

Spartathlon 2001

On September 28/29 the 19th running of the Spartathlon took place. This is a 246km (154miles) footrace which is based on Herodotus account of the Battle of Marathon where he is reporting on the Athenian messenger Pheidippides running from to Sparta in order to ask for support for the Athenian fight against the Persians. According to this ancient deed the time limit is set to 36 hours. This year there were 250 registered entrants from around the world - but only sparse North-American participation.

I arrived 2 days before the event. Coming from Germany with a really rotten cold (40's) and rainy September I was greeted by near 100F temperatures and feared the worst for the race. Fortunately the temperatures dropped by race day to 80F. The entry fee of 150\$ included two nights before and two after the race and all meals, so it was overall a pretty good deal. The food was good and plenty, the queues on the buffet long. The hotel room (double) in Athens, which I had to share with 3 other runners, was a bit small for the purposes, but we managed to sleep well the night before the race.

Race started in Athens just under the Acropolis at 7 am and out of an accepted 250 runners 192 were brave enough to actually appear at the start. You start out running through the heavy morning rush-hour traffic, an experience in its own. For the first miles the crossroads were well secured by the police, later we just blended into the general traffic. I started out relatively fast paced and covered the first 30k in 2:30. Then the sun got hotter and I purposely slowed down my pace. At 40k the last of the stray dogs which had followed the leading group out of Athens collapsed on the side of the road. After leaving Athens we had followed the picturesque coastal road with only minor ups and downs to the Isthmus of Corinth. After crossing the canal I reached ancient Corinth with the first major aid station at 81k after 7:30 hours of running, well within my schedule.

There is a handful of aid stations where runners are allowed to accept assistance from their crews, Corinth is the first of them. Between these aid stations no support or pacers is allowed. I had no crew and worked with drop bags, which could be placed at any! of the 75 aid stations. The aid stations all along this stretch and the entire remaining distance were meticulously organized. There were an overall of 75 aid stations along the course, hardly ever more than 3 miles apart. The course was marked with white arrows on the road, ribbons, LED flashers and glow bars during the night. Although flashlights were available at the aid stations, I preferred my own LED-headlamp. Nearly all turns were manned and cars patrolled the course. Getting lost or running out of drink/food: strictly impossible!

After leaving Corinth the course winds through endless Olive and wine plantations and for the first time I felt weak suffered from the heat and asked myself if I would be able to finish this race. Apparently I had started out too fast, had consumed too much energy and now I had to pay for it. When the sun was finally getting weaker - so was I. The first runners started to overtake me and I had neither the will nor the power to keep up with them. One of them was Sebastian a 51 year old from Munich whom I had met at the start. Despite his not runner-like appearance with a few extra pounds around his belly he swiftly moved past me. How deceiving can be a superficial judgement of abilities! What looked like a gentle rising road on the race brochure turned out to comprise of a lot of ups and downs. Nevertheless I managed to keep up a somewhat decent pace and got to the second major support station, ancient Nemea at 125k, right when the night fell (8pm). I had some noodles and soup, took my headlamp & knotted my long sleeve shirt around my waist and continued up some demanding switchbacks on a major road with some unpleasant truck traffic. On top of this climb the course branched from the major road and finally continued some 10k on a gravel road. Again: what I had thought to be a slowly rising climb towards the course's high point turned out to be a local maximum followed by a descent down to the valley floor at 600ft elevation. After following the valley for a while I finally reached Kaparelli village at 150k around midnight. This was well behind my schedule, which had meant reaching the high point at 161k around midnight. Given the fact that the course was much harder than I had foreseen this still was quite acceptable and well before any cutoff time. This gave me some comfort and the climb in the cold of the night went quite easily. Some 5 miles over the mountain top are very rocky with some intermingled scree, not a pleasant thing to walk on (nobody is running here). I made up a few places and also overtook the first woman at around 170k.

Down from the mountain follows some 25k of flat road running, well apt to make up some time, only there was nothing left in my legs to take advantage of the good flat road. Here Sebastian overtook me

for the second time. Without knowing I had passed him on the mountain. I reached 195k after exactly 24 hours. Not quite in my schedule but still a pretty good performance. There are not too many runners who beat 200k in a 24hour track race.

An hour later the sun was up again and we climbed the last major hill of the race out of Tripoli basin. By now I had exhausted all my energy and had to slow down to what seemed to me the slowest possible running speed, just barely beyond what you might consider as walking. The first woman passed me again, she seemed to be flying, I fought hard to keep up running and moved from aid station to aid station, occasionally being passed by the odd runner. I hadn't passed anyone for hours now. An Austrian guy whom I had switched places with many times since 20k into the race started approaching me again. He was faster on the downhills and I faster on the uphills. So we fought our own little battle and pushed each other towards the finish. In the last 5k he got cramps and I moved ahead towards the city of Sparta. The last 10k were possibly the longest 10k in my life: an endless turning road on a bare mountainside with the sun relentlessly burning down on the South facing slope, not to mention honking Greek drivers passing only inches by my side.

Finally I entered Sparta; every runner now gets escorted by a police motor bike and on the last mile by two Spartan virgins with olive branches. However I was much too tired to really notice and my mind was set on just getting it all over. One final uphill loop through Sparta and 3 stairs up to touch the statue of King Leonidas and it was done!!!!

I finished in 31:23 as 19th out of 82 who made it to the finish. Sebastian came in 10th in 29:30 (this shows how much can be lost on the last marathon distance). The winner came from Brazil in 24:15, 2nd from Germany in 24:45 and the third from Japan in 25:15. The first woman was from Portugal in 30:30 (times approximate, from memory).

Overall I am very glad I finished, the race was a good bit harder than I had imagined. My watch gave me a total climb of 10000ft, about twice of what I had expected!

Now, how does this compare to Hardrock, which took me about as long? -- You cannot compare, it is so different. Hardrock is a race for mountaineers who like running, Spartathlon is for road runners with excellent stamina and some climbing abilities.

Race day ended with a very nice celebration on Sparta's main square. Beautiful fireworks concluded the event.

For more information about the Spartathlon see <http://spartathlon.webvista.net> (not always up to date) or the ultramarathon world for the results. If you are tempted to try it yourself be prepared to handle some organizational deficits of the organizers before and after the race, but: the race itself is very well organized and certainly an experience not to be missed.

Giselher Schneider