Up This Hill and Down

Trail runners enjoy the state’s natural beauty all year long—while pushing their bodies to the brink.

WRITTEN BY ZACK HAROLD
When Sarah Jarvis was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes as a young adult, she wanted to find a sport that would help her take care of her body. She had run track in middle school, so running seemed like a good option. She signed up for a 5K, and it wasn’t long before she was competing in races almost every weekend. But road races proved difficult to manage for Jarvis. She could complete her 3.1 miles at a good clip, no problem. In just a short time, however, her blood sugar would skyrocket.

“You’re really putting forth a lot of endorphins in your system in a really short time.”

So she gave up road races and devoted herself to another kind of running, one with much longer races and rougher terrain. And roots and briars that grab runners as they pass. And lots of hills. Jarvis became a member of the West Virginia Mountain Trail Runners and, instead of tearing up the blacktop, she began racing backwoods trails all over the state.

And, strange as it might seem, it was exactly what she needed.

Much Slower and Much Harder
Like Jarvis, Dan Lehmann ran track in school, only to later abandon the sport. He didn’t lace his running shoes again until his 40s, when he started competing in 5K and 10K races. Then, in 1998, Lehmann and his wife Jody started a race in their hometown of Helvetia as a community service project for her college degree. The race was only partly off-road, featuring stretches on pavement as well as on dirt roads and trails. It wasn’t true trail running, but it was enough to give local runners a taste of the growing sport.

Trail running continued to grow in popularity, with events springing up around the state. In January 2003, Lehmann, his wife, and four others got together and wrote the first charter for the West Virginia Mountain Trail Runners. The group held its first race in June of that year, the 40-mile Highlands Sky Trail Run in Davis. Fifteen years later, WVMTR now boasts around 400 members.

“Misery loves company,” Lehmann says.

Trail runners talk openly about the grueling nature of their sport. They describe crippling cramps and “bonking”—running out of fuel—halfway through a race. But this physical and mental exertion is exactly what keeps them coming back run after run.
Lehmann describes it as an addiction. It’s a way of testing your mettle. It’s a way of pushing your body to its absolute limit and coming out the other side. Like Lehmann and Jarvis, many runners come to the sport from road running, but it doesn’t take long to realize trail running is a very different kind of activity.

Part of this has to do with the terrain. While road races might have uphill or downhill stretches, runners do not typically have to deal with mud underfoot, or brambles snagging their jerseys, or roots and stems reaching out to catch the toes of their shoes.

The races are also much longer. Road races generally come in four varieties: 5Ks, 10Ks, 13.1-mile half marathons and 26.2-mile marathons. Trail runs are often 25K or 50K, though more advanced races stretch to 100K and even 100-mile courses.

But the difference also comes in runners’ attitudes. “Trail running, it’s a little different mindset. It’s much slower, much harder,” Lehmann says. Trail running also puts less focus on speed. “Running roads, you get so obsessed with time and miles. You’re never going to be as fast on the trail as what you are on the road,” Jarvis says. “Expectations just have to be modified. It’s not about what time you finish in, it’s having a good time while you’re there. That whole kind of competitive nature doesn’t exist in this world.”

Lehmann says when he ran his first 50K—that’s 31 miles, for the metrically challenged—in 1999, “it kicked my butt.” Around the 26 mile mark, he started experiencing excruciating cramps in the backs of his calves. “I still remember meeting a fellow who was older than me. He talked me through, and we finished together,” Lehmann says. “That’s one of the amazing things. If you work through the tough spells, it almost always gets better. It’s a mindset for dealing with many other things in your life.”

Out on the trail, runners naturally form packs with those of similar abilities and experience. It’s also quite common to spend long stretches without seeing another person. “You might spend hours when you’re out there, physically alone. But you know there are others out there with you,” Jarvis says.

But once everyone has crossed the finish line, there’s little difference between the star athletes and the stragglers. Everyone shares in the same sense of accomplishment. “It creates this beautiful unspoken closeness. Whether you’re the first one that finishes or the very last one,” Jarvis says.

There’s no off-season in trail running. The West Virginia Mountain Trail Runners hold events all over the state, all year long.
Hit the Trail

Jarvis has some tips for anyone who’s ready to break out of the treadmill rut or just try something a little more adventurous than the usual jog around the block. The first step is to get a good pair of trail running shoes, which have more support and tread than a typical running shoe. It’s important they are properly fitted, too. “The first time you go out there, you want it to be a pleasurable experience,” Jarvis says. A local running shop can help you find the right pair.

Next, it’s time to pick a trail. There are hundreds of miles of trails on public lands around the state at a variety of difficulty levels. Jarvis says it’s important to familiarize yourself with the trail before heading out. Study a map, or even take a walk on the trail first. It’s a good idea to start out at half the distance you’re used to running. “If you’re used to running a 5K, do a mile and a half out in the woods, out and back,” Jarvis says. And don’t worry about running the whole distance. “That’s an inside secret,” she says. “You don’t run up the hill. Hills are for resting. Then you take off on the other side.”

Be sure to bring extra water and fuel, whether that’s energy bars or another kind of handy snack. “No matter how short you’re going to go, it’s going to be physically exhausting,” Jarvis says. Runners like Jarvis require an even greater level of preparation. For a 50K race, she carries 11 pounds of gear on her back: a glucose tester, insulin shots, extra food, and extra water. She has an insulin pump, but if it rains or the pump gets pulled out by a briar, she needs to be able to get insulin into her system. “It really does require an extra mindfulness for me to take part,” she says.

Once you’ve got some miles under your feet, it’s time to sign up for your first race. WVMTR’s Mountain State Trail Run Series hosts 10 different events on trail systems throughout the state, from January’s Frozen Sasquatch Trail 50k/25k and May’s Dirty Dog 15k in Kanawha State Forest to the Highlands Sky Trail Run, which celebrates its 15th anniversary in June 2017, and Fayetteville’s Canary in the Cave 25K+ in November. “There’s no off-season in trail running,” Jarvis says. “Seeing the trail in different times of the year allows you to see the beauty in its fullness.”

In a world of constant connectivity, runners rely on these rocky trails and steep hills for a different, deeper kind of bond, one that a social media site could never provide. “It’s almost kind of spiritual, if you allow yourself to feel that connection,” Jarvis says. “Until you get out there and experience it, it’s hard to describe.”

The Highlands Sky Trail Run, first hosted by the West Virginia Mountain Trail Runners in 2003, will mark its 15th annual event in 2017.