and looked really cold. “Are you okay?” I asked. “Yeah, a bit cold.” “Do you know when the next aid station is?” He answered: “I think it's in 15 kilometers.” That worried me a little since it's impossible there is a 15 kilometer gap between aid stations. “No, I think we are much closer,” I said. I walked with him until I could see the lights of the aid station up the hill and took off at a slow jog.

At last, the sky began to change color. I was looking at my watch and trying to count the hours – only 6 or 7 more. It felt like days. When the uphill was sustained and steep, I walked, trying to keep the pace brisk. When it was flat or downhill, I ran... slower and slower.

The sun came up, bringing a warm, bright morning. Finally, I had 42 kilometers left, just a marathon. But I was exhausted. The next aid station I saw Amy and Sam, looking pretty



perky considering they hadn't slept much either. "How do you feel?" Amy asked. "I don't have anything left!" I groaned.



*Exhausted, nearing the end*

It's funny the energy it takes to think even basic thoughts. There comes a moment when autopilot takes over; all your effort goes into just taking the next step. It's tiring to reflect on anything else.

With 35 kilometers to go, we slowly wound down the road. I saw Amy and Sam at the last aid station before the finish. Amy mentioned that Bob Hearn was right behind me. He soon passed me — I should say, flew past me. Rumor had it that last year he had the fastest final half marathon of *any* of the Spartathlon runners. I think later he said his pace was well under an eight minute mile; that's amazing reserves for this far in the race. At the time, I didn't realize I was the first American male and seeing him cruise by me gave me a boost — we were nearing the end!

Finally, we came across the pass and we could see Sparta off in the distance. It looked like it was 50 miles away, when in reality it was just 13. The struggle continued. Slowly the road wound down as the sun continued to grow hotter.



*The magical finish, king Leonidas in view!*

At last, down into the main street heading into Sparta. Sure enough, the kids came out on their bikes, I wanted to shout “*Kalimera*” or ask what their names were, but was too tired. Up the main drag, turn right, then right again. People cheered; cars honked. At 400 meters away, I could see the flags. Sure enough, there was a surge of new energy and I picked up the pace. I ran down the street, the crowd grew, I heard the music, then my name announced, people clapping and I was there – up the steps and touching the feet of King Leonidas.





My finish time was 27:40:36. I was the fourth American to finish, the second American male, and the first Swiss resident. I had hoped, best case, to finish in under 30 hours and was delighted with the surprise of a finish over two hours faster.



## *Closing Thoughts*

I heard a few runners say that it's hard to put into words the experience of the Spartathlon. I agree. It's so long, and you live through so many different experiences touching so many different emotions, all compressed into 30 hours, it's nearly impossible to capture the whole.

After the race, some said that running these long distances is a spiritual experience for them. It certainly was for me. For me, as I was leaving Corinth watching the sun set, I had a fresh vision of the way an ultra-race illustrates the marathon life holds out to us all. As I ran, I was reminded how in the Bible, the concepts of "glory" and "suffering" are very different, nearly opposites. But they have an interesting similarity. They both are *heavy*. "*Kavod*", the Hebrew word for glory has the basic meaning "heavy," and in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul refers to the "eternal weight of glory."

Life has a lot of superficiality to it. Our media-saturated, hyper-connected culture offers us little resistance. But suffering and glory have a strange immunity. They both have the capacity, like a wave washing away a sandcastle, to reveal the weight of life as it really is. They can shake us from our superficial drowsiness.

I think that's part of the lure of the ultra marathon. It's a call to suffer for sure. Few legs feel happy after 100 miles, let alone 153. There is the risk of a DNF. But with an objective finish line and with the knowledge that every step is a step closer, the pain has purpose. And at the Spartathlon, the memory of Philippides' feat makes that purpose timeless, special.

Then, the finish line produces an extraordinary alchemy. The struggle of 153 miles is transformed into an achievement – a small, but real, glory. The one weight is exchanged for another, vastly different.

That magical exchange, especially when it is personal and unexpected, offers a weird, beautiful experience. Maybe it's a little taste of what Tolkien mentions when he refers to a gladness "beyond the walls of this world," weighty and wonderful. I think this is the thing the ancient prophets referred to when they spoke of joy. Something far more alive, far heavier, than the modern fare of self-absorbed positivity.

At least, that is how it was for me. When the moment is as real as feeling the bronze feet of Leonidas beneath your hands and as personal as hearing your own name blaring through the speakers, fleeting but real, there is a taste of joy.

For that, the chance to finish a crazy race like the Spartathlon is a gift. I'm struck by how – almost instinctively- so many of the runners know this. After the race I was chatting with one Australian runner. "Yeah, life is given *to* us, not *for* us" he said. "Gratitude, not entitlement, is key." "I'm just grateful to be here" others said. Reading race report afterwards, a lot of people, religious and not, talk about being "blessed."

Two thousand years ago, the Apostle Paul said, while traveling in Greece speaking with the Greeks: "God did not leave you without a witness, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." Life is full of gifts and maybe they aren't random. They might be given by a Giver.

Like Paul, I'm convinced this Giver can be known. It is the astonishing message of the New Testament. This Giver came to us in the person of his Son to give us so much more than food and gladness and long races; he promises real eternal joy. For that, he took on the race bib in the hardest race of all: the human experience, perfectly lived. He accomplished the mission, he lived the perfect life, he died the death we deserve, and won. The resurrection – the very center of the Christian faith – is God's award ceremony for Jesus. There, we see the ultimate exchange of "weights", the worst of suffering traded for the best of victory. Our rebellion canceled by forgiveness, death trampled down by life. The empty tomb Easter morning announces a joy "beyond the walls of the world."

Of course, being inspired doesn't mean I feel the need to run that race again! I confess one of the first thoughts as I lay in the medical tent after the race getting checked was, "Never again am I going to run this far!"

Yet, it's amazing how quickly the low points of the race grow fuzzy in my memory and the lure of another challenge begins to pull. I don't know if I'll ever get to return to the Spartathlon. But here, writing two weeks after the race, I realize again the remarkable privilege it would be to again face such an epic challenge.