

# TRAIL NYMPHS, MUSCLE SPASMS, AND BRO-HUGS

The All-Sensory Adventures of the Next Big Endurance Thing: Team Trail-Running Races

by Roy M. Wallack



“C’mon – it’ll be fun,” said Gordon.

Yeah, right. Fun isn’t the word that came to mind for me when Gordon Wright, the always-upbeat contributing editor of this very magazine, suggested we team up for Stage 2 of the 2008 GOR-TEX TransRockies Run, one of the new multi-day team running events springing up all over the globe. Pain, yes. Shredded quads, yes. Crippled for a week, yes. Those words – not fun – are what came to mind at the thought of running 10 miles up and down a 12,000-foot mountain. Especially the down part.

You see, I love team events; I’ve done all the big two-man, weeklong mountain bike stage races – the TransAlp, the BC Race, La Ruta. And I love running. I even love running up mountains. It’s the going down part that kills me.

Take the time I ran/hiked 6,000 feet to the top of Panama’s highest peak, the 11,432-foot Volcan Baru, in under four hours... but took over five and a half hours to come back down. The problem? After the first 3,000 feet, my quads, battered by the eccentric contractions from the steep descent, got so wracked with spasms that I could no longer walk, much less run. Every lurching, tentative step was agony. I only made it down by nightfall by fashioning a tree branch into a cane. I couldn’t walk without wincing for a week afterward.

Long downhills have destroyed me again and again – 4,000 feet down Mt. Baldy, 5,000 feet down from Half Dome, the list goes on. I’m not good with downhills. In fact, downhills are hard on everyone. Boston Marathon historians say that both Alberto Salazar and Dick Beardsley were never the same again after their epic wire-to-wire battle at the 1982 race. Boston is a rare downhill big-city race. It has a total descent of 1,381 feet, including a fast 300-foot decline between miles 21 and 24.

Stage 2 of the TransRockies was only 10 miles long, the shortest of the six-day, 106-mile event that travels from Buena Vista to Beaver Creek, Colorado... but it was fearsome. Stage 2 includes a three-mile climb up 3,098 feet to a 12,538-foot pass, followed by a three-mile, 3,570-foot descent. That’s a drop of 1,190 feet per mile.

Translation: My quads would be committing suicide. And that wouldn’t exactly be fun.

## WHAT GOES UP...

Gordon was talking. I was nodding and wheezing. Did I mention that I’m also an elevation wimp, that that anything over 8,000 feet puts an elephant on my chest?

Stage 2 starts at 9,532 feet. That’s roughly two miles high.

So I gasped as we pushed up the conifer-shrouded singletrack, took in the spectacular views and listened to Gordon talk about several surprising parallels in our lives. Turns out that we missed each other at UCLA by a year; we both played rugby there; we both coached our sons’ soccer teams. Of course, mine took last place, while he led his two kids to numerous championships. Now he’s helping found a youth rugby league in the Bay Area.

Speed-hiking past the treeline, we began catching teams that had started before us. Ryan Flock and Amy Baker of San Diego, not ultra-runners like most of the field, planned to get married five days later at the finish line. (Which they did, and event sponsor Gore Tex gave them a free entry to the 2009 race.)

We high-fived the ebullient California Old Goats, Steve Harvey and Doug Malewicki – the latter a 69-year-old aerospace inventor who once helped build the infamous SkyCycle, a rocket-powered motorcycle Evel

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Kneivel tried to jump the Snake River Gorge with. They successfully battled to stay out of the cellar in the 80+ division – even though their combined ages totaled over 120.

We caught Carol Jaxon, the organizer of Hawaii's Great Ahoaha Run, and her husband Ed Bugarin, a former big-time adventure racer and member of Delta Force, the legendary military strike team. They were attached by a cord at their waists. She was towing him.

He wouldn't need it much longer. At the freezing, windswept pass at the top, we stopped to put jackets on and gaze at the magnificent Alpine vistas exploding around us. The conversation had done its job. I'd forgotten about the thin air and what was coming next: the dreaded 3,500-foot descent.

## THE MYTHICAL TRAIL NYMPH

Being on a running team is like getting an extra gear. You push the pace because you don't want to let down your partner – and because running downhill is a wild joy. I felt like a human mountain bike, swaying and juking with my feet a-spinning as if they were wheels. The suspension was my quads; steering was a forefoot landing on a bent leg, as the pros I've interviewed over the years advise. Gordon, tall and thin, with giant, smooth strides, seemed to need no rest, food or water – so I floored it to keep up. That has its risks. If you trip at this speed and slope, as I did once, you're airborne; but unhurt after 20 feet in flight, I brushed myself off and resumed the plunge.

We were passing teams left and right. That's why, after 10 minutes, we were surprised to suddenly be passed ourselves by something seemingly going twice as fast. A body whizzed by us as though we were standing still.

"What was that?" we gawked as it disappeared around the next curve.

It was a solo woman. Smooth, effortless and strikingly beautiful, with long, jet-black hair and large, muscular legs. "It's a dream," said Gordon. "We're both in oxygen debt, and we're having the same dream."

But we weren't. Minutes later, laying sideways on a log, there she was, propped up on her elbow looking as fresh as the morning dew, as enticing as a wild blueberry on a mountain meadow, as perfect as a *Maxim Magazine* photo shoot.

"I'm waiting for my partner," she responded as we ran by.

Her voice was clear and strong and – how do I say this without sounding sexist? – incredibly sexy. "We have just met Wonder Woman," I said to Gordon, awestruck.

Five minutes later, the Amazon Queen flew past us again, prancing deer-like, gracefully bounding with long, airborne strides that made no sound or impact. Instantly, like before, she was gone.

Five minutes later, we passed by her again, lounging peacefully amid purple flowers, basking in an idyllic scene suffused with the beatific serenity of natural and athletic perfection.

"She's a mythical creature. Part human, part animal – a female Satyr," I said, referring to the Greek myth that fused the upper body of a man with the legs of a goat.

"She's a goddess," said Gordon. "She's a Trail Nymph!"

Yes, of course. Also from Greek mythology, nymphs are beautiful women, usually dressed in white, decked with garlands of flowers... frequently with unnatural legs, like those of a goat, donkey or cow, that move them swiftly and invisibly over ground or through the air. They tend to frequent areas remote from man, but could be encountered by lone travelers in the forest while playing music, dancing and bathing in

a stream.

The nymph passed us yet again, then we her. "How do you go so fast?" I called out, as she reclined in the sun, her face illuminated like a serene pool of joy. "Deep yogic nasal breathing," she replied – adding the name of a book I couldn't remember in my dazzlement.

"My god, she's brilliant, too!" I said to Gordon.

I couldn't hold my feelings back. "You're a dream," I said as we passed her a final time where she posed under a tree. She laughed confidently, softly, knowingly, with the wisdom of a thousand millennia.

Soon, our breakneck descent was over. In 24 minutes of ducking branches and crossing streams, Gordon and I had plunged 3,570 feet in three miles. We cruised the final flat two miles to the Day 2 finish line. My quads, my calves, hamstrings, my hip flexors – you name it – all cooked.

When we crossed the Stage 2 finish, I lay down and stretched the muscles I knew I would feel for a week. When I got up 15 minutes later, I could barely walk. It was Volcan Baru all over again. In front of me lay a week of muscle-meltdown rehab and two weeks of a raging cold, due to being soaked to the bone in a windy Colorado mountain pass at 12,000 feet.

I stumbled over to the food table and threw in anything I could. A can of tuna, a banana piece, an energy bar, some orange juice. Gordon walked over and clapped me on the shoulder. I almost lost my balance and fell over.

"Hey, you missed the Trail Nymph," he said. "She came and went."

So, it wasn't a dream after all. We'd just done this incredible run, had this bona fide, world-class adventure. We shared some very cool memories that took us from friendly acquaintances to friends. All in three hours.

We did the bro hug. Then, I painfully lowered myself into the front seat of the airport shuttle and waved Gordon the bro fist as I headed for Denver.

He was right, after all. This team running thing is pretty fun. ✨

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*Roy M. Wallack is the author of Run for Life: The Anti-Aging, Anti-Injury, Super-Fitness Plan to Run to Age 100, which was published in January.*



Above: Gordon (left) and Roy (right) enjoy the view from the top.

Opposite: A team using the tow system. Notice the tether that keeps them connected.



# Team Up For Stage Races and Running Relays

Choose the format you like best: side-by-side or one-after-the-other. Either way, team races are running wild all over the world. Below we've listed some of the best:

## Do it in 24 hours

### MyoMed Ragnar Relay Del Sol & Race Series

February 27-28

189-mile race from Wickenburg to Mesa, Arizona, past saguaro cactus and red rock cliffs. Sister Ragnar 24-hour events run in Utah, Arizona, Washington and Minnesota. [www.ragnarrelay.com](http://www.ragnarrelay.com).

### American Odyssey Relay Run Adventure

April 24-25

200-mile run across three states, past the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials and a number of Civil War landmarks in Gettysburg, Antietam and Harper's Ferry. [www.americanodysseyrelay.com](http://www.americanodysseyrelay.com).

### Reno Tahoe Odyssey

May 29-30

178-mile relay run from the Truckee River in Reno, through the Sierra Nevada Mountains to Lake Tahoe. [www.renotahoeodyssey.com](http://www.renotahoeodyssey.com).

### Green Mountain Relay

June 20-21

Team 24-hour relay from Jeffersonville to Bennington, Vermont, through scenic valleys with many covered bridges. [www.greenmountainrelay.com](http://www.greenmountainrelay.com).

### Mt. Rainier to the Pacific

Mid-July

152.5-mile run from the base of Mt. Rainier to the Pacific Ocean. [www.EventMgmt.com/events](http://www.EventMgmt.com/events).

### Cascade Lakes Relay

July 31-August 1

216.6-mile run in the Cascades Mountains of Oregon. [www.cascade-lakesrelay.com](http://www.cascade-lakesrelay.com).

### Wild West Relay

August 7-8

Team 24-hour relay from Fort Collins to Steamboat Springs, Colorado. 195 miles through very scenic and remote dirt roads, through national forests. [www.wildwestrelay.com](http://www.wildwestrelay.com).

### Catskill Mountain Road Relay

August 9

100K run in New York's Catskill Mountains. [www.sullivanstriders.org/cmrr.htm](http://www.sullivanstriders.org/cmrr.htm).

### London Odyssey

September 4-5

200 miles through the English countryside past Windsor Castle, Hampton Palace and endless scenic beauty. [www.londonodysseyrelay.com](http://www.londonodysseyrelay.com).

### Klondike Int'l Road Relay

September 11-12

175K relay along the Gold Rush Stampede route from Skagway, Alaska to Whitehorse in the Yukon Territory. [www.klondikeroadrelay.com](http://www.klondikeroadrelay.com).

### Colorado Relay Classic

Sept. 11-12

174-mile run from Georgetown to Carbondale over several Rocky Mountain passes. [www.coloradorelay.com](http://www.coloradorelay.com).

## Multi-Day Races

### The Coastal Challenge (Costa Rica)

January 31-February 7

Six day, 250K tour through the seaside and hills of Costa Rica. [www.thecoastalchallenge.com](http://www.thecoastalchallenge.com).

### Gobi March (China)

June 14-20

Six days and 250 miles near the ancient Silk Road. Three other international multi-day stage runs from this organizer include Chile's Atacama desert, Antarctica, and the Sahara desert. [www.racingtheplanet.com](http://www.racingtheplanet.com).

### Desert R.A.T.S. (Race Across the Sands)

and Mountain R.A.T.S. (Race Across the Summits)

June 14-20 & July 30-August 2

"Desert" is a six-day fully-supported footrace from Grand Junction, Colorado to Moab, Utah. "Mountain" is a four-day stage footrace through the Rockies. [www.geminiadventures.com](http://www.geminiadventures.com).

### Chattanooga Mountains Stage Race

June 19-21

Covering 60 miles over three days around Lookout Mountain, Rocky Mountain and Signal Mountain in the Southeast, it includes nightly food and lodging in Chattanooga. [www.rockcreek.com/stagerace](http://www.rockcreek.com/stagerace).

### GORE-TEX TransRockies Run

August 23-28

110 miles through the Colorado Rockies, Buena Vista to Beaver Creek. [www.transrockies.com/transrockiesrun](http://www.transrockies.com/transrockiesrun).

### Nike Hood to Coast Relay

August 28-29

197 miles from Mt. Hood to the Pacific Ocean in Seaside, Oregon. Raises funds for the American Cancer Society. [www.hoodto coast.com](http://www.hoodto coast.com).

### GORE-TEX TransAlpine Run

September 5-12

300K over challenging Alps and Dolomites trails at the TransRockies sister event, [www.transalpine-run.com](http://www.transalpine-run.com).

### Jungle Marathon (Brazil)

October 8-17

Mosquito nets are advised for this rainforest trek through the Brazilian state of Para. Two options: 100K (four days) and 200K (six days). [www.junglemarathon.com](http://www.junglemarathon.com).