

For the Run of It

For such a simple activity, running has more subgenres than jazz and heavy metal music combined. There are your marathon runners, fun runners, color runners, track runners, obstacle runners, cross country runners, ultra runners and more.

Then there are the Hash House Harriers, an iconoclastic lot with an unofficial slogan, "Drinkers with a running problem," who prefer aliases to protect the guilty. This is a loosely affiliated worldwide group where competitiveness is frowned upon, running pace is irrelevant and the distance (not to mention route) is generally unknown, yet whose members have stories about their runs, known as hashes, that verge on fantastic adventures.

"In the middle of my first hash, I thought to myself how much fun I was having. I stopped dead in my tracks. I had never believed prior that running could be fun. I travel for a living and the *first* thing I do when I am going to a new town is look up the hash. They usually have the best people around, and always guarantee I will make new friends and have a ball," says a local hasher, a member of Old Frederick and Rural Territories Hash House Harriers, who goes by name "Palm Pilot."

You likely have seen the traditional symbol of hashing on a bumper sticker and wondered what it was. The emblem is an outline of a human foot, often with "On-on," the universal shout when a hasher has found a trail after following the hare's treachery.

At its simplest, hashes are non-competitive running clubs, numbering several thousand, including two in Antarctica. Runs are around an hour, following a trail of chalk directions put down by a "hare." It will almost certainly involve getting lost, having to regroup, stopping to listen to the shouts of "On-on!" from the faster runners who have found a trail, a lot of

laughing and ... was beer mentioned?

Hasher "Bad Dog" says, "Hashing is the most fun I've had with my sneakers on," while "Just K" says Hashing is "a great release from the constraints and restraints of conventional norms. There are laughs, camaraderie and lots of beer to be found all over the world."

Hashing started in 1938 in what is now Malaysia by a group of British Colonial officers and expatriates to run on a Monday evening to burn off the excesses of the previous weekend. It's loosely based on a British cross-country tradition of paper chasing, where a hare is given a head start and throws torn pieces of paper along a trail for the hounds to follow.

Modern day hashes typically use chalk or flour and one or more members lay a trail which the hounds will follow. This trail often involves false trails, short cuts, dead ends and splits, or will simply end, forcing the pack to regroup and find where it begins again. These features are designed to level the playing field and keep the run social despite differences in athleticism.

The of "Drinkers with a running problem" makes clear that the social element of any event is always paramount, far more than any running ability. As such, clubs have many traditions, circles, hash names and symbols.

So what is it about hashing that makes mature adults indulge in an activity where stories told often involve hazards to health such as, "I once followed the German ambassador over a cliff"? To outsiders, the names, songs and traditions might seem infantile or even offensive, a bizarre behavior displayed by strange people. Among clubs there is the often heard this refrain: "If you are talking to a hasher, you don't need to explain your addiction. If you are talking to a non-hasher, you can't explain it."

Hashers don't care if you run a 2:30 marathon, race triathlons or run a 15-minute mile. There is an instant camaraderie that usually only exists between close friends. They savor a group activity that bonds people together

through trails, forests, cities and around (or quite often through) ponds and rivers. Rarely are trails in familiar places. There is a joyful release from oval tracks, pavements, treadmills, stop watches and finish lines. Mutual *joie de vivre* replaces the runners grimace as it becomes an activity returning to the child's joy in simply running.

Another aspect concerns accessibility. One of the delights of hashing is being able to hit the internet, type in "hash house harrier" and the city you are in, and find a hash running near you. The treadmill at the hotel gym or the local running trail pale into insignificance of instant acceptance into a new circle, the opportunity to run, enjoy the company of like-minded souls and then to socialize afterward certainly takes the edge off time spent in unfamiliar places. Let's face it, you can watch the hotel TV's limited offering, sit next to that shoe salesman at the hotel bar ... or you can join a group of admittedly demented characters and see parts of the world you would never see otherwise.

Then you can bring back great stories, even if they can only be told in hushed whispers.

For more information, visit Old Frederick and Rural Territories Hash House Harriers, www.ofh3.com or DC Hashing (covering D.C., Maryland and Virginia), www.dchashing.com.