



Transcript of “Spartan Up! with Joe De Sena”

Bulletproof Radio podcast #116



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Dave: Hey everyone. It's Dave Asprey at Bulletproof Executive. Today's cool fact of the day is that some long distance runners have their toenails permanently removed because of chronic bleeding and pain. The way they do it is they anesthetize the toe, remove the nail and then they pour carbonic acid of the nail bed to prevent the toenail from growing back.

If you wanted to get this done and you lived in Nova Scotia, you could kill two birds with one stone by donating your toe nails to a cancer research which is the Guinness world record holder for having the largest collection of toe nails. About a quarter million.

They're doing a crazy study looking for data on why Nova Scotia has the highest rate of cancer in Canada and they're thinking maybe it's arsenic in the drinking water and toenails can tell you how much arsenic you're exposed to in the last six to nine months.

Hey, if you're a long distance runner and you don't like your toenails, there is a place for you to vacation.

Let's see. Also, as we're going here I got to just tell you, today's guest is Joe DeSena. This guy is an extreme endurance racer, a radical limit crusher. He made his fortune on Wall Street, packed up and went off to sunny Vermont. Since then he's competed in over 50 ultra-events including 12 Ironman events in just a year. He created the Death Race in 2005 and a couple of years ago he started doing Spartan Races. These are multiple day, physical and psychological challenge races, really, to push people to the ultimate limits of performance.

This is an amazing guest to have on Bulletproof Executive Radio because this is a guy who's about as super human as it gets. Joe, welcome to the show.

Joe: Thank you. Now my head is so big I won't be able to get back in my house.

Dave: If that happens just run 100 miles or something, you'll be fine.

Joe: There you go, or I'll rip my toenails off.

Dave: There you go. Have you done it yet?

- Joe: I've lost a bunch of toenails running, but it would seem weird for the people I did meet along the way that were taking them off permanently.
- Dave: Yeah, plus it just looks weird if you're barefoot. I don't know, it doesn't seem that attractive.
- Joe: Yeah, I agree.
- Dave: Then again, big black toenails falling off. I've had that problem doing some high altitude mountaineering. I've got these giant size 16 feet. When I buy the largest pair of mountaineering boots on the planet, I fit and I've even heat stretched them and I have custom made crampons and all. Yeah, just losing toenails sucks. I agree with you there.
- Joe: That is a large foot.
- Dave: Literally, when I bought the crampons they laughed at me and I had to get steel from Germany and they had to laser cut it. Otherwise, if your crampons fail, you die. I had to do it. It was the first \$800 pair of crampons ever known to man I think. But, oh well.
- Now, what got you in to all these crazy stuff? You're one of those banker guys from New York and then all of a sudden now you're killing it out there on these ultra-endurance events. What caused this change?
- Joe: Crazy story. Back 13 years old, even before that, I started a business. The business as a swimming pool cleaning business. I grew up in Howard Beach Queens and it's organized crime, it was the organized crime capital of the world. My neighbor was the head of Bonanno organized crime family. I didn't know it at the time, I just knew he was really nice to me. He took me in under his wing and he had me clean his pool for \$35 an hour and then he gave me the head of the other families, five family's pools to clean and then that grew pretty well. Before you know it I had 750 accounts, most of them in organized crime.
- Over a 10-15 year period I ended up building this really large swimming pool business which became a construction business and it was an extremely physically intense. The reason for that was in May, April, when the season would open everybody had a son named Johnnie or Jimmy or something that had a birthday party coming up and the pool had to be cleaned and the backyard had to be done and the brick work had to be done.

You can imagine having 700 customers that all owned weapons and if they were in jail, they needed the pool done immediately. I was working my butt off physically and mentally. Owning a business is very difficult, as anybody listening that owns a business.

Then, from there I was lucky I ended up on Wall Street. Thanks to one of those customers, got me my first job. They saw how hard I worked and thought I would do better on Wall Street. It was a great move. Then I became sedentary. I started sitting at a desk, making money, didn't have to work as hard as I had with the construction and swimming pools. Then I was lucky I was in a stairwell in a building in Manhattan and I was running up the stairs and I ran into a really good looking guy who happened to be on the cover of Men's Health.

He was running stairs as well and he started telling me about these things called adventure races and this was like mid-97ish, '96, '97 and I'm a glutton for punishment, got excited and started signing up for these things. Before you knew it I was doing the Iditarod by foot in January, 30 below weather. I just couldn't get enough of it. It was a way for me to escape Wall Street and all the headaches associated with it, the crazy people.

Every time I would do a race, Nova Scotia, Alaska, Switzerland, you name it. I thought, "Could I live here?" I need to be here because this feels really good wherever I was with nature. Ultimately ended up in Vermont, although a close second with Northern Quebec which was awesome but really tough to get to and pretty desolate and probably never see my family if I went there so Vermont became the choice. So here we are, we're in Vermont.

Dave: Wow! Similar story here. I live up on Vancouver Island. I wanted to be around trees and nature and still do what I do, but I don't want to live in a big city. I've done that in Silicon Valley for long enough that I feel my family will be happier, my kids will be happier, it's just a better deal to be in a place like that.

I got to ask you. Did you ever find a body part in a pool filter because I'm still just thinking about that?

Joe: There were just a couple of times where I was asked to put a couple of things under the swimming pool as I was building them but we won't talk about that here.

Dave: You have to have been asked that before.

Joe: I've got some crazy stories that we could talk about offline.

Dave: That's probably the right place to talk about it, right?

You said something that it was actually the reason I wanted to invite you on the show. It just caught my eye. You said the Spartan race was intended to wake up the world and save humanity. Its kind of a big claim for a Spartan race, what do we need saving from?

Joe: You probably talked about it on many of your previous podcasts. My big thing is we've been on the planet, let's call it a million years just for round numbers. Its only the last 200, 250 maybe that we live the way we live. Climate controlled houses, coffee on demand. We're basically living in bubble wrap. Some of us, not the whole world.

It was interesting to me. The reason that's relevant is as I was building these businesses especially construction and swimming pool business, is it intrigued me that foreigners would outwork any American I could hire. I was a maniac, I want to work 20 hours a day and very few people could keep up with me. The foreigners could outwork me.

That just, for 12 years, fascinated me. I finally came to realize it's a frame of reference issue. These guys and girls from these countries that don't live in that bubble wrap life that don't have food as readily as we do. That have, maybe in some cases, look at Bosnia. They burn the wood in their roof to heat the house until they have no roof.

That just intrigued me. These were tough gritty people that were just happy all the time to be alive, have water and food and a job. Spartan Race is a minor attempt to get us, the bubble wrap society to get a taste of what that feels like. Get out of our comfort zone, get in the mud, act like a human, face some obstacles and, maybe, hopefully change our frame of reference.

Dave: I really resonate with that. Probably one of the most amazing top 10 things I've seen was when I went to Cambodia about 10 years ago. A whole society has been ravaged by Khmer Rouge and people seeing their parents killed. Just the most traumatic things I can imagine. If you're lucky, make a dollar a day, everyone is impoverished. These people are walking around singing songs, smiling and happy

and genuinely, on average, kinder, nicer and happier than someone you see on the streets in New York. I just didn't even know that was possible when I saw this. I've asked myself ever since what was the difference?

It's sounds like you're saying that let's push some limits to the point where you see that whatever you have is so much more than it could be. Is that the idea here? Just hit that wall?

Joe: Yeah. We got the book coming out which I'm sure we'll touch on [Spartan Up](#) and all concept with the book because people, as you just ask, I don't understand how Spartan race supposed to change people. The book explains the concept. One of them is that frame of reference, that we just need to be ripped out of our comfort zone. I tell my kids all the time, my kids are done with their wrestling practice at night, they walk into the kitchen. If there's salad on the plate which is 9 out of 10 days there's salad on the plate, first thing they're going to eat. They hit the ground and are miserable.

They walk over to the salad and I say the same thing every night. Tomorrow we're having rocks. We're going to heat up rocks. You're going to eat rocks, they're going to break your teeth and they're going to ruin your stomach. The point is we don't know how good we have it.

Dave: I was in a sweat lodge once a while back, a traditional Indian thing and there was a women in there who's like, "Oh! I've hit rock bottom and I just have to survive." I don't know what came over me but I just looked out at her, and I'm like, "I notice you still have both of your legs." She was nowhere near a rock bottom. People, they don't see where it is. They're just not able to do it.

Joe: Do you ever see that honey badger video on the internet.

Dave: Yeah, exactly.

Joe: He doesn't care, right? He's getting stung by bees, he's attacking king cobras, he gets bitten by venom and so on. I'm having a bad day and like that woman that you just described in the sweat lodge, I think to myself, "It's not as bad as a honey badger." I mean he's getting bit by ...

Dave: What's the deal with the honey badger?

- Joe: A honey badger, he doesn't care. I probably can't curse on this podcast but it's a really funny video.
- Dave: Yeah.
- Joe: Yeah, exactly. The honey badger, just a badass. He just gets done no matter what gets in his way. I say to myself, I say to my kids, me and Andy who started Death Race together joked to ourselves whenever we're having a tough time. Lewis and Clark had it pretty tough. Just three generations ago, like I said to somebody recently who said they had a friend who had cancer and it was so terrible and certainly it was bad. I don't want to take anything away from anybody with cancer. In the old days you'd get in your horse, you got the buggy with the family behind you. You try to make it from New York to California because you want to change everybody's life. Grandma dies along the way. Your wife gives birth, maybe a lion attacks the family. No one pats you on the back when you get to California and says, "Oh my god! You had such a rough ride." That was a normal trip.
- Dave: Yeah. When you read some of those historical accounts, you're like, "Man." Everyone today is a wuss. Every single one, "Oh! My Facebook is down." Now I'm going to piss a few people off. Years ago someone close to me was doing one of the races to raise money for a disease of some sort. They ended up having a bunch of, mostly overweight, and still overweight at the end of the event. Where a bunch of people who were probably more healthy than they were before they started but didn't really push themselves that hard but ostensibly raised some money for cancer and what not.
- I see a lot of these events used for fund raising there I know there's a great community value and I support fundraising for medical research. I question whether it was I did it to say I did it, right, I did it versus I got every ounce of energy out of me. I pushed myself to a limit. How do you differentiate between that style of event where we're all loping through it to say we did it versus, "I'm killing myself here."
- Joe: No. I just had this conversation today with somebody. There's no accomplishment if it's not hard. It doesn't count. So people say, especially our board of directors and our investors with Spartan race, "Can't we tone it down a little?" I say, "We like the color run in many ways. We just believe in black, blue and blood. It's just a little different."

Because, otherwise, the medal doesn't mean anything and that medal is so significant and life changing, only if it's hard. It got to be hard.

Dave: So that the hard is what makes it there. Really, if you want your brain to change, your brain doesn't change for easy. It never has. The only thing that makes it change is when it's too painful to not change. That's a biological rule for the most part. You can motivate yourself with positive reinforcement. But the tiger chasing you is a bigger motivation than the hamburger at the end of the run. If you've combined them it probably works well.

I agree with you on the value of that. Isn't there also a level where you can push yourself too hard you just get sick? How many people have finished a Spartan Race and then they have the flu and a cold for a month and they feel like crap?

Joe: It's funny. We put on separate from Spartan race. We have Spartan's evil twin sister in Vermont where we've put on a few races and one of them is a 100 miles no shoe. I had one of the guys who works for Spartan come up here to attempt that race three years ago and it was a snowstorm and it was brutal and it was about 60 miles in and his girlfriend was here and he said, "I'm done. I can't take another step." I said, "What do you mean you're done?" She jumped in front of me. She said, "He's done! He's sick. He's not feeling well." I said, "Is he pissing blood?" I said, "Well, if he's not pissing blood, he can still go. When he starts pissing blood let me know, but he'll get through it."

Sure enough he finished it but, yeah, there's a level and you don't want kidney failure. The body can go pretty far, a lot further than you think.

Dave: In fact, a lot of the Bulletproof Techniques that are really profoundly effective, high intensity Interval Training, sprint till you puke. That's basically short description that even things like the [Sleep Induction Mat](#). You lay on a bed of longer than normal sharp spikes and your body is, "Holy crap! That really hurts." You usually shut up and lay there.

It's that shut up and lay there that when the body finally gives up, that's when the endorphins come, that's when the relaxation happens. It's funny that, basically, laying on a bed of nails helps you sleep deeper later. Anything that tells the body, "No. I'm in charge and you're going to do what I damn well tell you." When you do it enough times, it seems like you become master of yourself more.

When I look at Spartan races and death races, the self-mastery comes out of those. Is that what you mean by keeping yourself from being asleep?

Joe: Yeah. I've had some of my best night sleep on a bed of rocks and boulders and go out to my stuff, this is so damn comfortable. I used to think that I haven't pushed myself hard enough until I can lay on some really sharp rocks. It feels good.

Yeah, I agree. I think taking yourself to that level where your muscles finally relax and gave up and where you get to a place where, I use to say, where you just want water, food and shelter. That's a really nice place to be. All the other stuff that we live with and all these headaches and all these pressures are irrelevant when you get back to water, food and shelter.

Dave: Are you a masochist or a sadist?

Joe: No. I'm a little bit of both, depends upon ... it depends. If I'm putting on the Death Race, it's going to sound terrible, I like to hurt people. I like to hurt them in order to help them. I don't like to become friends with them because if I'm friends with them it's harder to torture them. There's something really good that comes out of what I do to these people. It might take them two or three years before they apologize for all the bad things they say about me or to me.

When they finally come around, I had the Olympic, U.S. Olympic wrestling team come up here and train with me and they hated me. When they got off the plane ... This is funny, this is in the book so I'm giving it away. When they got off the plane in Rutland, Vermont which is, let's say, 18 miles from here, a car went and picked them up. They were in khakis. Wrestlers are pretty professional people. They had loafers on and suitcases with little wheels and handles.

About five miles in it occurred to me, "Why am I picking them up? These are Olympic wrestlers." I called the driver and I said, "Drop them off. Give them directions, let them walk here." They walked 15 miles with their little wheels, some of their things and khakis and shoes and almost got run over a few times. It set the stage for what we were going to do that weekend which was completely turn their lives upside down and show them, "Yeah, you're pretty tough on the mat for the two or four or five minutes or whatever it is you're wrestling. Let me show you what 48 hours straight feels like because it's going to make your time on the mat that much easier."

It took a few years, one of those wrestlers won the worlds, called me. Hadn't talked to me since he left here. Didn't really like me and so I got a thank you. I won the worlds and I attribute it to that weekend.

Dave: In a lot of spiritual practices, there's the idea that you have to face death and you have to die a spiritual death or an ego death. A lot of times, going back thousands of years, those practices were, "Oh! Here's a knife and a loin cloth and freezing temperature desert. We'll see you in a week." Kind of a similar general principle there. Do people, do they have a spiritual experience when they hit that wall and they realize that there's a wall and I could go over it?

Joe: I had. I've had 50 of them and when you throw in some hallucinations in there it's really, really spiritual. One year we had the death race up here. We had it start and end in the church. Awesome, talk about spiritual experience. Awesome, we had the priest involved and we lost one of the racers. We're in the middle of this ceremony.

Dave: Lost, as in the racer died?

Joe: No. No, he didn't die. Something happened, we're in the church, the storm going on outside is biblical and he had taken off his boots and he was literally found talking to a rock. He's having a full-blown conversation with a large rock. Later we got him into the church but biblical experience and spiritual experience. It happens and I can't tell you how many thanks we get, tens of thousands of, "Thanks. You changed my life."

Dave: Just seeing what you're made of is worth it.

Joe: Oh! Without a doubt. I have to be that terrible person to get people to go to that level because people don't want to go to that, they don't want to push themselves to that level.

Dave: One of the things that I do with a few clients is I have some unusual electrical stimulation devices and I've done this with 60 year old women. I'm like, "No, I'm going to turn that up." If they're getting full on muscle twitches swear at me and they'll sit there and they make these faces and their muscles are tensing. Finally, when you hear someone who could be my grandmother dropping f-bombs, alright, we hit that level for you.

There's something about our biology. It's not even up here. You've got to get the meat to hit its limit. When similar happens that's when you get the BDNF, the brain-derived neurotrophic factor. That's when the muscles grow, the nerves grow, but the change up here happens too.

I'm intrigued that you're doing this with these really extreme things. Do you get kidney failure or do you get people who really get screwed up by doing this?

Joe: I'm trying to think. We've had some very close calls particularly with people that aren't the smartest in the bunch that might be on Adderall or some pills that they don't tell us about. You can't get dehydrated when you're on pills especially when you mix them.

We've had situations where 30 miles into the woods with no roads in or out and you get somebody that collapses, that's a situation. As far as just pushing yourself, knock on wood, we've never ... I've been. I had dysentery giardia. I lost 32 pounds in 8 days during a race. I was dead, but you somehow finish the race and you drink some water and you go to a doctor and you come out of it.

Dave: You know what happened to the guy who ran the first marathon, right?

Joe: He died.

Dave: Why are you doing this?

I don't know if you've read my stuff. Generally, I've seen some studies, endurance exercise may, long term, like ultra-marathon stuff, may increase telomere length which is a good thing, that's an anti-aging thing, one of the fundamental five theories of aging.

There's some benefits there but there's a bunch of other ones that look at joints wearing out, adrenal fatigue dysfunction, cortisol levels, baldness, testosterone. All of those move in the wrong direction when you do chronic, long distance exercise.

Joe: How many studies have you done on watching T.V. and sitting on a couch?

Dave: I think we have a study, I think it's called Texas. Just kidding. I have friends in Texas, I was just there. I'm just kidding.

Joe: Two ends of the spectrum. I take ultra-running over the couch any day and whatever comes along with it. I was in a car accident. I was thrown out the window at 85 miles an hour. My leg ripped out of my hip, they had to break my hip to put it back in. They told me they're going to have to replace my hip. I can't walk again. The whole nine yards. I don't know, I've done a ton of Ironman since then. I've done a ton of Ultras and everything is working fine. I don't know. You got to do yoga. If you do some yoga you'll be fine.

Dave: Do you do yoga?

Joe: I do yoga, yeah.

Dave: That's too funny. I'm a little out of practice right now, I live far from a yoga thing. I've done a lot of advanced yoga and I still do pranayama. It's interesting, you bring that in, so you've got some flexibility, some breathing. I'm not trying to be critical. I don't feel critical of what you're doing. I think it's actually pretty damn amazing what you're doing.

I just wonder about the ultra-endurance side of things versus the high intensity sprint side of things. Given the cognitive and life load on me right now, I don't think I have the time for the training do the long races because, for me, 15 minutes a week I'm, "Alright, I can sprint or I can lift heavy things and then maybe I'll get four hours of sleep and I'll do it again tomorrow." Not the lifting but I'll just do the same day again.

What do you say when the other CEOs and the non-professional athletes and Navy SEAL guys, when they come to you and say, "I want to do one of these races but I'm flying a hundred times this year." What's your take on that?

Joe: What do you mean when they say they're flying a hundred times?

Dave: There are guys who, like I work with guys who run hedge funds and CEOs... "I'll be here. I'll be there. I've got jetlag. I've got 12 hours of meetings today then I'm going to exercise for an hour then we'll get on a plane for four hours then I'm going to ... People live this life.

Joe: Yeah, you got to fit it in. I did it. I was doing the long distance stuff while I was on Wall Street. I was flying. Literally, I would leave on a Friday or Thursday, go to South Africa, do an Ironman and be back and work on Monday. That's a lot of

flying time. It sucks but, I don't know, life, you got to pack it all in. It beats the horse and carriage going cross-country and losing the grandma on the way.

Dave: It does indeed.

Joe: You got to fit in. If you're busy and you're an executive and you're spending a ton of time in airplanes, do burpees. I'll go in the back of the airplane and I'll be stretching out, I'll do some burpees in the airport. People think I'm crazy but whatever.

Dave: Yeah, I've done full-on yoga in the airport waiting like, "What the hell?" I'd rather be flexible when I sit. I haven't tried a burpee, that's not a bad idea in the airport.

I'm concerned about recovery because I have a few clients who exercise, they do marathons and what not on a regular basis. A lot of them, when I look at their labs, their cortisol is just through the roof. It's not because of the exercise as much as it is the lack of recovery.

If you're going to hit it hard every day, you're going to want some sleep and some proper nutrition. If you're not getting it, I found at least in my own life, that if I wanted to exercise that intensity, that it took so much effort to recover adequately to just maintain homeostasis that I switch to that intensity thing.

It's interesting because you're kicking ass obviously and I'm always intrigued by people who just are kicking ass doing high intensity, not even high intensity but just long term stuff that's also at high intensity. I wonder how you do it man.

Joe: What I found and I don't know if you've studied this is the better shape you're in, it gets progressively better. In other words, the recovery time takes longer if you're not in great shape. My best performances are back to back races. If I did a 24 hour race this weekend then the following weekend did an Ironman, my Ironman time was better.

Traditional theory would say you need the rest. I remember, I don't know if you know Ian Adamson. Ian Adamson, amazing athlete, Discovery Channel did this test where they had him strapped with all wires and they were studying the body and what they found was the body actually becomes more and more efficient. You get in better shape with every passing hour of working out and it's fight of flight. Yes, we all need rest. Yes, you need recovery time. With the better shape you're in, it makes it that much easier.

Dave: That makes great sense. When you kick ass the way you do. In fact one of the effects we know happens from long distance ultra-endurance things is you can get more mitochondrial efficiency. I know very well that better mitochondria in your cells equals more efficient sleep for instance. Your efficiency of recovery goes up when you're in better shape, I'd buy that in a minute.

You've said some other things though that one of them is really cool. You said the phrase, "I can't doesn't mean anything to me anymore. Not because of my ego but because I know anything is possible." You're bringing up the effects of ego on performance there. How do you deal with your own ego and your hitting your wall and when your body is saying no? How do you overcome that? What's the strategy?

Joe: I try to use my ego to get me through. What I like to do is publicly announce I'm going to do something. It's Sunday and I don't know if I'm ready, but I want to raise some money for hospital care. I'm saying, "Alright, Wednesday I'm leaving. I'm going to run 300 miles straight." I publicly commit. I send an e-mail to everybody I know. I don't really want to run 300 miles straight, no one does, right? My ego to trap myself and so at mile 70 I'm exhausted, at mile 140 I can't take another step. I told everybody, my ego now is the thing that's keeping me going.

That's how I use my ego. As far as knowing anything is possible, it's being in those situations where you're completely done, you can't take another step. You lay down, you want to just be dead. Somehow you do another eight days.

Dave: Transcendence of the ego. The ego says, "No." and you're, "I'm just going to do it." That's the point where you realize that you had limits you didn't know about.

Joe: You don't even know, you just keep going somehow. Just keeps going until, I guess, thankfully I haven't gotten to that place where you're dead. At some point I guess you die. I don't know.

Dave: It seems to happen to everyone that I've met, at least as far as I know. Do you have some tech? Do you use technology to keep your ego in check or to get yourself into a flow state? Is there any trick there or is this just like pure on willpower?

Joe: I'm not a technology guy at all. I don't want to know. I don't want to know what my heart rate is. I don't know want to know anything. Less is more. One step in front of the other, small little goals. Really, really detailed paying attention to the tiny little decisions like, "Gee! I feel a hotspot in my foot. Let me take my shoes off. Let me adjust the situation." Even if I lose 20 minutes here because 30 miles from now that could turn into a blister. If that turned into a blister, I'm walking funny, walking funny turned into a hip problem then I'm out of the race. Really paying attention to those tiny little things.

Dave: Do you know the book [Fixing Your Feet](#)? Is that a familiar thing for you? One of the first really serious books about ultra-endurance running and foot care, and it's funny you just mentioned that. Because this guy looked at all these successful people who've finished 100 mile plus races and the number one variable he could find was gaiters, to keep dirt out of their shoes.

He focused all of his work on how do you just keep feet from falling apart? I use a lot of techniques when I did a lot of high-altitude mountaineering. It's similar, for me, I'm going to get to that rock up there and use one foot in front of the other and it's one of the things I enjoy most is you and a mountain and there's not enough air and what's going to happen next? The answer is either you freeze to death or you get down the other side, it's one of the two. There's not much of a choice about it. There's freedom in that.

Joe: One of the things, only because you brought up the toenails earlier and we mentioned feet, that I found might be useful for your listeners is you don't even need gaiters. What you need to do is when you train, just sprinkle some sand in your shoes, don't wear socks ...

Dave: You're such a masochist. Alright, this is awesome.

Joe: Seriously. Tighten them up a little more than you would normally, make sure you run through every puddle you can find and get your feet used to. Listen, Michael Phelps' coach used to purposely break his goggles, completely screw up his flights, make his life miserable because if that happens in the Olympics, he's got to be able to deal with it. I always made my feet deal with terrible situations during training and it was a piece of cake in the race.

Dave: It's funny, I've had the tenderest feet forever. Blisters, I blister really easily and it's been just a bane for some of the things where I move a lot. Just walking

barefoot on gravel has always been terribly uncomfortable. I do the mind over matter but it just hurt like hell. I finally started standing on spikes, I have a [Sleep Induction Mat](#) which is basically a bunch of really sharp plastic spikes. I stand on that thing every day for at least 10 minutes. I can walk outside and gravel and everything else.

Somehow, rocks didn't do it but sharp nail things poking at the bottom of my feet, I'm so much happier now. This is something I've been working on for 10 plus years to just not have sore feet. Yeah, there's something to be said for just beat the crap out of them and get them get stronger. God! Sand in my shoes, I would just not like that. You're a man's man from that perspective.

Let's talk about flow state. Sometimes having physical pain puts in a flow state. What was your first flow state experience? What's it like for you?

Joe: I would say it was a race I did called the Yukon Arctic in Canada. It was Northern Quebec, it was four or five days into this thing. Everything had dropped off my shoulders, there was no more attachment to anything in the real ... A real world here with money and headaches and business, that all went away. I don't know, I just became this machine. I'm hallucinating and all that, but just doing things I didn't even know I was capable of.

Dave: You felt the flow state there. What's it like if you go into a flow state. You're hallucinating ... I've had [Steven Kotler](#) on to talk about studying flow states and things like that. Different athletes from different disciplines enter it in a different way. Any other details of you're hallucinating, you're pushing yourself really hard and you went into this space. Tell me more about what it's like.

Joe: For me, it's this ability to go beyond anything I ever did in training or any race before. All of a sudden you're not running out of breath, your heart rate doesn't matter. I was just moving, but I'm not talking about for 10 minutes, this is for 10 hours. You don't need water. You don't need food. I'm seeing all kinds of crazy things, hallucinating, all kinds of things. It's just an amazing place to be. By the way, crash, at some point.

Dave: You said you do crash at some point?

Joe: Yeah, you crash, you come down off that and then you got to recover. While you're in it it's pretty awesome.

- Dave: What do you do to recover after a race? You've been in a flow state, you push yourself really far. You hallucinated. You won. You achieved your goal. Then you're sore, you're hurt and, was it pizza and beer? Glutamine and egg yolks? What do you do?
- Joe: You're not going to like this one, but ice cold water.
- Dave: No. I like that. I do cold thermogenesis, I'll sit in ice water. It's just one of those things to tell the body to shut up. I support that. You actually get in ice water?
- Joe: Ice water, going to find it. We live in a cold place here and I got a cold pond that somehow stays in the 40 degree temperature range all year. It fixes things fast.
- Dave: You sit in ice for how long?
- Joe: I might do a half hour, 40 minutes. When I've done back to back events, I'll do multiple ice baths. I could do five, eight, 10 of them for 20 minutes. Just out, back-in, out, back-in.
- Dave: Wow! That's pretty hardcore. When you're not just recovering from a race, do you normally, like every week, expose yourself to cold to keep your vagal tone? How does that work?
- Joe: I like to take cold showers just to piss myself off. It just wakes you up. I like to do anything that I don't like to do. Whatever my mind says I don't feel like doing, I then force myself to do.
- Dave: That's a lot of discipline, but what an amazing practice. That works. In my view of organization of the mind, there's this operating system that controls the meat of your body, it's your meat operating system that keeps the flesh alive. It's a bitch. It's a fearful thing and it's just worried about dying and it's so worried about dying compared to what actually kills you, the challenge of being a human, not just the racing thing. Whatever you're doing, at work or at home is pretty much telling that meat operating system to shut up.
- When you make it uncomfortable on purpose, it's like training a dog to not be afraid of a gunshot. It's naturally afraid so somehow you train it and there's something to that that just forcing yourself to do stuff you don't like just to show yourself who's boss. I greatly respect that. You probably take it to an extreme of anyone I've interviewed on the show, but I like it. It's awesome.

- Joe: Awesome for you, it sucks for me.
- Dave: What do you do before you go on one of these races? You got this hard-edge bit of a masochistic edge where, “I’m going to beat myself into a submission. I’m going to do what I want to do. I’m going to win.” Do you prefuel or are you, “It doesn’t matter what I have before I race, I’m going to do it anyway.” Do you pay attention there or is that just a waste?
- Joe: This will sound silly and stupid. Couple of things, one is subconsciously I tend to get really tired before an event and like nap, nap and sleep. My body just must know we’re going into war. Secondly, I make the same mistake every single time. I don’t need any food. I don’t need anything, I’ll be fine. I do it every time and I want to kill myself for not being prepared. I don’t know why, I just do it. I must purposely do it.
- Dave: There’s something in there that says, “I’m going to make it even harder on myself.” That’s funny actually.
- Joe: Yeah. I always regret doing it, but that’s my routine.
- Dave: As a guy who does stuff you don’t like doing, I’m so curious, the daily snapshots or the daily life of Joe. What do you do to wake up and then eating and sleeping. What’s a routine?
- Joe: I get up around fivish, anything before five is just too early. Love warm water with lemon. I like to drink it really fast and just clean things out early in the morning. Immediately check some e-mails for about five, 10 minutes and then 300 burpees. I go to do my 300 burpees. Do some rope climbs. My kids start kung fu at 5:45. I like to watch them ...
- Dave: How old are your kids?
- Joe: I have four children. The three that are doing kung fu in the mornings are five, six and eight and they’re done around 7:00, we eat breakfast together. They’re off to school. What I’m about to describe the rest of the day is not the old Joe, this is the new Joe that has to deal with Spartan Race which is a tiger by the tail. I then go into e-mail and phone hell from ... let’s call it 7:30 until 5:30, 7:30 AM, 5:30 PM and then the kids do their second hour of kung fu and wrestling and I like to do that with them. Then I do my second tronch of e-mail and phone hell and then I’m done. I eat dinner and go to bed.

- Dave: You go to bed around what time?
- Joe: I'm in bed I would say by the latest, 10.
- Dave: 10 to 5, you sleep about 7 hours a night.
- Joe: About 7 hours.
- Dave: Then you say your kids are doing a couple of hours of kung fu. Do you have a teacher come in or are you teaching them or how does that work?
- Joe: We got really lucky we found this Chinese guy who is a master. He's probably 30 years old and we got him living on the farm with us.
- Dave: You are lucky man. That's awesome.
- Joe: We've got a farm here, an actual farm with goats and vegetables and stuff and greenhouses. The kid that runs that, I say kid, he's 25. He was a wrestler. He was, in his weight class, fourth best wrestler in Massachusetts. He comes in on the night session of kung fu and does wrestling with them as well.
- The reason I'm big on the wrestling ... You want to hear a great wrestling story?
- Dave: Yeah.
- Joe: This is unbelievable. As my kids were developing a couple of years ago when I got into the kung fu, I started telling everybody I knew about how my kids were badass and they were doing this kung fu. Everybody has their return stories with martial arts and MMA and so forth. Because Spartan Race has grown so much and has a partnership with many MMA affiliations and has a partnership with SOCOM. I would find out that actually American wrestling is what they look for in the MMA. Those guys are actually the toughest ones to beat.
- I found out that in SOCOM and in Special Forces, they want wrestlers, more so than swimmers, more so than water polo players, they want wrestlers. I started to really get excited about this American wrestling thing which I have no experience with.
- This hedge fund guy that I was having dinner with said to me, "Hey Joe, I got the greatest American wrestling story ever." He said, "I grew up next to two brothers

whose dad was an x-green beret. Every night after dinner, the dad would put them down the basement. Now, they did the normal wrestling practice, all their normal stuff during the day. Every night after dinner, one hour in the basement blind folded, lights out, wrestling. It got so crazy that so crazy that the mother want to divorce the dad, the green beret that the neighborhood was calling social services. It got crazy, right?

Fast forward, the kids get to the Olympic level but they don't medal. One of the brothers becomes a coach at Stanford and he's teaching wrestling. At Stanford he allows neighborhood kids to mix it up with the students just to mix things up. One of the neighborhood kids had been coming in for about a month and he says to the coach who is one of the two brothers that spent 10 years in the basement blindfolded, "Coach, do you mind if I sleep on the mat tonight because I got locked out of my apartment." Coach says, "Don't be ridiculous, stay in my apartment."

The neighborhood kid sleeps in the apartment, at 2:00 the coach wakes up to his door opening, this guy apparently had been following him around for months, the coach, just a freak situation, has a gun and is going to kill the coach. He trips him down to his underwear, he zip ties him, and this is a true story, zip ties him to a chair, hands behind his back, feet zipped tied to the chair, he's down into his underwear, puts a pillowcase over his head and duct tapes his head, shuts the lights and has a gun and is about to kill him.

Of all the people in the world that a perpetrator is in the house, he found the guy that trained for 10 years in the basement blindfolded. This guy, this wrestling coach head butts him and proceeds to beat the crap out of the perpetrator. Pins him on the ground while tied to a chair blindfolded, calls 911 from behind his back. You got to interview him on your show behind is back, they breakdown the door to the police, they come in and they can't believe what they find because he's still tied to the chair and blind folded.

They called the dad, the green beret and they said, "We got to tell you, we've been to car accidents, motorcycle accidents, we never seen anybody beaten as bad as what your son did while tied to a chair and blind folded.

My wife and I flew out to California to meet him. His name is Jay Jackson, he's the sweetest guy. He's unbelievable, he works with Spartan now and so my kids do wrestling now every night with the kung fu because I'm not messing around.

Dave: I would love an introduction to Jay. What an amazing story.

Joe: I'll connect you to Jay. It's unbelievable. The guy is unbelievable.

Dave: Wow! I can't imagine. I did this, in fact, something that really pushed my limits. I did the urban escape innovation course a few years ago where the final exam after two days of training with bounty hunters and all, they hood you and tape the hood around you and handcuff you and kidnap you in the back of a van and you have to escape and you're like doing missions with bounty hunters looking for you. If they find you they handcuff you even more uncomfortably and drop you further off outside of town with no wallet, no phone, no nothing and you're like, "What do I do? There's more bounty hunters coming for me."

You learn something about your nervous system when you do stuff like that. Here's the guy, he was actually really zip tied without the ability to cry uncle and he executed. Yeah, I got to talk to him.

Joe: Life and death situation with the lights out and blindfolded and zipped tied to a chair.

Dave: That's like Navy SEAL stuff. Wow! Incredible.

We're coming up on the end of the show and, man, what a fascinating story. There's a question and I'm dying to know your answer here. A question I've asked everyone who's been on the show. What are your top three recommendations for people who want to kick more ass? It doesn't have to be anyone thing you've done, anyone Spartan, whatever, just your entire wisdom, top three things.

Joe: Can I plug the book a little bit by saying it's in the book?

Dave: Hell yeah. We're going to plug the book at the end anyway with the title and the URL and we'll put links to your book in here and all. Definitely, it's in the book.

Joe: I've had 30 years to think about this because I'm trying to do it for myself. The book really tries to boil down, what is it that makes you successful? Whether success means finishing a hundred mile runs. Success means your business. Success means making yourself tougher which is probably required just to be successful. It's one commitment. You got to commit publicly like I talked about before when I tricked my ego. You got to tell everybody you're doing it whether

it's wrestling in the basement blindfolded, going to the two day urban assault school. I'm doing this, right? Now you're on the hook.

You've got to delay gratification. The cookie test, the marshmallow test they did in the 60s on kids. You can't hit this news button in the morning. You can't have extra glass of wine at night. You've got to learn to delay gratification. I've been an expert at this for most of my life. I bet you find most of the people you interview and even the people listening, the executives are probably really good at delaying gratification. You've got to change your frame of reference even if you've got to trick yourself. None of us have grown up in Siberia, we don't eat rocks for dinner but you can trick yourself in the middle of 300 burpees which actually suck in the morning. I tell myself, "Well, maybe I'll do 3000." Just by doing that 300 becomes easier.

When I did my first marathon, it intrigued me that I collapsed at 26.2 miles. It just blew me away that I didn't collapse at 25, I didn't collapse at 29. I collapsed at 26.2. I realized right then in that moment that I have to continue to tell myself, I'm running 100 miles, I'm running 200 miles even though I'm only running a hundred. A hundred becomes easy just cause my frame of reference.

Dave: Alright, I love that.

Joe: The final being is this upside, downside decision making which I touched on a little bit regarding my feet in the middle of a marathon. Every single little decision matters. It makes you more likely to succeed. It makes you tougher if you think through the simplest, most benign decisions.

For example, does it really matter if I stay in bed an extra 10 minutes? Does it really matter if I have a glass of wine tonight? Does it matter if we stay up and watch T.V. with the kids? Yeah, it matters. I'm going to give you an extreme example of what I mean. This is extreme, this has nothing to do with me. I'm just giving an example here.

You stay up late with your wife. You watch T.V. till 2 in the morning. You drink a whole bottle of wine. Bad decision. You wake up late in the morning. Kids are screaming. You now fight with your wife in the morning because everything is screwed up, the kids missed the bus, she's late for work. You decide that afternoon, you're not going home because you fought with your wife in the morning. You decide to go out with the buddies to a bar instead. You run into a

six foot beautiful woman, maybe you kiss her, who knows what happens? Before you know it you're divorced all because you stayed up. That's an extreme example, but it shows that domino effect of how these little decisions just like the blister or the hot spot on the foot could ...

Here's another great one. Here's a great one that your audience will probably enjoy more. An astronaut, the dials, turn a little too much to the right, a centimeter too much to the right, no big deal except you end up on the wrong planet. Pretty big deal. Very important, I'm really particular about all the tiny little decisions all day long.

Dave: You've driven a high state of awareness. You're paying attention a lot.

Joe: Yeah.

Dave: Sometimes even though your body is telling you something you're, "Screw you body." and just do something else anyway just because, "Alright, I like that."

Joe: Yeah.

Dave: Cool. Joe. Where can people learn more about your book? When exactly or where should they go to buy it? Give me URLs, give me ... Twitter handles all these stuff if you like people to know who'd like to learn more about this. All of these will be in the show notes as well. Just read it out for people driving so they can hit it on their iPhones.

Joe: Spartanupthebook.com explains everything and the website for the race is spartan.com. The book is spartanupthebook.com and that will tell you everything.

Dave: Joe, thanks a ton for being on this show.

Joe: Thanks for having me. You were awesome. You're probably the best interviewer I've ever been interviewed. I've been interviewed by a lot of people. You're good.

Dave: Joe, thanks man. That really means a lot. I really appreciate it.

Joe: No problem.



Dave: Have an awesome evening. Enjoy that cold weather in Vermont. I'm going to go outside, I'm feeling inspired to go sit in that, only slightly slimy cold water lake right outside my window here. Have an awesome night.

Joe: Take care. Bye-bye.

Dave: If you haven't had a chance to check out our Upgraded Aging formula, it's worth a look. It's an amazing molecule you can take that it helps you to mimic the effects of caloric restriction. You're probably already practicing Bulletproof Intermittent Fasting. Adding something like Upgraded Aging formula helps your body to get the benefits of reducing calories without actually reducing calories.

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