

Yesterday morning at three I was running the Chaberton Sky Marathon. I was running it with three friends but something was amiss. The pace was theirs, not mine. I was numb and made no decisions. We passed by a beautiful mountain lake and my friends asked me if I cared for a swim. "Not particularly" said my voice. But then we crossed a high, spectacular and improbable bridge about 100 feet over the lake. My friends jumped the hand rail and I did too. We started falling. I watched them pedal in the air at a frequency of 100 and thought of Lance Armstrong. I started pedaling too. I wondered if the impact with the water would kill us or if there would be enough water to save us from hitting the rocks below... or if, having survived the dive we would manage to swim to safety before hypothermia did us in.

I woke up before hitting the lake, so I'll never know. And immediately I started processing my dream. Premonition? Nah. Heavy dinner? Maybe. Did I "feel" the race? No doubt, and that was good: it's been a long time since I "felt" the tension of a race, but this one is special: I've been running it mentally for a year and for the past two months I've been preparing for it meticulously. I neglected my training on most workdays but have spent every weekend at altitude walking, jogging, walking, jogging. But the dream had a message for me: this is your race, Giorgio: run at your pace, listen to your body, decide for yourself. If your friends jump off a bridge don't follow them.

The gunshot is at eight-o-three according to my cell phone. I put it into my pocket and mockingly bite a fake watch onto my left wrist while all around me it's a cacophony of polar and garmin beeps. I'll look at my cell phone again on top of Mount Janus, to see how close it is to one hour and ten minutes. Then on top of Mount Chenaillet, to make sure I'm not late on two hours and twenty minutes. I must be in Claviere in three hours and forty minutes (in any case in less than four, otherwise I'll be disqualified. I must beat six hours at the Chaberton pass, but I plan to be at the Chaberton top (500 meters asl higher than the pass) by then. Seven hours and forty minutes to Fenils, Italy. Eight hours and thirty minutes to the finish line. That's the plan.

We're running. Alex, Max, Gerardo and I are doing this together, with three hundred other runners from Italy, France, Germany and Spain (mostly). The start is in Mongenevre, France. We'll have to summit four mountains and run 26+ miles with a total vertical incline (up and down) of 20 thousand feet. I'm the slowest of the quartet and soon all the jokes are on me, but I remember my dream.

After the first kilometer the path starts climbing. We're running among the pines at 1800 meters above sea level. I walk-jog while my friends just jog. But it makes no sense to just jog when you can just walk-jog instead! They take turns yelling at me like the sergeant in "Officer and a gentleman" because I'm always slightly behind and pulling imaginary bridles to slow them down. "Run!" screams Alex. "This is your race, Giorgio" says Giorgio. We reach the top of Mount Janus, 2500 meters above sea level, in an hour and three minutes. Normal if we had just one mountain today,. But we have four. There's a fort up on top of the Janus. From here and from the next two mountains we'll summit today the French took out the Chaberton Fort with mortar fire in June 1940, when the Chaberton was still Italian. It's been French since 1945. Because of all the forts in its path, the Chaberton Sky Marathon is also called the trail of the forts, a play on word meaning -- both in Italian and in French -- that it's a trail for tough people.

The three toughest people of our quartet start the descent at breakneck speed. It would be a mistake to follow them, because the

eccentric use of muscles at this speed would set me up for cramps when we start back up the Gondrand mountain. I'm running down a spectacular crest, watching my step because a foot on the wrong stone would send me flying down either side of the mountain, thus making my dream come true. The scenery is beautiful: more than a thousand meters below I see the French city of Briançon and a little higher than that and to my right the mountain village of Nevache. Just ahead, the top of the Gondrand. To my left, the Chenaillet. Behind me, I know, towers the Chaberton. The weather is perfect and not a cloud is in sight.

I reach the bottom of the Janus a minute after my friends. There's a water station. They're all there to mock cheer. I lose my patience: "guys, you're faster. Just go. I'll run at my own pace". They go. So much for the resolution to run it all together like the four musketeers "at the pace of the slowest". The slowest, with an unbearably patronizing undertone, being me.

It's August 3rd, my 23rd wedding anniversary, and my bib number is 233. Oh, and the wives are waiting for the four of us at kilometer 23 with a bottle of Taittinger. I think of a famous poem by Victor Hugo, "after the battle", where Victor Hugo sings of the time his father, a general, toured a battlefield the night after a battle and found a wounded soldier from the defeated Spanish army terrified, crazed and already half dead. "To drink, to drink for mercy!" screams the wounded. The general hands a flask of rum to his servant and says: "give this to drink to this poor wounded man". But the Spaniard suddenly pulls out a gun and narrowly misses the general, whose horse jerks back. "Give him the drink anyway" says Victor Hugo's father. *Mutatis mutandis*, I pull out my cell phone and inform Amy that my three friends will reach kilometer 23 ten or fifteen minutes before me. "Uncork the champagne for them and save the last glass for us".

Now that I'm finally running at my pace, I feel confident. I'm trailing behind an Indian file of runners up the Gondrand mountain and have the second fort of the trail of the forts in sight.

Now I'm hiking up my third mountain today. It's called the Chenaillet and it was an embattled mountain. Italy conquered it twice and France conquered it once and they both pretty much lost the war (or won it, depending on which side they were fighting it on).

It's a beautiful ancient submarine volcano. The path runs around a geological trail with lots of written explanations in French and Italian. I wish I had time to read them. It's also a tricky mountain and I'm happy I have good knowledge of the territory on my side. Tricky because three times you think you have almost reached the top and three times you go around a bend only to see there's a new top ahead of you. People around me complain. But they must be the people who "only" run the half. The trail of the forts is not for whippers and whiners. I forgot to say: three hundred of us are running the full marathon but another I-don't-know-how-many run the half. I reach the top of the Chenaillet two hours and eleven minutes after the start, nine minutes ahead of schedule.

Descending from the Chenaillet is fun. It's so steep that there are fixed ropes at one point. Sticks are forbidden, so it's sensible to run down with the right hand sliding on the fixed rope. After three hundred meters of fun we reach the "green collar", an ancient smugglers trail that leads into Italy. Rusty and forgotten barbed wire on the ground. Back in Italy for a while. The scenery is worth the voyage, as the Michelin guide would say. We're now at the altitude (2300 meters) where the lunar landscape gives way to pale green and then to green more intense and finally to the dark green of the pines.

This is a natural amphitheater called the Gimont Valley. From the top of the Chenaillet (2600+ meters) to Claviere (1700 meters) it's ten kilometers of uninterrupted downhill running.

I'm running down a steep meadow with a young woman on my side. She's doing the half. "Where are you from?" Barcelona, Spain. We chat about Barcelona and about a city village near Barcelona where my family had property when I was a child. Then I lose sight of her, but I'll meet her again many hours later at the finish line, all dressed and made up and cheering.

Kilometer 22. Tricky! It's a narrow path full of roots. Like jumping rope. Water station. I drink a cup of Coke. Coke and water is all I took during the whole race. Oh, and champagne. Km 23: I catch up with Max, one of the tougher ones of the quartet. He's dropping out. He's had it. "Come -- I say -- and toast with me. The wives are there. Amy and I toast and I have a half glass of Champagne and a kiss. I'm informed that Gerardo and Alex had their drink of champagne fourteen minutes before me. Then I'm off to the Chaberton. Here's where the tough part starts and I planned all along to be in the passing lane. Oh, sure, at the end I'll be one of the taillights, but first I'll pass dozens of people too spent to reach the next "gate" -- Chaberton Pass -- in time to stay in the race.

It's very hot (30 Celsius) and the Chaberton is very steep.

At kilometer 25 I reach Alex, the second toughest of the quartet. He's cramping and has nausea and he shakes. He's obviously dehydrated. "Drop out" I offer. The Chaberton with cramps is suicide. But he continues, with great difficulty. I pass him and move on.

There are scores of walking cadavers who struggle up the mountain. I pass and pass and pass. I'm hot and thirsty but feeling well.

To be continued...

I'm hiking up to the Chaberton Pass along the Vallon des Baisses, and I'm going strongly. I reach a small sometimes-river of rainwater and see the sorry sight of exhausted runners lying face down in the stream... well, they turn to breathe every once in a while, which proves they're alive. I move on.

I reach the Pass in five hours and fifteen minutes, forty-five minutes ahead of kick-out time. Lots of runners are lying there, waiting to recover enough to just go down, skipping the top. They're out of the race. A few are in serious trouble and choppers from both France and Italy take turns picking them up and fly them to Briancon or Turin.

For me it's time to smile: now I only need to beat nine hours in all to be ranked and I know I can do that. I'll be among the last, but it's the last of the good ones. This is no common race. I set out for the last hard climb, the one to the top of the Chaberton. I've done it about fifty times before and it normally takes me thirty-five minutes to climb the 500 vertical meters (up to 68% steep) from the Pass to the top. Today it will take me more. I'm approaching the thirtieth km of the race and suddenly I get warning signs of depleted glycogen: a gurgling in my belly followed by nausea followed by two simultaneous cramps in the back of my thighs. I tell myself to relax: the crisis won't last forever and I only need to reach the top and then the cramps will go. There's a very scenic spot where the path runs parallel to the center of gravity for maybe a hundred meters. To the left I have a 2000 meters drop and down below me are hundred of French mountaintops. The Mont Blanc is ahead of me, all covered with snow. And I'm hurting, but I'm reaching the top and I keep passing

people who are in far more difficult shape.

I reach the top, Coca-Cola and... Gerardo, the toughest in the quartet. He's in his windcoat and he looks cold. I'm in my sweaty t-shirt and I'm not stopping. I reached the top in 6 hours and five minutes, five minutes behind schedule. "Let's go down together" he says. Okay. We run. We have a drop of 1900 vertical meters (6200 feet) in only 7 kilometers (4.35 miles). A dive. We go down fast, sliding down the steep rocky mountain, sometimes digging our heels into the gravel. We reach the pass again. Then down the Italian side of the Chaberton, fast. We pass a point that looks just like Mount Rushmore, except there are no presidents. And then we reach Alex. He's sitting on a rock. He reached the Pass, skirted the top, took out his bib number and is painfully going down the Italian side, ten steps at a time. He asks to use my phone. He calls his wife and asks her to wait for him in Fenils.

I have an inner struggle. The good and catholic side of me tells me what I should do now. Forget my race and help him down, after a year of dreams. But he's not hurting all that badly and the weather is good. And suddenly the bad side of me comes up with a famous joke. I'm sure it's international but in Italy it goes like this:

Two friends are hiking up a mountain. One takes a pee in the bushes when a viper suddenly bites him right at the top of his penis. "Help! -- he screams -- call Emergency and ask what we have to do". So his friend calls Emergency and says "my friend here just got bitten by a viper and we want to know what to do". "Ok, says a very calm emergency voice, make a little cut around the spot where he was bitten and then suck the blood out...". "What are they saying?" wails the wounded man. "They're saying that you must die" :-)

So we leave him to his fate (three more hours than we to his next beer :-)) and run on down.

Our friends Paola and Tommaso are waiting for us at Pra Claud, where there's a water fountain. Km 35. Gerardo has fallen behind and I'm running alone and well. Just when I'm beginning to enjoy moving from fourth to first in our quartet, I trip on a root and twist my ankle. Not good, not too bad... a good warning that I should be humble and run my race, not anyone else's. Competition helps me stay focused, but it's not the point of all this.

I pass Tommy and Paola and launch my backpack at them. Good riddance. Now I'm really running freely. I reach Fenils and Amy exactly 7 hours and 40 minutes after the start, exactly on schedule. Coke station again. They fumble with the cups. I act impatient. "You're not going to win in any case" smiles one of the Alpine soldiers at the water station. "It's not about anybody else's time -- I say -- it's about mine". He nods. I go. According to my plan I should be walking the final five kilometers (uphill) in a very slow 50 minutes. But I still have enough energy to walk-run (walk uphill, run in the horizontal portions). Now I'm down below, running in the woods and along the river Dora, tired from eight hours of effort and no food.

I enter Cesana, a village where I know everyone and every one knows me. A few hundred meters to the finish line. All the shopkeepers are out and cheering and for the first time in my marathoning I don't have to hold back tears because this time I'm wearing Nike sunglasses :-).

Just before the finish line my friend Francesco, who was sixth today in less than five hours (!!!) finds the energy to run toward me to cheer madly as if I had done anything impressive. And I feel he respects my honest effort even though it took him little more than

half my time. My time: eight hours and eighteen minutes, twelve minutes faster than I had hoped and in the state of mind I had visualized.

This was the perfect race and also, by far, the hardest thing I've ever done.

Giorgio

(Excuse the spelling mistakes -- this was sent by Blackberry)