

Sparta 2016 DNF thoughts – coach sought... by Tarique Shakir-Khalil

First off, many thanks to all of you, friends and family, who have given pre- and post-race words and messages of encouragement. It has meant so much to me and I only wish I could have delivered the goods. So what happened? In a nutshell, I didn't make it to "the foot".

My immediate post-race reaction to this DNF was the following:

I truly gave it my all but my body just couldn't cope. It really hadn't been my day from quite early on as I struggled with a groin pain which had been growing in intensity throughout the race. I adjusted my race plan accordingly and kept the pace slow after the 80k Corinth checkpoint to stay within a constant 25 - 30 minutes of the buffer, never daring to go much faster. And never daring to go much slower. I got over the mountain with a 25 minute buffer intact by some miracle. By now I was in total agony and could barely lift my right leg. The descent had properly "done me in". I tried to loosen up after the mountain and managed to trot a little faster for a while but then lightning struck and my right groin area totally sized up. By 182km the only way I could find to propel my right leg forward was to push it with my right hand just below the butt. I was now running left leg hop, right leg push. The last km took me some 25 minutes to complete in this unorthodox style. As I inched towards CP 56 the death bus waited on me and then boarded me at the 26h20m checkpoint cut off time. I found my loyal crew waiting for me at CP 57 where the bus dropped me. My tears were part pain, part mental exhaustion, part disappointment. But also joy and relief at having such a wonderful crew (Sebastien Albert, Ludi; and my two youngest, Odessa age 4 and Livia age 1) who had been through hell with me and who humbled me with their kind words and insistence that I should give it another go next year, despite Ludi knowing full well what a commitment this would be for the whole family. It was a strange mix of desperation and elation which is the best way I can describe what one gets out of an ultra when pushed to the wire. Hats off to all those reading this who have ever run or finished Sparta, I admit I truly had not imagined the brutality of this distance and this particular course. I have a tiny consolation in now having completed my first 100miler in under 24 hours on reaching the mountain top; my second consolation is to draw inspiration from the words of Mandela; you never lose, you either win or you learn. Not the outcome I hoped for but there it is. Let's hope I learned something.

A week or two on, I have put some further thought into what this means to me and made use of a round trip to Canada and the US to put things down in writing. Why didn't I finish? Will I have another go? This additional introspection has given me some further useful perspective.

Well, let's start with the second question, will I have another go? As a prelude I should say that I always assumed this would be my one and only attempt - and I still believed that when the death bus caught me. Making a single attempt at this monster was intimidating enough and involved weekend compromises which were often tough for the whole family. I wouldn't have dared suggesting to my wife that I might be returning next year, whatever the outcome. Add to that the fact that the effort of the race was by far the hardest thing I have ever done in my life and my 26 hours were filled with dark thoughts which had to be repeatedly overcome, making the mental fatigue utterly exhausting. But on being reunited with Ludi, her support for me was so total, and her conviction that I deserved to finish based on my relentless efforts was so complete, that it genuinely made the option of returning next year a real possibility when she encouraged me to do so.

So, how do I see things now? Well, I could say "I tried my best" and call it a day there. I would never have to look hell in the face again, or at least not that particular brand of hell. Doing so did remind me just how much I appreciate a nice cup of tea with my feet up. But that just doesn't seem satisfactory. *Why oh why did I have to take the red pill!?* But there it is, I have looked down the Sparta rabbit hole and I have the desire, in fact the need, to finish what I started. Thanks to Ludi, I also have the license to do it. So, I've decided to have another go. I will finish this race.

Now I have two ways to see things. I could comfort myself and take the following view: *"I did indeed deserve to finish but just had some bad luck on the day with a groin strain - hopefully next*

year will be better with similar preparation and better race management". If I took that view and ended up with another DNF it would be fair to say that I would deserve another DNF. So, tempting though it is, that's not an option. Therefore, the only thing to do is to assume the following: *"I didn't deserve to finish and I will have to do something different in order to make damn sure that I do deserve to finish next year."* This approach requires taking a much deeper look at what I got wrong and what others got right and making a commitment to bridge the gap in the next 12 months. Since I started to think this way I have found one pretty sizeable gap.

My thoughts about how it went before this introspection were as follows:

Things that went right for the race.

- Nutrition wise I was as "sick as a dawg" at kms 82, 92, 112 ish losing an unprecedented quantity of water...but after I switched to coke and only coke for nutrition and hydration and I got fully rehydrated during the night. I subsequently maintained hydration and never felt tired or had a lack of energy for propulsion. The fat burning and "coke training" worked.
- Feet had zero blisters and didn't even hurt underfoot. Feet preparation was perfect and minimalist shoes worked even on this extended distance with the addition of neone insoles. Top banana!
- No chaffing at all. Compression gear rules. Long live tighty whities :)
- No pains anywhere where I had had injuries prior to Sparta such as upper back / neck area, knees, achilles. Cool, recovery from injury really was complete. Phew.

Things that clearly didn't work

- Initial nutrition should have been switched out much earlier as my dehydration caused renal pain and fictive desires to pee - this could have meant that my tendons and muscles paid a toll for too long a time. **In future I need to react immediately to early warning signs of dehydration.**
- My groin pain should have been managed better as I felt it coming from early in the race. This might have included: more stretching pre-race and at the first signs of pain; running faster to allow time out during the race for massage when things got much worse; no underpants beneath the compression shorts squeezing the groin (over-shorts would be better...bye bye tighty whities); I should not have tried to push the pace after the mountain descent when things were so vulnerable - this was not muscular "time to be brave" pain, it was "you're going to injure yourself / DNF" pain. **Overall, I need to learn to spot the difference between various types of pain and more generally learn to better manage race effort on ultra extreme distances - this is nothing like running a fast 100k and needs a gentle steady hand on a tried and tested strategy. Hmmm.**
- My leg length difference is not usually noticeable when running due to my forefoot / midfoot strike as my toe angle compensates. But when power walking during Sparta it seemed like a massive imbalance, as if my right leg was a thick wedge longer which caused higher than usual impact on the RHS of my body. **I need a left shoe heel lift for power walking to compensate for leg length discrepancy.**

Therein lie some useful tips which could make a difference, and, perhaps, if I had figured them out during the race I could have done better. Now for the difficult bit...

...let's layer onto this my further thoughts when thinking about what some other people got right. This is where it gets interesting for me...and a little frightening!

The major observation is **level of experience** in ultras. I am not talking about ultra races as I used to think of them. i.e 100k road races, 50 mile trail races and a multi-day race through Andalusia or the MDS. I am talking about 100 mile mountain races, 24 hour races and even 48 hour, 3 day and 6 day non-stop races which I didn't even know existed before talking to the Sparta crowd. In all fairness, I had had this in mind to some degree but injury had prevented me from doing a 177km training race in June which I had planned in order to get a better taste of what Sparta might feel like; but having fully recovered from my injury I had thought that the 120km training run I ran in August, my longest run ever, was a pretty good crown to my preparation and I felt as confident as

one might dare to before embarking on such an adventure. But the reality is that my experience was pretty thin compared to the vast majority and there really is no substitute for experience, especially in a race where you have to hit every single one of 75 cut off points to avoid elimination which means that there is very little margin for error. Successful finishers seem able to adjust their race strategy to the prevailing conditions; boiling hot or freezing cold, steep climb or descent, treacherous mountain pass, early in the race with fresh legs or late in the race with niggles appearing. Perhaps I should have planned to start faster as I have decent speed over distances up to 100k, faster than most people I met. Having bagged some time I could have taken better care of myself later on. Or perhaps a slower start would have worked better. I still don't know. Each successful runner ends up with a different answer depending on what has worked best for them in other extreme ultra distances and applies this experience to the Sparta race on the day. There is no single recipe. It's a form of body and mind art.

Combining fairly decent ability and exceptional luck to call everything right on the day to squeeze through the eye of the Sparta needle could produce a cunning Sparta finish. This was perhaps the only finish I could have hoped for with the benefit of hindsight, but it is probably a pretty elusive prize for most in this race. **A more reliable set of ingredients to finish Sparta would be to have a wealth of experience in races of a fairly comparable distance and/or duration to Sparta** in order to have mind and body memory of these ultra extreme conditions and to have tried and tested lots of strategies when passing through hell to know how to avoid the rocks in advance of a crash.

I know I can put myself through hell and keep fighting. Even when I was pulled from Sparta at least I had the satisfaction of going down on my feet still fighting to the last inch. But it was 64 km short of the mark which is a big miss by any measure you can take and just wasn't good enough. To get through Sparta next year, I need to prepare myself to go through this new brand of hell more than a few times beforehand in training races in order to feel that I can stand on the start line knowing that my legs and mind have a decent enough compass to navigate this very special race.

I am lucky to have the support to let me have another go, both from my friends and my family and especially my dear wife, Ludi. I am lucky enough to have a body which I think can withstand and perhaps even thrive on a whole new level of abuse which I believe is necessary to bridge the experience gap I have now identified so that I can be a different person when I am on next years' starting line. The only luck I am counting on is being pulled out of the lottery if the race is over-subscribed and I haven't managed to run an automatic qualifying time before race application deadline. Even in this respect I will do my best not to need this luck and have planned a few qualifiers despite the challenging speeds now required as Sparta tighten the automatic entry requirements for the second year running. Even if I don't hit the automatic qualifying times it will be invaluable experience...so long as the races are crazy enough! Now I just need to get back full use of my right leg so that I can stop just thinking about it and get on and start actually running again!

If anyone is still reading at this point and has a suggestion for a coach who has a history of transforming a decent 100km runner into a decent Sparta runner, please let me know 😊