

Readington Runs Sept 2008 - River to Sea Relay 2008

What motivates people to run long-distance team relays, getting up well before dawn to subject themselves to an all-day (or more) grueling jaunt in less than ideal conditions over a ridiculously challenging course with like-minded adventurers?

Team relays are becoming ever more popular amongst runners all over the country – those who are looking for something new and different from the routine local 5K or even the big mega marathons. They can range from “short” 60-milers to the 200+ mile adventure relays that start one day, run through the night, and finish the next. My preference is something right in the middle – 90 to 100 miles seems “just right”!

August 2nd 2008 was the date of the 13th consecutive year of the 92-mile River to Sea (R2C) relay that crosses the waistband of New Jersey. Seven-man teams are challenged to complete the journey in 14 unequal legs, and each member must do one of the first 7 legs and one of the last. It is a handicap race with a staggered start to spread out the teams and the 2 vehicles per team that get strung out across the state.

Always run on the first Saturday in August, it is long, hot, humid, open, and full of surprises. This year the weather cooperated, or so we thought... Yes; it wasn't the usual 95F with oppressive humidity, but..... Just for a nice change, Mother Nature threw a monsoon at us right around noon as we were nearing the half-way point. None of us had ever seen rain come down so hard. At times, it was going sideways. Runners who weren't pulled off the course by their teammates had to cope with water over their ankles, and then the final indignity – hail that threatened to shatter windshields. Our runner refused to quit, and so those of us who were responsible for support had no choice but to join him in getting soaking wet while trying to offer him water and words of encouragement. We wouldn't have it any other way.

It's an overused cliché, but these long-distance relays are all about camaraderie, planning, and teamwork. And the satisfaction of finishing and doing well, while staying safe, is the reward. I've said it many times – you think you are giving it everything you have when you run a typical road race like the local 10K, but somehow when you are part of a team, you find a way to push yourself even more and giving 110% is just the norm. You just don't want to let down the team, and want to do your best. And when you do – and you always do – your teammates recognize and respect you for it.

The field maximum of 110 teams filled up early, and we had 4 teams of 7 runners from our small running club in the county – Hill Runners of Hunterdon. One of our teams started at 6:55 AM; our elite women's team named Babes to Waves went off at 7:25; a third team with a lot of talent took off from the Delaware River that separates NJ and PA at 7:50; and finally our team of veterans called More Over the Hill Runners finally left at 7:55 AM. We were the 58th team to get underway, so we had a lot of ground to make up.

The HRH team named The Hill With These Runners was captained by Chris Franklin, and his crew included Dave Brown, Mike McDonough, Steve McKenzie, Pastor Andrew Paton, Ron Reitz, and Dennis Schmatz. They did admirably well for a team that was finalized only days before the relay.

The Babes to Waves (recently featured in the Star Ledger's Munchmobile series) were once again ably led by Beverly Atkinson, and her team consisted of Hope Atkinson, Kim Haris, Janet Howard, Holly McDonald, Ida Parente, and Karen Robinson.

R2C veteran Wes Knowles put together a strong team that included some experienced R2C runners, as well as a couple of "rookies". Very fast rookies! Others on the team included Steve Brookman, Mark Corgan, John Farrell, Gordon Kennedy, Tim Shea, and Pat Sullivan.

Last year our team named Over the Hill Runners had some problems along the way, as our strongest runner collapsed from heat exhaustion doing the infamous "Beast" leg and was hospitalized. The remaining 6 runners managed to finish and there were no long-term repercussions. This year the team remained virtually intact (captain Bruce Marshall, Hector Cruz-Rosa, John Fischer, Doug Masi, Dan Minzner, Mike Stockl, and John Weidner) and we were renamed More Over the Hill Runners.

How did we do?

More Over the Hill Runners were first to reach the sea amongst the HRH teams and finished 23rd out of the 99 teams that completed the course. We were passed by 12 teams, but in turn, we passed 45 others. We were 4th out of 17 in the Veteran men's division, which is 35 and over. We ran the 92 miles in an "official" time of 11:01:34 for an average pace of 7:04/mile. It was an almost an hour faster than our time last year, and was a new club record by 12 minutes.

BTW; one of those teams that passed us was the eventual winner of the fastest elapsed time. These young guys named Hide Your Daughters didn't start until 10:10 AM and flew across the state in an amazing 8:08:33, or 5:18 per mile!

Wes' team named HRH + 2 were right behind us at the finish, with an official elapsed time of 11:10:19 for 27th place overall and 6th in the men's veteran's category. They averaged 7:09.8 minutes per mile.

Despite stopping for 9:34 for safety reasons during the worst of the dangerous storm with the torrential rain and hail the size of marbles, the Babes to Waves improved on their time from 2007 and came in at 11:47:48, successfully defending their crown in the women's veteran's division.

The Hill With Those Runners finished quite respectably in 12:24:47, averaging less than 8:00 minutes per mile, and finishing in the top half of the field. It was a successful day for all 4 teams and 28 runners from the Hill Runners of Hunterdon.

As usual, I saw many good friends from clubs from all over the state during the long day. In addition to the camaraderie with your teammates, that is the other great thing about these relays. You cheer just as hard and encourage people from all teams as much as you do for your own. If someone else clearly needs a drink and their support van isn't in the vicinity, you don't hesitate. It's a 92-mile party.

R2C is over with for another year, and my legs are trashed. I've felt much better after doing multiple marathons 2 weeks in a row. But you can't wipe that silly smile off my face.

Inspired yet? Some of the local September races that might be of interest include:

Lehigh valley Marathon & Relay – Sep 7
NYRR Queen’s Half Marathon – Sep 14
Philadelphia Distance Run – Sep 21
Liberty Waterfront Half Marathon – Sep 28

For more information on the Hill Runners of Hunterdon, contact Bruce Marshall at President@HRHNJ.org.

Readington Runs – Sep 08.doc