

Peanut Island 24hrs, 2013 – When a smile makes you question reality

On New Year's Eve I participated for the second time in the Peanut Island 24hrs UltraMarathon. One year ago I completed 93.4 miles and this time I went to the race prepared to run, based on my fitness level, between 110 and 120 miles. What I forgot during the one year (and in part due to the fact I did not write a race report to remind myself of the event) was the difficulty of the course. Perhaps I went in a bit overconfident, which is in my book the biggest mistake one can make in an ultra. Arrogance is your enemy and generally any race over 100 miles will humble you if not taken seriously.

Peanut Island is a beautiful small island outside downtown West Palm Beach, making it a place with sub tropical climate. Beautiful palm trees and vegetation, not as many other creatures, except perhaps mosquitoes. It also holds an atomic shelter, so you are covered in case of a nuclear attack :-)

From the point of view of an ultrarunner, this is an ideal location to spend the New Year's Eve. The race is well staffed, the course is 1.234miles long so it can be ran without carrying a hydration device. The food served is incredible for an ultra event. Several courses of soup, pasta, burgers (beef, turkey, vegetarian), breakfast food, and the usual ultra stuff. Bob's wife will pretty much accommodate any culinary request. There is the beach, the party atmosphere and the fireworks at night which can be viewed above downtown West Palm Beach. You can drink and you do not have to drive, your family/children can safely play on the island with the other families. Bathroom facilities with hot showers. Ideal? Indeed.

Now let's look at the course itself: cobble stone for the most part, not evenly paved so at times your leg will go down perhaps an extra inch giving you the feeling you are falling (until you learn the spots and avoid them), then there is a hill, not high, perhaps a few dozen feet over a distance of 100 yards. Then there is a breeze, which can be filled on one side of the island but not so much on the other. Add all these changes every 1.234 miles and you can envision why is a tough course. Well, you can envision them when you feel them, I did not think of them at all before the race.

Started running at a fast pace (part of my Spartathlon training plan) with the idea of slowing down after about 100 kilometers. Not many athletes in front of me which made me feel uncomfortable. I like chasing others better (in a race anyway) than being chased :-)

Felt great and did not pay attention to the sudden changes in temperature. While the sky was slightly overcast, when running in the breeze the temperature was significantly lower than when running on the side of the island where you did not have a breeze. Every 10-15 minutes the body would go through these changes in temperature, magnified by the effort to run uphill and downhill. After a few hours I noticed my hamstrings cramping up. Having trained on the bridge pulling a tire it felt a bit strange to cramp up only a few hours in the run. Did not think much of it and increased my salt intake to compensate. Then I started to notice other runners massaging, stretching their hamstrings and slowly realized there is a larger problem but still had no idea what it was.

Better runners than me started to have energy problems which placed me in the lead. Slowly I started to experience the same depletion of energy (despite the fact I was eating and hydrating well). Did not think much of it and pushed it with one goal in mind, to reach my Spartathlon training times.

Slowly after midnight things started to get progressively bad fast, my stomach would not take in food, would not accept water (or any other drinks, which led me incapable to use the vodka I took with me for the night running) and started to throw up. I was not alone, everyone seemed to have been hit a very hard period and no one was running fluid anymore.

During the morning things improved a bit and having reached 100miles in 19some hours I knew my goal was reachable so I decided to keep a slow but constant pace till the end of the race. My friend Dave Krupski came to the island with his wife Alex and 8 month old daughter, Zoey. Being a huge fan of Zoey, during the morning time I stopped to play with her/say hi a few times when I passed her. Zoey smiled and being a beautiful/happy baby it melted my heart. Each time I was coming from a loop all beat up and in bad shape and I would interact with Zoey for a few seconds I would feel better for a few minutes when resuming running.

Finished the race with 113.5 miles, 20 miles more than 1 year ago. It was enough to take the first place and to meet my goal. However the sufferance and pain was so much higher than expected. It bothered me to not be able to understand what happened. Then it hit me: the sudden changes in temperatures messed up with my internal temperature regulation system, the hill, even if small by any standards, adds up when you running it over 90times, the cobble stone impact on my feet, ankles, knees, hips and spine made a difference. That's what created the misery!!!

But then again, I was feeling better after seeing Zoey. It was not for a long time, but it was enough to beg the question: WHAT IS REALITY? Was my feeling of being beat up/tired/sick real? If that was the case, why after seeing Zoey's smile I could run again well for a few minutes? It is pretty clear that what we perceive as reality is not entirely accurate. If a smile can make such a clear difference, then my mind is not prepared to run without the "feeling pathetic attitude." Perhaps there is a better way to train, to prepare for the races. Perhaps there is a better way to run and live where the idea of failure/negativity is so deep removed from one's mind that the only option left is complete success and happiness. This should be my new year's resolution!

Before the race I was looking forward to the race as a moment in time where my life should have changed in better from an emotional stand point. There, on the island, I learned I was to be once again disappointed by the outcome. When you take the chance to hold people to high standards, you take the chance of being disappointed... Been advised by friends to drop my standards. I just know, I will never do that! The very few people who are part of my life will always be held at the highest standard possible, and not because of some desire/measure of control, but because holding yourself and someone close to a high standard it is a measure of respect and ultimately love.

After the race, I left the island with a peaceful feeling, knowing I spent the crossing of the year in company of my ultrarunning family, that I have met several great runners on the island and that once again, the ultrarunning lifestyle has such a positive impact on life.

Thank you Bob Becker for putting up a great event and promoting the ultra lifestyle. Thank you Mike Melton for providing the timing for the race and thank you to all the volunteers who made this race a success. To all the athletes, may the 2013 push you to levels never dreamed possible. See you on the roads! Happy New Year!

