

Dania Beach Guard Cyrus Writer Stares Death (Race) In The Face

By Cap Peterson

When it comes to summer vacations, most people think of a trip to Orlando, a relaxing cruise or a visit to Gramma's house. Dania Beach lifeguard, Cyrus Writer, has a different idea on how to spend his time off. Writer will head to Pittsfield, Vermont in late June for the 2014 **Spartan Death Race**, a grueling event that has the ominous www.youmaydie.com as its website moniker. The site also adds that **"Everyman Dies But Not Everyman Lives."**...**"Plan on checking out early...this race will break you."**



Dania Beach is both work and workout location for Guard Cyrus Writer.

This summer's Death Race is a 48 hour (minimum) test of human endurance and will be Writer's third trip to Pittsfield. "My first year, 2011, I dropped out with hypothermia after 20 hours," Cyrus said, "but I learned a lot from the experience and finished in 2012," Quite an accomplishment considering that only around six percent of the 300 entrants complete the course. He missed last year's race recovering from shoulder surgery. Death Race organizers take pride that no two races are the same with no set start or ending time and encourage participants "to quit at any time." They must also bring their own food and equipment and among Cyrus' gear is an axe, saw and hand drill and survival kit. "Im not sure you can actually die," he said, "but I've seen plenty of broken bones and head injuries." All entrants must sign a waiver and be videotaped absolving race officials of any liability. "I also learned keeping your feet as dry as possible is vital. Plenty of dry socks are a must and Vaseline to help with any foot infection."

This is, obviously, not for the casual athlete. "The entrants are from all over the world and most are military personnel and endurance athletes, triathlon competitors looking for a greater challenge," Writer explained. "People like me that don't like to **LOOK** at the jungle and would rather be **IN** the jungle."

The **Death Race** includes many extreme tests. Entrants are disqualified if they fall asleep and are confronted with tasks



Barbed wire is a constant hazard in Spartan Death Race.

such as crawling in mud under a string of barbed wire, hiking up steep hills (with pockets full of rocks) burdened by heavy back packs, carrying bags of cement or a kayak overhead and chopping wood and other

chores guaranteed to test body and mind. "It's ironic that many of the tasks help out the organizers," Cyrus laughed. "We chop their firewood for the winter and haul the rocks for their pathways."

Cyrus, 29, grew up in the port city of Antofagasta, Chile and was always active, playing soccer and into karate, swimming and track and field. He moved to Florida at age 14 and was

dropped into a new world with no command of English. "I studied in school but it was proper English, nothing like my classmates in high school here were speaking. It was an adjustment."

At 5'6" and 140 pounds, trekking with an 80-pound backpack has become a common training task. With a lack of elevation in South Florida, Cyrus trains in inventive ways. For endurance and to experience sleep deprivation, he will strap on a heavy pack and hike around Pembroke Pines with his friend, Mike Quinones. "Other than packs we just take our driver's licenses in case we get stopped by the police. We've gotten some funny looks but nobody bothers us." He also does a lot of "dragging things in the sand" and plenty of swimming, gym and running sessions. "I don't feel I'm training for the Death Race unless I'm feeling pain in my workouts," he added.

Workouts with his **Dania Beach Ocean Rescue** cohorts is a daily event and the entire team, led by Chief Mike Huck, are world class athletes in their own right. "I believe ocean lifeguards are the closest you can be to a professional athlete without the high pay and accolades," Writer stated. "Every morning we set up buoys 100-250 yards offshore no matter what the surf conditions and swim around them and return for a piece of equipment like a race board or surf boat and go out again. We repeat this for 45-60 minutes. We like it when the surf is at its roughest and most unpredictable. A true waterman lives for those days."

The ocean is a second home for Writer. "I love paddling out to sea as far as I can, disconnected to the world for a moment. No noises or buildings, just gorgeous open space at the vulnerability of Mother Nature. It's good to know the difference between fear and panic. You panic and you get hurt or die. Believe me, I see panic in a lot of people when I fish them out of the sea at work."



Lifeguard teammates Jonathan Hernandez, Gustavo Lombana, Alice Henley, Chief Michael Huck and Michael Vasta, train daily with Cyrus Writer (far right).

With the constant demands on his body, Writer admits he gets hurt from time to time but credits his girlfriend, Melissa Meringolo, with bringing him back to health. "She has been my rock and supporter since day one," he said. "She cures me and I'm back to training in no time. You don't need a doctor when you have a great partner, except for surgeries! That one, I did have to see the doctor."

Very conscious of his diet, that changes about a week before the race. "I eat anything I can get my hands on," he joked. "I pig out, lots of carbs, I eat like it's my last day on earth. But I make sure to get my lean proteins, starch and vitamins from fruits and vegetables. After my injury I learned vegetables help with inflammation."

The physical training gets him ready for the mental aspects of the **Death Race**. "I remember that about the 40-hour mark I was getting delusional," Cyrus said. "I was hiking up a hill and seeing dragons, alligators and Native Americans in the trees. My friend, Scott Brodie, was my support guy, carrying extra food and encouraged me to keep going. I was so tired, I hated him,



Chopping and toting wood is just one of Death Race "chores"

but I wouldn't have finished without him. You reach a point where you say this whole thing is stupid, what am I doing? I'll never do this again. But it's a world I escape to that not many can do."

The start and end of the race are just as tough as the hours in between. In 2012, competitors were placed in a frigid pond to get initial instructions and were not allowed to move around to stay warm and the finish was absolutely brutal, requiring the few remaining Death Race devotees to crawl under a tarp and barbed wire on the wet rocky ground, stopping to stir a bucket of animal guts under the tarp. "The vilest thing you've ever smelled," Cyrus winced. "The tarp knocks out your sense of direction and if you go the wrong way you have to do it again. Plus, the stench caused a lot of people to throw up so you get



Writer credits support from girlfriend, Melissa Meringolo, with helping keep his competitive drive alive.

to roll around in vomit." For the few that complete the race, there is no pat on the back, 'good going' or awards ceremony. "They give you a little plastic skull and send you on your way. I want to be tough and tell them let's go one more round," Cyrus said, "but at the end, all I could think about was going back to the motel and going to sleep, even taking a shower seemed too much." Sleep he did but just for a couple of hours so he could drive three hours to Boston for his flight back to Florida. Ah, the joys of Summer. "I look forward to competing every year," he said. "Even if you're not an athlete, life is a death race every day. How you chose to run it is up to you."