

# A six-day war

I am looking forward to running my third multi-day race within four months. It is a new event for me and, without my own support, I am keen to find out more. Race director Kaj Jensen is responsive to my Internet enquiry. He confirms a trackside tent for me and sends the Swedish train ticket to connect with my flight. The race is on an all-weather track and the night lasts just two hours in Southern Sweden at the end of July. As I learn more I look forward to being part of this event. My awful six-day race just five weeks ago in the blistering heat of Antibes is almost forgotten.

I arrive at Hallsberg after midnight, 36 hrs before the race starts. Kaj greets me and leads me to the stadium and my tent. It is 5m from the track and next to where the electronic lap control and aid station will be placed. It is spacious and welcoming. I jump into bed and sleep right away.

Next day passes quickly. I look around, join meetings, share greetings, and set up equipment. For social reasons we

decide to walk to nearby restaurants for lunch and dinner. Two more competitors have arrived from Germany, Jutta Jöhring and Peter Ludden, who include the race as part of their holiday in Sweden. I am happy to meet friends from previous events, but the star is the Greek legend Yiannis Kouros, who showed up without registering beforehand. I understood later that he wanted to avoid any serious competitor like the German Wolfgang Schwerk. Yiannis avoids pre-race activities with the other 18 participants, and sticks with his two supporters.

On race day everybody sleeps in, only rising for the compulsory pre-race meeting. The rain is pouring down. From the start, Yiannis Kouros wants to be clear that it is a running race, and race walkers must use lane three or four to allow runners to pass inside. But - that's me! If walking is not allowed maybe I should go home right away. But Kaj provides reassurance.

## Day 1: An early duel

Rain pours down, but the track drains well. My umbrella is good against the water from above. I use the inside lane, jogging slowly, and tilting the umbrella infield. Yiannis only once rails against me in aggressively loud voice. He is preoccupied in chasing Glen Turner. I later learn that Glen once crewed for Yiannis, was yelled at by him - and yelled back! An enmity was born. But Glen soon gets stomach problems and Yiannis gets a leg injury. After only seven hours, the chase is over. Glen jogs; Yiannis walks. He walks on the inside kerb, and never gives up this position. I am relieved: nobody will mind me also walking there.

I feel good on the first day. I need the umbrella less and less. I use baby powder to protect wet and wounded feet. The race has been going nine hours before I experience the Scandinavian summer night where complete darkness lasts for just two hours. Before and after I jog and walk through seemingly endless hours of dusk and dawn. These in-between-hours create a meditative mood. After 24 hours I have collected 156.8km. For me, this is good.



## Day 2: runners, hedgehogs and earth-worms share the track

I take my first big break. I lie in my camp bed, caring for the needs of the body, but one hour later, I am on the track again.

Just then, Glen comes by. I catch up and we discuss his world record at Extramiledurathon, when he was on the move for 103 hours without rest. That's something for me: "Who sleeps is lost" is a famous quote of mine. I am excited, by our plan to work together in a future event. Time passes quickly, as Glen's stomach - and the weather - calms down.

Most runners are still in buoyant mood. Jutta and Peter are already suffering, but move well, smiling or joking when passing me. She will finish with more than 500km. But Yiannis' injury gets worse. He walks and yells at his supporters, but they take it with a smile. He is 20-30km ahead of me, gained in the first seven hours of the race. He never takes a real break, but is able to recover within minutes. When changing shoes, his supporters do everything for

him. I walk faster, but stop every six hours for 30-60 minutes whenever we change direction. Both methods are well-balanced.

An exciting chase for second place is developing between the Swede Christian Ritella and me. People tell me that he is young and speedy; he gets emails telling him about me walking almost nonstop every day at the same speed. We joke about who might be more deadly, and it is great fun.

My midnight break shortens further the short Scandinavian night. From 01.00-04.00 I am alone on the track with Yiannis, apart from the hedgehogs. They seem to enjoy walking on tartan tracks, but if they pass by me I will go to sleep. Later Jutta makes it even more difficult for me to sleep as she points to the earthworms. Does she mean those few living or the many dead? We laugh about such nonsense. I finish this funny day with 128km; 285.2km in 48 hours.



## Day 3: Ambition arising: 400km in 72 hours?

The laundry service works wonders. Every dirty piece of clothing given in the late evening returns clean to my tent in the early morning, but I am too lazy to arrange clothes properly, and too impatient about how much time may be lost.

I hear a heat wave is ahead, so I put in as many kilometres as I can. The Swedish berrycake sustains me, and at the aid station I ask the right woman. She is all smiles, and promises to bake more for next morning. But it becomes increasingly troublesome to move forward. I know the best jokes and life-stories of almost all participants. My MP's repeats every eight hours. I try to find inspiration in nature. I think of all the energy in grass and flowers and imagine myself as part of this. Better ignore the joyous cries from the swimming pool. Mental strategies.

At night Kaj warns us it will get cold. We put on our warmest clothes, but even then I do not sweat at all when moving. My six-hour splits are a steady 30km, and I have done 406.5km at the end of day three.

## Day 4: Chasing Yiannis

Short Scandinavian nights cook up hot days. Noon rest in the tent is like baking in an oven. I try to rest in the shadow behind the tent, but the shadow evaporates. Back on course I still feel surprisingly refreshed, and move forward at 5.5km/h. Yiannis, still yelling, has his usual lead on me. Christian's breaks get longer, and he falls behind me. Glen stops more and for longer. I survive the first hot day on the track, but the prognosis is not good.

In an encouraging email, I read that I am the woman who chases Yiannis Kouros. Good idea! He does indeed seem fretful, yelling not only at his supporters, but now also at me. I do not respond, and go very wide when overtaking him. We are alone on the track, except for his helpers who pace him with impunity. Finally I protest, and he gets a warning. This happens several times.

Hardly noticing how hungry I am, I finally I order soup - any kind. They give me something blue: "Blubarsup". It's blueberry soup, the favourite drink of Swedish cross country skiers, and I slurp it up. At 06.00 I take tent rest. Life on the track is getting hard, but my 117.6km on day four makes a total of 524.4km.

## Day 5: A wall of heat

I am bumping against a wall of heat. The aid station offers water melon and ice cream to counter-attack. I drink non-alcoholic beer with isotonic drink and crushed ice. Yiannis is doubled over and almost too exhausted to yell, but never really takes a break. I get headaches which become unbearable. I take painkillers and drink more, and just through a relaxed walk I manage about 5km/h. A camera team approaches, asking "Are you tired? What kind of tired? Is it fun?"

Something is different today. A strange calm pervades the stadium. Spectators are hushed and the nearby swimming pool is closed. The sad message comes through: a small child almost drowned there. It should live - but with brain damage. It frightens us all.

After my short 18.00 rest, I head onto the track in the wrong direction, still brushing my teeth. It takes a whole lap for me to understand. The heat has got to me. But for once Yiannis is not on the track. He is lying in front of his caravan. When back up he is unexpectedly friendly to his fellow competitors. "very good," he murmurs when I pass by.

It doesn't last long. He soon asks me angrily if I find it fun to chase an injured man. If he is injured, why doesn't he drop out? The myth is that Yiannis Kouros does not give up or lose. I try to look innocent, but every hour I ask race officials to disallow assistance afforded him. Disqualification never seems to be an issue; perhaps everybody fears his name.

At midnight take my longest stop: 90 minutes. I sweat a lot; I sleep a little. On the track again. I feel refreshed. Jutta tells me what just happened: "Yiannis went at a crazy speed as soon as you left" I checked the standings. He is 18km ahead again, meaning he did 6km/h?! Eventually I catch him, and he yells. We spend another "funny" night together.

I've done 113.6km for 628km total, 106km short of my own 6-day German track record.



## Day 6: Reaching out to Yiannis Kouros

I dream of 750km, but feel terribly overheated. I take an ice-cold shower for several minutes, enjoying every second of it. On my mattress I still sweat a little bit and finally sleep for another few minutes.

The fresh 24-hour runners join in on the outside of the track, reviving our jaded spirits. We applaud each other. Maybe it's last-day excitement, or can we really get used to anything? I keep cool by continuously eating ice cream and watermelon, and putting ice cubes under my clothes. Fatigue fades away; I am chasing my own record, and the Greek.

Suddenly my foot hits something soft. The hedgehogs! Checking on the next lap there is no hedgehog to be seen: it seems to have survived the collision.

Tonight it cools only after 21.00. Yiannis is watching me as I disappear for a while at midnight. He seems to fear defeat, and this inspires me to do better. He talks, seemingly friendly: "You will get your record at about 10.00. Then it will be really hot again, and you can comfortably go to have a shower. You are doing well, but I cannot accept your fighting! Fights are for sprinters. Ultra distance runners are soloists. Myself, I move peacefully, just watching what others do". I finish his speech in my thoughts: "...as long as nobody is close behind me...". He thinks I am stupid? I say that I want to do my best, and away I go.

With six hours to go I rest and return, but have to again protest the assistance afforded Yiannis "this is an IAU label event. Rules must be obeyed. Assistants must stay inside the aid station zone. Do I have to take this further?" My protest cost me two minutes, but I have my own helper for the rest of the race. I feel like a queen. But Yiannis protests and soon my helper slinks away. I walk faster, and even run, managing 6.7km/h. At 10.00 I surpass my record, but then press even harder. My sudden fall onto the smooth grass of the infield brings me back to reality, momentarily. Towards the end, I move as if in a dream.

We all walk the last metres hand in hand, dedicating them to the small Norwegian child who almost drowned in the pool.

With the closing shot we hug each other, laughing and weeping at the same time. Blackness descends but I get out of the sun in time, lying down with my legs up. I made 756.4km, more than ever before, but Yiannis finished 2.4km ahead of me.

In third place Christian Ritella covered 701.6km for a new Swedish record. In fourth Tom Hendriks set a new Dutch record of 652.4km, and Aku Kopalekala set a Finnish record with 565.2km. Yiannis Kouros and Glen Turner ran national age records.

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