

Urban Human Hounds Tracking Down the Beers

HOWARD M. UNGER • MARCH 30, 2007



Manhattan hashers at the inevitable final reward. Patrick Andrade for The New York Times

A FEW minutes after the lead runners scattered in all directions to search for their next mark, Edward Coda stopped on the corner of West 13th Street and Eighth Avenue to inquire about where the chalk-drawn trail picked up next. "Which way did they go?" Mr. Coda asked. "I have two virgins following me. And they're pretty slow."

Moments later, calls of "On! On!" echoed from two streets over. A lead runner had found the trail. Mr. Coda pulled a piece of chalk from his running shorts, hurriedly drew an arrow on the pavement and sped off. The high-speed quest for beer would not be slowed.

For the doctors, lawyers and engineers who compose a large segment of the [New York City](#) Hash House Harriers, the four-mile dash through the West Village and TriBeCa one recent Sunday was not a contest so much as it was

a social event: a cheddar-and-Chardonnay crowd in a Pabst-and-Pumas mood. Some were dodging traffic to squeeze in their daily run or just for the thrill of the chase. But besides a graduate school education, their most common bond was a desire for a post-hash pint.

Hashing, as it is known, is based on Hare and Hounds, an English game in which a "hare," given a head start, marks a course with bits of paper (the "scent") for the pursuing hounds, whose collective mission is to catch the hare before it reaches a designated finish line.

Also called Paper Chase, the game evolved into hashing during the late 1930s, when a group of British expatriates added alcohol to the equation during a stay in Malaysia. The game moved around the globe; it is believed to have arrived in New York in 1978.

"My colleague and I were introduced to it as British people who like the whole pub culture but who also thought it was time to get some exercise," said David Byron-Brown, a frequent Manhattan and Brooklyn hasher who until recently organized Queens hashes. "It seemed very much a good idea to combine the two things."

"We do what hashers do everywhere," Mr. Byron-Brown said, "which is to basically run around a lot and end up at a bar."

Outside New York City, most hashing groups incorporate a bit of lunacy and mid-run alcohol, features proudly displayed on dozens of hashing Web sites. A Big Apple hasher is a bit more refined, said Mr. Byron-Brown, a banking-software consultant. "You know that they are going to be of a certain sensibility and not idiots," he said, "although there is no prohibition against that."

"We keep our clothes on," added Lauren Whitney, another hasher.

"It's suspended adolescence for overworked professionals," said Cree

Lawson, an online advertising executive and the first runner to finish the recent hash downtown.

A four-mile hash may mean only a 25-minute jaunt for a fast runner, but a second or third post-hash beer can give New Balance a whole new meaning. Aside from the beer buzz, Mr. Lawson said, the most exhilarating part of a hash is picking up a hare's trail and leading a pack of runners in the right direction.



A trail sign. Patrick Andrade for
The New York Times

For Tim Reed, who hashes two to three times a week in New York, hashing in a city like Washington can require more tolerance for alcohol.

"When I hashed there, they had beer checks every 20 minutes," he said, referring to a point along the trail where the runners gather to drink and figure out where the hare's trail continues. "I find New York more fun because it's more of a runners' hash and more of a challenge. D.C. has a beer truck and does 'shot checks' in alleys."

Jean Marie Kelly, co-president of the New York City Hash House Harriers, said, "About 90 percent of what we do is legal," in contrast with some hashers elsewhere in the country. "We usually end up at a bar — not in the middle of a park — and we don't have beer in the middle of the runs," she said. "We keep it low-key."

The craziest it gets, Ms. Kelly said, is at the group's annual Flashlight Hash through Central Park, a full-moon run, or at its Red Dress Run, which has only one rather obvious rule.

"People think we're doing a fund-raiser during the Red Dress," she said, "and they ask us, 'What are you running for?' We say, 'Beer.' "

The club's signature event, Ms. Kelly said, is Marathon Weekend, when group members set up a "beer check" at Mile 23 for hashers running the [New York City Marathon](#). Beneath a giant footprint, a universally recognized hashing symbol, the group distributes beer to hashing marathoners from around the world.

"If my time is off my mark when I get there, I'll do the check," said Dave Stewart, a lawyer who has been hashing for five years. "It's a dumb idea," he admitted, but it gives everyone a thrill to see a marathoner chug a brew just a few miles before the finish.

With the help of the Internet, hashing has gone from trend (50 chapters around the world, according to a 1981 article in this newspaper) to phenomenon. Today, there are more than 300 hashing groups in the United States (including 8 in the New York City area) and more than 2,000 others throughout the world.

The hashing explosion has led to regional meets and "interhashes" like the one last October in Chiang Mai, Thailand, where 6,000 hashers from more than 50 countries ran through jungle and rice paddies for Singha Light.

VISITING local hash groups around the country is just as popular, say the New York hashers, many of whom regularly incorporate hashing into their business trips or vacations. Mr. Stewart and Mr. Byron-Brown, along with a group of other runners, traveled to London early this month for the specific purpose of hashing.



Manhattan hashers on the move. Patrick Andrade for The New York Times

Wherever you hash, there's an immediate connection, said Melissa White, an American living in The Hague.

"Some folks find God; I found the hash," said Ms. White, who also met her husband and found a home in North Carolina while hashing, the latter occurring while she was running with a real estate agent.

In the Netherlands, where she and her husband moved for his new job (a position he learned about through a Raleigh hasher), the couple now hashes with a NATO missile scientist, an investigator for the International Criminal Court and a medic for the Dutch Special Forces.

Every hashing group does things a little differently, said Bill Gillin, a Navy Reservist visiting New York from Memphis, before one recent hash. Besides camaraderie, he said, he was looking for a way to drink, exercise and see the

city.

“I know I’m going to get a good tour,” he said before the run. However, he wasn’t expecting a \$15 fee, called “hash cash,” for the post-run beer and buffet.

“I guess everything is more expensive in New York,” he said. “In Memphis, we charge two bucks, and we roll out a keg at the end.”

A few hours — and a few beers — later, Mr. Gillin, surrounded by a group of new friends, said that he’d figured out what separates the New York hashers from his Memphis brethren. He took a glance around the bar.

“They can’t hold their alcohol!” Mr. Gillin said.

VISITOR INFORMATION

HASHING IN NEW YORK To ensure that area hashes do not conflict, local hashing leaders meet once a year to divide up the calendar. “If this were a Mafia, it’d be a meeting of the syndicates,” said Cree Lawson, who heads the New Amsterdam Winter Wednesday Hash House Harriers.

The leaders have also combined forces on www.hashnyc.com, where schedules for Mr. Lawson’s group, as well as those for half a dozen other city “hash houses,” are posted. The site also includes links and contact information for hashing groups in Westchester, Long Island, New Jersey and Connecticut.

To hear a recording about upcoming local hashes, call the New York Hash Hotline, at 212-HASH-NYC (212-427-4692).

OUTSIDE NEW YORK Two Web sites — www.gotothefhash.net and www.half-mind.com — offer lists of links and contact information for more than 2,000 hashing groups around the world.