

WHAT A NIGHT “THAT” NIGHT.....

Alessandro Santoni

On the starting line of the 100 Km race called “Passatore” I was feeling really excited. Actually, even I put myself the fatal question: why?

Why do people choose to run an Ultra Marathon? I’m a runner, I’ve been running for ten years, I’ve already brought to a close 27 marathons. But what motivated me most in facing the Ultra Marathon was the idea of overcoming my physical and mental limits. My new borderline was to cover the distance within the maximum time limit of 20 hours.

But I would have to wait the finishing line to give this almost masochist enterprise a deeper meaning. A true curiosity took possession of me and brought me to Tuscany, where I ran almost two marathons and a half through hills, mountains and woods.

By race started immediately with a forecast but maybe undervalued problem called “heat”! In Florence the temperature is rarely inferior to 30° C at 3 p.m. at the last weekend of May. It immediately becomes a disadvantage for people like me: I had trained indoor on Virgin-Active treadmills. From my first steps high temperature made my legs heavier.

The first unevenness was after 5 Km: we had to run up to Fiesole (295 mt.). For a runner that has to run for many hours this can seem an easy effort, but short climbs affect the general effort and the performance.

The slope of the way that leads to Fiesole was demanding (8%). It became easier only after the inhabited area, at the 10th Km I could catch my breath, stretch muscles, and start again with a regular running....

Along the hardest tracks I imposed myself the rhythm of an experienced excursionist, to stay within an average time of no more than 9 minutes per kilometer: long steps and oscillation matched to the movements of the arms...

Unfortunately I was “alone” with my Garmin-gps, I had no other points of reference. The big warmth “packed” my legs which found it hard to go. I had nobody to talk to and lost myself in sterile and useless thoughts. They could only add anxiety and uncertainty to my trip to Faenza. On the top of the next climb called “Vetta Le Croci” (518m.) I was officially in shortage. I was late on the schedule, completely lost and I felt powerless to manage the enterprise.

It was a mental more than a physical problem, basically I was prepared enough... I only had to react! Only a pride gesture could save me from the coming drift, and it was exactly like this...

I joined to a line-up of runners (three women and a man who had run the whole race in 13 hours the previous year) and stayed with them for over 10 km, running between 5'20'' and 5'40''/Km as the way was sloping down towards Borgo S. Lorenzo. In this part we went past dozens of athletes. They were dazed, looking at us, a group of people running like a small train. We also seemed like a gigantic vacuum cleaner which sucked up, picked up and overstepped runners and runners... We were running in the shade, there was often a breeze adverse to our track. It was almost 6 p.m. In 15 km we lost altitude and went back almost to the starting level (195m.). This area is called “Mugello”, the land of bikers.

In Borgo S.Lorenzo (33th km) one could get the impression that the first third of the race passed by without any particular difficulty. This is only a sheer calculation. I was going on with my bad feelings, I thought it was a really bad day from the very beginning. I felt the ghosts of the past approaching: in 2003 and 2004 my march ended after 33 Km –there was like a barrier. There was still room for a slow twilight until Marradi at 65th Km.

As an attempt to exorcize this scenario, I often stopped, maybe too often. I sat on a wall along the way, had a sandwich staring at the void. Dozens of contestants passed me by. I changed my garments soaked with sweat and I put on some light clothes. I set out again after half an hour feeling totally perplexed. Short after 7 p.m. the sun was like a red ball on the horizon

which is slipping down behind the Appennines of Tuscany and Romagna. I heard thundering far from the East, as if it was announcing big gray clouds coming towards us. That was the worst thing when you spend a night in the mountain but fortunately it didn't rain in the end....

The road S.S.302 "Via Faentina", that led to a pass called "Passo della Colla" (the pass between two hills "Della Sieve" and "Del Lamone"), gradually gained altitude just outside the inhabited area of Borgo San Lorenzo. Ascents were steeper from Ronta, and the strongest point was near Razzuolo, where we had to do much effort. The slope that led to "Passo della Colla" is considerable, in some points it is almost 15% for hundreds of meters. The ascent is over 17 Km long, I walked when I met sharp turns, it was better not to waste too much energy and not to stress the muscles too much.

When you ascend walking you lose time, but you don't need to get frustrated: if walking reduces the average speed, it is sometimes better to reduce the strain then wasting resources to run at any cost. I had a rather slow walk, so I decided to run some parts in order to maintain a good average and to make the gap up. This way, as the light went completely down near Fonte dell'Alpe -where there was once a hotel of the same name, now in state of desrepair-, I ran for other 750 mt and got to the top of the hill (913 mt.)

This is the pass in the Apennines which I longed for and was frightened of. At the same time it was a point of reference in order to test my good form and the possibility to put the race to the end with dignity. It was 9.45 a.m. and compared with the previous years I was sensationally in advance... As I was trying to put my concentration hardly on my rhythm, attention shifted from my body to the environment, to the mountain landscape made up of rocks and streams. I was less stressed and I passed the line which signed the half of the race in about 7 hours.

In the next two hours and a half, as I was running along this slope, which wasn't steep but considerably long (almost 20 Km), I thought about my afternoon hardship. It came from a mental difficulty, and my disease was

persistent. Byron Powell's statements came into my mind. He was a member of the Montrail-Nathan Ultrarunning Team. He suggested some mantras to repeat yourself in case you are in shortage. "...maybe the situation won't get worse. If you manage it well, sometimes things can get better, be determined, stay calm, smile and enjoy the landscape. Keep on reminding yourself the reason why you're participating in the marathon. You decided that your aim was to reach Faenza. If you remind yourself of your commitment, you'll have more chance to get to the end... If you put a marathon to the end, you can make it again. You just need to teach your body to resist as long as possible..."

At the top of the hill there was a place for refreshment, food and drinks. Time has come to put aside chemical integrators and to have only "enjoyable" food. The stomach normally can't bear more than ten pieces of gellies and bars. I had salami sandwiches, slices of lemon pie, some pieces of dark chocolate. And then I took a strong pain killer... I continued to drink a lot of water, two glasses every 5 Km depending on the temperature. The stop lasted 25 minutes. I put on my night garments, thicker and reflecting.... Then I started the street through the woods which sloped downwards. There was full moon but it was completely dark in the wood....

At this point we could nearly give in to the temptation that we had already done most of the effort, but that wasn't true: Faenza was still far away. Descending helped to reduce the intensity of the effort and the engagement of heart and circulation, but it was really stressful on muscles and joints. Runners needed a lot of strength to make legs move.

After the relief of running a few hundreds downwards, every step was hard and painful. Joints and thigh muscles started suffering evidently, as the impact with the ground pulled muscle fibres. It was like a cut in the thighs and legs. Changing way of running from upwards to downwards wasn't easy at all, everybody risked to get "packed". The key point of my strategy was that I made the decision to walk downwards to Marradi.

In the meantime I chatted for almost three hours (from 10 p.m. to 1 a. m) with a runner from Livorno. He was a trade representative for HerbaLife and in the darkness I've never been able to give a look to his face. In this way time passed by, I felt calm and I recovered from all my efforts due to heat and slopes...

There was no bigger effort for extensors, and coming down from the hill "Colla" to the "Crespino del Lamone" was very steep. For no reason we had to speed up, in order to make up the time we lost ascending. I preferred keeping energy and motivation for the track after Marradi. Then we had a 20 minutes pit-stop for a couple of sandwiches and a Gatorade. Then the street was almost plain and the effort was lighter and I could run fluently. As the street rolled towards Faenza (which was the terminus of my race 6 and 7 years ago) I ran constantly for several kilometers, feeling no pain in my feet and legs, and listening to the sweet voice of Enya coming from my Ipod.

I got to know the magic of a night in the woods at 42... Mist was coming from the ground, covering fields and trees for a meter, and tree tops were out of it. I heard owls hooting and waterfalls roaring. The full moon in the sky was beautiful and able to light the black ribbon of asphalt so intensely that I could see the shape of my shadow on the ground. My action had no depth in that moment, and I could hardly perceive the meeting point of the sloping streets.

At 75th Km, at 4 a.m. I took another pain killer (my stomach ache was even worse than my pain in muscles and joints) with a slice of bread and chocolate cream. Volunteers along the way were very kind, there were children with them. Kids were sleepy and tagging but they really wanted to help. There were places with doctors and nurses, who were discreet but careful, because they had to check if every runner was in good condition and could continue with the race...

Near Fognano (80th km) I was falling asleep while running. I would have never thought one can fall asleep running forward. It was more or less like fainting, I tagged twice.

I was determined to go on, further kilometers were easier, my physical and mind conditions were positive. I was feeling like a winner, I was in the opposite mood as before. I believed I could really make it... The cock sang at the dawn, light was spread and tore the darkness from the East, exactly where Faenza is.

The rising sun came up in my direction, I saw the rising of a new day: what a beautiful sight! Since my camping holidays over 30 years ago, I hadn't seen a dawn so great.

As I came to Brisighella (88.5 Km) it was daylight, it was 5.30 a.m. I wasn't finished yet, I had to run for two hours to reach my personal "Mecca", called Faenza. It would have been good to have a GPS to run the final kilometer, or to stay with other runners, or to have a cycling friend by side. But my Garmin-gps had run down and I was alone... For a couple of hours I had been running unloaded with a couple of bladders, as big as two 2€-coins, just above the heels. My heel pads had slightly moved inside my Nike-Pegasus running shoes. It was inevitable, like a duty, after so many hours running. I didn't want to insist on my Achilles' heels and tried to shorten their tension using pads. Anyway, if you are in an Ultra- Marathon you can't do without a sort of persistent, insistent pain, which comes out of an inflamed heel or a suffering knee and arrives directly to your guts and torches them. Briefly, pain is a matter of fact! You always have to manage it. As my feet were becoming grilled as a pair of hamburgers, I promised to put them into the most comfortable and softest slippers. That was a pact that my feet accepted, because after a few kilometers the pain coming from the bladders became easier to bear. I could go on serenely....

Anyway, I had to take an easy pace in the final part: in case you are really tired at the beginning of the day, it's always better to have regular breaks; you can bear the effort better and the finishing line gets closer and closer....People were always there, to support runners from the borders of the streets until a certain time of the night. Some people used to leave signs along the way, to express their esteem and appreciation of the hundreds of runners, who each year strive to arrive to Faenza.

As you run this way you realize that races are a very simple sports event, a gesture that still requires a great deal of effort and will.

I finally arrived in Piazza del Popolo in Faenza at 7.10 a.m on a clear Sunday morning. The town was still sleeping. I had thought many times about this moment especially about how I could exultate in front of a photographer that was there to immortalize me as I would cross the finishing line. But in the end I felt only a surprising sense of fulfillment: in a day I had revolutionized the whole perception of my skills and my weak sides. Briefly, I was exhausted but extremely happy!!

My time? 16 hours, 8 minutes and 36 seconds (862nd of 1026 finishers). But if you arrive to Faenza you're a winner indeed, no way you are a loser...At the end I swore myself, I would never run so much again. A few days have gone by, I'm sitting comfortably on my couch and I don't feel like betraying the promise...

“Il Passatore” race is not only a 100km race which involves the usual difficulties of such a long competition. The route is full of steep slopes upwards and downwards. You often have to run when the temperature is as hot as 30°C in the day and goes down to 10°C at night, and you often have to run in darkness. Road traffic is not limited along the route, and, as you run up winding roads, you have to be really careful.

I deduced for such races my mental energies are not enough. I don't have a gift for running more than a marathon. My mind concentrates only on the athletic gesture, on dynamic, efficiency. So, I'm ready for races that last not more than four hours. But I got the satisfaction of getting until the end, in Faenza. I beg pardon for my 7 year-delay. After two withdrawals at 65th km, it seemed impossible, and yet...

My only advice is to participate without too much thinking about it ...If you train for a competition for six or seven months, or for a whole year, you get really stressed, you get too tired, your expectations raise too much, and at the end the race makes you feel sick. If you are already trained for a

marathon (in 2010 I ran Valencia marathon in February and Boston marathon in April) a good training schedule over 30 or 40 days is enough (without injuries)...

“Il Passatore” race attracts and frightens runners, but you needn’t be too scared of it. I didn’t run the Boston marathon perfectly well. Because of physical difficulties my finishing time was bad despite 8 weeks of hard and specific training. However, I decided to participate, in order not to turn my back to 700 Km of preparation in nearly 5 months. So I enrolled in the first days of May and tried not to think about it too much until the day came...

The performance I had, running from Florence to Faenza, requires a lot of patience. It has strengthened my resistance capacity, widened my physical and psychological energies. It has made better even my concentration on work! Briefly, it has changed me!

If you still remember, I put myself a question on the starting line: “Why should you try an Ultra Marathon?” Now that I’ve finished it, I can easily answer: “Because, as you finish it, you feel damned fine!”

ALEX OneHundredMan