

Running Briefs
c/o Tracey Martinson
1716 Reed Circle
Fairbanks, AK 99709

Volume XII, Issue IV

August 2005

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Running Briefs

GETTIN' TO THE CHURCH ON TIME

By Andy Sterns

I felt like the engine on the cog railway. Running up a steep hairpin turn to the top of Mt. Washington, I heard the wail of a steam whistle and spotted a trail of black smoke on a high ridge, billowing from the antique locomotive chugging to the summit.

The peak of the 6288-foot New Hampshire mountain is the highest point in the Northeast. Its summit can be reached by hiking one of a half-dozen trails, riding the cog railway, or driving up a narrow, winding auto road, earning the right to paste a "This Car Climbed Mt. Washington" sticker on your back bumper.

The Mt. Washington auto road climbs 4650 feet in 7.6 miles, at an average grade of 11.5%. It's the vertical equivalent of more than two-and-a-half trips up Ester Dome- the 2364-foot high point in Fairbanks' Equinox Marathon- and the road to the top of Mt. Washington is the site of an annual car and truck race, a bicycle race, and a running race held around the summer solstice.

I was out of Alaska on the longest day of the year for a wedding in northern New Hampshire. The timing of the wedding presented an opportunity fraught with danger- to celebrate the solstice by running the Mt.

Washington road race at the risk of not finishing fast enough to get an early ride back down the mountain to get to the wedding on time. The pressure facing the race favorites paled in comparison to the potential wrath I faced from the bride, her sister (my girlfriend), and their mom, if I was late.

But I couldn't resist the challenge- and after a few quick logistical calculations, I convinced myself that I was fast enough to run the race and still not miss a single note of the wedding march.

On race day the auto road is closed to traffic from the 10 a.m. start until just after noon. If I ran a sub-two-hour race, I could catch one of the first down-mountain shuttle buses and beat the post-race traffic jam. I'd be back at the base well before 2 p.m. and on my way to the 3 o'clock wedding. After a one-hour drive, I'd even still have a few extra minutes to change clothes.

Reaching the top in under two hours was the big "if." Most runners finish the Mt. Washington road race in about the same the time it takes them to run a half-marathon. I broke two hours in North Pole's Santa Claus half-marathon a few years ago, but not by much- and on a course whose only climbs are a couple of 100-

foot hops over the dike of the Chena River flood control project.

So even if I made it, I'd be cutting it close.

If I were a slightly faster runner, the original course record would have been an enticing goal. In 1904, George Foster, a Massachusetts medical student, made the first-ever timed run up the auto road in 1 hour, 42 minutes, and 32 years later some of his friends organized the first Mt. Washington road race in his honor. Remarkably Foster's time was 3 minutes faster than the existing automobile record of 1:45. Both records have been bettered significantly since: the current automobile record is 6 minutes, 41 seconds, and the standing men's and women's running marks, set by Kenya's Daniel Kihara and Sweden's Magdalena Thorsell are 58:20 and 1:10:08, respectively.

Driving to the race start on an already warm, sunny morning, I rounded a corner and suddenly, Mt. Washington was right in front of me. I was surprised and somewhat intimidated by how clearly I could see the switchbacks high on the mountain as the sun glinted off the bumper-to-bumper traffic headed to the top.

I parked in a grassy field at the base of the auto road filled with cars, long lines of

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Running Briefs is published bi-monthly. Unlike two former editors, who write entertaining columns for real newspapers, Tracey writes technical jargon for musty scientific journals. So, puhleeze, if you have any exciting news that you would like to see here, write it up and send it to Tracey at 1716 Reed Circle, Fairbanks AK 99709, or email at fntam@uaf.edu. Your fellow RCNers will thank you.

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Sterns on Mt. Washington

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people waiting to use the porta-johns and a giant white tent with enough room to hold 1000 people for the post-race barbecue and awards ceremony.

I pinned on my race number, put five packets of GU in my pockets, took a drink of water and optimistically stuck a backpack full of dry clothes in van #20--slated to drive back down the mountain just after noon--before I walked to the starting line.

Standing behind the line, the entire upper half of the mountain loomed overhead. Squeezed in among 800 other anxious runners, glancing nervously at the radio towers on the summit, I finally admitted to myself that I was in for a tough test and on a very tight deadline.

The starter's final announcement, "Just remember, there's only one hill," certainly didn't make me feel any better.

A friend who's a Mt. Washington race veteran told me not to worry about any race strategy, just to put it in first gear and go. I considered that good advice, especially since first gear is the only one I've got.

After passing the race's four-mile mark, leaving timberline and its shady relief behind, I could see the finish, but it was still many endless switchbacks, more than three miles and two thousand vertical feet away. The 2003 edition of the "Race to the

Clouds" featured only clear skies, and my head began to throb and my legs felt heavier and heavier in the bright sunshine and 80-degree temperatures. Running thirteen-minute miles, each of the three water stops was a long time in coming, and I didn't think I'd need the wool cap I'd been advised to carry. I should have brought sunglasses instead.

On the plus side, I passed the halfway clock in 50 minutes and was on pace to finish well under two hours. To further boost my confidence I told myself I must be feeling better than that cog railway engine, since I wasn't spewing black smoke and I was successfully suppressing the urge to wail each time I looked up to see that the top of the mountain didn't appear to be getting any closer.

With dripping sweat stinging my eyes, it was hard to imagine the horrendous race day conditions of the 2002 Mt. Washington Road Race, when in gusty winds and a driving freezing rain, officials had been unable to set up the finishing chute at the summit. Concerned about the safety of volunteers manning the aid stations, and the potential nightmare of getting 1,000 runners back down the icy road, the organizers shortened the race, for the first time ever, to finish at the halfway point, just below the shelter of treeline. Snow has fallen on the mountain every month of the year, and the highest wind-speed ever recorded on earth was a 231

mph gust that raked the summit of Mt. Washington on April 12, 1934. It's clearly not a place to gamble with the weather.

Looking out onto a landscape that's a mix of tundra, stunted spruce trees and jumbled blocks of granite, I could easily imagine myself--especially in an oxygen-deprived state--back in the Alaska Interior, hiking in the high country north of Fairbanks on Mt. Prindle or the Pinnell Mt. trail. Only the unexpected wild cheering of a group of roadside picnicking race fans brought me back to racing reality. Even with my poor vision (made even more blurry by my efforts), I could see that they were standing just beyond a wooden milepost stamped with the number seven. I was afraid to look at my watch to check the time, but at least I finally knew I was going to finish.

The last 100-foot uphill stretch of the race--before a short, flat run--in to the finish line--is steep (18%!), even by Mt. Washington standards. But seeing the race clock reading 1:53:00 was all the incentive I needed to lumber up that hill with everything (which wasn't much) I had left, and 18 seconds later I was across the line, wearing my finishers medal and wobbly searching for van #20.

And yes, I made it to the wedding on time. I wasn't even the last one there, arriving respectably right in the middle of the pack--just like on top of Mt. Washington.

Musk Ox and Hot Springs... Runs, that is...

By Sandy Murray

From deep in Costa Rica, I'd like to give a little background on two races that are still on the RCN calendar after 13 years—the Musk Ox Run and the Run N' Soak—and also thank the persons who are perpetuating them, Dave Covey and Keith Pollock and their predecessors.

The run from the Musk Ox Farm to the KUAC dish on the ridge was a favorite training run that Bob Vitale and I had for a few years. We liked it so much for its minimal road and nice variety of trail situations that we decided it would make a great racecourse. So in 1993 we proposed it for the RCN calendar for a Thursday in July or August.

We had also, along with MaryEllen LaBerge, undertaken exploration of the rumored trail between Angel Rocks and Chena Hot Springs. Finding that a nice adventure, we proposed to the Hot Springs management a race that would end in a barbecue and free immersion in the healing waters. The manager, desperate to get something positive going at the then bad-luck springs, agreed, thinking also that some entrants might fill a room or two overnight. Somehow we scheduled this risky wilderness race within three or four days of the Musk Ox Run. We further complicated matters by giving entrants a choice of high road or low road—run the paved road between Angel Creek Lodge and Chena Hot Springs 7 miles or take the arduous trail

8+ miles over the hills. Our finish line thus had runners coming from two general directions with additional variety in the individual paths taken through the lodge grounds.

The night before the race, I tried to do some trail marking starting from the hot springs. When I neared the ridge, fog came down on the hills so that I chickened out and turned back, leaving the next day's competitors pretty much on their own to find their way after passing the last of our surveyor's tape above Angel Rocks.

Of course, we had a lot to say about landmarks and directions to the impatient group gathered at Angel Creek Lodge the next morning. MaryEllen was doing her best to frighten the participants into wilderness expert mode. Luckily the day was clear and nobody got lost though all must have experienced at least some moments of indecision. Runners found atop one of the knobs a rifle-cradling cook from the lodge, prepared to assassinate any bears that might try to interfere with the race.

A year or two later the clouds came right down on the ridge before the race started, so that some Good Samaritans such as Vitale and Alan Doyle turned from contestants to guides, helping many socked-in runners find the top of the ridge. Within a few years the State got industrious, not only making the trail quite obvious but also building a hut about midway. Much of the adventure was

gone but the fun remained, especially on the long, twisting downhill trail into Chena Hot Springs.

Our first Musk Ox run was not error-free. Someone moved tape from the turn leading up to the dish and so a few runners ran straight ahead into a small residential area. On the way back, the lead runners (Bill Gardner and Rocky Reifentstahl among them) came booming down the steep hill off the ridge, and blew straight past the right-hand turn onto the single-track trail. They, too, found themselves in a residential area, and had to add a bit of distance to the 11.5-mile course as they ran back up the hill.

Retrieving tape off of two long courses within 3 or 4 days proved hellishly time consuming, so Bob and I found someone to take the Musk Ox run off our hands. It is here that my history turns shaky, even with input from Vitale and Dave Cowee. I thought John Fridrich took over for us the second year; however, it might have gone directly to Colleen Porter and Karen Toney. These two preceded Scott McCrea, who a few years ago gave it up to Covey. I'm grateful to all these people and to Bill Young, who took over the Run 'N Soak for us in 1997, and to the current director, Keith Pollock.

Though I was born in Fairbanks, the RCN races and other races such as Mt. Marathon and the Crow Pass Crossing, and the camaraderie of my fellow runners are

Running Away from Home

Yukon River Trail Marathon, Whitehorse, YT, August 7, 2005

Steve Bainbridge	4:09:39
Jane Lanford	4:09:39
Jo Malcolm	4:27:55
Roxanne Rigo	4:54:39

San Francisco Chronicle Half-Marathon, San Francisco, CA, July 31, 2005

Paulette Goodwin	1:48:55
Holly King	1:49:18

Mayor's Midnight Sun Marathon, Anchorage, AK, June 18, 2005

Bob Hildebrandt	5:44:57
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Sunburst Marathon, South Bend, IN, June 4, 2005

Bob Hildebrandt	5:33:18
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all I miss about the place. I now follow the races through the excellent work of Dave and Jo Cowee on the RCN website. I still see in the race results the names of many who ran with me. Though some are considerably slower than they used to be, I envy them, since, due to a botched knee replacement, I do not run at all. Running on these Costa Rican roads couldn't compare to those great Alaskan trails, anyway, and sometimes I imagine myself running parts of the Musk Ox trail, feeling again as if I could run forever. But I can't, so I play tennis instead.

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among others. Most of them were originally from Pittsburgh, so you may think them inconsequential, but they all did have No. 1 records in their day. ("Record?" I hear you ask, "What's a record?" 45's, no less.) If Jack would let me borrow his mike, I could sing you a few lines. I knew all the words to all their songs—my husband was both appalled and amazed. Now, if had I only used those brain cells to store more useful information at a time when I could actually remember things...