

# Blindness doesn't hinder Team Eye Rock

Walkers and their guides make good time

By EDWARD STRATTON  
The Daily Astorian

SEASIDE — After crossing the finish line for the Portland to Coast walking relay in Seaside, members of Team Eye Rock gathered on the beach to receive their medals.

There were twice as many relay medals to give out for the group, made up of 12 blind and visually impaired walkers and 12 guides who traversed 129 miles over more than 32 hours together.

The teams split up 36 legs ranging from 4 to 8 miles, each taking on at least two. Blind walker Adrienne Lattin and her guide Rachel Buschelman started Friday walking



Edward Stratton/The Daily Astorian  
Members of Team Eye Rock congratulate themselves on reaching the beach in Seaside after more than 32 hours completing a relay from Portland.

7.8 miles north on U.S. Highway 30 north from Scappoose Middle School. By 3:45 a.m. Saturday, the two were walking uphill toward the crest of Oregon Highway 203 and into

Clatsop County's woody hinterlands, a total of 6 miles and more than 550 feet of elevation gain in pitch black. Lattin said the experience can be like an emotional roller coaster.

"You go from being exhausted, delirious, and there's so much laughter, and sometimes people get emotional," she said. "And then you're walking, and it's like this crazy, magical moment when you're walking in the middle of the night and it's so peaceful."

Buschelman said the conversations often turned more personal, as the two tried to keep each other upbeat while walking down a dark, windy highway in the Clatsop State Forest. The two, who had been training the last month and a half, walked tethered by an elastic band the guides used to help keep the walkers safe from passing cars, branches and other obstacles. Together, they covered nearly 14 miles.

"I don't see my disability as being a barrier," said Lattin, who has competed in three Portland to Coast relays.

Colleen Madigan, a visu-

ally impaired walker for Team Eye Rock, met her partner Jeff Anderson, a blind walker for the team, at a hiking event on Mount Tabor organized by the Northwest Association for Blind Athletes, also a sponsor of the relay team. The couple see themselves as strong racers, separate of any disability.

"It doesn't define us, the blindness," Anderson said.

Madigan bragged of her 19 road kills, a colloquial term for passing other walkers by, on one leg alone.

"I don't want to be known as just a blind fast racer," she said. "I want it to be known that I'm a fast racer, that I'm out here doing it. I have an accommodation in the form of a human guide, you know. I get a buddy."

Team Eye Rock was born during the Vision Walk fundraiser for The Foundation Fighting Blindness. Dr. Irv Han-

delman from the Casey Eye Institute approached Charlene Cook from the Oregon Commission for the Blind and asked her to assemble a team.

Team Eye Rock finished in the top half of the relay its first year, and has often been in the top third. Last year, wind and rain storms kept the team from two stages and disqualified them from the relay. Anderson said that made this year's relay all the more special.

"Our goal from the very first was to compete and beat our prior times and teams around us," Cook said in a statement about the founding of the team. "This took training, grit, hundreds of hours of walking together and with our partner. The end result was that Eye Rock wasn't just about blind people trying hard, it was about people who happened to be blind competing and finishing with a stunning outcome."

## Hood to Coast: 'I've seen nothing but happy people so far'

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through the night and crossing the next morning.

Waites said they appreciated the cool-down weather, in the high-50s Saturday morning. "It feels really good — especially because in Portland it was brutally hot."

The run was "awesome," she added, the rugged outdoor path illuminated by lanterns.

Celebrities on the 197-mile track to Seaside included comedian and actor Kevin Hart running on the Nike team and American decathlon gold medalist Ashton Eaton, his wife and Canadian Olympian Brienne Theisen-Eaton, Olympians Josh Cox and Lopez Lomong, all running for Team World Vision.

Along with the big names and superstar athletes, more than 17,000 participants on teams of up to 12 people landed in Seaside, running and walking. With most teams sending

three volunteers, there were another 3,600 people working the event.

"It's about showcasing 200 miles of Oregon, culminating here," said Dan Floyd, chief operating officer for the Hood to Coast Race Series. He said there were people from 41 countries participating and from all 50 states. "For us to be part of that, we want to showcase the best of what Oregon has. For it to end here, and to have weather cooperating, is amazing."

### Change in course

For the overall safety of all participants, organizers decided to make a small tweak to the race route, which is not uncommon, Floyd said.

The 2015 run came to a rocky conclusion — 85-mph winds shut down the beer garden and vendors, and runners were diverted onto already busy streets. Merchants complained about the chaos and confusion.

Saturday was different. From

the tents on the beach to the number of sponsors and spectators, every step showed a rebound for the event, which first came to Seaside in the 1980s.

"It's 200 miles of improvements," Floyd said. "It starts with our staff, our focus on customer service. That means neighbors, businesses and everybody else in the community. It's about treating people well and being respectful of where we operate."

"I'm just happy to be back on the beach," Hood to Coast Chief Operating Officer Jude Hubber said Saturday morning. "Everyone just came together last year and talked about what we wanted to see in the future. How we wanted a partnership. Now it's a partnership beyond all partnerships. It's exciting."

The difference this year, according to Floyd, came in communications. Seaside City Council hearings in October considered options including a change of date for the



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Hood and PDX to Coast Relay walkers and runners started reaching Olney School around 4 a.m. Saturday.

event or even a change of final destination.

Hood to Coast made it clear they could not accommodate a date change. Not wishing to see the event completely

depart from Seaside, city councilors were unanimous in their support of the race for at least 2016 and 2017, with the provision of enhanced communication between race organiz-

ers, Seaside businesses and city officials.

Conversations were "absolutely" productive, Floyd said. "It really played out over the last 10 months, because they led to openness and discussions about what we need to do to make this a successful event not only for Hood to Coast participants, for the city, as well."

"One of the reasons for the change is Brian Owen from the chamber and Jon Rahl of the (Seaside) Visitors Bureau, and the city in general," Floyd said. "Our relationship's been excellent."

"So far everything I've seen looks great," Rahl said Saturday afternoon. "It's a little cooler than we expected, but typically the runners like this weather, running in the heat and finishing in the pool."

"I haven't heard the complaints," he added. "That doesn't mean they're not out there. But I've seen nothing but happy people so far."

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