

The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts

Episode 16: Joe De Sena

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Tim Ferriss: Guten tag, ladies and gentleman. This is Tim Ferriss and welcome to another episode of The Tim Ferriss Show. Let us start off with a little munch munch, a little snack for your brain. And these are proverbs. So, the first is from Japanese and it is [Speaking Japanese]. [Speaking Japanese] that means monkey also. [Speaking Japanese] tree from. [Speaking Japanese] falls. [Speaking Japanese]. That means, do not fall into hubris, do not get arrogant because no matter how good you are, you might still fall out of the tree, even if you are a monkey.

Alright, the second is from German and we will see if the Japanese messes it up because when I speak Japanese it tends to actually lead me to mix up my R's and my L's and that is not being racist. Do not hit the big red racist button. Chill out. It is because they have [Speaking Japanese]. They have this sound that does not differentiate between the L and the R. It is actually more a combination of R, L and D. [Speaking Japanese]. Alright, those are the syllables and they are syllabary.

So, moving to the German. This one means in English – I will give you that first. During hardship, the devil eats flies. So, the English equivalent might be beggars cannot be choosers or desperate times call for desperate measures, which is very appropriate to this episode. And this one is [Speaking German]. Alright, [Speaking German] which is during hardship. [Speaking German] which is actually it is [Speaking German] which is kind of interesting. But, [Speaking German] that is the devil. [Speaking German] flies. Alright? So, during hardship the devil eat flies. The devil eat flies you say. Speak the English.

Okay, moving on. Sorry, I have had a lot of caffeine. I am feeling frisky. This episode is featuring guest Joe de Sena. Joe De Sena is a maniac. He is a crazy man. He is also the CEO and cofounder of Spartan Race, but prior to that – because Spartan Race, perhaps as you know, has been attempted, perhaps completed by a million plus people in a dozen plus countries around the world.

It is a huge business, a massive success, a phenomenon. Prior to that, he did things like run the Iditarod, which is the world's most

famous dog sledding race by foot. Why? Because perhaps he is a masochist, I do not know what drives someone to do such a thing. But, we explore why he might do that. He has done things like the Vermont 100, the Bad Water Ultra Marathon. He has completed many other races that would kill most mortal men, like the Lake Placid Iron Man and he did all three of those in one week by the way.

The predecessor to Spartan Race was called the Death Race because in effect it was designed to kill people and in his spare time – prior to I think that [inaudible] life, he was a derivatives and equities trader on Wall Street. But, he came from very humble beginnings and I find that Joe is very tactical. He is very astute. He is very pragmatic. Philosophies of life that you can apply and I found his stories fascinating.

We really tried to dig deeper. I tried to dig deep. I hope you enjoy it. Two last things, 1.) for all the show notes, links, including to his book which is a new book, *Spartan Up*. I encourage you to check it out. Go to fourhourworkweek.com/podcast. Alright, fourhourworkweek.com/podcast. You can find the links to all sorts of episodes with other folks as well and all the show notes.

So, without further ado, Joe De Sena. Here he is. Thank you for listening.

Tim Ferriss: Joe, thank you for making the time to jump on the phone. I appreciate it.

Joe De Sena Thanks for having me.

Tim Ferriss: And quite the story that you have. Now, you were introduced to me by Josh. I believe it was over at Summit Series and of course you seemed to be in all places at once. It would be great as a starting point is to just give a little bit of background on who you are for those people who may not be immediately familiar with you.

Joe De Sena Yes, so just background on me and where I came from?

Tim Ferriss: Yes, exactly.

Joe De Sena So, I grew up in Queens, New York. If you have ever seen the movie Good Fellas, I literally grew up right in the center of that. We lived right near Kennedy airport and it was a crazy life. My dad was a super aggressive entrepreneur. He had to be back in those days. He had a greenhouse. He had a trucking business. He

was in air freight. He had a [inaudible] You name it, he had it. And around the mid 80's started to have some real trouble just because he was over extended and parents got divorced. Mom moved to Ithaca, New York to get us out of that insanity of – it was basically just a big organized crime area where we were. It was probably organized crime capital of the world and thank God she did.

But, I had my dad's DNA regarding work ethic. My mother completely made a left turn and got into health and wellness in a big way. Traveling to India, becoming a yogi, a vegan, and teaching meditation, and complete opposite where we had come from, the first ten, 12 years of my life.

And really influenced my sister and I to focus ourselves. Although, back then it was not mainstream. It was not normal to be into that. Maybe if you were in California, but certainly not where we were from. So, she was shunned and battling a big tide of non-believers that were focused on – certainly in Queens, focused on sausages and hot dogs and not – everything except what she was into.

And so I had these two different lives. If I went to go visit my dad back in Queens, we were out all night at Chinese restaurants or Italian restaurants and getting to stay up late as kids and if I went back with my mom, it was very strict focus on health and wellness. And then he lost everything and it was the best thing that ever happened to me because I had all those creature comforts and amenities being around a successful entrepreneur that all the sudden vanished.

She could not pay the mortgage. She could not pay the heat bills. We were losing the house up in Ithaca and it just a switch went off that hey if I want those things again I have to work and so I started a business. The neighbor of my dad was unbeknownst to me at that time was the head of the Bonanno organized crime family and he said, hey I know you are going through some trouble. Why do you not clean my pool? So, I started cleaning his swimming pool and before you know it, I had every organized crime figure as a customer in the – not in the tristate area, but certainly Brooklyn, Queens, Long Island, even Staten Island and it became a pretty big business.

Now, my mom was in Ithaca, so she was pushing to get away from that and get into education and so I ended up applying to Cornell, which I had no business going to. I was not smart enough, so I did not do that well on SAT scores because I had this pool business that I wanted to build.

And I applied and they denied my application and that only made me more interested in getting in. I found out that you can go to many colleges extramurally, which means you could take up to three classes or nine credits and be non-matriculated. So, you are not getting credits toward anything until you get accepted somewhere. Most kids were taking fifteen credits. So, I figured well I will do nine credits and I will just prove myself and they will have to let me in.

So, I did my nine credits. I studied my butt off and did really well and reapplied and they did not want to set a precedent and show that there is a back door way into an Ivy League school, so they denied me again, which only made me more furious. And so I did it again. And I was on my fourth try, four semesters in and they almost broke me. I was almost –

Tim Ferriss: This is like Rudy. It is like the movie Rudy.

Joe De Sena It is just like the movie Rudy.

And I had this pool business was growing and growing and so now I am starting to make some really good money. It had turned into a construction company and so for the summers I was going down to New York. And I am thinking at that point [inaudible] and they are not accepting me. There is no way to win here. I am just going to go to New York and run my business and who needs college?

And my mom says to me, “I know some people at Cornell.” If she had not said a word, I would have never expected her to have a connection. The kind people that had connection with people in New York, like my dad. And it turns out she is teaching a woman yoga that is Head of Admissions at one of the schools of Cornell. She sets up a meeting and the woman sits down with me and says, “Alright, well I am in the School of Human Ecology.” Cornell has many, many schools. Many, many focuses and one of the schools within Cornell was Human Ecology and they had a textiles department, which would study the business of textiles, clothing.

And so she says to me, “I know your mother. She told me you have been trying. You are four semesters in here. Have not been accepted. I head up this department. It is like 90 women and one man. Would you be interested?”

I said, “Very interested and that would be perfect for me.” “Do you have any interest in clothing?” “I love clothing.” And they

accepted me. So, that – Professor Anita Raseen had changed my life and she accepted me into this program. If I had to do it again, I would study again because I could watch any movie anywhere and tell you when that movie takes place based on women’s hemlines. I am an expert in clothing now.

And so, it was awesome. It was an awesome experience. I broke out of multi generation of people not going to school. Got into an Ivy League school and it literally changed my life.

Tim Ferriss: That is – I did not know the college story at all. Now, you have done so many different things. You ended up on Wall Street at one point. Am I right? Did that happen right after school?

Joe De Sena Yes, so what happened was I was so excited that I got into Cornell that I found out – and again, I was kind of figuring this out on the fly. Really did not have parents that were guiding me on this because they had no experience with college. And so, I found out that there was an MBA program at Cornell that you could do in one year. So, you could finish undergrad and grad in a five-year program. So, I figured let us just press my bets and go for it and I took a class to get familiar with the MBA program, and entrepreneurship class, and I won the entrepreneurship award.

So, during that class, I met a bunch of judges who were very successful people that had graduated Cornell, gone on their own, and one of those judges took a real liking to me. I did not make the MBA program, they did not accept me and I went back to Queens to run that swimming pool and construction business, which was doing very well at point because I was able to apply all the things I was learning at Cornell to my business. So, I go back and I am running the business and that judge stayed in touch with me and he calls me literally first of the month every month and says, “When are you going to get out of the pool business? You have to go to New York City.”

And I was in Queens and I said, “I am doing really well. I met this great girl. I am 22 years old. I do not need to go to Manhattan.” And every month he drove me crazy and one day he says, “Sorry, if you are not going to listen to me,” – now I am probably two years out of Cornell and he sees that he is losing the battle and he says, “If you are not going to listen to me, I want you to buy this stock.” And I had never bought a stock before and he tells me about this stock, Zyntex which is a drug company. Now, this is an

older guy that has been trading and managing money for years and he had been watching this stock for 25 years.

And he says, “I want you to buy this stock. It is \$14.00 a share. It is a drug company.” And he is an old time case reader. And I thinking, I do not want to – I have been working so hard, I do not want to invest in a stock. I remember the ’87 crash and this guy is crazy. And I go to one of my customer’s house that day that owed me quite a bit of money for finishing a big construction job.

He owed me \$140,000.00 give or take. He is towel drying his hair as I ring the bell to pick up my check. And I said, “Hey,” – he was a pharmacist and I said, “Listen, buddy of mine is telling me to buy this stock. It is in your industry. It is called Zyntex.” And as he is towel drying his hair he is like, “I cannot believe you are asking me.” He goes, “I was just in the shower and I am thinking of buying some today.”

Tim Ferriss: You are like, first pay your damn bills and then we can talk about what you are buying. But, yes.

Joe De Sena So, he sits me down, this customer of mine, and he says, “Here is the deal. You are single. You are making quite a bit of money now running this business. If you are ever going to take chances in life, now is the time to do it because you do not have a family.” And he convinces me. He calls his broker because I do not have a broker. I do not know how to do this. And he convinces me to take the entire check, the \$140,000.00 and buy this stock, right?

And I go from not wanting to invest and everybody is crazy, to within an hour later I am investing the entire check in this stock.

And the next day, the company gets taken over. And it was not funny business, it was just these were old timers that I guess read the tape well and I made \$100,000.00 and I said I am the God of Wall Street. [Inaudible] just like this is crazy.

So, I spend the next two years trying to get a job on Wall Street because really I am a pool and construction guy from Queens. I have a textile degree. I have no business getting a job in Wall Street. I am already making at that point really good money and so any job I am even lucky to get would maybe pay me \$30,000.00 a year. And I am so lucky that I was guided by this guy out of Cornell because he guides me to the institutional side of the business and I end up getting this job where they train me in the whole industry.

I worked in research. I worked in investment banking. I worked on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. And literally, I spent two years just bouncing from department to department learning the entire business and as I was there, the company got sold to ING for \$600 million.

And so I thought to myself – again, because I lack intelligence sometimes. I said, I can start my own investment bank firm. I know everything about swimming pools. Why do I not start an investment bank? So, everybody told me at the firm, you are crazy. No one – what institution is possibly going to business with a pool guy? And so I started a little business and they were right. Nobody, when we first started, would do business with us.

And then one day, just as we were about to go out of business, a guy from Cornell that has since become one of my great friends and life changing inspirations in my life, he calls me up and asks me to purchase a bunch of equities and derivatives, which he pays me a nice commission on. And just like the head of the Bonanno organized crime family that changed my life in the pool business and just like Professor Anita Raseen changed my life getting into Cornell, he changes my life with this order. And we end up building this giant business right before we were – just went it was darkest and we were going out of business because I could not get anybody to deal with this brand new firm that had no business.

Tim Ferriss:

Like the phoenix from the ashes. So, I have a couple of really quick questions just because the story – there is so much more to the story obviously, but what did that judge see in you that led him to contact you on the first of the month and continually ask you to get out of the pool business? What do you think the characteristics were? The conversations that you – what are the things that led to him pursuing you like that?

Joe De Sena

Well, I think – I am sure you see the same things as you make investments or you are hiring people or partnering with people, and that – there is very few people on a percentage basis that have that fire in their belly. It is not necessarily specific knowledge because I certainly – I am not that smart of a guy, but I have an enormous fire in my belly from the time my eyes opened to the time I collapse on a bed every day, to just get stuff done. It is not always the smartest way I attack things, but I am just relentless.

And I think that is rare. I think it is rare and I think he saw that and it would have – because I look for that and I am sure you look for

that and I think he thought, wow this would be waste to have this guy stuck in Queens. Now, you do not know it – me, I do not know it at the time that that would be a waste. I am feeling like I am killing it and he sees much bigger opportunity for me and my dad later thanked him because – again, all these people just changed my life.

But, I do not think it is by accident and by chance those things happened. I think I just put myself out there like you probably do or anybody that has had some luck in life. You kind of make your own luck. You do not say no to anything. You take every meeting. You listen to every phone call and stuff just happens for you.

Tim Ferriss: The entrepreneurship award that you won, what did you do to win that award? Was it a project? Was it based on a track record with the pool business? What caught the attention of these judges who then gave you that award?

Joe De Sena So, it is funny. It was not – when I remember asking the professor, Professor Ben Daniel – I will never forget his name because it was pretty big for a guy that could not even get accepted to the school to win the award. It was really the fire in my belly that they saw when I stood in front of the class and made my pitch. It was not the idea.

Tim Ferriss: Just out of curiosity, what was the idea? Do you remember?

Joe De Sena Yes, so back then and probably still in existence today, Champion sweatshirts were the rage. They would take silk lettering and put Cornell University on the Champion sweatshirt and I believe back then they were selling them for about \$50.00. and I thought to myself, it is kind of ridiculous they are taking a Champion sweatshirt made in the US, shipping it to some old women to sew the letters on and they are selling them for \$50.00.

First of all, I think I can make a better sweatshirt. I think I could import them because remember, I was studying textiles at this point and there were problems with the sweatshirt. It was – they used to blow out around the waist and they used to blow out around the sleeves and if I could incorporate some lycra into the waist and the sleeves, sew the letters on myself, I could probably produce a better product for less money.

So, it was not like some earth shattering technology or anything. It was just a very basic business, but the pitch I think was – they saw that here was a guy who was relentless and inspired because there

were better ideas. It is just that is what got them.

Tim Ferriss: Got it. So, speaking of relentless, I want to come back to investment world obviously, and we will get there I am sure. But, just what time is this? What year when the company was saved by this particular order for derivatives and equities and what not? Where was that relative to the birth of the Death Race, which I am sure we will get to? But, sort of how many years prior was that?

Joe De Sena So, Death Race – let us see, was 2004. The day I got that order when we were on the brink of literally closing the doors I would say was 1198.

Tim Ferriss: Okay. Got it and so what was the path from the doors are reopened, Wall Street is looking a little more attractive, from there to Death Race and then obviously Spartan Race, but how did you end up making that transition or that discovery?

Joe De Sena So, what happened was the pool and construction business got me in incredibly physical shape because I worked 20 hours a day physically and when I went to Wall Street that changed. I had weekends free. I did not know what to do with myself. You sat on a desk all day. I had never done that before and I started to gain some weight and I just didn't feel as healthy as I had always felt.

And so I was looking for some exercise or something and I stumbled upon a guy in the stairwell at my building that I lived in in Manhattan who was on a cover of *Men's Health* and just was the epitome. This guy was ripped. And I met him in a stairwell and just was inquiring and I wanted to work out and he said jump in the stairs with me every day and we started doing stairs together.

The first day I could do like five flights, and then ten flights, and he started to get me motivated by telling me about these things called adventure races. And so he hooked me. He got me to go do a small three-hour adventure race in Texas and I was hooked. It was outside, I felt alive again. And I said, "Man what is the next level. I have to do something bigger." And he said, "Well, you could do a 24-hour race, but you have to really," – "Sign me up, I have to do it."

And whatever I did, I have to find the next level. Whatever the – give me the craziest race in the world and he said, "Well, you could die. There is this one – the Iditarod in Alaska. They do it in the middle of the winter and it is by foot and it is 30 below. But, you have to," – "Sign me up. I have to do it." And so, the crazier it

was – I had to get back to this place where you just want water, food, and shelter. And all the craziness of my life – this Wall Street life I had taken on would go away, would melt away that stress all day long of –

You make and lose \$30,000.00, \$40,000.00 in minutes screwing up an order or having customers tell you that they are no longer going to deal with you. It was very stressful business. So, to get back to the core of life, just water, food, and shelter was very liberating. And so I kept seeking that.

And it kind of connected with me because since I was very young, building that first business I was having a tough time finding people with fire in their belly and here in these races I was seeing people with fire in their belly. Anyone who was out there doing this crazy stuff had that thing I was seeking my whole life. And so when I got to Vermont, which – so, fast forward. I sold that Wall Street Business, met my wife at a race, got married, moved to Vermont to have a family and to remove myself from New York City because I was afraid if I was around the possibility of doing business while I was trying to grow a family, the business would always win.

I am addicted to business, so I had to literally put myself in a padded room, that room would be Vermont mountains with a 400-person town, and just dedicate some time to growing a family. And while I was there – that lasted like two days and I said, I want to create a race that helps me find those people with fire in their belly. That like – Russel Crowe in Gladiator or Mel Gibson in Braveheart or just these amazing people that just get it done when their back is against the wall.

And what if I created – with a buddy of mine, this race that purposely broke these people? Not the way the races I had done or a marathon does, but actually where I would actually drive the participants crazy? Not tell them when it is starting, not tell them when it is ending, not giving them water, giving them busses during the middle of the race and saying you could quite here. Just get in the bus. This is not for you. You are too week.

And worse than military. Like just really just break people. And that was the beginning of my race business.

Tim Ferriss: That was the Death Race, right?

Joe De Sena That was the Death Race. That was 2004, '05.

Tim Ferriss: Literally called the Death Race.

Joe De Sena Literally called the Death Race.

Tim Ferriss: And that – from just some of the reading I was doing. Excavating tree stumps, heavy rocks, sleep deprivation. Where those some of the crazier elements or where there other aspects to it? Did you have any like real catastrophes or did you self-select for the most part the most successful or grittiest folks who tended to make it through to the end? Like what percentage of people who started the Death Race finish the Death Race?

Joe De Sena Well, we knew – I will answer those in this order. So, we knew in the beginning we had something. We had eight participants show up and immediately five quite, like within the first three hours.

Tim Ferriss: What broke the – was there any moment that was really the straw that broke the camel’s back that led these five to quit?

Joe De Sena Well, I do not think they knew what they were getting into because we had never done it before and one guy – I remember specifically, one guy started crying and he was like, “I am a really good runner. I just do not know how to chop wood.” Broken. Because no one knew. We did not tell them what – and so, Doug Lewis, who is an Olympic level skier, downhill skier, is about – whatever 15, 18 hours into this thing and he is cracking. He is broken and he turns to me and says, I made the Olympics. I trained my whole life. I am a pretty tough guy. He goes, this is fucking crazy. Sorry for my language. I do know if we are allowed to curse or not.

Tim Ferriss: Oh, no you are allowed to curse. It is totally fine.

Joe De Sena So, that moment we knew we had a winner here.

And Doug finishes and so yes then it just took on a life of its own. Doug and two Vermont guys – he like shredded steel for breakfast. These guys had been chopping wood for their whole lives. They were just hearty. The Ashley brothers. Between Doug and those two guys, we knew we had something. And then they started training other people for the next year and then *The New York Times* picks it up. All of a sudden lights out.

My home phone starts ringing from every TV producer in the US, whether it was Discovery Channel, NatGeo, BBC. I was fielding

calls for reality TV shows. Screaming at me, we are not doing a reality TV show. Well, let us just listen. See what people have to say. And then ultimately, the top guy in reality, outside of Mark Burnett, this guy Craig Piligian from Pilgrim Films called and flew in on his private jet to Vermont. And we met and shook hands and then we sold the show to Discovery in six minutes.

They bought 13 shows. This was going to be unbelievable. Start the casting call and that is when I stated to learn everything about television because the new CEO came into Discovery – the CEO that bought the show from us got fired and the new guy comes in and says I am not taking any of the old shows because I have no upside. If it is bad I am going to get yelled at and if it is good, I am not going to get any credit. So, he drops it and then we spend the next whatever years trying to get a TV deal.

In that timeframe, I started up something called Spartan Race and while we thought we had a TV deal and Spartan Race was an attempt to tone the Death Race down a bit and make it for the masses. To maybe find that fire in people's belly and get people off the couch and get them healthy. Thought maybe 50,000 would compete in a Spartan Race. I thought I will invest – I am not going to invest more than \$50,000.00 in this. I am kind of retired in Vermont, having fun with the Death Race.

And I begged everybody I knew to run it or invest in it and everybody said, who is going to crawl under barbed wire and jump over fire? Sounds ridiculous. No one is going to do that. And that first race, you could see the look on people's faces. Like there was something there. They went primal and all the things I felt when I did those adventure races, they were feeling. And now there was a social network where they could share that feeling that coincided with the Spartan Race and it just exploded.

And so now this year we will have one million participants in Spartan. We will be in 131 events around the globe in 17 countries and I went from trying to grow a family, being retired in a small town of Vermont, to never being home and living on a computer.

Tim Ferriss: The full circle. A hero's journey. So, the Death Race, at its peak, how many participants were participating in the Death Race on an annual basis?

Joe De Sena So, even today – even with – the Death Race now has a lot of visibility thanks to Spartan Race. Even today, the most you will get on an annual basis will be 400 participants in Death Race. 15

percent of them each year will finish. That is our goal. So, in other words, if 400 people start it today, the race is over in our mind when we get down to 15 percent. So, when 60 people are standing – and if that takes two weeks, it takes two weeks.

And that creates an interesting element because it drives people crazy. Like, we try to pick all the things that are going to drive people crazy. Form when I did races or my partner did races and Death Race, we know what almost broke us or did break us and those are the elements we add to Death Race to drive people crazy.

Tim Ferriss: So, two things. If you could give just a couple of examples of some of the feats that you are well known for, endurance wise, I think that would be interesting to folks. Of course, read some of the stats, but I would love to hear that and then second part of that is, what are the things that drive you crazy when you are doing that kind of thing?

Joe De Sena Yes, so back to that stairwell with that *Men's Health* cover guy. When I started doing those races – again, I what helped me – which has really helped me through life, is a lack of knowledge. I think sometimes people have so much knowledge in a particular area or study it so much that actually they talk themselves out of doing something and because I did not have any knowledge in this endurance area, I just signed up for things. And so I signed up for the Iditarod. They call it the Iditasport, where you do it by sport and that was 350 miles, 30 below temps, and three feet of fresh snow. It just did not stop. It was terrible.

Tim Ferriss: No dogs, just feet. Just two feet.

Joe De Sena Yes, I was the dog. I was the dog. This race called the [inaudible] An easier way to explain it is if anybody knows the Eco Challenge. Eco Challenge had a bunch of competitor races that all had different names, whether it was the Discovery World Championship or The Raid and they were all over the globe.

And so, I ran around the world for a bunch of years just doing every race possible. I would just leave my office on Wall Street and go disappear in the woods or the snow somewhere and just kill myself.

They were such intense races that when the race was over, I would sleep 24 to 30 hours straight. Just literally collapse and you wake up and you do not even know what day it is and so you get addicted to it. Like, it is such a – you get such a proud exhilarating

feeling form pushing yourself that hard that then you want to do it again.

Tim Ferriss: You did the Bad Water Ultra along with two other races in the same week, did you not? Am I making that up?

Joe De Sena Well, that was – yes, so that was a mistake. What had happened was I got into this thing where I was doing all these races and so anybody would come out of the woodwork and say, hey Joe, let us do this or, hey Joe, let us do that. My standard response was yes, let us do it because that was an easy way for me to commit. I was not going to turn down a challenge.

And so one friends that said hey let us do the Bad Water and yes, whatever, let us do it. So, sign me up. Another guys said, hey let us do the Lake Placid Iron Man. Is aid, yes no problem. Let us do it. And then someone else said, let us do the Vermont 100 and that was like six or eight months before these events. Well, just because of the way that I am – I am kind of a scatterbrain. About three or four weeks before these things, my assistant says, “Hey you realize these are all in the same week.”

I said, “No, I did not realize that.” And so, I said, “Let us try to do it and maybe we will get some press.” And I so figured I will train hard for it. I did not have much time and did a ton a Bikram Yoga, a ton of running in the three, four weeks leading up to it. I mean, a lot and again, I am not a – the stuff I read about you – your thoughts, you are very methodical in your training. I was more of a throw everything against a wall. The more training there is, it has to be better.

And I put – I definitely pushed the limits and went and did the Vermont 100 and then a few days after the finish made my way out to Bad Water –

Tim Ferriss: Now, 100 is a 100 kilometers? 100 miles?

Joe De Sena 100 miles. 100 miles through the hills in Vermont. Finished in under 24 hours, which is your goal when you are running a 100. Finished that. Flew out to Vegas. Drove however far the distance is. I forget – the lowest elevation in the US is Bad Water. Ran to the top of – well, not to the top, but to the finish line at Mount Whitney and then jumped on a private plane.

My wife said the only way she was going to let me do it is if I hit a wedding that week. So, I had to get to a wedding, which was the

worst part. You cannot tell her – of the whole damn week because my feet would not fit in the shoes. She wanted to dance and then from the wedding made it to Lake Placid.

And did great in the swim in Lake Placid, did great on the bike, and when I got on the run I thought I am going to kill it. I already ran 235 miles this week and my legs just gave out about mile five. I was in so much pain. And I never drink and I never take any aspirin or anything.

And I am in so much pain and I am looking around for an aspirin or an Advil. I am asking spectators. And I got somebody to give me a few aspirin and I ran a few more miles and the pain was not going away. And I saw a couple of kids with backpacks full of beer and I never drink. And so I was like, can I have a few beers? I literally got drunk and finished that and they filmed it. The Iron Man folks filmed that. But, that is how I got through the run and I stopped at mile 20 for two burgers. I ate two – I was so hungry and so I was drunk and full when I came across the finish line of the Iron Man.

Tim Ferriss: So, just to put this in perspective. Obviously, that is insane on so many levels. But, to put this in perspective for people listening, the Bad Water Ultra Marathon describes itself as the world's toughest foot race. I know a number of guys who have run this. It is 135 miles. It starts, like you said, below sea level and then goes up to more than 8,000 feet of elevation. And it usually – I guess it takes places in July, but in the shade very commonly 120 degrees.

Joe De Sena It was 131 degrees. My shirt melted and my sneakers melted. It was terrible.

Tim Ferriss: So, there are people who will have support vans following them with basically coffins full of ice to revive them in case they collapse. So, we do not have too much time. We will probably have to do a round two with this at some point, but let me ask a couple of sort of rapid fire questions and then I would love to hear what you are up to and obviously tell people about the book. What do people consider you world class at? And ideally, things that are coachable or learnable skills. I would be curious to know what other people consider you world class at.

Joe De Sena I am definitely not a world class athlete. I am not fast. I was never a good athlete. I would say I am just relentless. I just do not give up. I am persistent as hell and when I get on something it is like a

pit bull. I just do not let up.

And it is definitely a sickness because it – I am so focused on that thing it is like I have blinders on like a horse would in a race. I just do not see anything else. I just have to get this done. And so, if the race was forever, I would do really well. I just kept going until the last person was standing. I would do well, but if it is speed or athleticism, I am not your guy.

Tim Ferriss: Right, when you are hiring people – how many employees do you have for Spartan?

Joe De Sena So, we have about 40, 45 in Boston and then about the same number overseas in a bunch of different countries. And then with every race we have, we bring in 500 volunteers, which kind of act like employees for the weekend. So, it is not a giant operation on a daily basis. But, every week we have almost two and a half events and so then 1,000 people come in for those events.

Tim Ferriss: Full time hires, what do you or your people look for? What are the criteria at least for the first – the early hires? The first say five to ten people, what were you looking for in those people?

Joe De Sena Well, I do not – I am definitely no expert. Again, there are much smarter MBAs on how to approach this in a methodical fashion. But, for me, since I am ten, 11 years old it is really the passion – the fire in the belly that I am looking for and it was always – and this is going to sound terrible to Americans, but it was always the Eastern Europeans or like a third world country person, guy or girl, that just outworked anybody else, including myself.

And so I am always looking and that is what intrigued me so much and that really is what the book is about, is how to – first of all, why do they outdo us? And how do you not lose that edge if you are that kind of person? And then how do I find more of them? And then is that more important than exact skill sets of the job? And I believe it is.

I believe you can teach that really aggressive fire in the belly persistent person the task at hand, as opposed to finding an expert in the area and then try to teach them passion and fire. I do not – I think it is hard to teach the other thing, which is that aggressiveness.

Tim Ferriss: No, definitely. Have you found any other commonalities? For instance, I know that some companies, like EMC for instance

which is a mass data storage, often recruits former football players. Are there any other commonalities or patterns that you have seen in the people that –

Joe De Sena

Yes, it is funny you ask. This is a really interesting one for me because I would have never guessed this. I do not think anyone listening would have guessed this, but downhill skiers. I see a high correlation and then because I am a skier and because I have children that I take skiing now, I get it. And if you think about skiing, if you are a downhill skier, the moment you make the decision that day to go skiing, it is 50 percent miserable experience, right?

The boots do not fit. You forgot your poles. The goggles. It is snowing. It is sleeting.

And if you are a racer – and that is really what I meant to say, they are downhill ski racers. If you are a racer and you have raced a large part of your life, you probably stood on top of the mountain for hours freezing, waiting for your slot to go. And that builds grit and so – right? Because it is one thing – you and I, if we were hiking up the mountain you take your jacket off. No matter how bad the weather is, you can deal with that. But, standing still in the cold getting pounded takes a certain skillset – in uncomfortable boots and uncomfortable weather and gear. So, that is what I found.

Tim Ferriss:

Excellent. Yes, that is very interesting you should say that because I have only recently gotten to know a couple of really highly competitive downhill skiers and it makes perfect sense. Now that I know them a bit, that does make perfect sense. Are there any books, for instance, besides your own – which I want people to check out – that you have returned to again and again or suggest to other people that has had a large influence on your life or how you look at life?

Joe De Sena

Yes, I would say loved *Atlas Shrugged*. Read often. I love *Shogun*.

Tim Ferriss:

Yes, great stuff.

Joe De Sena

Shogun is like – puts everything in a proper frame of reference for me. What that guy is going through, it like puts your day in perspective. And then funny enough I love the *One Minute Manager*. That little book really helped me in business. And I am not a giant reader, but those are good books for me.

Tim Ferris:

And of all the things you could do, obviously financially you are doing very well and have done well at many different well, which has always been very interesting to me. Why write a book? *Spartan Up* of course chronicles your journey and we did not even get into half of the stuff that you do and maybe we will get a chance another time. Including a lot of your investments, some of which have panned out extremely well since you started Spartan. But, why write a book and what do you hope that *Spartan Up* will achieve?

Joe De Sena

So, for me, I have been writing this book for – literally since I was able to drive that pool truck.

And I would look over to my right and figure out who my employee or partner was that day and where they going to make it the whole day because we were working until 11:00 p.m. And it just intrigued me and this is going to sound silly, but Rocky Balboa – Rocky Balboa was a big movie back then and it really intrigued me that in the movie – and granted this was not real life, but that he was broken and fought to get ahead and he wins the fight. And all the sudden he has money and then he gets soft.

And I look over to the right in that pool truck and I would think, what makes this guy soft or hard? Why do I not I – finally found these Eastern Europeans. They were tough and I just really – just like the question you asked, like what correlation do see? It has literally intrigued me for 30 years and I have been writing this book in my head. Why at a young age did I want to take cold showers and anything I did not want to do, force myself to do? How do I pass that on to my kids?

And so, I have been writing this thing for a long and I retired in 2005. I was done. I was in Vermont. I am building my family. Awesome wife. Awesome kids. And then we do this Spartan thing. I have people saying we changed their lives, and it got them off the couch, and they are losing weight, and their relationship is better, and they are off drinking, and they are not doing drugs anymore. And I am thinking, I am doing – we are doing something really good here. But, even if I reach a million – if we reach a million people this year, there is still eight billion. That is a lot of people to reach.

So, and a lot of them are just not going to come do the race. They are not going to get moving. So, maybe the book is a way to reach a bunch of people and just get them to do something because life is such a waste. If that guy at Cornell that got me to move to New

York – he changed my life. That professor changed my life. So, if I could change just a few lives with the book – people that would not go to the race, I win.

I am happy. Right, what else can you do in life? You cannot just make money and worry about – you have to do some good things while you are here and life is fast. It is going to be over soon and so that was really – that was the impetuous for this thing.

Tim Ferriss: Yes, it is a – I love your story and I think the – every time we talk or I text you anything else, you are always off doing something interesting and I think that it is – like you said, it is not enough to just collect monopoly chips and make money. Yes, money is useful. It makes a very helpful tool and a terrible master, but you should build things. You should make something interesting with your time that you have on this planet and really create something compelling that excites you.

And I think that your story is really inspiring, so I hope that people check out the book. It is *Spartan Up, a Take No Prisoner's Guide to Overcoming Obstacles and Achieving Peak Performance in Life*. We will have to have part two to this I think at some point. But, where is the best place to people to learn more about what you are up to and perhaps Spartan itself?

Joe De Sena We have a website. It's spartanupthebook.com or just Spartan.com will tell you about the races. But, spartanupthebook.com will get them to the book and yes I am excited. Today – actually got launched today, the book. So, love to get feedback from people and see what they think.

Tim Ferriss: Yes, I would love to hear what people think as well. So, I will have them check it out. I will put that in the show notes. And Joe, I will let you get back to the life and times and I know you are at another person's office at the moment, so I will let you get back to all the various adventures and we will talk very soon. But, thank you for taking the time.

Joe De Sena Thanks for having me. A huge honor being interviewed by you.

Tim Ferriss: Oh, my pleasure. Obviously, a lot of respect for what you have done and I am sure what you will continue to do. So, to be continued and until next time. Thanks very much.

Joe De Sena Thanks.