

Trail Nuts

Carolyn Szczepanski | The Pitch | 2008-09-11

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Yellow “Race Event” signs pockmark the ground at Wyandotte County Lake Park, a 1,500-acre expanse just a few minutes from The Legends megamall. The parking lot steadily fills with men and women pulling on mud-caked shoes. Dusk casts lazy shadows on the lake as runners fill out forms and pin numbers to their athletic shorts. At the edge of the crowd, a lanky woman tries to dress up her nervousness with casual humor. “My goal,” she says, “is to not cry in the first half-mile.”

This isn’t a typical fun run. It’s not the kind of charity jaunt that’s held on a Saturday morning with groggy cops keeping watch over joggers as they meander through sleepy city streets.

No, this is Psycho Night.

These runners have the standard gear: the fancy Garmin watches, the tiny iPods. They carry water bottles with sleeves that attach to their hands. They wear gaiters that cover the tops of their running shoes to keep out pebbles and burrowing insects. And with headlamps wrapped around their foreheads, they look like Cyclopes that have found Buddhist enlightenment.

I’m feeling like the dorky kid at recess in the \$10 athletic watch I’ve had since ninth grade. I’m embarrassed that I can’t figure out how to tighten the straps on the crappy headlamp my younger sister used at summer camp.

A few minutes before 8 p.m., a woman remarks ominously about the creepy sounds she hears out here during solo night hikes. But before she can elaborate, Ben Holmes gets the crowd’s attention. Holmes is one of the leaders of the Kansas City Trail Nerds, the group that puts on these races through the woods, in the dark and over any terrain. The third-annual Psycho Night race is six miles through the hilly forest — a navigable distance for newbies. So Holmes doesn’t skimp on the instructions.

Yes, you’re going to have to hurdle those two creeks in the first 50 meters, Holmes explains. But that will get you ready for obstacles you’ll have to dodge on the trail. Run too close to the person ahead of you, and you’ll be picking the dirt out of your teeth. And most important: Don’t think the weak remnants of sunlight will guide your way, especially in the deep woods of WyCo Park.

“You do need a headlamp,” Holmes warns. “Someone tried to go without last year, and they ended up coming back on the road. And they were scared to death on the road, too.”

He warns of the ample poison ivy. “Remember: leaves of three, don’t wipe with me,” he says.

“And as for other wildlife and fauna endemic to this area,” he continues, “we’ve got the WyCo mud snipe; flying monkeys; the deadly, pernicious snid; and you might see one or two jumping tree gators.”

A racer in the crowd yells: “Are there plenty of shallow graves?”

“Oh, yeah,” Holmes replies. “We’ve got a motto: All whiners will be buried in shallow, unmarked graves. So don’t be a whiner. We do have a shovel at the aid station.”

That motto is the root of the Kansas City Trail Nerds. Eight years ago, Holmes was running through snow and ice on a brutal winter night at Shawnee Mission Park and was shocked to encounter Kyle Amos gutting it out in the cold. Because they rarely met other athletes kicking up dirt after dark, Amos and Holmes started training together on the trails. Friends started to join them until the group swelled enough to need a name. They called themselves the Kansas City Trail Nerds. Their mud-spattered, insect-defying ranks continued to grow, and in 2004 the group put on its first “Pyscho” race — a 50-kilometer event that only 21 of the 43 entrants managed to finish.

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They train several times a week on area trails, until the idea of running a mere marathon becomes mundane and their attention is piqued only by races for which they must clamber 100 miles through mountain passes. They’ll run so much that even daylight is a buzzkill. They up the adrenaline by training and organizing races at night. During business hours, they’re teachers and entrepreneurs with children to parent and lawns to mow. But they spend their nights and weekends as extreme athletes.

Gary Henry, a lanky grandfather type who lives in Lawrence and speaks with a soothing, ’60s-love-child cadence, is standing next to me just moments before Holmes starts the clock.

“I don’t know if you’ve heard the Trail Nerds’ goal yet,” he says with a conspiratorial smile. “World domination.”

When Holmes shouts “Go!” at the start of Pyscho Night, the crowd bolts across the field. Our feet catch in undulating soil disguised by ankle-licking grass. We hop the streams, cross a paved road and take a 90-degree turn into the forest.

The woman who was worried about tears in the first half-mile was right. It’s uphill from the start. The path is too narrow to run in pairs, so the group threads into single file. Thanks to horse hooves and erosion, the path is dented with deep troughs and scattered with rocks. The sun hasn’t quite set, but the few dim shards of light are intercepted by the trees. Racers turn on their headlamps and click their flashlights. The forest is speckled with erratic beams of light, like some disco-themed alien invasion.

It doesn’t take long to hit the first patch of mud. Most runners flank the bushes and try to tiptoe around the edges of the gushy pits. But some relish the brown stuff.

“C’mon, guys!” Laurie Euler yells as she sloshes up the middle, coating her calves. “Go through the puddle. It’s fun.”

“Mud Babes don’t go around the mud!” Debbie Webster shouts, sending up another volley of splashes.

When Euler, an engineer who lives in Lawrence, first started running with the Nerds in mid-2007, she was the only woman. Since then, the gender gap has closed and the women have created their own Nerd culture. The Mud Babes lead their own Saturday morning run and induct their newbies with mud tattoos. They run under pseudonyms. Webster is known as Hangover Hottie.

Coleen Voeks, who owns an independent music shop in Shawnee, is one of the standouts. Her father was an ultrarunner, and she hated the family vacations that centered on watching her dad slog through the mountains for 30 straight hours. She's called "Cynical Mud Babe." For her 35th birthday in June, she ran 35 miles at Clinton State Park. At races and training runs, the diminutive woman can be spotted by her high pigtails held up with pink bows. Pinned to her athletic skirt, which doesn't quite cover a tattoo on her thigh, is the number "69." She convinced the organizers to let her have the number for this Psycho Night.

She's still trailing behind Euler and Webster, who are among the first women to hit the Wyandotte Triangle. Before the start, Holmes announced that any runner who blazed through this "obnoxiously curvy" section in less than seven minutes would get a free race entry in any Nerd event. Not even the most hardcore can manage it.

The trail is barely six inches wide and zigzags unpredictably. To keep the racers on track, fluorescent pink flags are stuck in the ground every foot. The trail doubles back so often and veers up and down the hill so much that racers seem to be coming from all directions. As though in a pitch-black echo chamber, racers shout instructions, making sure their fellow runners don't get whipped in the face with a branch or get gut checked by a tree stump.

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"Tree!"

"Biiiig rock!"

"Watch out for that root!"

As light from our headlamps cuts quickly against the trees, we catch eerie glances of Trail Nerd décor. Tucked into the crooks of branches and nailed to the trunks of trees, Holmes and crew have installed plastic alligators and huge tiki masks. Holmes wasn't lying about tree gators.

He wasn't bluffing about shallow graves, either. Clearly visible in the bushes, where the Wyandotte Triangle mercifully spills back onto the comparatively predictable trail, a yellow running shirt is half covered in dirt, partly buried above a pair of shoes sticking up as if still attached to a whining runner.

There aren't any mile markers out here, and it's tough to steal a glance at a watch while making sure that my next step isn't going to disturb a snake or slip on a rock. But after the Triangle, racers start to pick up the pace on the back end of the six miles.

By now, the winners are already sucking down electrolytes back at the lake. First-place finisher Gregg Buehler plowed through the uneven terrain in about 45 minutes. The leading woman, Allison Keegan, a Pittsburg State University student who drove more than two hours to compete, wasn't far behind at 52 minutes and 36 seconds.

But in the middle of the pack, we face an even trickier return now that the mud has been churned by more than 70 runners. Two racers and less than 20 feet ahead of me, Cara Reglin comes to a dead stop, as if some fairy-tale trail villain has turned her legs to stone.

"I'm stuck!" she yells, flinging her arms to the sides for balance.

She's knee-deep in mud.

"My shoe's going to come off," she says with a laugh that's half amused and half panicked.

Gelatinous muck extends around her several feet in every direction. Two male racers and I tread to the edge. One of the men extends his hand over the gap, grabs Reglin's forearm and starts to pull. The other guy gets behind the first, tugging the two-person chain. After some straining, Reglin pops out with a wet thwack!

"Ugh, good luck to me," she says as she tries to take off again, her shoes shellacked with an inch of slime.

It's not too far to the finish, though, and mostly downhill. The buzz of locusts is interspersed with the howling of dogs and the squawking of geese — a sure sign that we're getting back toward the start. We hit the final stretch of grass and aim for the shadow of the large tree. Headlamps bob wildly as weakened ankles struggle to maintain a steady trajectory on the uneven dirt. As I squint my way into the crowd, I yell out my number and hear someone with a stopwatch tell someone with a clipboard, "One hour, 8 minutes, 10 seconds."

The Mud Babes are waiting for one another at the end. Webster's drenched socks are clumped around her toes. Euler announces that she got mud in her eye. They both whoop and applaud when they hear Voeks crossing the final field just before 9:30 p.m.

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"Sixty-nine, baby!" Voeks shouts as she trots past the timekeeper.

It is, after all, Friday night.

On a steamy July evening, drive-time DJs warn of an extreme heat advisory as a handful of Trail Nerds gather in a parking lot at Shawnee Mission Park. It's been a mercury-popping week of record high temperatures, but a dozen runners are getting ready to put in a few miles on a Tuesday night.

Surrounded by several other women, Bobbi Aschwanden-Thomas, a teacher, is doing what Trail Nerds do best: regaling her peers with the tale of her latest long-distance haul. Just three days earlier, she completed the Pacific Crest Trail Ultramarathon, a 50-mile race with 5,300 feet of climbing to the top of Mount Hood. She ran and walked over snow, narrow ledges and slippery volcanic ash. Yeah, she'll admit it: She cried. But she finished.

Euler, a Lawrence engineer, sympathizes. She entered her first 50-kilometer race — 31 miles — last winter. Part of the trail was such a mud pit that she walked for a good five miles. She cried the whole way. But she finished, too.

Just as the small group is about to abandon the idle chatter and take the discussion to the trails, the runner they've been waiting for whips into the parking lot in his black Honda Element. Ben Holmes isn't the kind of guy most athletes would peg for the cover of Runner's World. Far from the sinewy Kenyans who dominate distance running, Holmes has boyishly cut blond hair and a smile that makes his round face scrunch. He's an accomplished athlete, but he moves with the casual swagger of a bar buddy. A slight bulge around his middle betrays a love of beer almost as deep as his affection for running. By day, he's a manager at Bayer in Shawnee. But when he pulls on his white, moisture-wicking tank top and straps on his headlamp, he's known as the king of the Trail Nerds.

That persona was born at the Boston Marathon a decade ago. Holmes had been running most of his adult life and had already logged 38 marathons. As he lined up at the starting line, the whole ordeal suddenly lost its appeal. This is like running with a herd of horses, he thought, or being in line at a Wal-Mart. And the blunt-force trauma of pounding away on pavement was starting to wear down his nearly 50-year-old body. So he traded the roads for trails.

Shortly after he changed his routine, he ran into Amos on that winter night in 2000. A teacher with two kids, Amos started training for triathlons when he was 15 years old. He was never crazy about the running portion, though, so he logged his foot miles on the same trails he cruised on his mountain bike. Unlike Holmes, it was the trails that drew Amos to running, not the other way around.

Holmes jokes that the Trail Nerds are a bit of a cult. But with 400 people on the group's e-mail list and more racers flocking to "Pyscho" events, it's getting harder to marginalize this movement. "People are realizing, 'I don't have to run on an artificial construct and wear blinky lights to keep from being run over by cars,'" Holmes says. "You can have an outdoor experience within the city limits, see wildlife. It's more of a spiritual experience than running on the road."

The first time I ran with this band of dirt pounders was late May. The group had just introduced a beginner's run on Monday night. I'd read tales of runners stepping on dead animals, coming toe-to-tongue with copperhead snakes, emerging from the forest covered in so many ticks that they needed to bust out the duct tape to tear them all off. For someone like me, who had completed half-marathons but had become sick of the monotony of the city, it sounded more interesting than the quiet, predawn streets of midtown.

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On that first run, a seasoned Trail Nerd named Caleb Chatfield led a small group of us onto the mountain bike trails of Shawnee Mission Park. Chatfield trotted along so casually, he looked as though he ran for a living. We were the only runners on the rocky, root-latticed path hugging the sides of shadowy ravines and veering up and down hills. Here it takes karate-like focus to avoid spraining an ankle. Running through the trees calls to mind an odd mix of military training and Zen meditation. After four and a half miles, we stopped near the edge of the forest. Time had flown by like it never had on the roads.

"Just wait until you run at night," Chatfield said. "It's like drunk Tetris."

The following Thursday, I showed up at Wyandotte County Lake Park just after 7 p.m. The sun was still reassuringly high in the sky. Euler and I headed out with Shane Jones, a veteran Nerd who wears gaiters decorated with skulls. Jones knows more about these winding bridle paths than most. That was comforting, because these trails are far more challenging than Shawnee Mission Park's. The first 50 feet are a dramatic descent over soil eroded into jagged drops. Less than a hundred feet in, we had to crunch through the forest and elbow through brush to avoid a tree that had crashed onto the trail.

We turned a corner and found a flock of vultures roosting in a tight stand of trees. One evening, a wild turkey fell out of a tree right in front of Jones, passing inches from his face. "It scared the shit out of me," he said. "I thought it was a monkey."

Turkeys aren't the only erratic inhabitants. A couple of years ago, a group of Nerds thought they saw a log up ahead on the darkened trail. Instead, it was a man decked out in full camo lying across the path. The man put his finger to his lip in a gesture of silence. "They're looking for me," he said.

We didn't see anyone on the trails that night as we ran through a field where the grass slapped our knees. Jones stopped to break off large branches that had fallen into the path. He comes out here sometimes with a weed whacker to buzz back dangerous obstructions. We started down a lush ravine, part of an area the Nerds call Fester's Wander because Holmes blazed the path with help from his dog Fester.

Past the halfway point, the setting sun softened the edges of the oak trees. We approached Hedgehog Hill, a steep incline named for the speedy video-game character. While running in the opposite direction, Holmes

and others have crashed into a tree near the bottom when they haven't been able to brake fast enough. In fact, they rarely run down this hill anymore.

"This is my favorite part," Euler said as we started to stagger slowly up the incline. "Especially when it's muddy or snowy."

"Snowy?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said. "Then you have to use your hands."

At 7:15 on the morning of August 10, a mist is lifting off the lake when the Nerds start to gather at Wyandotte County Park. Half a dozen runners with packs of water strapped to their backs and around their waists amble to the edge of the parking lot. At the start of a dirt incline into the trees, nobody takes a clear lead. Apparently, nobody is jumping at the chance to be Spider-Man this Sunday morning. Because the trails are rarely traversed by anyone but the Nerds, the head of the pack will get a face full of spider webs.

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Holmes takes the front spot as the group starts on the 12-mile loop. The chatter on the trail turns almost immediately to the reason they're up so early: races. These long weekend runs make up a pillar of training for races of 50 or 100 miles. Instead of running every day, Nerds training for a race often log 20 miles on Saturday morning. Then they get up on Sunday and do another 25 on tired legs.

It sounds like a lot of abuse, but these runners are rarely injured — aside from a monster, green-purple bruise on the rare occasion when one trips and falls. The dirt paths absorb the impacts that cause stress fractures and chronic pain in road runners. Navigating among the roots and rocks cultivates an array of muscles. It doesn't take long before Nerds start to ponder ultradistance races.

Holmes' first ultra was in 2003, the 100-mile Rocky Raccoon in Huntsville, Texas. Compared with other big-name events in the Colorado Rockies or the Sierra Nevada range in California, the Texas race is pretty tame: five times around a 20-mile loop that meanders through swampy but relatively flat terrain under a canopy of impressive oak trees. Holmes listened to the chorus of frogs and armadillos. The physical effort was grueling, but that wasn't the toughest part. The mind, Holmes says, does strange things.

"You go through emotional ups and downs, kind of like mental and spiritual stages," he says. "It's like an onion, and the first thing that goes is your ego. You basically get peeled down to this emotional beast, almost like a reptilian brain peeled down to surviving."

When he made it to the finish line, exhausted, he spotted a German woman smoking a cigar. He broke out a bottle of Maker's Mark. As runners crossed the finish line, the two puffed away and drank four fingers of bourbon. Now Holmes enters four or five 100-milers a year, along with a half-dozen 50-mile and 50-kilometer races. He goes back to the Rocky Raccoon every year, too, though he doesn't always break out the bourbon.

As we trot through the trees on Sunday morning, Gary Henry, the grandfatherly runner from Lawrence, asks Holmes about a sensitive injury at the 2008 Rocky Raccoon. Holmes says he was in horrendous pain but didn't figure out until the final four miles that he had a severe chaffing issue in his shorts.

"It was a wardrobe malfunction," he yells over his shoulder.

Henry laughs. It looked like the kind of weeping sore they show high school kids to scare them off sex, he says.

Sometimes, the mental or physical strain does become too much to bear. The past two years, Holmes has attempted the Cascade Crest, a 100-mile race in the Pacific Northwest that includes 20,000 feet of climbing. In 2007, it rained during the night as the temperatures dipped to 40 degrees. He had to rappel down a 500-foot cliff at mile 50. Soon, his lips turned purple. He lost his footing and slipped off a small slope. He had run for 62 miles and had 20 more until his next drop bag, where he'd find extra clothes and food. He was having trouble staying upright. So he dropped out.

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"I didn't realize how hypothermic I was until they put a blanket around me," he says. "I had to warm up to shiver. That's bad."

But Holmes has already committed to return for next year's Cascade Crest. He has promised race organizers that he will bring the rappelling rope.

Running ultras isn't always so grueling. This summer, Amos upped his trail cred a few notches by finishing 10th in a field of 150 runners at the Big Horn 100 in Wyoming. The course is intense, climbing 3,000 feet in the first seven miles. Right away, Amos felt like he was surrounded by wilderness. At mile 45, as he ran alongside two other racers, he told them to stop. For a few moments, they just gazed at the vista of snowcapped mountains. Then they resumed their quick pace through the night. By the next morning, Amos had traversed the 100 miles over and across the peaks in 23 hours and 27 minutes.

Even Amos says he struggles down the stairs on stiff legs after a race like that. But that's just proof that he has accomplished something. Thanks to these weekend training runs, though, veterans such as Holmes and Amos are quick to recover, even after 100-mile races. They're back at work on Monday morning, despite lack of sleep. Within a week, they're jogging shorter distances before jumping into another Sunday morning mini-marathon.

It's getting close to the two-hour mark when the group emerges onto a sunny stretch of pavement. The bright light and unforgiving concrete are jarring. Our feet, so quiet on the trails, hammer out a cadence. A couple of guys start shouting out the sing-song chants of military recruits on a training run.

"I hear ROTCies ain't that fit," Holmes shouts. "Only running with the Trail Nerds is worth a shit!"

After more than two hours on the trails, the Sunday morning group ambles back to the parking lot a little past 10 a.m. Some peel off soaked shirts, change their mud-caked shoes and suck down the final dregs of their water bottles.

Within five minutes, Henry is moseying around with a blue mug of brown liquid. It's not coffee. It's a dark ale. Holmes has an entire keg of his homebrew in the back of his Honda.

The parking-lot preparty moves uphill to the west side of the lake, where other Nerds are unloading food onto a picnic table. To celebrate this August Birthday Bash — a catchall celebration for the handful of Nerds born this month — they've brought plenty of sprits. Webster sets a rum-spiked watermelon on the edge of a picnic table, complete with a hardware-grade spigot sticking out the bottom of the green fruit. Euler and Nick Lang, a fellow Nerd, dump cans of Keystone Light, vodka and lemonade into a blue cooler. As the group digs into a cake, aptly decorated with chocolate sprinkles that cross the white icing like a dirt trail, Henry pops open the first of two bottles of champagne.

Before long, the group is getting a little tipsy. Voeks, perched on top of a cooler, joins Henry in a rendition of the Lewis Carroll poem "Jabberwocky."

“Beware the Jabberwock, my son,” the two croon dramatically. “The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!” Before the applause dies away, Henry is flooded with cries for an encore. They want to hear his “Moon Poem,” which he recited before a 50-kilometer race called the Lunar Trek that many of the Nerds completed in June. With a flourish at the end, Henry raises his glass.

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“Brought to you by Nick’s panty droppers,” he says and laughs.

As the sun climbs toward noon, the group reminisces about embarrassing run-ins. The way Jones once screamed when he stumbled upon a huge possum on a Clinton Park trail. How Holmes said he’d wear one of the Mud Babe-style skirts in an upcoming run. Another Nerd says he’d shed his shorts in favor of the feminine wardrobe “if it has room for my junk.”

Voeks bolts up and grabs a few items of food from the picnic table. She turns her back to the group, and when she spins back around, she’s got a banana and two oranges packed into the lining of her black skirt.

But wouldn’t the skirt chafe after 50 miles? That’s the kind of question only a Trail Nerd can answer.

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