

CASE STUDY EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Case Title: *Spartan Race: Building a Global Obstacle Empire on Grit, Community, and Branding*

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SUBJECT ORGANIZATION:

Spartan Race Inc. – A leading global brand in the endurance and obstacle course racing (OCR) industry, known for its hardcore ethos, global community of fitness enthusiasts, and transformative experiences.

SUMMARY:

In early 2023, Spartan Race founder and CEO Joe De Sena faces a strategic inflection point. While Spartan has successfully scaled into more than 40 countries and become synonymous with mental toughness and resilience, growth has plateaued post-COVID, and profitability remains a challenge. With increasing competition from wellness-oriented races, declining millennial engagement, and rising operational costs, De Sena must decide how to evolve Spartan's brand and business model without diluting its core DNA.

Key questions arise: Should Spartan Race continue to focus on expanding into emerging markets, or double down on deepening engagement with existing loyalists? Should it embrace mainstream fitness and digital content (e.g. hybrid fitness races, virtual coaching, brand partnerships), or retain its purist, suffer-fest identity? How can Spartan compete with lifestyle brands like CrossFit and most recently Hyrox while staying financially viable?

The case places students in De Sena's shoes as he weighs the trade-offs between authenticity, scalability, financial sustainability, and brand evolution in an increasingly crowded wellness and endurance space.

EVENT TIMING:

January 2023, post-pandemic strategic review at Spartan HQ in Boston, USA.

CASE PROTAGONIST:

Joe De Sena – Founder and CEO of Spartan Race, visionary behind the brand’s ethos of grit, discipline, and transformation.

POTENTIAL DECISION POINT(S):

1. Should Spartan Race reposition its brand to appeal to a broader wellness-oriented market or remain true to its hardcore roots?
 2. How can Spartan develop a more sustainable revenue model beyond event registrations?
 3. What role should partnerships, media, and digital fitness innovations play in Spartan’s strategy?
 4. How should Spartan respond to increasing competition from hybrid fitness events and gamified training platforms?
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LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

1. Explore strategic brand positioning in niche vs. mainstream markets.
 2. Analyze business model innovation in experience-based and lifestyle industries.
 3. Understand growth vs. authenticity tensions in founder-led companies.
 4. Examine the role of community, content, and partnerships in expanding global lifestyle brands.
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RECOMMENDED READING:

- *Blockbusters: Hit-making, Risk-taking, and the Big Business of Entertainment* – Anita Elberse
 - *Shoe Dog* – Phil Knight
 - *Start With Why* – Simon Sinek
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INTENDED AUDIENCE:

MBA/Postgraduate Undergraduate Introductory

DISCIPLINES:

Strategy Marketing Entrepreneurship Leadership & Organizational Behavior