To dominate your Spartan Race, you have to train hard and train smart because the course will test every ounce of your body and mind with an intense footrace through arduous mountains and dozens of obstacles seemingly designed by someone who had to have been bullied in high school.

So what's the right way to train for it? It depends, but if your race "training" means maxing out the chest machine and jogging twice a week, you’re already f*cked.

That’s why the founders of Spartan Race created an intense, two-day seminar called the “SGX Workshop” to train coaches and athletes from around the world how to become “Spartan Fit” — to certify them to develop world-class conditioning and to fluidly move in all three dimensions by crawling, climbing, hanging, jumping, twisting, and carrying heavy sh*t so they can thrive on race day.

To see what it was all about, I flew to Chicago to attend a Spartan Race SGX Workshop (and to fuel up on deep-dish pizza and hot dogs). Arriving at the facility on a cold, rainy Saturday morning, I found a tiny room packed with fitness coaches, led by Jeff Godin, Ph.D, CSCS — called “Dr. J” — who broke down the mission of the brand into seven foundational elements of Spartan athletes and showed us how to design our very own SGX program.

If you’re serious about your next adventure race, read on, take notes, and make it happen. Don’t just smile and nod — it’s the difference between a personal record and a participation ribbon.

THE SEVEN PILLARS OF SPARTAN COACHING

Stamina. To develop the endurance to excel at a 15-mile run through a dense forest, on a mountain, and at elevation, you need strong conditioning: aerobic for long durations, alactic for quick bursts, and lactic for sustained, intense pushes. I’ve talked about the importance of having a strong aerobic base before — don’t underestimate it.

Power. To become a Spartan athlete, this fitness component will propel you over challenging obstacles. Here, exercises like plyometrics, Olympic variations, and speed-based training are essential. But power also describes empowering your clients and the people you lead.

Athleticism. In a Spartan Race, an endurance runner will die on the obstacles and a powerlifter will die before the second mile. Why? They’re too specialized. The athletic person is the one who can do everything well and has an insane general level of fitness: strength, balance, agility, conditioning, movement, etc. That’s what you want for a successful race.

Readiness. Are you ready for when your equipment breaks on the third mile of a 15-mile course? Are you ready for unseasonably hot and muggy weather on race day, even if it’s November? Are you ready for whatever may come not only in fitness but also in life? Successful Spartans must be prepared for anything that may come in training, race conditions, and obstacles. Expect the unexpected.

Tenacity. Never quit — not on a friend, not on your training, and certainly not on yourself. “Tenacity means nothing can go wrong, even when it appears to others that it has. Without tenacity any career in obstacle racing will be short lived.”

Attitude. This is everything. Avoid the chronic complainers and surround yourself with people who inspire you, motivate you, and push you forward. Make sure to do the same for them, too; you never know who thinks you’re a hero.

Nutrition. “You are what you eat,” says the old adage. For example, the official sponsor of the Spartan Race is CLIF Bar — fitting, since the entire weekend I munched on their high-protein bars, which had all the carbs, vitamins, nutrients, and protein I needed to NOT die during the five-minute burpee challenge. (I survived, but my ego didn’t.)

What do those pillars spell?

SPARTAN.
The problem with most workouts is that it doesn’t fit into a long-term training block: everyday is different and “thinking long-term” means deciding what exercise to use as a finisher. Instead, the SGX team recommends a 12-week block separated into three four-week phases: Function, Fitness, and Performance.

Phase 1: Function. Here you focus on improving your basic fundamental movements, coordination, nutrition, and work capacity. Learn how to properly crawl, squat, and bend at your hip. Open up your joints to eliminate pain and build solid movement patterns. And start with bodyweight stuff — lunges, pushups, inverted rows, etc. — and work your way up.

Phase 2: Fitness. Start to layer on more strength and cardiovascular improvements and add complex movements like kettlebell swings, single-leg exercises, and Turkish get ups. Ramp up the intensity; if you did Phase 1 correctly, you’ll be able to handle it.

Phase 3: Performance. This is where you put together your foundations to mimic the intensity of the race. You might include some Olympic lift variations, plyometrics, shorter rest periods, and obstacle-specific moves like climbing, hanging, and jumping. Maximize output and get ready for the big day.

As for the race itself, here are a few tips:

1. Stay hydrated and fueled on electrolytes because, during an intense race, you lose about 3 grams of sodium per liter of sweat. (That's a freakin' pack of instant ramen.) Bring fluids and foods rich in carbs and electrolytes.

2. Get acclimated to your equipment. For example, if you plan to wear a hydration pack for your Spartan Race, get used to the feel in the weeks and months before.

3. Taper your training volume and intensity before the race. As Dr. J said: “Before the start, you want to feel like you’re dying to do some exercise.”

4. Traditional pre-race dinners of carbs, carbs, and more carbs are overrated. One, you don’t want to run the race with a “full load” the next morning (if you know what I mean). Two, it’s better to start inhaling carbs two days in advance, not the night before.

And there you have it. Follow these steps, understand the pillars, build your own SGX program, uh, watch 300, and prepare yourself for race day. When the Spartan Race starts, you’ll be glad you did.

Thank you to everyone at Spartan Race and CLIF Bar for creating such a great event and workshop. And thank you to Dr. J and all the phenomenal coaches at the Chicago SGX — please don’t tell anyone how out-of-shape I was.

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