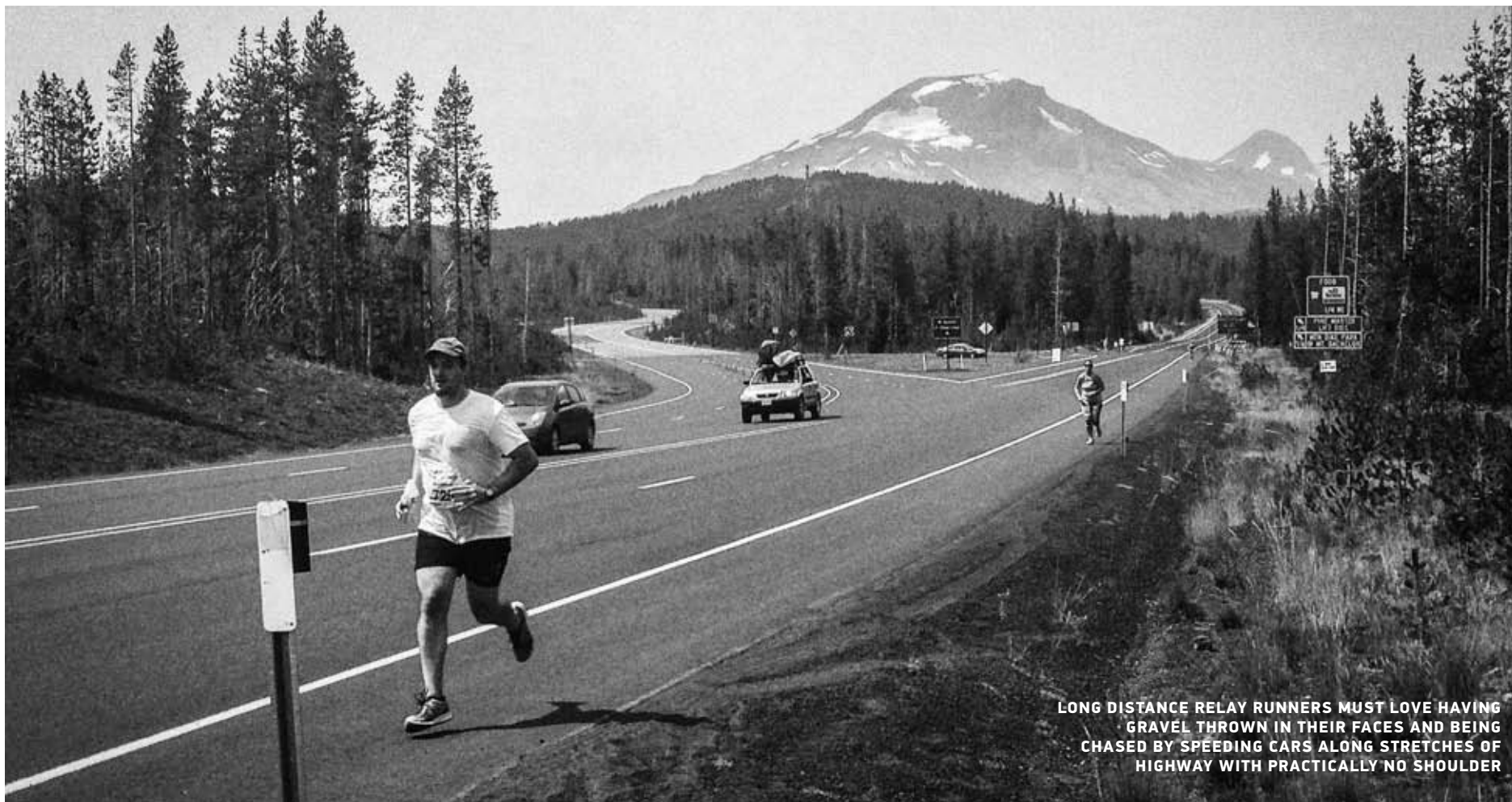




LONG DISTANCE RELAY RUNNERS MUST LOVE HAVING GRAVEL THROWN IN THEIR FACES AND BEING CHASED BY SPEEDING CARS ALONG STRETCHES OF HIGHWAY WITH PRACTICALLY NO SHOULDER

PHOTO BY DAMIAN FOLEY

RUNNER WITHOUT A CAUSE

Inside the madness of long-distance relay races BY CORINNE BOYER

People collapse. Toenails are turning black and falling off all the time.

And still, long-distance relay races attract enough runners to sell out in Oregon.

In my early relay race outings I've tripped, rolled ankles, blacked out, nearly puked and slept like a corpse propped up against walls and in open fields. At one point, after running 11 miles uphill in the sand, my mind left my body; I somehow found myself back in the team van without any recollection of how I got there.

After completing the Cascade Lakes Relay, which runs from Diamond Lake to Bend, I felt a sharp, burning pain across my chest. When I finished the race I discovered a lesion stretching across the top of my ribcage. The medic who helped bandage me up said he'd never seen a sports bra injury so ugly.

I'm a longtime runner, but I am not an athlete. I ran cross-country and track in middle and in high school. I've run dozens of 5k and 10k races, and I've completed a half marathon.

When I lived in South Korea, I regularly laced up my sneakers to run the walking paths and hiking trails carved out between the skyscraper apartment buildings in the suburbs outside of Seoul, often to glaring looks of confusion — I learned the hard way that jogging isn't popular in some Asian countries when I was mistaken for a prostitute. A friend told me it could have been my running shorts: another *faux pas* in South Korea.

I said yes to my first relay race because I thought it sounded like fun. For a person who'd jogged about 35 miles a week on foreign soil, what could surprise me?

To complete a long-distance relay race, a team of a dozen runners divides a route by taking turns attacking three separate legs of a 200-plus mile course. Each leg is ranked by distance, elevation differential, terrain and anticipated time of day.

During the first leg of my first relay, Hood to Coast, I

found myself flying along a downhill stretch of Highway 26 that leads east from Mount Hood towards Sandy. Container trucks kicked up gravel, and the shoulder along the winding mountain road was more or less nonexistent in some places. The threat of being killed by speeding cars pushed me to average a 7:48 mile, one of my personal bests.

Many of my teammates were relative strangers. I had just met half of them at my new job working at the University of Oregon. Now we run together in a relay every year.

A 9-mile run through a scenic Oregon state park may sound like a runner's dream, but running another relay in the dead of night, while descending more than 7 miles, and maintaining a white-knuckle death grip on a canister of pepper spray to ward off potential bears and cougars, allowed me to live out my own personal lucid nightmare in real time.

But the threat of wild animal encounters isn't the worst part of a relay race.

Every team hires two vans, six people in each. When runners from the first van set out, the second drives ahead several miles to an exchange point — vans alternate, arriving ahead of time at a location where each of the six runners are set to complete their stretch of the course.

After completing a leg, the runner hops back into the van and gets to stretch, eat, doze off, change clothes and pick the music.

It takes roughly 36 hours to complete a relay race.

As the journey wears on, so does the stench: sweat-soaked socks and shoes, armpits, fermenting banana peels and beef jerky.

Pro tip: Vans with seats upholstered in polyester and nylon cloth hold odors better than ones detailed in vinyl or leather.

Strangely, Michie Spradling, one of my teammates, says being stuck in a smelly van for hours on end doesn't bother her the way you'd think. Next to the physical punishment, it's not so bad: "Running in 90-plus degree weather — that was the most disgusting part."

My team captain Damian Foley says he received a few tips before running his first race, one of them being to bring zip-lock bags to keep his clothes in so they wouldn't stink up the van.

"I don't think I was entirely prepared for just what condition the van would be in by the time we got to the finish line," he says, "since when you start off everything is clean and pristine as it can be with six people putting two days worth of gear into a van, but by the time we finished it looked like a nuclear bomb had gone off; there's food all over the place, and everything smells of Tiger Balm."

Foley concludes that long-distance relays are "basically just a fantastic road trip with that every now and then someone has to get out of the van and go run."

When you run in all kinds of weather and on all kinds of turf for almost two days, injuries are going to happen. The worst Spradling suffered, she says, is a lost toenail, but she's heard multiple stories of people being chased and stung by bees. Foley once fell face first and cut open his leg after helping push a stuck van out of a gravel embankment.

Foley began the first leg of the Hood to Coast race at Timberline Lodge and ran straight down the side of Mount Hood. "You don't notice how much you're tearing your quads up," he says.

The good outweighs the torture, Foley and Spradling agree.

"It's a great way to see new parts of Oregon," Spradling says.

After finishing a relay race, parts of your body hurt and swell. My feet look like marshmallows the Sunday following a relay.

There's nothing in the world like finishing a long-distance relay. Teams all wait just shy of the finish line for their final runner so that they can all cross together. And then there's beer, food and a ridiculously oversized participation medal.

Overall, it's a horrible, fetid, cramped picturesque adventure. And for reasons I can't fully rationalize, I signed up for another round this summer. ■