

# SCRATCHPAD

## I am a runner

By **ERICK BENDEL**  
FOR COAST WEEKEND

Last fall, with well-meaning doubters informing me I'd made a huge, possibly life-threatening mistake by signing up for the Great Columbia Crossing — the 10K race across the Astoria Bridge — the challenge was simply to survive with my knees and dignity intact.

Somehow I'd managed to cover the full 6.2 miles in

about an hour and 10 minutes — roughly 11 minutes per mile.

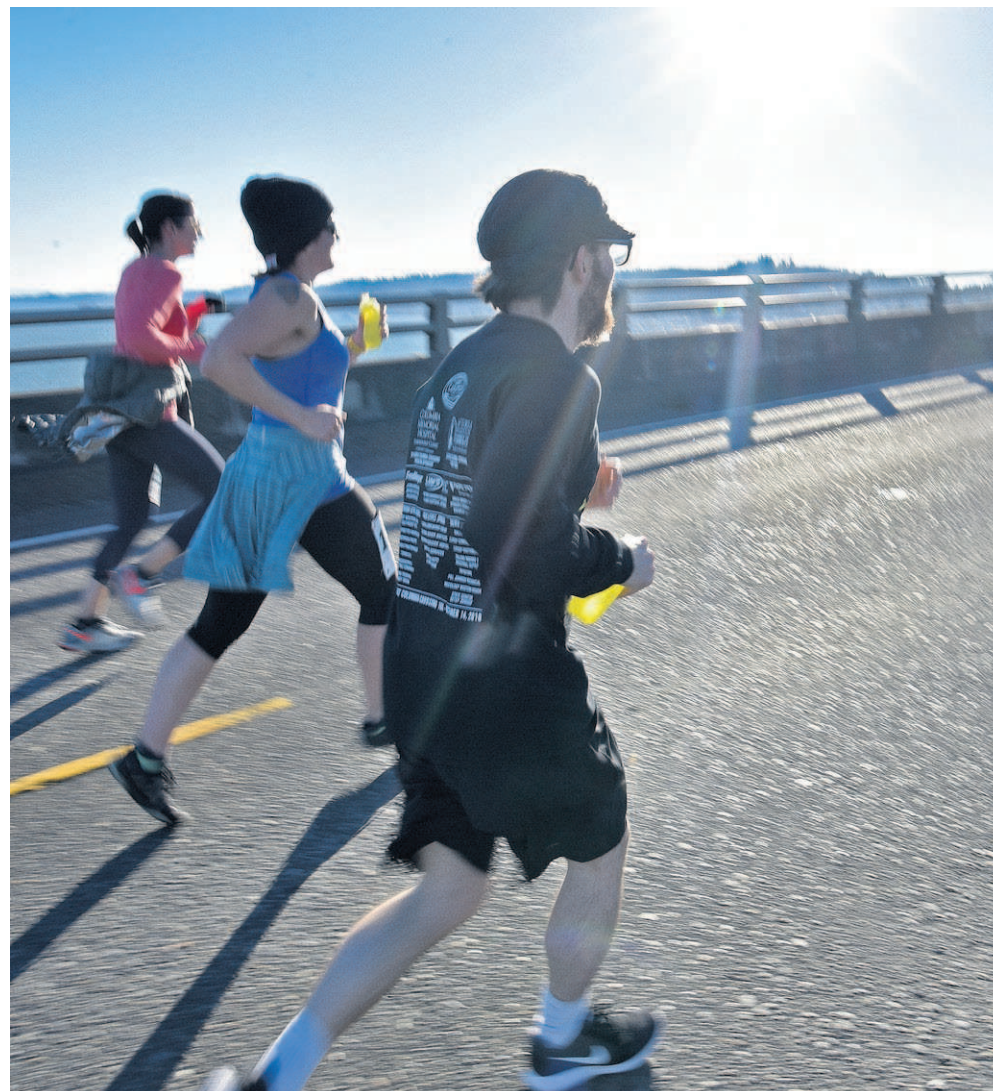
This unforeseen feat ushered in a year of running regularly — up and down my street, on treadmills at the Astoria Aquatic Center, through forest trails with my partner and her dogs.

It's remarkable — once you see yourself as the sort of person who does something you've never done before — how quickly your self-image shifts. You

redefine your limitations. You mentally slot yourself into a new category: "I am a staunch chair-sitter who smokes on lunch breaks and proudly pats my beer gut" becomes "I am a runner of races." You want to see how far you can go.

And so, on Sunday, I found myself once again among the thousands who ran.

Few mornings feel more sacred than the predawn hours before a race. Even after a restless night, I rise



COLIN MURPHEY PHOTO

Features Editor Erick Bengel, foreground, runs the 2018 Great Columbia Crossing while miraculously avoiding a front shot.

### coast weekend

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in a state of fierce focus. The small, preparatory rituals — like eating a breakfast of peanut butter toast with coffee, when all is dark and quiet outside — have a holy aura, full of energy and purpose.

Sunday's race came on a clear day. With stars still piercing the twilight, the sidewalks of Uniontown were overrun with giddy, geared-up runners and walkers. Near Basin Street, we boarded buses that shuttled us across the bridge. We shared the sunrise near the starting line at Dismal Nitch and huddled in groups

against the chill wind whipping off the river (we short folk using our tall peers as windbreakers).

Then the time came to see what the past year's exertions had born. The countdown began, the horn sounded, and it was just us and the road and the question of how much we could endure.

I was pretty confident I would do better than last year — which isn't to say that when our bus crossed the river I wasn't thinking: Hmmm ... this bridge is longer than I remember it. And it's not to say I didn't start

out way too fast and commit additional amateur errors as the race unfolded.

But perfection isn't the point.

The point is that, having set myself a once-unthinkable goal — a goal well outside my customary interests and abilities — I can get addicted to surprising myself.

That 11-plus-minute mile is now an 8.42-minute mile. The real triumph, however, is the small measure of self-reinvention the new stat represents: I am one who tries new things.

I am a runner.