

ENDURANCE

ULTRA RUNNING ● TRIATHLON ● IRONMAN ● ADVENTURE RACING



**74 SPARTAN
TRAINING CAMP**
*Sarah Russell gets
stuck in to some serious
Spartan Race skills*

THIS IS SPARTAN RACING!

ANYONE WHO'S SEEN THE FILM 300 AND FANCIED THEMSELVES AS A SPARTAN WARRIOR, MIGHT HAVE JUMPED AT THE CHANCE. BUT FOR OUR INTREPID EDITOR-AT-LARGE SARAH RUSSELL - WHO'D DONE NEITHER - IT WAS A CASE OF THROWING HERSELF INTO THE UNKNOWN. THIS IS THE SPARTAN TRAINING CAMP

● PICS: John Russell

I have to confess, I would never - I repeat never - have willingly signed up for an event which required wading through a freezing lake and running with a log on my shoulder for two miles. However, an email popped into my mailbox from the *RF* editor; in fact I believe I was cc'd on it. Title: Spartan Training Camp. "Oh yes Sarah will be there, she'd love to attend," it said. "What?! Erm...I don't do things like that. I'm a 41-year-old mother of two. I like running and cycling; I don't like wading through muddy lakes, clambering over obstacles, or - worse - being electrocuted for the sake of the 'challenge'. I mean, seriously, why would anyone want to do that?"

I've always been rather scathing of these obstacle races, such as Tough Guy, Tough

Mudder and Kamikazee etc. Especially the ones that get you to sign a 'death waiver' in advance. It's what I call a 'manufactured challenge' and they're not my cup of tea. At all.

Don't get me wrong, I'm all for a challenge, but I prefer it to be provided, naturally, either by the length of the race (what's wrong with a nice ultra?) or some hilly terrain, like a mountain, for example. I've done mountain ultra races, long distance triathlons and even muddy trail duathlons but I've never had a desire to jump through hoops of fire, swim through a lake of ice cubes or crawl under barbed wire...all in the name of fun.

So you can imagine my disdain, not to mention anxiety, when I realised what I had been volunteered for. A bit of research online revealed that the Spartan Training Camp would "get me

'Spartan ready'...and demand every ounce of my strength, ingenuity and animal instinct". Right then.

I posted the link on my Facebook page and friend's comments were along the lines of "OMG!", "Should you be doing that at your age?", "Won't you get injured?..."and best of all "Why are the people on the website not wearing any clothes and covered in scars?". Dear God.

COMETH THE DAY, COMETH THE WOMAN

The dreaded day arrived and I duly set off for Pippingford Park in East Sussex on a lovely warm Sunday afternoon with my husband and kids in tow for support. I say 'support' but secretly they

thought it would be an entertaining afternoon laughing at me and taking photos. Anyway, Pippingford Park is an army training ground on the Ashdown Forest, in East Sussex, which has all manner of beautiful views, cold lakes, hills and plenty of mud. I was petrified. Cunningly though I'd signed up for the 'Beginners' session. Surely it couldn't be that hard? Could it?

We pulled up to a welcoming signpost. "Spartan. Are You Tough Enough?" "Ermm...well since you ask, no I'm not, and am quite happy to admit it. Can I go home now?" But sadly that wasn't to be. I was introduced to my fellow 'Spartans' as a journalist writing a feature. Damn: I was here to stay. And it looked like I had to actually take part too. The gang was in great spirits - well they were here voluntarily - and

mostly had signed up for this camp learn some skills and get some advance training before taking on the Spartan Race later in the year.

We were introduced to Michael, head coach all things 'Spartan'. Walking around barefoot covered in mud and with twigs stuck to his legs, he looked like a bit of a Bear Grylls character and I half expected him to dash off to skin a

rabbit or feast on some bugs. He introduced us to our new 'friend' - a log. There was one each; I named mine Lenny, in the hope that giving it a personality might make me feel more affectionate towards it (four hours later, I can assure you it was a strategy that didn't work). Hoisting it up on my shoulder it didn't seem that heavy. Ok maybe I could do this.

THE WATER WAS FREEZING COLD, AND IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO FEEL - OR SEE - WHAT WAS UNDERFOOT AT THE BOTTOM OF THE LAKE



We gathered for our briefing from Michael. "You are Spartans," he yelled. "You will work together. You will stay with your weakest member and help them. Work as a team and support each other. AROO!" And with that we set off at a brisk pace into the undergrowth with logs on our shoulders. Just your typical Sunday afternoon then.

Michael leapt and jumped over trees roots, through the undergrowth and across streams with amazing agility and skill. We followed, with somewhat less agility. By now 'Lenny' was turning out to be quite heavy after all, and really making my shoulder hurt. But not wanting to be 'girly' I just grimaced and carried on jogging along at speed, regularly changing shoulders to try and ease the pain.

Finally we arrived at a clearing, with what looked like a climbing frame apparatus made out of wood. We stopped and Michael set about explaining how we were going to train using our natural environment, to build skills which would help us not only with the Spartan Race, but to develop our own natural fitness. He explained how we should learn to move in more natural patterns and develop strength and flexibility. We should try to adapt to our environment as nature intended. It made a lot of sense.

HAVING FUN?

By now I was beginning to engage in the whole process and dare I say it, started having fun – especially since I'd been able to put Lenny down on the floor. Michael then taught us how to crawl, crab walk and bear crawl across the woodland floor – all skills that would potentially help in a Spartan Obstacle race, but more importantly to build core strength and flexibility in an entirely different way. Clearly it looked like I was having way too much fun as, my 'support team' (aka my two boys aged 11 and 13) asked if they could have a go too. The answer was 'yes' and they spontaneously joined in with the group, hanging, jumping and clambering up muddy slopes – with more technical skill and confidence than most of the adults. I later found out that there is a Spartan race for kids too – I know what they'll be doing in August then.



Can someone get me down from here?

LIKE A GROUP OF DISCIPLES FOLLOWING OUR LEADER INTO THE UNKNOWN, WE WENT AFTER HIM WITH OUR LOGS ALOFT



This is so easy I can do it one-handed

Crossing the river using ropes – or in my case, failing miserably and falling in – was a clear lesson that I needed more upper body strength work. Rather like most runners I should imagine. We finished off with more skill training to help us climb and descend muddy slopes safely, throwing our logs overhead (that bit, I was happy to do – just a shame I had to pick it up again) and then, just as we thought it was over, came the final challenge. Slowly but surely Michael waded up to his waist into a large cold lake with his log on his shoulder. We all looked at each other "Er... are we meant to follow him?" "Aroo!" came the reply. I think that meant yes.

Like a group of disciples following our leader into the unknown, we went after him with our logs aloft. The water was freezing cold, and it was impossible to feel – or see – what was underfoot at the bottom of the lake. The water crept up to chest height and I started to hyperventilate. Breathing deeply and thinking calm thoughts, I focused on the waterfall at the end, about 100m away, which was where we had to climb out. One of my fellow Spartans was starting to panic, but I was calm enough to turn around make eye contact and encourage her to slow her breathing and get control. It worked, she managed to carry on and I was rather proud of my newly found 'Spartan Team Skills'.

Out of the lake – amazingly alive – we lugged our logs back onto our shoulders and ran the final mile back uphill to the hut where we started. The pain was searing though my shoulders (by now Lenny and I were heading for divorce) and the group became a strong team, sharing log carrying,



Sarah gets to grip with new playmate, Lenny

supporting each other and grimacing as we took those final agonising steps. After four hours of the most diverse and challenging training I've ever done, we collapsed on the grass, utterly exhausted but with a newly found sense of achievement and self esteem. I've never been more grateful for a hot cup of tea and some warm dry clothes.

I must admit, I went into the camp expecting to hate every minute, and as I said at the beginning, I would never have willingly signed up for it on my own. I've been through a lot of medical treatment over the last few years and it's really knocked my confidence, fitness and self-esteem.

However, I'd go as far to say the Spartan Training camp was a life changer for me that day. I came away buzzing with a renewed confidence in my own body and my ability. I'd been taken way out of my comfort zone, but I rose to the challenges and achieved more than I thought I ever could. I left feeling that I could tackle anything – not just physically, but mentally too. I felt invincible. It was one of the most unexpected experiences of my life and just goes to show how sometimes you just have to open your mind...and trust your editor.

I may even be tempted to do the Spartan Sprint race in August...watch this space. 



DETAILS

Spartan Training Camps take place in Pippingford Park, East Sussex throughout July, August, September and October and cost £42 for the 4 hour session. You can do the camp even if you're not signed up for the race: <http://spartanracetraininguk.wordpress.com/spartan-race-training-camps/>

Spartan Obstacle Races take place throughout the UK (and around the World) and range from the 'beginner friendly' 5km Spartan Sprint, culminating in the 21km Spartan Beast on 18th November 2013, <http://www.spartanrace.com>.

