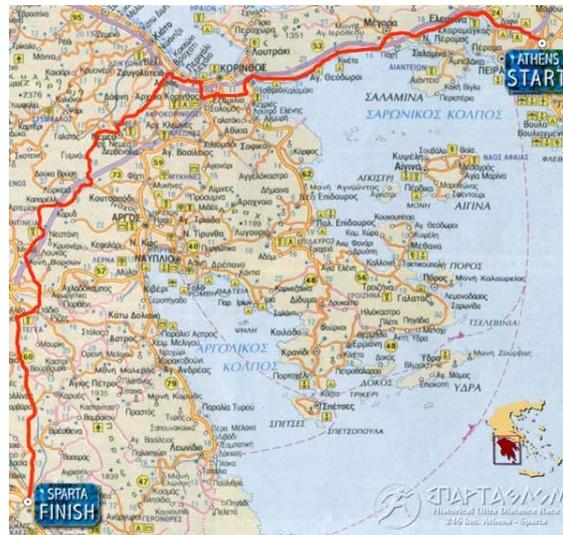


SPARTATHLON

2005



A 246km race from
Athens to Sparta

John Tyszkiewicz October 2005

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In the footsteps of Pheidipides
A 246km race from Athens to Sparta
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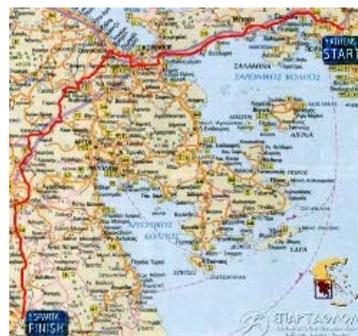
0645hrs on Friday morning, and qualifiers for the 2005 Spartathlon are making their final preparations in grey pre dawn light at the entrance to the Parthenon. Race officials, camera crews, reporters and supporters mill around the competitors. Some take group photographs on the start line, others stand silently apart, stretching off muscles that are shortly to be assaulted by 246 kilometre of non stop racing. This, the 23rd running of the race, has attracted 275 entrants from over 20 countries.



The British Spartathlon Team

From left to right: John Tyszkiewicz, Jackson Griffith, Martin Illott, David Sill, Glyn Marston, William Sichel, Mark Williams (and daughter), Sammy Kilpatrick, Peter Foxall. Missing – Mark Cockbain

There are 10 British entrants, surprisingly few for a country with such a wealth of ultra running talent. 60 have made the journey to Athens from Japan, 18 Koreans form the splendidly attired and cheerful KUMF team (Korean Ultra Marathon Federation), USA, Poland, Estonia, France, Morocco, Bulgaria, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Holland, Russia, Romania, Croatia, Czech Republic, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Poland, Switzerland and of course Greece are all well represented. A couple of Brazilians and an Argentinian fly the flag for South America.



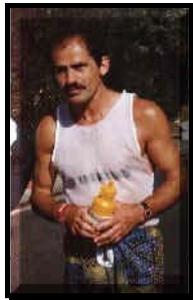
Early morning nerves

The 246km route



The Start Line - 0700hrs Friday

As the clock nears 0700hrs, I look around at my fellow competitors and as ever am amazed by the variety of bodies on display. While a certain amount of our grey matter might be similar, what is certain is that there is no such thing as a typical bodyshape for an ultra runner. The smallest competitor is a Japanese lady, who appears to be only a little over 4' tall, and the biggest a Croatian man, who stands well over 6' and according to the entry statistics weighs in at over 90 kg.



Yiannis Kouros – Spartathlon legend

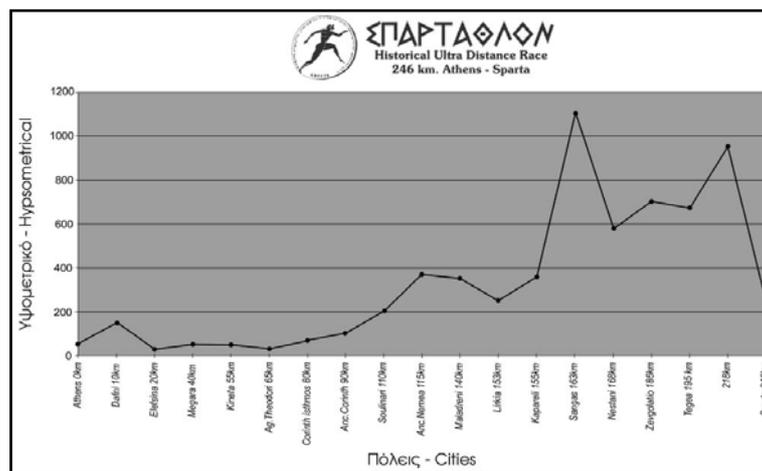
Thanks to the severity of the challenge ahead, there is no telling who will be successful. All are aware of the stunning course record for the race, set by Yiannis Kouros in 1984 of 20hrs 25mins – he has won the race the four times he has run it, and never had a time in excess of 22hrs. Some are on the start line for the first time and will make to Sparta, others have been there on multiple occasions and have yet to touch the foot of King Leonidas. Jackson Griffith and I are here for the second year running – in 2004 the heat and exhaustion got the better of us. Jackson's race ending at Corinth and mine at the 172km point, where I was unceremoniously despatched to the sweeper bus, a frustrating 50km or so from the finish line. We do not want to fail again.

The crowd suddenly parts, allowing the competitors a clear view of the cobbled street that will lead them away from the Acropolis – a long blast on an air horn sends us away downhill towards the Athens rush hour, which is just getting into its stride on a hot and humid Friday morning. Police outriders clear the way across junctions for the tightly grouped pack of runners as people at bus stops look on slightly bemused at our presence. The race photographer darts around the field, helmetless on his KTM 650 motorcycle, ignoring police instructions and danger to life and limb with equal abandon, he seems on a mission to capture pictures of every competitor.



A competitor negotiates the Athenian suburbs

One of the many difficulties of the Spartathlon is that not only is it a very long race over some exceedingly harsh terrain, but also that competitors are forced to maintain a fast early pace. To put this into context, the minimum pace required to stay in the race up to the first major control point at Corinth is a sub 4hr 30 min marathon. Twice in a row ! Having achieved this, runners are then expect to run the remaining four marathons, a significant piece of which will be on stony, unlit track, including a nighttime scramble up, and descent of, a 1,110 metre high mountain, with strictly enforced cutoffs at each of the 75 checkpoints.



The route climbs to 1,100 metres after 160kms

With 275 competitors on the road, there are probably 275 different strategies for pacing. Some, such as Mark Williams, the USA based British 8 times finisher of the event, has a complex pacing chart with him that extends, concertina style, to display the required pace as well as the gradient and distances between checkpoints. Others have cut

off times written in indelible ink on their arms. Pacing charts taped to water bottles or written up the side of the race number abound. I have nothing, deciding to try and ignore the checkpoint numbers and cut off times as I go. This race is to last 36hours. A day and a half of continuous movement. I do not want to repeat my experience in 2004 when I got bogged down by detail and my effort ended in frustration. Barely a day has passed since then that I have not thought about the ‘what if’ factor – I have decided that the race is about patience, and the ability to overcome temporary setbacks. Wherever you get to along the course, it’s going to be along day at the office.

Kilometres				OUR PACE								
Distance from Sparta	C/P distance	Distance covered	C/P	C/Ps & Cutoff Times	Time of day	Elapsed time	C2C Pace	Mins per km	Mins per mile	Elevation (metres)	Avg metres per km	
0	0	0	S		7:00	0:00	-			52		
5	5.6	5.6	1	07:35								
6	5.2	10.8	2	08:05	7:55	0:55	5:06	8:12		152	9.26	
7	4.4	15.2	3	08:25								
8	5.3	20.5	4	09:00	8:50	1:50	5:40	9:07		35	-12.06	
9	3.7	24.2	5	09:25								
10	3.2	27.4	6	09:50	9:35	2:35	6:31	10:30				
11	3.1	30.5	7	10:10								
12	3.0	33.5	8	10:30	10:15	3:15	6:33	10:33				
13	3.1	36.6	9	10:50								
14	3.4	40.0	10	11:15	10:55	3:55	6:09	9:54		47	0.62	
15	3.5	43.5	11	(First Marathon) 11:40	11:20	4:20	7:09	11:30				
16	3.4	46.9	12	12:05								
17	3.1	50.0	13	12:25	12:05	5:05	6:55	11:08				
18	3.2	53.2	14	12:50								
19	2.5	55.7	15	13:10	12:45	5:45	7:01	11:17		47	0.00	
20	3.1	58.8	16	13:35								
21	3.1	61.9	17	14:00	13:30	6:30	7:15	11:41				
22	4.4	66.3	18	14:30						35	-1.13	
23	4.5	70.8	19	15:05	14:35	7:35	7:18	11:45				
24	4.2	75.0	20	15:40								
25	3.5	78.5	21	16:15	15:35	8:35	7:48	12:32				
26	2.5	81.0	22	#1 Hellas Can 16:30 (50 Miles)	16:00	9:00	10:00	16:05		70	2.38	

Jackson's patented pacing chart

The streets of Athens are choked by frustrated traffic as we weave our way towards Piraeus and the coast. Unfortunately the route out of Athens is significantly less picturesque that it must have been in Pheidipides' day. Instead of green fields and olive groves we travel along a noisy dual carriageway which seems to be the main artery for heavy goods vehicles. Snarling dogs rattle fences protecting business premises selling building materials and auto parts. Acrid smoke belches from factory and refinery chimneys and the traffic hurtles past, but the runners remain focussed. Notes made following the 2004 effort have prompted me to bring along some foam earplugs which I wear to reduce the incessant whine of heavy tyres on the concrete road. The heat and humidity increase as after a couple of hours we pull away from the main road and start to enjoy the relative peace of the old coast road.



A typical checkpoint setup

Jackson and I are still running well, keeping the lid on the pace while staying ahead of the cutoffs, but the unusually high humidity is getting to both of us. It is hot, but nowhere near the high temperatures and searing sun of '04. I keep falling behind Jackson, struggling to maintain any rhythm in my running.

Memories of my last and longest proper training run, an uncomfortable 100km overnight effort in Belgium back in June, come back to haunt me. Jackson seems to be running freely and I steadily fall behind. It seems that am having problems on all quarters. Some minor pain from a tendon somewhere in my hip niggles at me, then I think that I can feel the outside of one knee start to ache. My bum bag is uncomfortable and requires constant adjustment. My clothing is too restrictive, or is it too loose? Sweat stings my eyes as I search around every corner for the elusive checkpoints, if only for the chance to dither while filling water bottles. I long for a race car to pull up beside me and say “That’s enough mate, you’re clearly in no state to continue”, but they just drive on by as ever. Maybe I feel worse than I look.

I get a text message of encouragement from Christian Cullinane back in the UK who is running a website showing our progress during the race – I respond with “feeling crap, lucky if I make Corinth” as I shuffle on up the road.



I battle with myself in desperate need of something (other than stopping) to alleviate my distress. As I cross the road to run in the shade of some eucalyptus trees, the answer appears right in front of me. Tomato. A vegetable merchant is offering me a tomato from his stand as I run towards him – I can’t feel any worse than I do already, so I accept the proffered, and hitherto untested, endurance runners food.. Walking briefly I munch on the tomato and drink the juice and pips down. The brief respite from running allows me to gradually gather my thoughts. I decide on a plan. I will head for Corinth – there I can give up gracefully – it’s a couple of marathons into the race, so at least I can claim to have put in some sort of effort.. Once I have my goal, I am happier. I now know where the finish line is, a mere three hours or so away. I can hack that. I settle into a better rhythm but still feel less than well.

A couple of hours later on the long climb up to the bridge over the Corinth canal, I devise the next part of my plan. Somehow I have managed to get 20 minutes ahead of the cutoff times, so unfortunately there is no danger of being pulled out at Corinth. I decide to try and get to the 100km mark instead. It’s only another 20km further on and would be a far better place to quit. Just before Corinth I take a paracetamol to help shift a headache and force down whatever trail snacks I have with me. I make sure that I am fully hydrated, and stop to wash my face, arms and legs at the CP just short of the canal. As a result I do not feel that bad at all when I lurch into the 80km control.



A runner leaves Hellas Can control point at 80km

Better than that, Jackson is there – it’s great to see him looking strong as this is where he quit last year – he urges me to continue – insisting that I take the time to stop for a leg massage. I allow myself a five minute break sitting at the massage bench while stuffing down cold pasta with tomato and chilli sauce (we have left pasta sauce in our drop bags to improve the rather dry stuff the CP offers). Before he leaves, Jackson also tells me that I look fine, which drives a further nail into the ‘I’ll give up in 20kms time’ coffin.



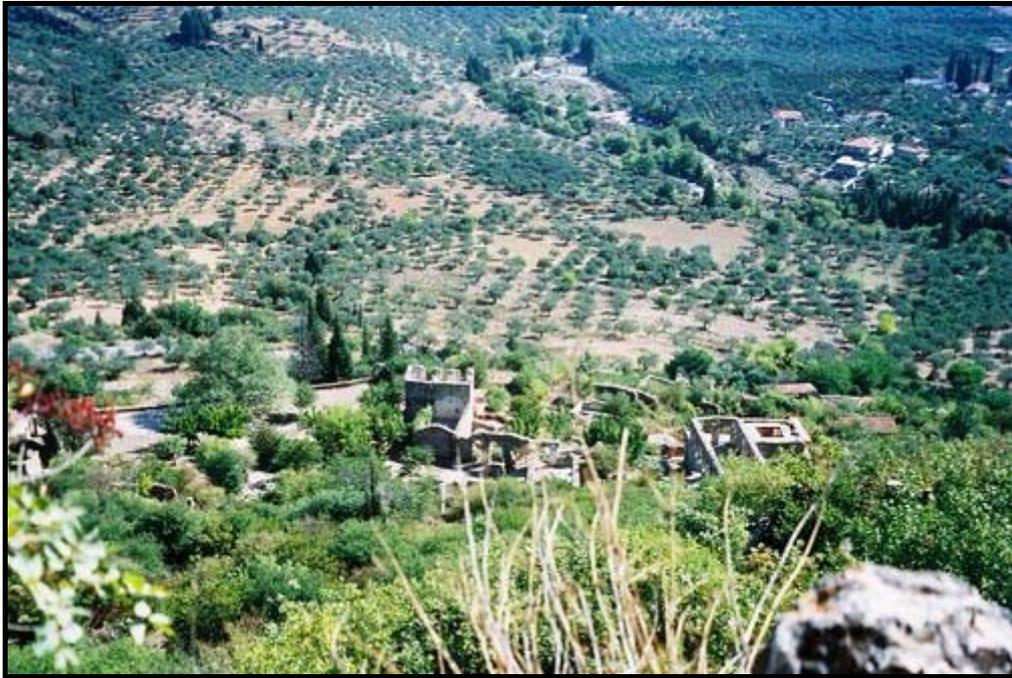
Checkpoint board, feed station and massage mats at Corinth

I leave the CP fully loaded with trail snacks and water, eating the rest of the pasta as I go. I barely dare think it, but I do feel marginally better at last. In a rash moment, I decide that instead of trying to get to the 100km mark and then quitting, I will try and get there with a 30 minute cushion. Breaking back into a run I am pleasantly surprised by how well I am moving. After a couple of hours the 100km mark approaches. We have been climbing for a while on country roads and the oppressive heat of the afternoon is receding.

A further boost to my morale happens when I eventually catch up with Jackson and we settle into our pace. In various races around the world we have run hundreds of miles together, and are comfortable, steady, keeping control, chatting as we head into the night. Things are looking up for me, I seem to have beaten the low point I suffered for five hours or so on the way out of Athens. I have eaten well – better than in 2004 that’s for sure – I am fairly well hydrated and I have also taken the first part of the race relatively easily. The feet are a different matter. I can feel a few hotspots and as usual my heels are giving me trouble. I am sure that blisters are developing, but there is nothing I can do about it.

We progress well and the miles slide by. Aside from the distance, the next really stern test will be 3,300 climb up Mount Parthenio between 150km and 160km. Right now that is still eight hours running away, so it's far too early to think about it. We satisfy ourselves with ticking off the checkpoints as we go, safe in the knowledge that every step we take brings us closer to the finish line. I do not dare contemplate even getting as far the foot of the mountain. I came so perilously close to quitting just 60km out of Athens, I am thankful just to remain in the race.

In the early evening, Jackson hangs back a little longer than normal at a checkpoint, and I bat on alone. I am sure that he will catch me again soon enough – we have discussed what we will do in the event of one of us slowing, and each is to run his own race. The metalled road soon turns to a dirt track, and darkness falls. My head torch does a good job of illuminating the track ahead on a moonless night and while the surface beats merry hell out of my feet, my pace does not change. I remain roughly 25 minutes ahead of the cutoff point and do not try to improve on this. Just before midnight I pass fellow British runner, Mark Cockbain, who only sticks with me for half a mile or so then drops back. Mark is not looking that good – in 2004 he raced with the lead group to the 150km point, then collapsed. Mark ended his race in a courtyard outside a taverna, under a blanket, waiting for the sweeper bus. This year he has deliberately taken it easy, but now this tactic appears to be backfiring on him as well.



A long descent into and through this valley in the dead of night brings runners to the bottom of Mount Parthenio

Shortly afterwards I receive a text message bearing news that I did not want – Jackson has succumbed to cramps at the 130 km point, just before midnight and will take no further part in the race. Family and work commitments have prevented him training with anything approaching the intensity that he would have liked in the lead up to the race, to the extent that he has not run for more than an hour at a time for nearly a month. Hardly ideal, but hugely disappointing nonetheless. Jackson also sends news that Glyn Marston, a 2004 finisher with whom I ran much of the course last year, has also called it a day at the same checkpoint.



Previous winner Valmir Nunes of Brazil works hard through the night.

An hour so or later I catch up with Martin Illott, another Brit, who is running freely and seems in fine spirits. We push on together for the 145km checkpoint, which heralds the beginning of the long descent to the base of the mountain. It is dark, but cool, and soon the valley we have been running down for a couple of hours flattens out, leaving us with the massive and threatening mass of the mountain filling the horizon. This is still all familiar to me and I know that I will be strong in the climb, I figure that while Martin is running better than me on the flat, I will be able to recuperate a bit on the hill where he is bound to struggle. Far above us and almost impossibly far away, we see the flashing lights that mark the goat track leading to the summit of the mountain.



The approach to Mount Parthenio – there is a road down there somewhere.

The climb starts and I am rudely reminded that pride often comes before a fall. Martin Illott, it transpires, is half racing snake, half mountain goat. He strides up the hill as though it is not there and I am soon trailing in his wake. A surge of effort from me means that we make it together to the base of the steepest section, where there is a major checkpoint – the CP tent is surrounded by DNF's waiting for the bus, too exhausted for the final push up to the peak. It is 0425hrs on Saturday morning, and we have been on the road for over 21 hours.

Martin has pushed ahead by a couple of minutes and I set out up the rocky path alone. I climb at my own pace, each step bringing stinging pain as the rocks mash my blistered soles, my thighs screaming protest every time I clamber over a rock, of which there are many. The path is marked by light sticks, flashing LED's and odd bits of mine tape flapping from bushes. On thing is certain: missing your footing, having a dizzy spell or just plain old falling on this section would result in serious injury. I climb with care but do so relentlessly and hit the peak at 0500hrs. I do not pause on the summit but head straight down again. I immediately lose my footing and almost go over backwards on the loose scree. If I'm going to fall, I figure that I may as well make a good job of it, so I break into a jolting run,

which seems to work better but stirs up my heel blisters. The one on my right foot has burst, bringing a painful reminder with each heel strike.



**The way down into Sangas at 165km – rocky, very steep and done in pitch darkness.
The peak is by the pylon, the picture does not do the slope justice!**

I pass Martin on the way down and make good time to the next CP, where I have a tin of “gigantes” beans in tomato sauce waiting for me. They are loaded with carbohydrate and I hope that they will give me some strength for the day ahead. In the event, I struggle to make them go down and I am only able to eat about a quarter of the tin, but coupled with some sweet, tepid coffee and a refill of water, I am confident that now I can at least reach the 120mile point. That will be, for me, the true start line of the 2005 Spartathlon. Better still, I have somehow made up an extra 15 minutes during crossing Mount Parthenio (maybe my climbing’s not that bad after all), and am now 45 minutes ahead of the cutoffs.

In 2004 it was at this point in the race that I suffered a serious downturn in fortune. Having been “10 foot tall and bullet proof” on the hill, I was reduced to a shivering, stumbling wreck within hours. I run through the options in my mind – there are still a couple of hours of darkness left, and I will try and make full use of the relatively cool weather. I have around 80km to go and 13hrs to do it – that’s roughly the equivalent of two 7 hour marathons. Surely I cannot fail now? Surely I must be able to cover the distance faster than some of the slowest people in a big city Marathon? Ok, so I have already run more than four marathons back to back in under 24 hours – oh yes, and climbed a 1,100 metre high mountain – oh yes, and nearly collapsed on the way to Corinth – oh yes, and there is a further climb over 15kms or so to come..... No matter, my personal goal right now is to reach the Village of Lyrkia, whereupon entry into next year’s Spartathlon will be guaranteed, should for any reason I again fail to reach Sparta.



Runners grind out the miles through vineyards and olive groves

I run across the valley floor as dawn breaks, revealing a mass of black clouds gathered around the mountains on either side. Soon flashes of lightning illuminate the sky every few minutes and the puddles on the road tell me that it has rained recently, and rained hard. I continue through the next series of checkpoints, eating whatever I can whenever I can and always drinking as much as possible. I

am on a stretch of road I recognise – it marks the point at which I realised, in 2004, that my race was over. Barely a minute in front of the cutoffs, struggling to put on foot in front of the other, head down, I was thankful to be able to collapse on to a chair at the checkpoint, mumbling weakly that I had no more to give. A long bus ride and a year of frustration followed, until here I am again – stronger this time, but by no means confident that I will reach Sparta under my own steam.

I run a couple of kilometres that I do not remember from last year, and realise that these are on the final approach to the CP. With this comes the confirmation that I must have been in serious trouble a year ago – I remember the detail of the actual checkpoint intimately. The small bus shelter, the table, the dreaded plastic chair and the layby in which the sweeper bus waited to collect the DNF's. There is no bus this time, I am now 50 minutes ahead of the cutoff and run straight through the CP without stopping – I have plenty of water and there is no way that I am going anywhere near that chair again.

After 172km and 23hrs 47mins, the race has now finally started for me. I know that I have drop bags every few checkpoint containing spare socks, food and drink. Unfortunately no waterproofs though and the skies are becoming darker, the thunderclaps more frequent. We are in for a soaking. Soon the first rain drops are falling lightly. I don my tyvek jacket which keeps the damp out, but there is no way that what is basically plastified paper will withstand a serious downpour. I look around for alternatives scrounging a bin liner at the next CP, tearing head and arm holes in readiness for the storm ahead.

The surviving runners are spread out now, each going at their own pace as they try to manage their remaining resources to allow them to reach the finish line. All are on the edge, those around me secure in the knowledge that they are within reach of the finish, but equally aware that so many things could still go wrong. In the Spartathlon, as in all ultra distance races, the line between success and failure is a fine one indeed. I pass a few that have given too much too early and are paying for it now. The bus will collect many DNF's between here and Sparta.



**The pain of the interminable climb up to Hero's Monument is etched on the faces of the runners
These pictures are from 2004 - in 2005 this section was run in torrential rain**

I concentrate on maintaining my steady progress and rather than trying to go any faster, I try to make up a bit of time by not indulging in what I call 'checkpoint hugging'. This is a phenomenon where distressed runners seek the relative comfort of the checkpoint, wasting precious time faffing around adjusting kit and seeking comfort from the officials. What is required at this point in the race for me is mental strength – I remain deliberately monosyllabic at CP's and do not stop at the actual checkpoint other than to refill my drink bottle or to grab some food. If I need to get a stone out of my shoe, retie a lace or eat, I do so in between CP's. I notice that I am pulling away from quite a few competitors, while managing to retain an easy banter with my fellow runners as we run along.

I eventually get an hour ahead of the cutoff and dare think about the climb ahead as we turn onto the main road that will eventually lead into Sparta. The road stretches into the distance as far as the eye can see – one long ribbon running relentlessly uphill. With a theatrical clap of thunder, it also starts to rain properly. No UK style drizzle here, no mountain mist to gently cool these Spartathletes, but a torrential downpour and crosswinds that will last, on and off, for five hours.

Soon the generous torrent of water running down the hill soaks my feet and my blistered soles start to give me significant pain. In what turns out to be a brief lull in the weather, I stop to change my socks. What a waste of time that turns out to be - no sooner have I struggled to get my shoes back on than the heavens open again. All I am left with is another pair of soaking socks and a hard earned five minutes lost. I decide to push on to the finish no matter what and struggle on against the wind and rain. At the

next CP I manage to scrounge a see-through chuckaway cagoule. Less than elegantly attired in this and using my headtorch strap to hold the hood in place against the blustery wind, I make good progress up the hill.



A runner emerges from the mist and rain

My tyvek jacket is donated to another runner, who has nothing but his running vest to keep the wind out. I am strong on the hill and regularly pass runners. Eventually I catch up with two diminutive Japanese ladies and a Greek runner Dimitri Kechagogliou. We have been overtaking one another for many kilometres depending on the terrain and now settle in to a steady trot. Dimitri is running his tenth Spartathlon, but has only been successful twice. He is as excited about the prospect of reaching Sparta for the third time as I am for the first. He tells me that his friend, Seppo Leinonen is a few miles ahead, about to complete a record 14th finish of the race. Seppo will wait at the Evrotas River crossing – the last checkpoint, and we will all finish together.



Past champions of the Spartathlon immortalised on Sparta high street

Discussion and bragging rights after this race will not be about what time you finished in, but merely about whether you finished at all. We pass a sign telling us that it is 11km to Sparta, and we have almost 1hr 25mins in hand. We can see Sparta quite clearly, but this is because we are on the edge of a very steep escarpment, and Sparta is in the valley below. A painful 8km descent follows, during which legs scream in protest and I can feel my blisters tearing as my sodden feet slide forward in my shoes. As though to punctuate the stabbing pain from my feet, almost every vehicle that passes toots its horn, the driver and passengers waving their congratulations. The Spartathlon really is a major event in the local calendar, what with the fiesta and fireworks in the town square that follow the official presentations that evening. Everyone is aware of what the competitors descending carefully into the town has achieved.

We approach the final CP, where Seppo Leinonen is waiting, looking remarkably fresh. Children on bicycles also wait to accompany us over the final 2.5km through the town. We get a police car as well, which follows us, lights flashing, preventing the traffic from disturbing our final moments. Unusually for Greece, not one honk of protest is heard from the delayed traffic, instead people in tavernas hail us from their seats. A lady washing her windows and another hanging laundry on a balcony stop what they are doing to cheer us on. Young and old alike raise their hands in greeting and respect for our achievement. Other competitors, whether successful or not, raise their arms in salute. It is an emotional time and we trot silently on towards the finish line. Nothing can stop us now.



One last turn and we are on the final straight to the finish line. Flags of every nation decorate the final stretch. Past the Spartathlon monument we go, seeing at last the giant statue of King Leonidas glaring fiercely down at us. One touch of his foot will stop the clock. In order to preserve our feet we have lost some time descending the escarpment, but we are still a comfortable 1hr 10mins inside the cutoff. I have thought of this moment almost every time I have been for a run for the last 12 months.



John Tyszkiewicz, Dimitri Kechagogliou and Seppo Leinonen

The three of us join hands and stride up the few steps to the monument together, touching the polished foot of King Leonidas in unison. The disembodied voice of the announcer battles with piped music and the cheers of the crowd to herald our arrival. We are crowned with an olive wreath and offered a sip of water from the sacred Evrotas River. Heavy medals are pressed upon us along with a bear hug from an emotional mayor. My basic Greek goes down a treat as I thank everyone I can see for organising such a superb and challenging event, before we are escorted off to the medical tent for a checkup.



Shoes and socks are removed and placed in a bin liner, feet are sponged with disinfectant and a doctor casts a quick eye over us. Those looking shaky are offered a stretcher on which to recuperate, those who look as though they can still look after themselves get a sandwich and a carton of drink. I am indignant when offered orange juice – “Is it water you want?” asks a concerned nurse. I reply that I have been dreaming of a beer for nearly 35 hours and she crosses the road to the local taverna returning with a smile and a cold can of Mythos. I turn down the offer of transport back to the hotel in favour of watching the remaining runners come in. I can have a shower anytime, but it’s not every day you can watch someone finish the Spartathlon.



Ambulance with the medical tent behind it the morning after the race

Jackson is on hand and fetches my sandals from the hotel (there’s no way my running shoes are going back on again!) giving me a warm top to wear while we watch the final hour of the race unfold. Somehow I have finished the race in fairly good condition, but then I had the luxury of a decent cushion for at least the last 70km of the race. Some of those coming in now have been living on borrowed time for hours now and it shows. There are tears of relief and joy from some, near collapse from others and silent acknowledgement from more. One Greek athlete somehow has the energy to leap up onto the plinth in one bound to wave his nations flag. To a man other Spartathletes, whether successful or not, wince as they imagine what that little stunt must have put his legs through.

I am particularly pleased to see both Don Winkley of the USA finish, closely followed by fellow Brit Mark Cockbain, who comes in with minutes to spare. In 2004 Don and Mark were both DNF. Mark at the 150km point having gone out far too fast, and Don at the mountain. Don was the first person I spoke to on the sweeper bus, and his good nature helped to diffuse the massive disappointment I felt at having to quit. Don was also one of the first people I saw in the hotel back in Athens for this years race, and the last thing I said to him before we set off for Sparta was “Next time I see you Don, just make sure that it’s not on that damn bus!”



An exhausted Mark Cockbain rests weary legs allowing another athlete his moment of glory before rising painfully to his feet and stopping the clock with 7 minutes to spare.



Fatigue and cold gets the better of me and I retire to the hotel. My room mates are two Poles and a Frenchman – three of us having completed the race. One of the Poles has limited German, the Frenchman only speaks French (loudly) and so I am left as the main communicator in this little corner of Europe. As I lie exhausted on my bed, tattered feet hanging over the end, one of the Poles comes over to inspect my blisters. Despite my protestations, he returns with a medical kit and proceeds to pierce, drain and dress my blisters, waving away my thanks once the job is done, pointing to the olive wreath on the bed beside me and giving the thumbs up.

A meal and a few beers with Jackson follow until I am forced to admit defeat. I wave the white flag of surrender and drag my sore limbs off to bed. By then I have been on my feet for around 40 hours and 246kms. As we head back to the Sparta Inn, I am overwhelmed with fatigue and cold, an uncontrollable shivering taking over my body. I get to bed and pass out, only to be woken at 0140hrs by the crazy Frenchman, who cannot stand up on his own and needs to take a shower. “I smell so bad I woke myself up” he exclaims as I limp with him to the bathroom. I have to go and fetch him when he is finished, as he can’t make it across the room alone. I then give him my spare water as he has somehow managed to go to bed having run 246kms without even so much as a drop of liquid to hand to stave off his dehydration.

The following morning breakfast is full of stiff limbed people, each plate is piled high with food and gallons of orange juice consumed. The harassed waiters of the Sparta Inn can barely keep up. Stories of battles fought, both won and lost, are told. Congratulations and commiserations given and accepted as appropriate. Some will return in 2006, others will move on to different challenges. Not one person asks that question which usually plagues the endurance athlete but tends to fixate those outside our rather exclusive club: “But why do you do it?”

Everyone in the room knows why they came here.

In all, 101 athletes completed the 2005 Spartathlon.
 The winner for the second year running was Jens Lukas of Germany in 24:26
 The top placed lady was Kimie Noto of Japan in 30:23 (12th overall)

Five of the ten Britons were successful:

Mark Williams	33:07 (9 races, 8 finishes)
William Sichel	33:14 (1 race, 1 finish)
Martin Illott	33:28 (1 race, 1 finish)
John Tyszkiewicz	34:55 (2 races, 1 finish)
Mark Cockbain	35:52 (2 races, 1 finish)

The bus ride back to Athens is a long one – well, around 153 miles I suppose, although the bus doesn’t try and cross Mount Parthenio..... During the journey the athletes really get the opportunity to appreciate the terrain that they have covered, since a lot of the really spectacular scenery was lost on them the first time either through fatigue or darkness and rain, or a combination of all three. The feeling that the Spartathlon was gracious enough to allow me to complete my journey is reinforced. I am not a victor, merely a survivor. The feeling of humility upon touching the foot of that magnificent and foreboding statue of King Leonidas was genuine.

Will I be return next year? The jury’s out on that one, but I get the feeling that Jackson needs a finish in this race.....and what are team mates for if isn’t making sure that we all make it over the line?????

Some random stuff about the Spartathlon: USA ultrarunning legend Don Winkley does not remember anything about the last moments of the race. Martin Illott, part racing snake, part mountain goat, who participated in the Spartathlon medical research programme, lost over 10% of his 73kg bodyweight during the event. Sammy Kilpatrick stormed along in the leading group until only 20km out of Sparta where he succumbed to hypothermia in a rainstorm. Mark Cockbain was not seen again between his heroic arrival in Sparta until it was time to board the bus – he was sleeping. Mark Williams finished comfortably – again. Within 48 hours of finishing the race I found myself in Dublin, where I played 18 holes of golf with a client (badly, as usual) at the Island Club.

Links to Spartathlon:

Main website: <http://spartathlon.webvista.net>

Full results listing http://www.a-z.gr/index.php?name=News_en&file=article&sid=12

Photographs of the race http://community.webshots.com/user/j_tyszk

Some random pictures:



Don't mess with King Leonidas – even in (blisters) socks and sandals.....

*I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read,
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed,
And on the pedestal these words appear:
**"My name is Leonidas, King of Kings:
Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"**
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

With apologies to Percy Bissche Shelley



Sammy Kilpatrick, William Sichel, Glyn Marston



A sip of water from the Evrotas River



Olive wreath and medal



Four to a room in Athens



The crowd goes wild.....while a runner suffers in the heat



KUMF (Korean Ultra Marathon Federation)



BUMF?



Jackson Griffith and Glyn Marston in the shadow of Leonidas



246km, 12 months + 34hrs 53mins, sore feet. Chuffed!

Some of the pictures in this report have been harvested from the net. Anyone having any copyright issues etc, please contact me and I will remove the relevant items from the report.