

(Disclaimer: I know very little of the culture to which I speak. I was very recently exposed to the Reebok Spartan Race and to me it is still a novelty. I will do my best to acknowledge my naïveté wherever possible and applicable. My position is merely plebian, outsider speculation; spectator observation.)

Mike was in charge of my zone today. He looked a lot like the other guy, whose name I forget. He picked us up in the plastic-lined Dodge pickup that was one of a fleet rented out for this race. I climbed into the truck bed with six other people, sat along the edge, and wedged the remainder of my body in between the bed liner and a water tank that nearly filled three-quarters of said bed. Everyone was standing except for me, and I was making wagers with myself whether I could keep from falling. The phrase 'Spartan strong' flashed brightly and unexpectedly in my mind's eye. The time was 6:26 am.

I was meeting people. People from Utah, Texas, Colorado, Alaska, and Kansas; no further east. People were all dressed the same, more or less. (See footnote for detailed description.)<sup>1</sup> They all knew what was going on, and they were asking me questions that I had to answer truthfully and awkwardly:

“Did you race yesterday?”

“No, I didn't”

“Oh so then today?”

“Ah, no”

“OH, ok so you're just racking up race credit?”

“Err yeah I guess so. Well actually I'm getting paid”

“Oh well have you done a Spartan race before?”

“No”

And somehow they still accepted me. They mostly all thought it was cool that I had grown up in the Breckenridge area.<sup>2</sup> Mike dropped me off with two ladies

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<sup>1</sup> High-end Salomon trail running shoes, leggings with Xs on them (second skins maybe? I saw they had a booth there), no shirt or shirt from a previous race or team shirt or shirt making reference to something Spartan related (buck furpees, I'm sorry for what I said during burpees, SHIT JUST GOT REAL, BEAST MODE, etc.), Spartan-branded headband with race number on it, lifting gloves, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Breckenridge, CO – the ski resort where one of many Reebok Spartan Races takes place annually

from Utah at the empty Rope Climb Obstacle. He gave us a Walkie Talkie and a set of instructions on how to manage the obstacle properly.

The taller and more brunette of the two white girls told me that she had been doing the race since it started in 2011. She explained how much it had grown and that it was now international. She subtly became our group leader. The smaller blonde white girl asked me to braid her hair.

We had some time to wait before any racers came to our zone so we chitchatted some more. I told them I have been living in New York City and the response – always – is one of both shock and admiration. Jaws drop and I am applauded.

“I am too much of a country girl!” said brunette.<sup>3</sup> “But I think it would be so fun!”

I on the other hand admired both of their ease around the nearby stable horses. I’ve spent time with horses, plenty; but like I am with kids, I start out too eager and too abrupt. Kids and animals balk at that shit. I balk at it too.

The racers started trickling in and the things that began coming out of my mouth surprised me. A stark contrast from yesterday, I felt more authoritative than I could have imagined; and I was getting into the jolly spirit! I really quickly learned how to parrot the vocal rhythms, volumes and intonations that people are used to hearing from their coaches and instructors. These people love being cheered on.

The day before, I started out at the water and nutrition<sup>4</sup> booth located about 4.5 miles into the Beast course.<sup>5</sup> I answered a lot of the same questions that morning, and the only one that I didn’t trip over was the elevation. I know the topography of this area like my hand, thanks to Dad. I could also inform people that the unusual burning in their chests was normal and due to aforementioned elevation. I filled up cups and water jugs and one lady asked me if I was a bartender. That boosted my confidence and I told a little fib and said yes.

I watched all kinds of things happen. Garbage cans fill up with plastic water cups and air. One after the other after the other. Seven 30-gallon trash bags in less than six hours. I wasn’t surprised and so I tried to ignore it. Some people took two cups and some people poured a third cup of water on their head. Everyone took a package of Bloks and some took two and pretty soon we ran out. Some people threw their trash in the woods.

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<sup>3</sup> I’m sorry girl I forgot your name too

<sup>4</sup> Clif Bloks – Ingredients: Organic Brown Rice Syrup, Organic Evaporated Cane Juice, Organic Brown Rice Syrup Solids, Pectin, Citric Acid, Green Tea Extract, Colored With Black Carrot Juice Concentrate, Natural Flavor, Organic Sunflower Oil, Carnauba Wax

<sup>5</sup> The Beast Course is a half-marathon-length course with a lot of vertical gain, variable terrain, and man-made obstacles like a spear throw and carrying buckets full of dirt

I myself ate about four whole packages of Bloks because I hadn't had any coffee yet and also because I was under the impression that there'd be some quality catering and therefore didn't eat any breakfast at home. Unfortunately, all of the food for volunteers was either packed with gluten (which I'm allergic to) or simply more sugar or dry empty carbs like lays chips and fritos. I decided to fill more water jugs and move them around.

I was grouped with Amy and Brandon at this water station. Amy was a doe of a creature from Nebraska – sweet as can be but something about her gave the impression that she doesn't register danger. Brandon is in the military and is working the event to raise money for his faction's morale club. He has never run a Spartan race and didn't have much information for the participants. He told me he wants to be a comedian.

We three got more and more excited for 'run' o'clock – Amy's little pun for 'one' o'clock which is the time we finished. Well, I didn't finish but I got to go down to the base again and waste some time riding around in the taped-up truck.

The guy driving this time explained a little bit of how it works. They bring in trailers with the obstacles in crates and boxes, fly the crew in, put them in nice hotels, and pay them a lot of money for their jobs. He wouldn't tell us how much but he said much more than a teacher.

I got dropped off this time at the sandbag obstacle. This is a mandatory obstacle with no penalty option. My job is to organize the 40lb sandbags so that they are easier for people to pick up. (Sorry, for the *women* to pick up. The sandbags are gendered. We were actually supposed to *enforce* the gender protocol. I didn't. The bushy-tailed white kid did – without blinking.) Competitors walked with them on their shoulder(s) for about ¼ of a mile or so and soon I learned that my other job was to assist people to get the sandbags around their shoulders.

By this time I was beginning to acclimate to the unbridled enthusiasm released by so many people, mostly white. I've only seen it rivaled at karaoke and professional spectator sport events. I was doing my best to swallow my cynicism and accept reality. I was doing my best to understand this type of mentality without othering myself. I was trying my best to mask my liberal thin-skin. I knew that my Nike running hat and pigtails wouldn't be enough. I tried my best to pretend that I still genuinely liked Eye of the Tiger and music by Mumford & Sons.

Then, just as I was getting used to enthusiastically amping people up instead of instinctively thanking them for their patronage, I was swooped up again and driven to another obstacle area. I was in charge of two that time, and I therefore got to hold the radio. I felt very official and unlike before, I got to enforce a rule

that was meant for safety, and was not gendered. Sadly, from my observations, the obstacles still were. Many of the women couldn't reach the rings that they were supposed to swing from, or their arms weren't long enough to sidle across the Olympus wall (essentially a rock climbing wall that had to be maneuvered across horizontally, and without much help from the feet.) You'd think, with nearly a 50/50 ratio, they'd provide more equity. But I guess I wasn't surprised and said nothing.

People were asking me techniques, like I knew something about it. I was tired – the time was closing in on 7 pm. I'd been standing in the sun all day, absorbing so much stimulus. It was here that I overheard a racer saying that he made \$4800 in take-home every two weeks by giving sedatives to unruly inmates and digging drugs out of their orifices. I could hardly imagine another 10-15 hours of this.

My zone leader came by and picked me up with a few more volunteers after the course sweep made his way through. The plastic-lined truck banter was this time extremely homophobic. Then sexist. My mezzo-liberal ears began to bleed a little.

“Y'all saw the guy in the thong I'm sure” – zone leader

“Ha ha yeah how could you miss him I'm glad I didn't have to run behind him” – endorphin-laden overzealous homophobic volunteer

“There are like 30 of them out there now. When I did a tough mudder a few years ago I got stuck behind one of them and it was really foggy so I could hardly see anything ahead of me except this guy's ass. I just stopped and let him go because I was like ‘dude I'm not gonna run five miles staring at that fuck that shit’” – zone leader, with a hearty and confident backwoods inflection – “and one year there was a stripper.”

“Oh wow what? Wow that's insane” – EOHV

“Yeah well I mean she didn't get like totally naked or anything” – ZL

And then I returned to the same checkout booth that I had visited in the morning for my volunteer tee-shirt. The same blonde white girl wearing a lot of makeup was still there and she recognized me and commended me for staying there 13 hours.

At the end of the second day, after the race was over, we were enlisted to begin breaking down. It occurred to me that this was essentially my first time working

as part of a team<sup>6</sup> of manual labor workers - grunt work, it's sometimes called. It was here that I saw the personalities of these ecstatic strangers flourish.

All were white. The man and his dad from the Denver area were the most lily. They seemed very nervous about how to handle tools like ratchet straps and about carrying hay bales. The man from Louisiana and the lady he was with had a lot of gusto – always being the most proactive about doing something and making it known. She seemed to be a little bit competitive with me, the only other female. Then there was the quiet man with the camo backpack and a military high and tight. He clearly didn't have any patience for weakness in others. I later overheard that he works on a fishing boat in Alaska. He told that to the man who had the son.

"I went with a one-way ticket. It's not hard to get a job like that. You just show up and walk the docks. Basically if you're onboard before a boat leaves port you're in."

As we were moving around and waiting for instructions, I involuntarily wished that there had been *anyone* of color on our crew. It was a complicated thought to have and I got a bit distracted trying to sort it out for myself. I was sure I was only wishing that because I thought these people lacked humor and were rigid. But then I wondered if all Spartans were squares. I gulped and reflected on my own level of indecency. I almost tripped over a large tent stake.

Mike came back to our site, his pocket speaker blaring some white rap that I didn't recognize. I could see some very chapped and sunburned lips underneath his orange facial hair. A few minutes later he asked if anyone had ChapStick. I did but didn't say anything. I'd have to dig it out.

We were done for the day. Mike thanked us and dropped us off at the base for the last time. We checked out with the same blonde, and I walked back to my car still donning my volunteer t-shirt.

I got this gig from a tip-off from my dad, who works at the ski resort where the whole shindig took place. It's an outdoor event, claiming to be the world's best obstacle course race. They are trying to officiate it as an Olympic event. While that doesn't seem a stretch, the thing is absurd. It's cruel and unusual, in so many ways. If you've done time in boot camp, you're probably well prepared. If you've played high school sports, you'll have insight into the fervor. Anyone can do it, and apparently, thousands of people want to. As much as they want to eat and want to fuck.

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<sup>6</sup> I use this word because this is the word Mike used. I'm unsure whether he used it because that's common in this type of work or because that's a term that makes sense to people who run Spartan Races