

## 2014 Death Race – A beginning Death Racer’s Perspective.

On June 27 in a quiet Vermont town 300 endurance athletes will begin a journey that is sure to change them forever. That race is **The Spartan Death Race**. Race organizers use words like “**Remarkable Exploration**” and “**World’s Most Challenging Endurance Race.**” These are easy words to use and only those who have attempted the race know whether or not this is an accurate description.

I am not one of those who have attempted the race; rather I am one of those who will attempt the race this year. I really don’t know what to expect but here is what I have learned from my research.

It’s difficult to describe this race concisely. Here what the race organizers have to say:

*“The obstacle and challenge-driven race requires competitors to complete numerous grueling mental and physical challenges throughout a 40-mile course that runs through the Vermont woods. During the Death Race, competitors may be asked to chop wood for two hours; complete a 30-mile hike with rocks and weighted packs; build a fire from scratch; cut a bushel of onions; or after 24-hours of racing, memorize the names of the first 10 U.S. Presidents or a Bible verse, hike to the top of a mountain and recite them back in order -- miss a word and you get to do it again...and again.. and again.*”



The author rappelling at the Lightning Strikes Adventure Camp organized by Thunder Rolls Adventure Racing.

*Unlike other endurance races that offer a detailed map, Death Racers have no idea what to expect next as the course map and list of challenges are kept secret. This provides competitors with one of their biggest challenges as the length of the race can range from 48-72 hours. For an endurance athlete, not knowing where the light is at the end of the tunnel can be sheer torture. “Just like life, the Death Race is designed to push and aggravate people to such a point that even the most stoic eventually fail,” said Joe De Sena, co-Founder of the Death Race and the Reebok Spartan Race Founder. “Only those people possessing incredible discipline under the most insane and even delusional circumstances can call themselves a finisher. These athletes are willing to complete the journey at all costs. The fact that people endured for 70 hours to see what they are made of, is just remarkable and awe-inspiring.”*

What I do know is that everything about this race is designed to challenge and test you physically and mentally...or maybe just mess with you a little bit. Shortly after completing my entry I received a friendly note from race organizer Andy Weinberg asking if I had any questions. After spending hours researching the race on YouTube, Facebook and any other source I could find I knew that Andy had no intention of answering any questions. I couldn't help but smile at his note. I quickly fired back a list of questions asking how long the race was going to be, what the challenges were and could I get a list of required gear. Andy's reply was no surprise...he simply said "**Great Questions. Glad you'll be joining us.**" I'm thinking "Game on Andy."

Over the past 9 months since completing my entry I've tried to prepare myself for a race that can hardly be described let alone trained for. I've done countless burpees, beat the heck out of an old tire with a sledgehammer, climbed a rope tied to a tree branch in our side lot, hiked an olive green military backpack around the neighborhood full of 75 lbs of logs and rocks and maintained my typical adventure racing schedule of running, biking and paddling. Am I doing the right things to prepare for this race? I have no idea. I have this gut wrenching feeling that I'm going to show up and be completely unprepared. Given the 90% drop rate for this race my fears have statistics on their side...a fact that's not as comforting as you might think. If I think about it, I have had this fear about every long race I've entered so maybe I'll be ok. Having completed 3-4 day races in the US, Canada and Costa Rica there are a number of things I have learned. Here are a few of those things:

- **Train Efficiently** – If you're like me you don't have all day every day to train. We have kids, wives and careers that often come first. Use your entire day to fulfill your training goals. My training day often starts at 5am with weight training, burpees and beating on that darned tire. If you're fortunate your next opportunity is on your lunch. Even a 30 minute run or bike ride is good training volume. I spent my Thursdays this winter running up and down the stairs at work and doing burpees in the basement between each trip. After the kids go to bed is a great time to train. Make sure you spend some time training in the dark...that's when most people quit adventure races...when it's cold and dark.
- **Maintain Good Balance** – Don't lose sight of the true goal...keep everybody happy and you'll be happy too. I'd really like to get out of work a couple of days a week and drive to my favorite Orienteering Course to walk my rocks and logs around the woods while navigating the Check Points. Instead I head home and work on dinner, laundry and shuttling kids to sports. Don't get me wrong here...my wife is the leader of our tribe and like all good mommies she bears the brunt of the work around our house...but get the important work done first then play.
- **The Long Workout is the Most Important** – If you're going to skip a workout, don't skip the long one. This is the most important day of your training week.
- **Train to dress and eat appropriately** – I've seen many excellent athletes DNF because they weren't dressed properly or they failed to fuel the machine. NEVER eat anything at a race that you haven't eaten when training. I once accepted a power drink from a sponsor at a 4 day adventure race in the mountains of Virginia...I spent the last 3 hours of that race trudging

through the hills with stomach cramps. Practice eating and drinking and prepare for the weather.

- **Train your brain while you're racing** – if you're used to just putting your head down and grinding through a race you'll experience a whole new frustration when faced with a complex problem when you're tired and hungry. Your brain consumes 30% of the energy you eat during a race so low blood sugar will hit you hard. Train that brain to perform under race conditions. Orienteering while running is one way. I spent my winter doing Sudoku and tying climbing knots while on my exercise bike. I don't know if it helped or not but I had to try something.
- **Have a mantra** – Have a saying that you can focus on when you're racing. Endurance racing is a mental game. My buddy Jay uses "5 more minutes. I'll keep going for 5 more minutes then I'll quit." As a Force Recon Marine, Jay never quit. He just did a whole bunch of 5 minute races. My good friend Doug of American Adventure Sports uses "Always Forward." Everything he does in a race brings him closer to the finish...always forward. My mantra is "It's just time." I'm sure you've noticed that time does fly...unless you're miserable! It's just time though. It will all be over before you know it. Decide before the race starts whether you want to be a finisher or a quitter and do your best to focus on that no matter what. Focus on your mantra. You will never regret finishing.

I hope that I can take some of my own advice, especially the part about focusing on being a finisher. It's not so easy when you're in that moment of being cold, tired and hungry facing many more hours of grueling miles of misery. But when you overcome that desire to quit and you drive past your self-imposed limits of endurance the sense of accomplishment is emotional and amazing. You have redefined yourself as a stronger person. You are no longer who you were. Congratulations.

*By Jim June*

*Husband, Father, Engineer, Adventure Racer and 2014 Spartan Death Race Competitor*