

The ultimate challenge



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHRIS FERN

Verona resident Chris Fern navigates through barbed wire during an attempt at the "Spartan Death Race" in Vermont.

Resident to compete in 'Spartan Death Race'

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Being named in a local newspaper can often lead to extra recognition or a feeling of pride. For Verona resident Chris Fern, it means avoiding a grueling physical challenge.

At the end of the month, Fern will compete in the "Spartan Death Race," a 60-mile marathon with an array of obstacles that can take between 60 and 72 hours to traverse — for those who do finish.

The challenges go beyond bodily punishment, however. The rules state that a participant must have an article about the event published in a media outlet prior to the race, or face a penalty of 2,500 burpees (an exercise that combines pushups, squats and a jump in the air) while wearing a

hour effort before he could no longer continue. While he said it was a relief when he stopped the race, he instantly regretted it each time. Such feelings come with the territory, though, in what Fern described as the most severe and intense endurance challenge in the country.

About 300 people registered for this month's race in Vermont, which is the usual amount per year, according to Doug Drotman, a media representative for the Death Race. Of that 300, usually only 250 or so actually show up after some racers either suffer injuries beforehand or "chicken out," Drotman told the Times Tuesday afternoon. Even after the dwindled down number, only about 10 percent of runners actually finish, Drotman said.

The Death Race differs from



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the series, is relative to a 5K with obstacles. The other ventures include the Super Spartan race that goes eight miles, and "Spartan Beats" with 10 or more miles before leading up to the Death Race.

"Anyone can hike 20 miles at a leisurely pace," Fern said. "But when you have a kayak over your head and they're telling you the last group will be disqualified, it's this overwhelming sense of challenge that you're not just tired and physically drained, or mentally fatigued, you're all of these things."

When he heads to Vermont June 27 for the race, Fern, 27, will need to face the elements, a lack of sleep and a set of rules that can change at any time. The "unfair" nature of the competition creates some of the buzz, as Fern said the time cutoffs are moved, the rules altered and the challenges unevenly distributed to racers at any given notice to create more mental stress for the athletes. The "cutoffs" create more urgency, as the rules set either a time limit to reach certain distances, or only accept the first number of racers before the rest are eliminated automatically.

As another measurement of the severity of the race, its official website uses the URL YouMayDie.com. Despite the ominous sound, no one has ever actually died while competing, though Drotman said people "know the risk" before entering.

A mechanical engineer by trade, Fern said he is not the prototypical athlete, but rather focuses on endurance. Years of mountain biking, backpacking and crafting survival skills gave him the "fortitude necessary to press through the pain" and allowed him "to relish the torment," he said.

That drive helped Fern win a Tough Mudder event and excel in the other Spartan races, leading



PHOTO COURTESY OF CHRIS FERN

Verona's Chris Fern hauls a rock during a previous attempt at the "Spartan Death Race."

to a search for a larger challenge. The Death Race remains the final frontier, as Fern aims for the skull, a plastic trophy given to those who finish the race.

"Each failure is a bitter sting, a blow to my ego, and a lesson in humility," Fern stated in an email to the Times. "From each, I have unearthed my weaknesses, discovered my strengths and further understood the inner force driving me toward success."

The Verona resident will not be alone in his trial. This year's race focuses on a "Lewis and Clark" expedition theme, as Fern said teamwork will be vital. He will partner with fellow enthusiast Seth Czarnecki of Boston. The duo met through a mutual friend and competed together in two previous Death Races, though they did not finish. The result may be different this time because both are more levelheaded, Czarnecki said, and he and Fern make an "awesome team."

"I think we balance each other out perfectly," Czarnecki said. "Chris [Fern] is very organized, very determined and has a lot of drive. I also have a lot of drive, but I tend to take things in stride

and try to think things through before I do them. I think that really works to our benefit."

Fern originally planned to take part in the race with his wife, Nina, but she backed out after experiencing the training of a 50-mile hike while carrying heavy equipment. The preparation for the Death Race cannot be done in a gym alone, Fern said, so he has practiced hauling large items over his head to get ready, as well as remembering what the other attempts were like.

This year's contest could be the last for Fern, he said. While Czarnecki also originally planned for this to be his final try, he said the students he teaches remarked how it was a hypocritical stance, as he always told them to never give up. The feeling of satisfaction from a successful journey may also pull them to continue as well.

"To make it through the whole race is a real testament to your own resourcefulness," Fern said. "It leaves you with the sense that you're self-reliant; I knew I pushed myself."

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