

The UltraBalaton - When dreams become reality through hard work

UltraBalaton 2012 – 131.7miles/212kilometers

On new year's eve I was running the Peanut Island 24hrs race with Menyhert discussing ultras. He told me about his brother Zoltan who ran the Spartathlon after qualifying with the UltraBalaton the previous year. I was sold for the race in that moment.

The next few months I was busy running several more ultramarathons, increasing my endurance and confidence. However the longest run prior to the race was LOST 118, a 118miles/190kilometers race. Even if LOST helped me break through the plateau I have previously hit at 100miles/160kilometers, the UltraBalaton seemed a tough task as the cut-off is 32hours. Most 100mi/160km races have that cut-off and I was supposed to be able to run another 32mi/52km in the same period. Started my specific training for the race after running the Keys 100 UltraMarathon in May. Several weeks of 100+mi/160+km, followed by a slow increase with the last 2 full weeks before the race, running 200mi/320km each week. At the end of the training felt pretty good about my endurance level and confident in the value of my training.

Made it to Budapest the day before the race. My sister Ioana/"crew chief," picked me up from the airport and we headed to Lake Balaton. Arrived there early on Friday morning, checked in the hotel and after walking a short portion of the course (to get my knees and legs moving) we went to package pick up.



Part of the course, view of Lake Balaton from NW. Day before the race.

Outside temperatures were around 38C/100F and some of the athletes checking in seemed less happy about the heat. Having talked to Johanna who flew in from Finland, I realized how much easier the race will be for me due to heat exposure. Johanna's hottest day for training was around 20C/68F. Even if the Miami temperatures were not high the past few months, I was pretty well acclimated.

Morning of the race. Start time 0600. The sun was already up and hot, had mixed emotions, some concerns and much excitement. Had brief conversations with Kathy and Rob, the French UltraRunning Team and several Italian ultrarunners. While moving around, had my last carb load, a Leffe Beer.

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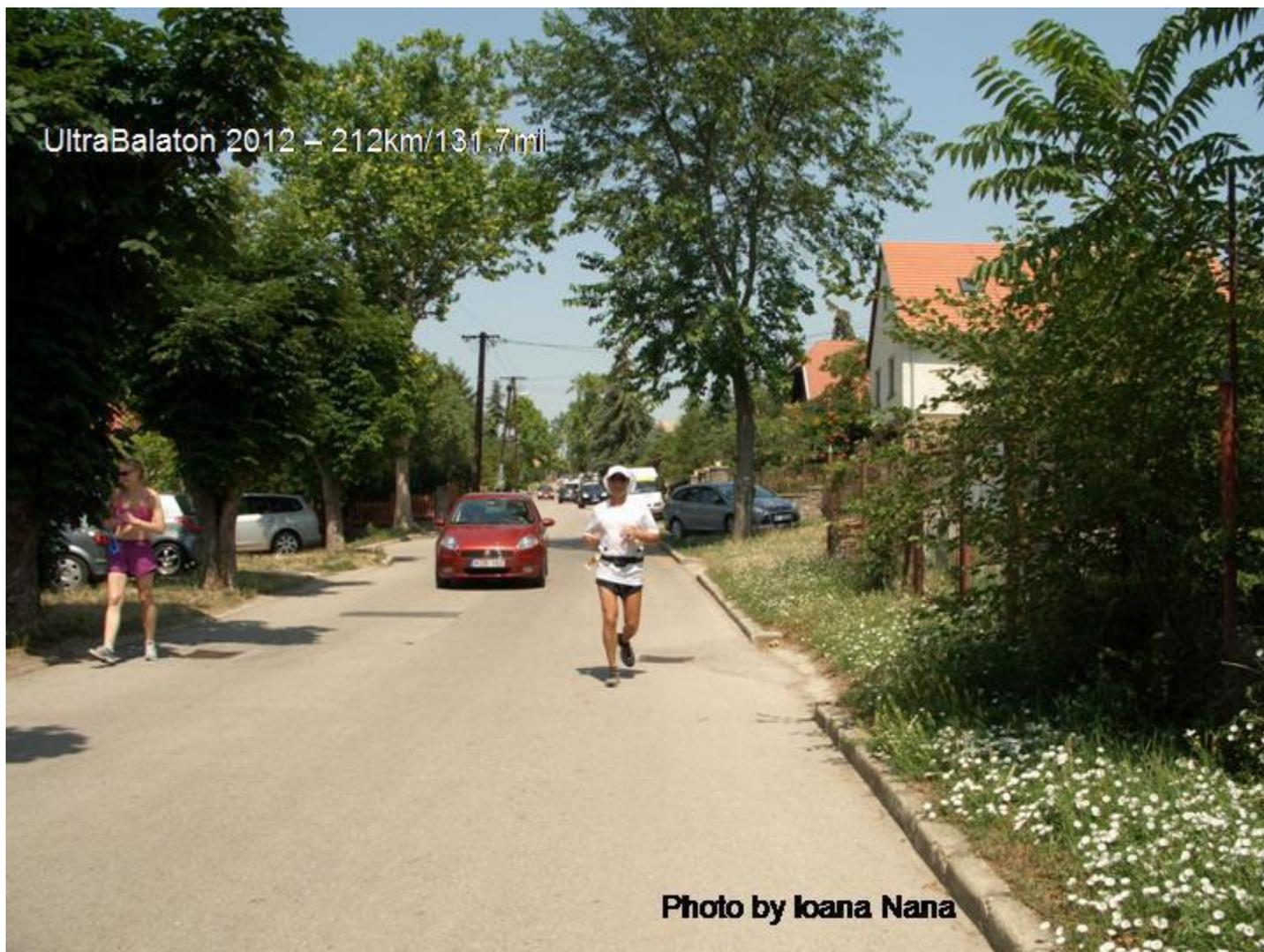
Leffe Beer - "carb loading" before the start of the race.

The start was given and after a few meters, the course went up a hill. The first one in a long series of unexpected hills. My mistake for not doing my homework regarding the course's profile. Had assumed it was a flat course and only a few minutes before the race, Zoltan told me "there are about 30km/18mi of hills at the start, you should keep it slow."



Early in the race, running through cozy villages.

Most of the hills were not too steep, however some seems to be at a 65degree angle, which made driving on them hazardous... Saw some runners going full speed up those hills. At that moment I was thinking "I am either the least trained runner in this race, or all these runners have no idea what will hit them in a few hours." It seems that the second part of my taught process was right... While I ran up the most hills, on the very steep ones, I decided to walk. It felt bad to be passed by runners all the time, however I would catch most of them downhill. Apparently most of the runners who passed me were using the same pace for uphill/downhill, which did not make sense to me. Why would anyone break/slow down when gravity did all the work?



Running downhill...

Before the end of the hills I talked to Gilles, Juan Carlos, Thierry and Jean-Philippe from the French Team. They are all experienced runners and seeing them running “slower” made me believe they knew the course. It turns out Gilles has ran the race before and just finished a 1,000km race on Wednesday, 3 days before this race.

On one of the last hills, I was passed by Szilvia, my favorite to win the race, even if most people favored Bogar. Bogar holds the CR after succeeding to beat Yiannis Kouros a few years back. Nevertheless, looking at Szilvia, something told me she was unstoppable this race.

At the end of the hills my calves and quads were screaming and I hit the first wall as I realized I was exhausted already with more than 100miles/160kilometers to go. It took a few long minutes to take control of my mind and body. Slowly I started running easier with less pain in the calves and quads. However by this time the heat started to show “what running in the sun is all about.” The temperatures reached 38C/100F fast and I started to pass runners who displayed signs of overheating already.

Running through the villages and lands around the villages was nice. Beautiful scenery, nice people and the race had aid stations every 5km/3mi or less. Enough supplies on the tables, however NO ice (just a few aid stations had ice). For all my American friends, you have to really appreciate running in 100F weather and having warm water/isotonic drinks at aid stations with no means of cooling down. Oh well, it is part of the race and one more obstacle to overcome.

The next part of the race was quite flat, some mixed areas of sun and shade. Have decided from the beginning to speed up in the shades and slowdown in the sun. My approach worked, as slowly I started to relax and enjoy the race. Nevertheless my plan was to reach 50mi/80km in 9hours, 100mi/160km in 20hours (2 hours slower in the second 50) and then do the last 32mi/52km something in like 8hours at a slow pace to make sure my body will take me all the way to the end.

Reached the 50mi/80km in 10hours due to heat and was quite disappointed as I knew 1hour was hard to “make up.” The ambulances were moving up and down the roads which led me to believe many runners had problems. At about 50mi/80km had my first large meal, some ham/bacon and cheese on black bread (later decided to drop the bread and stay on protein foods). At the aid stations I took some stuff (peanuts, resins, crackers, watermelon) and beer every time where available. Unfortunately not every aid station had beer, and some had non-alcoholic beer (which in my opinion is a sin, same like decaf). My sister had Leffe in the car so it was a huge bust in energy having some Leffe with the food.

Continued the next portion through high heat, some thermometers were showing 43C/110F in the shades. We were baking when running in direct sunlight. Running through some small “tourist” cities was fun as people were relaxed, in party mode and happy. I could feed of their energy. Talked to Ciro and Giacomo who were struggling through the heat, and ran quite a few miles with Belej. It was nice to see at one of the aid stations, Ervin waiting for me with a beer and to receive some ice and encouragements from Zoltan and Betti. My sister was able to purchase some ice from a gas station and it worked well. Started to share the ice fast with the other runners, however I was surprised to see some runners looking at me confused when I asked them if they want ice and showed them (where the language barrier prevented) to place it on their necks and head... I guess not every one runs with ice :-)

After about 6PM the heat went down and decided it was time to start pushing slowly. In a few hours, the temperatures reached about 27C/80F and I felt “at home.” Legs were in good shape and I was in pretty good spirits, especially when passing through areas on the side of the lake where people were dancing in the streets, playing music, games, etc. There were quite a few beautiful women so it was hard to stay focused on running and caught myself “looking around” much more than required for some one in a race ... :-) Do not regret the experience. A smile, a wink can do a lot for someone running for over 14-16hours.

At night I increased my pace even more, passing runners, in some cases even runners participating in the 2 person relay. It was an empowering feeling. At one time I passed “Club Palace” and it was a display of fashion, beauty and great music. For a few seconds I even contemplated if worth taking a break to get in..., not to dance as I am the stereotypical “white guy” who cannot dance, but to look around at all the beauty. Ultimately I decided not to stop and push forward.

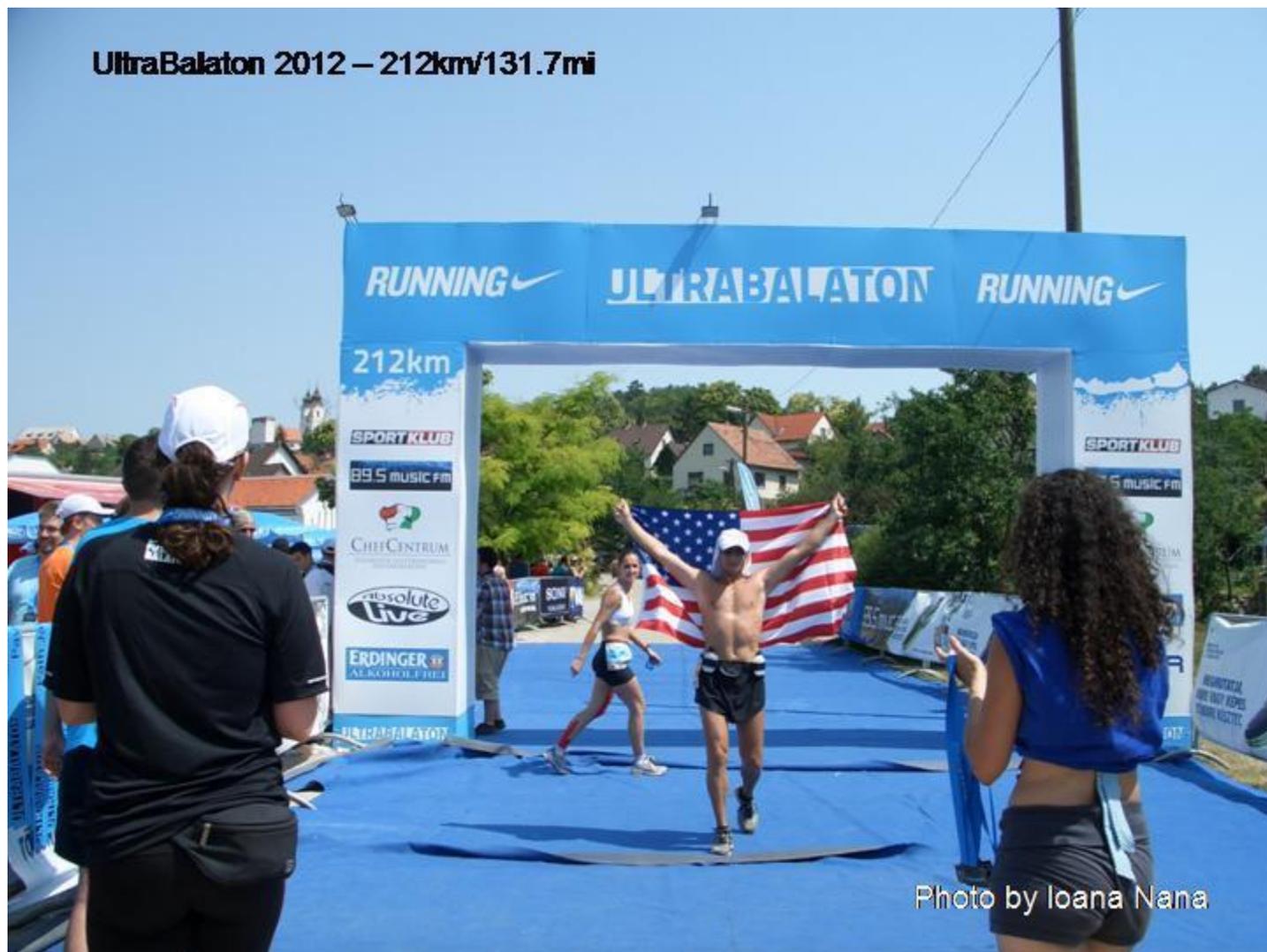
During the night I encountered the first signs of “rude” behavior. If during the day everybody was very nice and respectful, at night some groups of drunk people “acted up.” Never felt unsafe, however they were loud and had to wonder if female runners would have to deal with them as well.

Around midnight the temperature dropped below what I was comfortable and I was looking forward to put a t-shirt on (which I took off after sunset). Reached the 100mi/160km mark in 21hours. I have reached my 11hours goal for the second 50mi, however I was not able to make-up the 1 hour lost in the first 50mi. Met my sister after the check in at 160km/100mi aid station, had something to eat and continued running. She informed me that ahead I will encounter more hills for almost the entire portion of the course left.

The next few hours went uneventful, ran pretty well until the sun was up again. Sunday was supposed to be hotter than Saturday..., and it was... The heat affected me and slowed me down to a crawl. Around the same time it started to be difficult to take in food or liquid and realized I will slowly go down. Playing games in my mind with kilometers left/time left I worried if I would even be able to finish the race... I was hitting rough

times very often and the highs were not high. During the highs I would try to run, but mostly walked. During the lows I “death marched.”

The last hill was just crazy. Perhaps a 50 degree angle and more than 2km/1.5mi long. Was impressed to see several of the runners, actually running the hill. The top of the hill was a relief, and from there, only a descent to the finish line. Crossed the finish line with the US flag, finishing in 29:15:40. I was more than 1 hour behind my plan, however I had the feeling it will be a small percentage of finishers. It turns out from the 200+ starters, only 34 finished. That is an approximate 15% finishing rate. I was 16th overall, 13th male and 1st age group.



Crossing the finish line and reinforcing the idea that "ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE."

The winner was Szilvia with an impressive time of 22:09:13. She improved her time from the previous year by more than 2 hours on the hottest UltraBalaton to date. She finished ahead Bogar who holds the course record of 18:50:06 from 2007 when he beat Yiannis Kouros' time of 18:52:00. Szilvia is truly an impressive athlete.

At the finish line was great to meet and talk future plans with Edit Berces (world record holder for 48hrs years in a row) and see Gilles who competed the race after just running 1000km the same week. Juan Carlos crossed the line, as well as Ciro, Giacomo, Allesandro, Belej, Hrvoje and the “Nordic Girls” Johanna and Sandra. It was hard to hide my tears seeing them cross the line, knowing how hard they had to work for this ultra and knowing how much they struggled (through updates from my sister who kept in communication with them). I am certain all athletes had to overcome serious problems at times and was happy to see them crossing the line one by one.

The Hungarian ultrarunners were strong and they took not only all the podium medals, but about 65% of the finishers were Hungarian. Was great to see Andras crossing the finish line. Learned later this was his first long race... :-)

A very tough race, however extremely beautiful sights with pavement, trails, steep hills, flat areas, hot weather at day, chilly at night (for my standards). Extremely well organized and supported. I had a fueling belt which helped, however in lower temperatures you could probably run the entire course without carrying water and without a crew.



When you stay awake/avoid sleep in order to train/work hard, dreams become reality.

Thank you to my sister, Ioana for all the hard work. Thank you all the volunteers and organizers for a JOB WELL DONE. Congratulations to ALL FINISHERS! Each one had to work very hard for the medal.

The UltraBalaton – a world class ultra race! Can only hope will be back some day and more American runners will participate next year. Highly recommend this race to all!