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Running Without the Bulls

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Rob Bennett for The New York Times

The bullfighter David Fandila finished the marathon but did not beat his target of five hours, perhaps because he stopped several times to take photos with fans. [More Photos »](#)

David Fandila took the final step of his first 26.2-mile journey on Sunday and staggered across the finish line of the New York City Marathon.

Never before had his body felt so abused, so achy. Considering his profession, that is remarkable.

Back home in Granada, Spain, Fandila is the star matador called simply El Fandi, top-ranked in the world. He is known for his courage and flamboyance inside the ring, sometimes even dropping to his knees as he waves his cape to goad the bull.

But painwise and fearwise, Fandila said, running the marathon was much worse even than facing an angry, snorting 1,000-pound bull out to skewer him.

“I’m scared most times when I go into a bullfight because, yes, every time there is a chance of being badly injured or even killed, but we don’t like to talk about that,” Fandila, 27, said in Spanish. “But I was more scared for this marathon. In a bullfight, I have some control of the outcome. In a marathon, there was no control.”

Over his eight-year career, Fandila has been gored by a bull 12 times, with 12 jagged, deep scars on his body to prove it.

Countless times, he has been stomped by a bull as it fights for its life. Being hit by the animal, he said, is like being hit by a small car — again and again.

In the marathon, unlike in the bullring, Fandila said he felt helpless. In the final mile, sweat dripped from his forehead and onto his bushy eyebrows.

His goal was to finish in less than five hours. He finished in 5 hours 13 minutes 24 seconds, after stopping several times to stretch and take photos with fans who recognized him.

Not bad for someone who did not train for this race. Fandila usually runs only during the annual running with the bulls in Pamplona. But at 5 feet 8 inches and about 160 pounds, he is naturally athletic. Before entering the closed and controversial world of bullfighting, he was on the national youth acrobatic ski team.

“Let’s put it this way, it would have been much more enjoyable if I had trained at least a little bit,” Fandila said, saying he hit the wall about Mile 20, where his legs began to feel as heavy as the bulls he spars with.

Fandila faced at least 222 hulking, charging bulls this season, leaving him no time to train for the marathon.

He spent the last five months crisscrossing Spain in a van with his entourage, traveling about 90,000 miles from June through Oct. 19, as he fought in 111 bullfights. His quick reflexes and flexibility have kept him alive in the bullring. But they did not help him break five hours in New York.

The marathon was harder than Fandila thought it would be when he signed up to race in August. He was planning to be in Manhattan for last Friday’s premiere of “The Matador,” a film that follows him over three seasons in his quest for 100 corridas, or fights, in a season. Only a dozen Spanish matadors in the sport’s history had achieved that level.

But Carlos Gil, who works in tourism in Spain, coaxed him to add the marathon to his schedule.

Gil, who has a scar running up his left arm from what he called “a slight mishap” with running bulls in Pamplona, wanted to be Fandila’s guide in the city and the marathon. Gil had run the race 12 times before.

“I said, ‘You are athletic, you can do it,’ ” Gil, 62, said. “I thought it would be a great way for him to see the city, and I thought he was certainly mentally tough enough for him to do it.”

Fandila ended up running with three others: Gil; his brother Juan Alvaro Fandila; and Rodrigo Rufo del Castillo, Fandila’s mozo de espada, or assistant in charge of handing him the sword when Fandila is ready to kill the bull in the ring.

The three of them wore T-shirts with a “1” on it. (Side by side, they formed 1-1-1, the number of Fandila’s bullfights this year.) The back of Fandila’s shirt read: “Fandi 111 bullfights and one marathon.”

For one day, he blended in with a yellow T-shirt and long black tights. He looked nothing like a matador, who wears skintight candy-colored pants embroidered in gold and Pepto-Bismol-colored socks.

“David, he likes anything that’s not normal, and we try to just follow along,” said Juan Alvaro Fandila, 31, who serves as David’s manager and personal assistant on the road.

Meeting Fandila, one would never dream he was a matador, which is Spanish for “the killer.” But in the ring, he becomes someone else.

“He is usually timid, but in the ring he transforms into a volcano,” said José Antonio del Moral, a top bullfight critic, who smoked a cigarette while watching Fandila jog up First Avenue on Sunday. “He knows how to deal with adversity and can push himself to the limit. That is why he is one of the greatest matadors.”

Fandila and del Moral came to New York to promote “The Matador,” which Fandila agreed to be a part of to help explain the tradition and beauty of his sport. He is used to seeing animal-rights protesters on the road. Spanish public television no longer televises bullfights live because of the brutality.

“It’s not just someone going out there to kill an animal,” Fandila said. “It’s about courage, culture and the knowledge of a very noble animal. I wanted to expand the knowledge of our world.”

Fandila said that the bulls, like turkeys for Christmas, are raised for one purpose. He added that the bulls have a chance to defend themselves. He said he even pardoned 14 bulls in his career because they had fought so bravely.

Fandila has 800 bullfights on his résumé. Before each fight, he lights two candles at a makeshift shrine and prays.

“We didn’t bring any candles to light before the marathon because it would have been of no use,” Juan Alvaro Fandila said. “We probably would have had to light too many candles to get through it.”

That might have been true, considering their preparation for their first marathon. Instead of staying off their feet and resting, they took a weeklong, whirlwind tour of New York City.

They visited Rockefeller Center, took a helicopter ride around Manhattan, ate pizza at Grimaldi’s beneath the Brooklyn Bridge and had lunch at Balthazar in Soho, waved No. 1 foam hands at a Knicks game, bought Bulgari watches in Chinatown and shopped at Century 21, where Fandila bought a pair of size 6 Timberland work boots.

Their nights were spent at the New York City Club Taurino, a group of bullfighting aficionados who treated El Fandi like royalty.

“I feel like we’ve already run two marathons, so that’s probably not so good,” Juan Alvaro Fandila said two days before the race.

Gil, their tour guide, tried to get them to carbo-load or run in Central Park, to no avail.

“I encouraged them to at least eat a pretzel because they need the carbohydrates,” Gil said. “But no, he would say: ‘No, I’m on vacation. Me gusto los hot dogs!’ ”

It was an entirely different world from where Fandila had been just two weeks before: standing in a bullfighting ring in southern Spain, staring into the eyes of a bull he would eventually spear through the heart.

He left the arena that day waving two bloodied ears of the last bull he killed and preening as the crowd cheered.

On Sunday, he left the marathon course with slightly less machismo, happy that the run was over.