

1

GET TO THE STARTING LINE

“The bravest are surely those who have the clearest vision of what is before them, glory and danger alike, and yet notwithstanding, go out to meet it.”

— THUCYDIDES

MY NAME IS Joe De Sena, and if all you want is a training program, there’s a list of exercises in chapter 6 and recipes in the appendix.

Or, to make things *really* simple: Go outside right now and run as far you can. Then do as many burpees as you can. Then run, walk, or crawl home. Eat whole foods, skip dessert, don’t get drunk, get some sunshine, take cold showers, lift something heavy, use the stairs, meditate or pray, find someone to love. Lights out at 8 p.m.

There’s your program — go do it.

Look, if being fit were as easy as having a list of the right exercises, the Internet would have ended the obesity crisis. There are a gazillion exercise programs out there! The team at Spartan Race posts a new workout every day — it’s all there, it’s all free. We have all this information at our fingertips. Lack of information isn’t your main obstacle.

Your main obstacle is *you*.

You are also your greatest opportunity.

And that’s as true for me as it is for anyone.

The purpose of this book is to help you overcome any physical or mental obstacle — and to achieve the opportunity that lives inside of you. To become Spartan Fit.

SPARTAN FIT!

Specifically, this book contains a 30-day training program to prepare you to complete a Spartan Race, an obstacle race that I founded and oversee. Spartan Race drives competitors to their limits so they can surpass them. Our tagline is “You’ll know at the finish line”—and you will—but I spend much of my time imploring people around the world to get to the starting line, which is even tougher. Once they’re there, the race takes over.

As tough as it is to get some people to the starting line, I’m constantly amazed by what those same people accomplish *after* the finish line. Jay Jackson didn’t wrestle blindfolded because he thought it might save his life one day; he trained for a sport and it changed his life in a way that he never could have anticipated. After that experience, Jay changed his career, became a high school teacher, and developed a curriculum with us called Spartan Edge to help kids overcome any obstacle through grit and toughness. I’ve received tens of thousands of emails from disabled veterans, cancer survivors, and ordinary folks who went on to do extraordinary things beyond the finish line. I’m committed to helping others build more strength and grit to achieve their goals in sports *and* life. I love to inspire people to achieve the seemingly impossible.

I’m an ultraendurance athlete who has been lucky enough to compete in challenging races all over the world. I have completed more than fifty ultramarathons, and more Ironman events than I remember. Most of these races were one hundred miles or more, with a few traditional marathons mixed in. I was roped into competing in the Vermont 100, the Lake Placid Ironman, and the Badwater Ultra in one week. The last of those events is a 135-mile run that travels from Death Valley to Mount Whitney in the middle of summer. That year it was 137 degrees. My shirt melted.

Yet, no matter the challenge, I never question whether I’ll finish a race. The rush of the starting gun drops me into an empty space where I hear nothing but the sound of my own breathing and the

drumbeat of my heart. My body moves forward, but everything else stands still. I'm not thinking about hopes or regrets, what I'm having for dinner, or what my kids are doing. All I'm thinking about, if it's thinking at all, is the repetitive *thwap* of my feet striking the pavement. I will finish, no matter how far I must go to reach the finish line. It's simply what must happen.

As for why I'm so compelled to compete, I think back to my childhood in Queens, New York, in the 1970s. My mother introduced me to yoga, an ancient form of holistic training that captivated her imagination and changed her life, bringing calm to her troubled mind. True yoga masters could hold a pose for minutes, hours, or days. It wouldn't make much difference, because for them time stopped. They had mastered the relationship between their mind and body to such a degree, fused them so completely, that nothing mattered other than the sound of their breath and the beating of their heart.

But even if you practice yoga, meditate, or run for hours on end, life will intrude in ways that leave you unprepared. Obstacles confront you and require quick adaptations, making a mockery of something like "the runner's high." So you're cruising along, feeling in control of the situation? Great. How about when the trail ends and the terrain grows rocky and you break your ankle? Then what do you do? Or what happens when you need to climb a rock face to keep advancing — only, come to think of it, you didn't train for that, and you could easily fall and break your neck? Do you adapt, or do you fall apart, because all you knew was the thud of the pavement, and now the pavement is gone?

Forget the challenges of an endurance run — some people are so ill-equipped at handling the unexpected that a cold cup of coffee or a traffic jam can ruin their day. Very seldom do we wake up and have our day unfold exactly as mapped, so I grew interested in how physically unprepared many people are for daily events, let alone

SPARTAN FIT!

extraordinary ones. Their training doesn't reflect life's complexities. An event such as a distance race, as challenging as many people find it to be, is highly predictable — an adjective that seldom applies to life's great challenges, the ones that truly define us as human beings. If a 5K race seems like a good impetus for improving your health, consider an alternative, one that's not totally preplanned and that will strengthen your mind as well as your body. Consider a Spartan Race.

I created the Spartan Race in 2010 to test people's overall conditioning, a term that encompasses endurance, strength, stamina, speed, and athleticism. I also wanted to test their ability to adapt physically — and, perhaps even more importantly, *mentally* — especially to surprises. I wanted to stress test the weaknesses that make us vulnerable in a difficult and sometimes dangerous world, where the chaos of the battlefield increasingly characterizes civilian life and everyday society. My theory was that such a test would have broader implications for a person's life than mere fitness. Attempting a Spartan Race, I believed, would teach people to handle the obstacles of everyday life, enabling them to function at a high level as parents, employees, public servants, or in any role that life might throw their way.

Spartans refer to this readiness as “obstacle immunity,” meaning an ability to move past, around, through, or over what life places in their path. In the races, we'll position a mud pit, a greased wall, and other physical challenges in the way of racers — but, whatever the obstacle, its purpose goes beyond just trying to trip someone up and challenge them with thirty burpees. These obstacles are metaphors for the obstacles we all encounter as we move through life. A cancer diagnosis is an obstacle. A pink slip is an obstacle. A broken marriage is an obstacle. Life sends them our way in an endless procession.

Spartan Race was conceived as a test, but no one should race

— at least not like this — without adequate training. The absence of physical conditioning would lead to failure, plain and simple. In my mind, the *training* for the race, even more than the race itself, was where the major life progress would occur. Training for a Spartan Race poses the same challenges as preparing to give a performance does for a jazz musician. It requires extensive preparation, but its content can't necessarily be predicted. Musicians can't prepare for the concert by rehearsing what they know they'll play; it wouldn't be jazz without improvisation. What they have to do is train, or practice, all the necessary skills they will need to improvise effectively. They have to practice finger technique, experiment with different keys, be thrust into unfamiliar musical situations and have to figure out ways to navigate them. Successful jazz musicians jettison the mindset that says "No, if I am going to play a performance, I will practice exactly what I am going to be playing." They need to flow.

How should someone train for an obstacle race the likes of which nobody had seen before? In the absence of any established plan, folks cobbled together regimens based on what they thought they might expect. But even that approach raised questions. To climb over an eight-foot wall, should you build one and practice several times per week? That's practice for the event, but is it the best training for the event? Maybe it would be better to spend part of that time doing body-weight exercises, pull-ups, grip exercises, and so on — just in case the wall were higher, inverted, or especially slippery next time. The questions were endless.

Spartan Fit! follows *Spartan Up!*, my previous book, which became a *New York Times* bestseller in the summer of 2014. This new book is a blueprint for people to follow regarding their workouts and their diets. *Spartan Fit!* will be a meaningful tool for anyone who's decided to get off the couch and get living. *Spartan Up!* inspired people to push their limits by taking on an audacious challenge. They did it, and, as a result, they developed new beliefs in

SPARTAN FIT!

themselves and their capabilities. They have hope. They have confidence. Now they're ready to make a change in how they sleep, move, and eat. *Spartan Fit!* will be their guide.

I have outlined a 30-day workout and diet plan that will take you from wherever you are to Spartan Sprint condition, meaning you will be fit to tackle our easiest race, which isn't all that easy. I intend this book to be a practical guide that will help you, the aspiring Spartan, or Spartans who want to refine their skills, to apply Spartan principles to your health and fitness. Once you're done with this book, you will have the tools needed to continue in the Spartan lifestyle on your own, and, just as important, help others achieve their own success.

"The first thirty days are all that matter," says Joe DiStefano, who with Jeff Godin, PhD, and our Training unit created the Spartan SGX certification course for Spartan trainers, athletes, and fans. "If you're setting out to train for a race, lose weight, do a pull-up — whatever you may be trying to achieve — the first thirty days will set the stage and dictate your future performance. Furthermore, it will serve as a point of reflection when the road gets bumpy and progress comes slower in the future."

The challenge of becoming Spartan Fit makes it fun though. Fitness-wise, you have to develop a little bit of everything. This is a program for generalists, not specialists. Strength is going to be important, but so are power and muscular endurance. You must build your aerobic capacity, but you're also trying to increase your anaerobic threshold. This is where high-intensity interval training (HIIT) helps, allowing you to withstand the fatigue that sets in as you confront the obstacles between the run stages. After you experience one of those challenging obstacles mid-race, you'll recover a little bit faster than the average person if you have a good aerobic capacity. It'll also allow you to put forth as much effort as possible in the next obstacle.

This book teaches you to train for a Spartan Race, but what we've found is that Spartan training prepares you for most sports. Truthfully, the fitness regimen and dietary advice in this book can be applied to any endeavor, whether it's running, wrestling, skiing — virtually any sport you care to name. Moreover, it will prepare you for everyday life! It can help you recover from injury, heart-break, emotional trauma, and stress.

Even if you don't want to do a race, this program is still a great way to get in shape. You may need to lose weight, and weight loss is part of the picture, but only a very small part — a byproduct really. You'll burn fat, build muscle, increase your endurance, and begin to develop obstacle immunity, meaning nothing will faze you. You'll have more energy and get rid of brain fog and depression. And yes, if you want to look great, attract a partner, and mate like an animal, this will help with that too. Your self-confidence, like your fitness, will skyrocket.

You may wonder how someone can expect to complete an endurance event as demanding as a Spartan Race after training for thirty days. I believe people are capable of heroic levels of endurance when their lives depend on it. Say your car broke down on the side of the road, and you had to walk 26.2 miles to find food and water . . . would you do it? Or would you die? I hope you would do it, but, sadly, many people in real situations just like this one do not. Hell, people on lifesaving drugs take them only 55 percent of the time, so even when there is a magic pill, often people don't take it. Poor health endangers millions of people in this country, and many of them know their lives depend on change, yet they still choose to do nothing in response. I believe a large part of the problem is that they don't know how to start.

I'm promising big changes with this book, but before you get too excited, you need to know that taking this leap is seldom easy. Following the advice I give may seem less alluring than simply sit-

SPARTAN FIT!

ting on the couch. But follow the Spartan Fit regimen and I believe you'll save or at least extend your life.

This fitness leap, like any drastic lifestyle change, is difficult, because humans are creatures of habit. We know when to watch our favorite shows, when to arrive at the airport to catch a flight, when to brush our teeth. We go to work on Monday and sleep in on Saturday. Some of us go to church, some watch football. We like to assume we'll eat another meal, live another day, cash another paycheck, and that nothing out of the ordinary will interrupt what we perceive to be straight and steady progress toward some goal. Often we settle into these routines lacking self-awareness, only to wake up in a strange place, blink, and say, "How did I get here? Have I been here this whole time?" Habits become deeply ingrained, and they exert a unique and powerful control over our lives that sometimes takes more than willpower to resist.

Precious few are immune to the waking sleep of habitual life. Even the best of us can become so comfortable that days blur into weeks, weeks into months, and, before we know it, we are living a life constructed for the most part while asleep. Heck, twenty years ago, when I was a trader on Wall Street, growing plump in my office chair, I had no idea what was going on with my health. I just knew I didn't feel nearly as well each day as I thought I should. Many of us are sleeping now. If we don't wake up soon, we may end up somewhere we didn't want to go, or worse, nowhere.

In sleepwalking through life, a person may unknowingly reject a golden opportunity, thinking it strange and unconventional and therefore incompatible with "normal." But could it be that "normal" is not what it should be? That the good life has gradually been covered and weighed down with something else, to the point where it is now buried? Could it be that what we *thought* was life has kept us from living this whole time? What could living be, anyway, if it's not this? So the truth startles us, unsettles us, even terrifies us, because

it clashes so violently with our neat and tidy expectations and with our sense of what is normal. The truth asks too much. We'd have to change everything. Furthermore, the devices, systems, and tools we have to make our lives better are actually crippling. They are braces and casts for our mental muscles, atrophying the mind's ability to adapt and then overcome.

The habits we form become so strong that we believe change is impossible. Only, this is untrue. Change is actually a guarantee; the only variable is the form it takes. Continue with life as is, and the changes experienced will be negative: declining health, zero motivation, and lack of energy and achievement. Our limits are a prison of our own making, with bars made of a thousand small decisions to sit and wait, to accept the reality given to us by everyone but ourselves. Everything in the life of habit is predetermined. Without new horizons, we might as well call it quits.

People who are stuck in what's normal and familiar are going to quit at the first sign of discomfort. Where I see this most often is in people's lack of physical fitness. They'll work up the motivation to go to the gym one day and think, "Phew, that's enough work for one day — now I'll just go back to my smart phone or video game." But Spartans don't fear pain or exhaustion, because they know that every time they go beyond what they thought was possible, they grow stronger, braver, and greater than they were before. Improvement is motivation enough for a Spartan. We smile while all hell is breaking loose, because we know that we'll come out better on the other side.

Spartans always respect a challenge, but, beyond that, they respect their health. If life is truly important and meaningful, then health must be a top priority. Health, not gold and silver, is wealth! Health is not merely the momentary absence of disease or injury; it's the best possible physical and mental state of a human being. When a person maximizes their health like a true Spartan, they don't just go about daily life without getting fatigued; they gain the

SPARTAN FIT!

ability to *enjoy* their life each day while being filled with a sense of wellness and capability. They fear neither distance nor height nor strain. A true Spartan is ready for anything life throws their way. The Spartan races help develop this capability, and then validate and extend it once it has been established.

Humans are meant to strive and grow. From birth to death, trillions of cells in our body continuously reproduce and regenerate. Humans are meant to work, to sweat, and to then bask in the exhaustion that often accompanies great achievement. Humans are meant to be healthy, with a body that functions long and efficiently. Humans are meant for a greater purpose than sitting, watching, and consuming. And it's not just our physical health I'm talking about: striving and struggling give our lives deeper meaning.

No one is born physically fit. Everyone who ever became fit did so through a thousand simple decisions — decisions they made every day to move, to exercise, to purge their imperfections, to eat the healthiest foods, and to structure their lives in pursuit of important goals. You may be out of shape or in failing health, but change is still possible. When you leave the couch, it will be headfirst. Your mind leads the way; your body follows suit.

Before that moment, a thousand excuses might enter your mind:

“I don't have time.”

“I'm out of shape.”

“I'm scared I'll injure myself.”

“This whole fitness thing is just a fad.”

If you think you don't have time, you probably don't. If you think you're out of shape, you probably are. Yet for every obstacle we face, there is a solution, if only we take the time and energy to look for it. If fitness is a fad, if feeling your best every day is a fad, then human life itself is a fad. Don't worry. It will be over before you

know it, and then some other species will step up to the podium and deliver its inaugural address as the new fad.

What I'm asking you to do here is to *wake up*. Turn on the lights. Get off the couch. Put down the French fries. The old normal of inactivity, of processed food, and of limits to your potential is over. A new normal is about to begin. It consists of constant improvement, of crushing your goals, and of robust living built on the most human of principles. If you have a Spartan mindset, you hit your workouts as consistently as you brush your teeth; and the unhealthy meal, not the healthy one, becomes the exception. You'll like what you see in the mirror, but you'll probably be too busy kicking ass to bother looking.

This guide is for anyone who wants to break through their limits and achieve what they thought was physically impossible. For some, that might be a running a marathon. For others, it might be a walk to the grocery store. I'm not here to tell you that you're fat. I'm not here to make you into a fitness nut. I'm here to make you into a life nut, to remind you of who you are and highlight your innate potential.

Like I said, I never question whether I'll finish a race—even though there are some I didn't finish. And by the time you're Spartan Fit, you won't question your potential either. Training will take you to a point where doubt and fears of failure don't prevent you from embarking upon a new challenge. Instead, you will see your victory with a sense of certainty and even inevitability.

But first things first: get to the starting line.

We like to say "You'll know at the finish line," but there's also something you'll know at the starting line. When you're surrounded by thousands of screaming people—professional athletes and amateurs, Navy SEALs and cancer survivors, firefighters and hairdressers, men and women, young and old, people of every background.

SPARTAN FIT!

When adrenaline is coursing through your veins. When there's a little bit of fear inside you, but you're prepared to overcome any obstacle ahead. When you're Spartan Fit.

That's when you'll know that this is bigger than any race.

It's a way of life and a movement.