

Runners, take your shark, get set, go ... have fun

By Lauren Bishop
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Gary Franke first wore the shark suit on a dare.

He doesn't remember the exact year, but he won an award for best costume in the charity race where the suit made its debut. The reaction he received got him hooked, and Franke - an attorney who started running in college - has been wearing the suit in races all over Cincinnati and beyond ever since.

"When you're wearing an 8-foot, corduroy shark suit," he says, "you can't help but make people laugh."

Next time they'll be laughing at Franke will be Cincinnati's annual Thanksgiving Day Race. The shark-suited jogger knows he's not going to win a race anytime soon, but for him, competing has taken a back seat to simply having a good time.

Around Cincinnati and across the country, runners don costumes, imbibe beer, dine out and otherwise take to great lengths the social, rather than competitive, side of the sport.

That's the theory behind races like the annual Jingle Bell Run/Walk for Arthritis on Dec. 6, where Santa hats and fake antlers promise to be plentiful, and last month's Cystic Fibrosis Foundation's annual Run Like Hell Run/Walk and Halloween costume party.

Dressing up and running was unheard of during the initial U.S. running boom in the 1970s, says Bob Roncker, of Bob Roncker's Running Spot stores..

He says there's more of an emphasis on exercise for enjoyment now than there was 20 or 30 years ago - and that running, as a solitary rather than team sport, easily lends itself to levity.

"I think runners, to a large degree, are very individualistic," says Roncker.

Perhaps the best example of running for fun is known as "hashing," practiced here by a group called the Sin City Hash House Harriers and Harriettes.

Contrary to what the name might imply, hashing doesn't have anything to do with smoking, but it very much involves drinking - to the point where just about every hashing group calls itself "a drinking club with a running problem."

Hashing has its origins in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in 1938, when a group of bored British expatriates created a version of a children's game called Hares and Hounds.

The "hares" set trails for the "hounds," or harriers, to follow, and the participants would gather afterwards to eat and drink at a restaurant nicknamed the "Hash House." The sport took off in Asia and eventually spread around the world: Hashing Web sites claim there are now more than 1,000 chapters.

The Cincinnati chapter began eight years ago with a core group of 10 to 15 people, and it now draws anywhere from 35 to 40 to its hashes, says Fred Singer, who is the group's grand master.

Beer is usually consumed before, during and after the group's weekly trail run (or walk - it's up to each individual participant). Bawdily-nicknamed hashers - like Just Spank Me, Stinkie Winkie and Sweet Cheeks - sing equally bawdy songs along the way. Wearing new sneakers and otherwise serious running gear are crimes punishable by chugging beer at the end of the "race." And no one keeps track of who finishes first.



Gary Franke will run in his shark costume.
(Brandi Stafford photo)

"It's not competitive," Singer says. "There's no such thing as a winner or a loser in a hash. It's more of a camaraderie kind of thing.

A relatively new twist on hashing is the now-annual Red Dress Run, where male and female hashers dress accordingly. The tradition started a few years ago in San Diego, when one male hasher stayed behind at a bar to talk to a woman in a red dress, Singer said. At the next hash, all of his friends wore red dresses, he said.

Pete Dewbury, who started hashing nearly 20 years ago, says many people don't even know other hashers' real names or where they work. (Dewbury himself is retired.)

"People kind of leave all that stuff out of the picture," he says. "Everybody's just a fool."

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