



Joe De Sena

Building a Community

**An Interview with Joe De Sena,
Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Spartan**

the right name while things like CrossFit were becoming big.

There may be great ideas backed by great execution plans, but without the right timing, they won't work.

How has Spartan's product offering evolved over time?

In 2009, we cut back from a 350-mile race to three miles, but I wanted it to be three miles that still could change someone's life. At first, I was skeptical because three miles wasn't enough in my mind. However, when we consider the fact that most people sit in a chair or on a couch all day, and then with the addition of 30 obstacles to those three miles, it is a lot. It shook people up – in a good way – more than I thought it would.

I happened to be at the finish line of our first race with someone from Discovery Channel whose job was to determine whether TV shows would be aired or not. He was really good at seeing people's visceral reactions and he noticed that the participants were literally being transformed.

That gave me the motivation to push even harder. I had been doing this for 10 years and was feeling insecure because I had blown millions of dollars and could not get it to work. It really helped to find myself with this person from Discovery Channel who knew what he was doing and having him vouch for the impact it was having.

We did a few more races and kept tweaking them. Ultimately, we realized that people like to progress, so three miles was no longer enough. We wanted to take them from three to eight to 13 and now offer the Sprint, the Super, and the Beast to do this. There are also 141 other products, but those are derivatives of these three core products. We are now in 41 countries with 275 events and 1.1 million participants a year.

Where do you see the greatest opportunities for growth?

To put on our races, imagine renovating a kitchen on the side of a mountain during a rainstorm and needing to have it done in four days. This is not like putting on a marathon where it's all on the road – this is difficult logistically. We do this 275 times a year around the world in countries where it isn't so easy.

I don't expect much growth in the number of events but I expect growth in the number of participants – I think we'll eventually get to two million people. There are roughly nine additional countries I want to enter.

EDITORS' NOTE From selling fireworks at age eight, building a multimillion-dollar pool business in college, creating a Wall Street trading firm, and now the world's fastest growing sports movement, Joe De Sena has demonstrated his entrepreneurial drive since his pre-teens. Following a successful career on Wall Street, De Sena moved his family to Pittsfield, Vermont to operate an organic farm, a bed and breakfast, and a general store for bikers. His passion for ultramarathons, adventure races and endurance events led him to start the Spartan Race and to compete in more than 50 ultra-events overall and 14 Ironman events in one year alone. De Sena has written two New York Times best-selling books, *Spartan Up* and *Spartan Fit*, and has just released his latest book titled, *The Spartan Way: Eat Better. Train Better. Think Better. Be Better.*

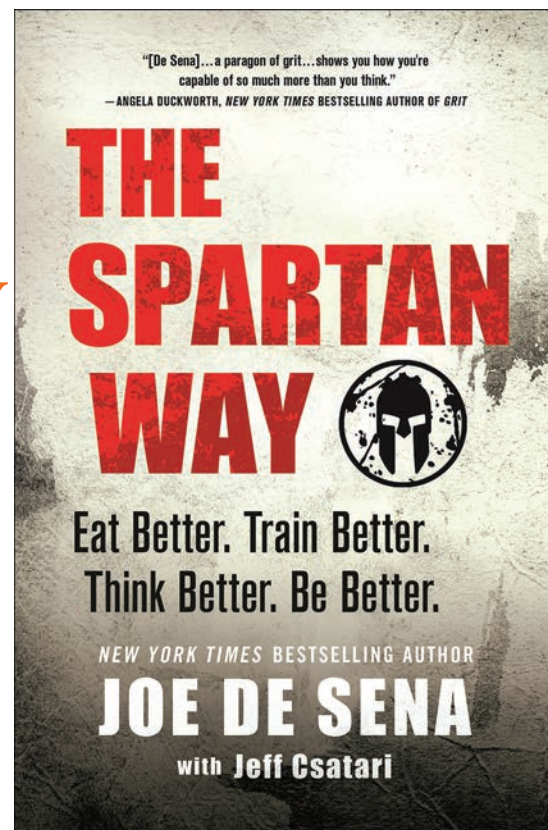
COMPANY BRIEF With more than 275 events in more than 40 countries, Spartan (*spartan.com*) has more than a million global participants and offers open beats for all fitness levels and ages, as well as competitive and elite beats. The company has more than five million passionate social media followers, health and wellness products, and two popular NBC television series, making obstacle racing one of the fastest growing sports and lifestyles in the world. As a leader in the sport, Spartan is the first obstacle racing company to feature timing and global rankings.

What was your vision in creating Spartan?

I definitely mistimed the timing of its launch. I started it in 2000 when the Internet was just getting going. There wasn't a social network yet. I didn't understand digital marketing and it didn't exist like it does today.

The first format I put together was way too long – it was a 400-mile race. There wasn't a big uptake there.

I changed the format and the name in 2010. Spartan has proven to be an unbelievable name. It provides incredible opportunities for products from leadership materials and events to drinks, etc. I was at the right time at the right place with



When we talk to investors, they all want to know how many more races we can do. We can probably do another 60 or 70 in China and in Europe, where there is room for more. However, we can't do one every weekend because then the medal that people earn at the finish line would lose its luster. We have to keep it somewhat exclusive – like the NYC Marathon.

Are the races primarily for people who are athletes?

Of the 10,000 people competing in a race, those in the front of the pack are literally the fittest human beings on earth. They could be put against the best of the best in any sport and few could compete with them. We have tested them and their scores in the laboratories are above any athletes that have been measured.

The reason is that there aren't many sports where the entire body is at work – crawling, jumping, climbing, swimming, etc. These people go through 40 obstacles over 13 miles and they're still completing each mile in the 5:20s. Who else does that?

The rest of the group are moms, monks, marines and others of all ages. It's an unbelievable, very diverse cross-section.

Have the participants become a community and how important is it for Spartan to build a community?

The number one reason we have been successful is community. Too many people today sit around staring at their phones all day, so we're becoming more disconnected from people and our environment. When we create a weekend that brings together 10,000 like-minded people to do something that is very positive and healthy, it feels really good and people want to remain a part of this community.

If that sense of community didn't exist with people helping each other over obstacles and talking about suffering together, I don't think we'd be anywhere near where we are today. It might be our most important reason for existing. ●