

BY TIFFANY GREENWALDT-SIMON
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BEFORE he was an ultra-marathon runner, Gary Elbert was a kickboxer.

The graduate of NUI Galway, who runs locally with Castlegar Athletics Club, started kickboxing in his 30s. Before that, he hadn't competed in sports consistently since his teens.

"That kind of put me on the road to realising how much I liked the challenge, and I realised I had a competitive nature. It was definitely making me a better person, I was learning more about myself, and I grew as a person.

"With martial arts, you're always trying to improve your techniques, your kicks and your attitude, your mindset and everything."

In 2017 Gary competed in his last kickboxing contest, and shortly after, ran the 2017 Dublin Marathon.

He ran his first ultra-marathon in 2019, which he "loved everything about".

"I was looking for something to give me a similar challenge to what kickboxing would've given to me, a challenge where you require a lot of discipline, a lot of consistency and effort. Just to finish the race that day, I just had a sense of euphoria," he told the *Galway City Tribune*.

He began focusing on running

Gary Elbert: The 245km Spartathlon, follows in the footsteps of the ancient Greek runner Pheidippides.

BEST FOOT FORWARD

● Gary Elbert came late to ultra-marathons – today he seeks glory in Greece

in 2020, and "ran a lot more" during the pandemic before competing in his first 100-mile race, the Connemara 100.

Gary ran his second Connemara 100 in 2021 and completed it in 16 hours. This qualified him to compete in another ultra-marathon, the Spar-

tathlon.

The Spartathlon takes place today, Friday, in Greece, following the footsteps of the ancient Greek runner Pheidippides. According to historians, he ran from Athens to Sparta in two days to request the Spartans help in the war against Persia.

The race begins underneath the Acropolis and follows a 245km path to the modern city of Sparta.

Gary is one of 400 runners competing in the Spartathlon, with six others from Ireland.

"It feels surreal," he says. "It's kind of like 'how did this happen?', because I would've been one of those people that would read about people run-

ning 100 and 200 miles, and it would be so beyond what I would've even considered within my grasp."

Participants have 36 hours to complete the race, and there is "no material reward".

"There's no money, you get a medal, but what you also get is a sense of deep sense of satisfaction and fulfilment," says Gary.

The Spartathlon is a "special race", and he "respects" the task.

"It's kind of like an adventure, and you don't know the ending. Having that sense of walking into the unknown, it really concentrates the mind, and makes you feel alive.

"You literally put the challenge in front of you, you don't know what the outcome will be, there's no guarantee you can finish it, but you have to try," he says.

If he doesn't finish, Gary will try again.

"I can assure you, I'd definitely be back, but if everything goes well and I finish, it's going to be an absolutely incredible experience," he says.

Running ultra-marathons, as well as his journey in academia through the University of Galway's Access Programme, has been transformative for the Tipperary native.

"I started to discover I had potential in me, whether it was in academia or in running, and whether that potential was going to be brought out or not was actually up to me.

"In the last five years I've got a 1.1 undergraduate degree, I've got a 1.1 Master's degree, I've run multiple hundred-mile ultra-marathons, but I just commit to trying to get better, and trying to improve. As a result, I keep seeing the results over and over again. Once you get on that road, once you get on that process, it's kind of hard to regress," he says.



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