

**Ancient Oaks 100, 2012 – Attempting to appear normal
in a place where normal is impossible to define.**

One year ago I completed my first official 100 miles/160 kilometers race in a time just shy of 29 hours at Ancient Oaks 100, 2011. Before that race I made a deal with myself: to run only 100 miles [or more] races and only 24 hours [or more] races. NEVER to DNF in my races as I was able to understand that there are NO EXCUSES. During the next year I was able to keep my promise, complete 11 official ultramarathons, and be part of charity 24 hour runs which offered me the most personal satisfaction.

Leading to Ancient Oaks 2012, I was physically prepared better than any time before, I had the experience of one year of racing behind me where I learned more about myself, than possibly the rest of my entire life. I lacked however the mental readiness for a race. This was the first race where I went totally unprepared.

To be successful in a long distance race there is a strong requirement to have a strong body and a prepared mind. Over the summer have challenged myself to complete a 100 miles race without training, just on mental power and succeeded to do so. Possibly, one can complete a 100 miles run on the physical ability alone, if that athlete has an exceptional running talent. That is something I cannot claim, or qualify for, as less than 4 years ago running 2 miles was a struggle and the first 3 years of ultrarunning, physical pain was present every step.

A few days before the race my mother's health condition has changed from "relative stable" to "end of days." My mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer several years ago and defying all predictions succeeded to survive over 4 years with long surgeries and continuous chemo therapy. Nevertheless, in November the cancer progressed and it looked like it will win. As always, made the decision (right or wrong) to maintain the appearance of hope and strength. My sister Ioana, was able to take time off from work and go spend the last days with her at the hospital. Her strength/assistance and kindness cannot be described in words.

I wanted to run the race and felt a strong need to do it, however the week prior to the race the doctors decided that the only option left for my mother was to administer morphine as the periods of relative well were less frequent. The entire week I had two bags in my car, one packed for a trip to Transylvania [funeral], the other for the race. Had contacted Mike Melton, the race director and explained the situation to him regarding my uncertain showing at the starting line.

The Friday before the race, talked to my mother and her ability to engage in conversation was almost inexistent. Worked all day and in the evening drove to Titusville, FL for the race. Got checked in the hotel almost at midnight then went to eat at the local IHOP restaurant. After about 3 hours of sleep, woke up to get ready for the race, called my mother however she was not conscientious at that time. Talked a bit with my sister and left for the starting area feeling a huge weight in my chest. I was not sure if she will still be alive by the time I finished.

The energy before the race was nice and relaxing, knew almost all the athletes, support crews and volunteers. Appearing normal and holding it together was the toughest part. I wanted so bad to just run and scream... Finally at 0700 the start was given and we all started running. Usually it is customary to run the first "warm up" miles as a group and chat with the athletes running besides you. That was something I couldn't do. As I was a bit cold, I decided to push the pace from the first 100 yards. Marc Drautz was ahead of me and decided to stay just slightly behind him, this way I had someone to chase and at the same time was able to avoid much conversation. Very soon we were the only two people in the lead, quite a distance away from the rest.

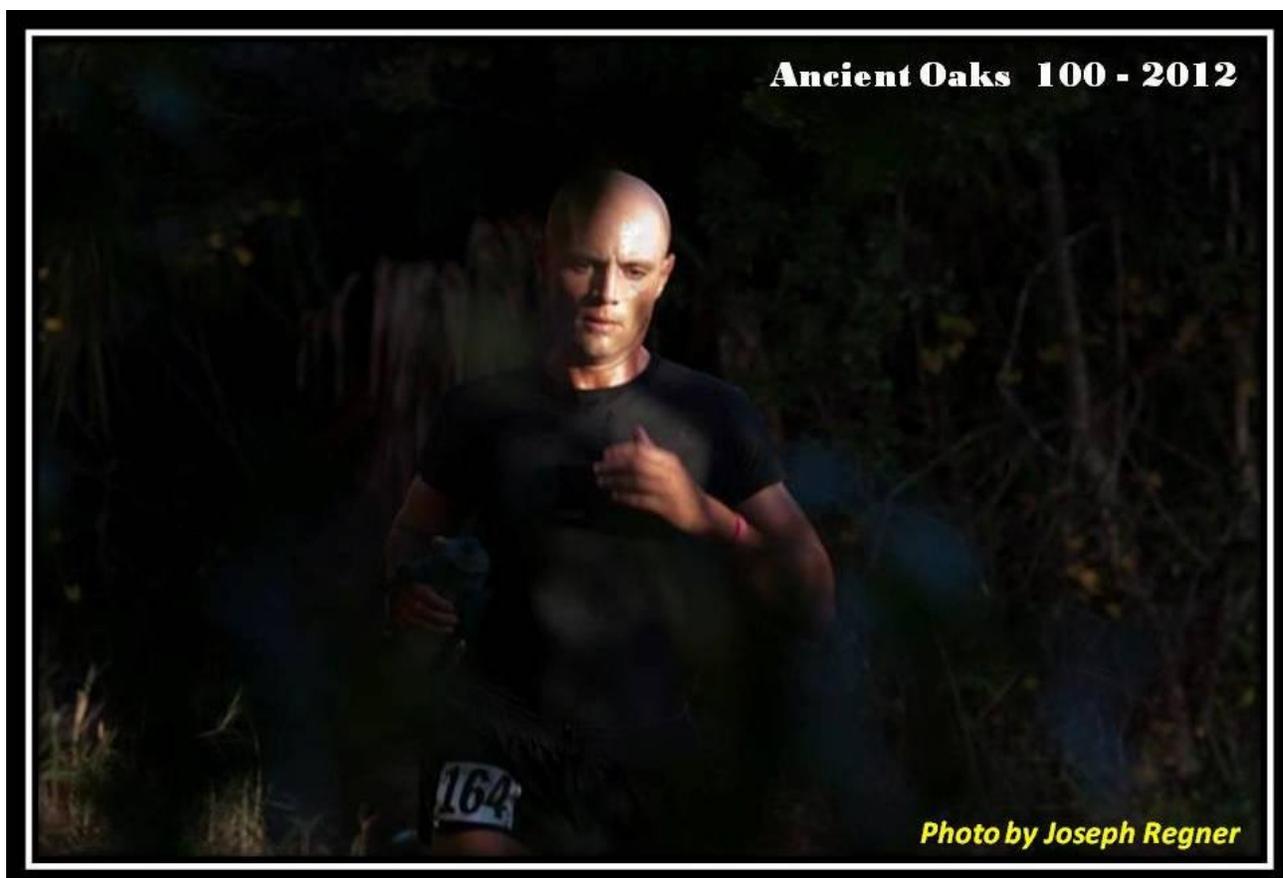
Pushing the pace helped with my secondary goal, to run the first 50miles/80kilometers of the race at a pace which will allow me to make the 1st cut off at the Spartathlon. With the exception of the heavy weight feeling in my chest the rest of my body felt great and everything worked better than expected.

After a few miles, Marc took a really bad fall and soon afterwards decided to stop. Was left alone, in the lead, a position I am not accustomed to. I did not care much, but was surprised not to see my friend Sung, who was not catching up with me.

Reached 50 miles just shy of 08:30 and at that point decided to slow down. Right afterwards Sung passed me and moved in the lead, position he kept all the way to the end.

Around mile 60 I hit the proverbial wall and the race transformed into an exercise of anger and frustration. Nothing hurt in particular, except my right shoulder from a fall I took, but that had very little to do with running. The muscles just refused to fire up and the legs seemed heavy enough where on the trail portion I was afraid to attempt running over fallen branches and roots.

The more you slow down, the more your muscles tighten up, the more tired you feel, the more frustrated you become. I was trying hard to get myself out of this state with not much success. Dragged it like that for about 20 miles, running the pavement/sand portions and walking the trail. Kati Craig was kind enough to run with me a loop which made the time pass easier. At some point it started to rain and coupled with a cold breeze, I started to freeze. I decided I needed something different so I went for my now, standard remedy: vodka. Had a few minutes conversation with Dave Krupski who came there to offer support and who just won the Wild Sebastian 2 weeks earlier and had a shot of vodka with tea. It helped. Not long afterwards, Traci Philips offered to run with me a loop just after drinking a large can of coffee. She went for a second loop with me at the end of which I decided to increase my vodka and coffee intake. Had two more shots of vodka and another can of coffee. Started running and I guess the vodka relaxed the muscles enough to drive the frustration away while the coffee and sugar gave me a new wave of energy. From that point on, approximately 80 miles into the race, I ran the last 20 miles much better than expected in times almost matching the morning ones.



Ancient Oaks 100 is not a very tough course, it has several portions of sand, pavement and trail. The trail part is the most difficult one as you have to constantly step over roots, between them and jump over some fallen trees/branches. During the day time while the energy level is up, you can run pretty fast that portion. Night time presents a bit of a challenge as accidents could easily take an athlete out of the competition. Nevertheless, each year the finishing percentage is low even if almost all the athletes have experience with running 100s. It kind of makes you wonder why such a low finishing rate.

Several athletes did however a remarkable job. Kenny Matys, Jay McCullough, Jen Pearson were at their first 100 miles race. Kenny ended up taking 3rd overall, Jay took 5th overall, and Jen finished 2nd female.

Will Glover came to the race slightly unsure about his fitness level, had a great race and finished 4th overall. Same applies for Wayne Wright, Christian Stewart, Otavio Bueno, Fred Murolo and Will Jorgensen. Very impressed with the performances of Smith Jean-Baptiste and Eric Friedman. Both showed such a determination and focus the entire course. They both finished in great times, a huge improvement from last year's race. Tammie Wanning had great race as well, she won 1st female slashing a few hours from her last year's time.

Seeing the improvement made by the above mentioned athletes only shows we can get better with time, the limits do not apply to us and age is not a factor. Talking about age, by far the most impressive performance was that of Karsten Solheim. At 75 years young, Karsten ran what I call a perfect race. He maintained the entire time a consistent pace, was focused and finished running 100 miles with time to spare. It is so humbling and inspiring to be able to run with someone like Karsten. Can only hope I can follow in his foot steps for years to come. Other finishers who had great races, Robert Pope at 71 years young and Jim Schroeder who after having some troubles for a few months with long distance races was able to finish in under 30 hours.

The Ultra Queen, Liz Bauer finished her 34th ultramarathon of 100 miles or more in 2012, with 2 ultras left to go. Her world record is so impressive, it will stand for quite a few years. She finished 3rd female and her accomplishment can only be truly understood by someone who ran 100 miles.

Finishing the race was a relief, the result was better than expected 19:53:47 which placed me on the 2nd place, a 9 hours improvement in one year of racing. Running the race helped me at a certain degree deal with the emotional issues and somehow make peace with myself. I like to believe something my friend Eric said, my mother held long enough to see me finish. She died soon after the race in agony and horrible pain. She was capable to endure so much sufferance she never chose for herself.

During the race I had the opportunity to analyze why I am running, why I am pushing myself to extremes, why I have this desire to always push the limits. The answer is a bit complicated but can be summarized somehow in a simple way: humans do not learn from pleasure, we learn our most important and lasting lessons in life through pain and sufferance. Looking back at my life, I cannot remember a single instance where I had a wonderful time and learned something valuable about life or myself. I can however remember very clear every instance when things did not go well, when sufferance and struggles were the operative words. All the lessons I learned were from those experiences. I remember the people, I remember the conversations, I remember the feelings. Would be a hypocrite to deny the most wonderful moments of my life; I cherish them and will always be part of my heart, I am just saying they did not lead to self discovery, or to personal growth.

Until this race, I always believed "hate" is a very powerful resource in an ultra. During this race I realized the "self-hate" was actually the realization/acceptance of pure TRUTH. I ran my best races when I wanted to feel pain, to make myself hurt. Looking back I realize, I did that because deep inside I knew I wasn't good enough, from mundane things such as being good enough to secure an invitation to a certain race or a certain job, to selfish emotional ones such as good enough to make someone happy, to the altruistic ones such as good enough to prevent my mother's sufferance. Rationally we know that most of the things/interactions in life do not depend on us alone, that no matter how hard you try if the other party is not willing to meet you somewhere and work

together the action will fail. But deep inside, our soul does not seem to comprehend that distinction, it seems to be a very clear cut between success and failure which leads to the realization of the truth. That truth is very simple and basic: if I am not a stronger/better person today than I was yesterday (in every aspect of life), then I still have so much more work to do, so much more improvement to seek. Perhaps without this TRUE feeling there would be no progress, no evolution and no ability to understand/appreciate beauty, love or happiness.

