

MATTHEW  
CUNNINGHAM

## Will Run for Beer

*The Sin City Hash House Harriers are looking for a few good runners. Just be sure you know their rules.*

She knew better and now she's paying for it. Serving Seamen, an attractive twentysomething with shoulder-length blonde hair, understands the rules as well as anyone else. She tries to look calm as Unallicker, the sergeant-at-arms, checks the shoes of 25 sweaty men and women gathered in the backyard of Foley's Irish Pub in Reading, but on this humid summer evening, there's no disguising her crime: new shoes. Despite the dirt from the just-completed run, Serving Seamen's spiffy white Mizunos shine like a flashlight compared to the other hashers' filthy sneaks.

"I've been wearing them for two weeks," she contends over raucous catcalls of "New shoes!" and "Make her drink!" from her fellow runners. She follows Unallicker into the middle of the group. He's a tall, middle-aged man who wouldn't look out of place in a business suit, and now he uses that bearing to hush the crowd.

"We have a shoe violation," he announces with the mock severity of an old-time preacher. He turns to Serving Seamen. "You know what to do."

She takes off her right sneaker, removes the sweaty insole, and shakes out the dirt. Then the song starts, and the beer starts flowing. Into the shoe.

"Balls to Mr. Banglestein, Banglestein, Banglestein... Balls to Mr. Banglestein, dirty old man..."

The song drags as members empty mug after mug into the sneaker. Beer streams out of the vents like a busted sprinkler.

This is how the night typically ends with the Sin City Hash House Harriers. For the last 11 years, this local branch of the world's largest unofficial running club has been drawing 20 to 40 diehard members to each of its three monthly runs. It's a small contingent of a global group whose membership exceeds 160,000. Their mission: to hash, a quirky activity that combines running, hide-and-seek, and plenty of beer.

And lest we forget, there are the names, too. Ever since 1938, when bored expats in Kuala Lumpur invented the game, the bestowing of IDs, next to the running, has been the group's oldest tradition. It's a passkey to the inner sanctum of the hashing world. (Case in point: Those interviewed for this story would only speak on the condition that their real names not be



PHOTOGRAPH BY RYAN KURTZ

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revealed.) Some of the older members of the Sin City group have essentially created alternate personas to go with their hasher identities. Here, real names—and real-life personalities—only intrude through not-so-subtle innuendo and fully intended puns.

Right now, though, Serving Seamen, who's recently applied to the Navy officer program, is the focus of the group. Amid an energetic chorus of calls to "down, down, down, down" she takes a deep breath and drains the shoe in one gulp. The circle cheers as she triumphantly holds the sneaker overhead. A trickle of suds drip into her hair and a wide grin stretches across her face. Despite the consequences of her mistake, you get the feeling that Serving Seamen wouldn't have it any other way.

"People either really love it," says one longtime hasher, "or they never come back."

**TO AN OUTSIDER**, the individuals who've congregated at a Reading parking lot for a pre-run routine of stretch-

ing and poking fun at one another look normal enough. It's a diverse group, a mix of ages—twentysomethings intermingle with soon-to-be seniors—and body types, from the ultra-fit to jovially plump. They could easily pass for a church group training for a charity run.

On this night, Anal Vise is the first one ready to go. It's 20 minutes past six o'clock, the designated start time, and the tall, extremely fit man with a touch of gray in his moustache paces from group to talkative group, loudly trying to figure out the holdup. When this get-along bluster reaches the crowd drinking beer from a cooler in the back of Beat Me's red hatchback, the diminutive woman puts her foot down.

"What time is it?" she says in a booming voice that drowns out Anal Vise. "What time do we usually start these things?" In hasher world, it's a rhetorical question. Along with the strict rule against mentioning marathons, racing, or training times, a ban on sports watches means start times are merely suggestions.

Anal Vise catches the hint, takes a deep breath, and redirects his energy to orienting the night's newcomers, or in hasher parlance, virgins. Later, he'll confide that his hasher-given name came from a similar situation years ago. During a hash, he shared a few gripes with a fellow runner. "Man, you're tight as a vise!" the guy said. The name stuck, though out of respect, the hashers simply refer to him as "A.V."

While the names cast a veil of exclusivity over the Sin City gatherings, the group is far from a closed society. Beyond the \$7 each hasher puts into the night's beer and snack fund, there are no dues. Officers of the "mismanagement" committee are elected, but none takes the job too seriously. "The more qualified you are to be in charge," says Hot Wax Me Officer, the current "on-sec," or secretary, who goes by the nickname Waxy, "the less likely you are to be in charge."

The participants come from all walks of life; Bouncing Baby Ball Barrister is a lawyer; Waxy holds a position with

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## AT THE HEART OF THE HASH, SAYS ONE member, is the liberating feeling of being able to "go out and run around, like we did when we were kids." Age and real-world success mean nothing.

an executive search firm. Conversations during the hash are just as likely to center on recent trips abroad and stock tips as fart jokes. Even a diehard member like I'm Not Gay, whose outfit often includes a SpongeBob SquarePants cycling jersey occasionally augmented by a three-foot-long plywood sword, transforms into a courteous expectant father the minute the hash is over.

Unlike a typical hash, where a designated lead hare will plan out the run well in advance, tonight's event is a "hyper," in which the leader gets only a five-minute head-start on the rest of the pack to plot the course. The rules would be familiar to anyone who went on scavenger hunts as a kid. On this night Hot Tub Slut, a guy in his mid-60s with a lean, muscular build, is selected as the night's

hare. He takes off through Reading's neighborhoods, marking his path with piles of "hash mix" and a code of dashes and arrows scrawled on the sidewalk. In the wake of 2001 terrorist attacks, the group's practice of marking trails with small piles of chalk dust came under scrutiny. Apparently to some non-hashers, the piles of white powder looked suspiciously like anthrax or cocaine. The solution, found in partnership with the Hamilton County Terrorism Early Warning Group, was to mark the trail with a pre-approved "hash-mix": orange-tinted flour, sawdust, and paper confetti.

After a five-minute wait, the rest of the pack takes off in hot pursuit of Hot Tub Slut. Catch the hare and you get the bag of hash mix and a five-minute lead to start laying your own trail. There's no

winner, and the game ends when the hare decides that he or she's run far enough—usually two to four miles at a relaxed pace—or the pack gets tired and returns to the start point.

For every legitimate mark Slut lays, he adds one or two false trails. It only takes two blocks before the pack of 25 breaks into several small groups, each one convinced it's on the right trail. Conversations ebb and flow as they converge and split, the hashers listening for a whistle blast that would indicate someone is back on the hare's trail. On this night, no one has encountered any intrusions from the "outside" world, but that's not always the case. "The inner city neighborhoods, they're not too bad," says one member. "It's the suburban neighborhoods where we get a lot of flack. People really get on you about not messing up their grass."

Not that the hashers don't occasionally bring it on themselves. Waxy recalls one hare who thought he'd be clever and mark the trail with a paintball gun. "We caught up to him as the police were put-

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ting him in the back of a cruiser," she says.

Tonight, few bystanders pay attention as the pack winds through a quiet neighborhood on the east side of downtown Reading, down a stretch of railroad tracks, through a park (with a detour down the slide, of course) and through a muddy construction site. The little piles of hash mix stretch down an industrial road, then abruptly vanish. With a locked fence to the left and impenetrable foliage on the right, there are two options: hang a right into the brush, or go straight and hope for the best. The group wisely chooses the latter path.

After a half mile the pack regains its bearings and takes a shortcut to the finish point back at the parking lot. Slut, Unalicker, and A.V. are there, their hands grimy with orange flour and confetti from their turns laying trail. A few of the faster runners who had earlier broken off from the pack have made it back to the parking lot as well. Despite their healthy pace over the three-mile course, no one acknowledges their achievement. As the majority of the pack dives into their cars for clean shirts, bottles of water, and more than a few cans of Natural Light, Unalicker looks on. "Some people take it a little too seriously," he says.

**A GOOD 30 MINUTES** later, the group walks into Foley's smelling like death. The bartender does the only sensible thing and directs them to the back porch as she starts filling pitchers.

Beer plays a tremendous role in the hasher experience, going all the way back to the original 1938 run. An anonymous member in Kuala Lumpur laid down a charter that stated hashing's four purposes. The "Mother Hash's" charter still guides hashers today; not too surprisingly, half of it is dedicated to beer:

"Purpose of the Hash Number Two: To get rid of hangovers."

"Purpose of the Hash Number Three: To acquire a good thirst and satisfy it in beer."

After a loud 15 minutes of what could best be described as herding cats, Unalicker forms the group into a circle and the "on-after," or the post-run party, begins. The night's newcomers are introduced, then they drink. The night's hares are pulled into the circle, serenaded by a chorus of the hasher hymn "Shitty Trail"

(sung to the tune of the Mickey Mouse Club anthem), and they drink. Serving Seamen then gets her taste of beer *à la* Mizuno. By the end of the ceremony, everyone has taken at least one trip into the circle for a rule violation during the hash. Birthdays and "anal-versaries" are celebrated in like fashion. While everyone's required to drink, no one's required to drink alcohol unless they so choose, and the assembled hashers show a surprising amount of moderation: They all drink, but no one gets blasted.

According to Acts Stupid, a meat-and-potatoes guy who looks more tackle football than cross country, hashers with the Sin City group are more conservative than most. He mentions a group of hashers in New Orleans. "Some of them," he says, "they're more about the drinking than about the running. In New Orleans, man, it's wild. They do a lot of naked hashes."

Maybe the nude running craze has yet to hit Cincinnati, but spend enough time with the Sin City hashers and one obvious question about the group arises: Is this just a bunch of kind-of, sort-of athletes looking for an excuse to drink?

No, says Waxy. The running and the booze are just a part of it. At the heart of the hash, she stresses, is the liberating feeling of being able to "go out and run around, like we did when we were kids."

That's poignant in light of the charter's first and fourth purposes: "To promote physical fitness among our members," and "To persuade older members that they are not as old as they feel."

Flaming Pickle Licker, a retired naval officer, who speaks with the fast, clipped pace of someone trying to express a lot of thoughts in a few words, gives it a slightly more philosophical spin. "Every two weeks," he says, "you're just a hasher."

And that's where the beauty lies. Somewhere between the juvenile jokes and the childish behavior and the copious intake of light beer, there's a sense of purposelessness that the real world rarely allows. Age, status, and real-world success mean nothing during the hash. For those with the right sense of humor, the hasher circle is a welcome escape, a surrogate family that shuts out stresses and concerns for a few hours every other week. And it's open to anyone. Just don't wear new shoes. G