

New Nicknames and the American Odyssey Relay
By Darren (Diesel) Buck, Carin (Puma Empress) Michel, and Karyn (Brought Barry) Vandervoort



My Way or the Highway team members (from left to right) Steve Clinger, Mark Swanlund, Carin Michel, Darren Buck, Kyle Pickett, Karyn Vandervoort, Richard Brennan, and Bob Sheehan pose at the finish line of the American Odyssey Relay. (Not pictured: Oscar Bedolla, Don Burger, Allen Greenberg, and Matt Smoker.)

What happens when twelve people who barely know each other decide to spend an inordinate amount of time together in a very small space? (Did I mention the small space was very sweaty?) The *American Odyssey Relay* happens! Throw in ghosts, elves, sleep deprivation, and a Santa impersonator, and lifelong friendships are made.

On April 24 and 25, a team of 12 fearless DOT employees joined 108 teams to conquer this inaugural 204-mile relay from Gettysburg, PA to Washington, DC. FHWA's team—*My Way or the Highway*—was quite competitive, placing 2nd in the Corporate Division of the race, and 28th overall.

The *American Odyssey Relay* is the newest entry to a series of ultra-distance relays held across the Nation. The relays are competitive races, but the majority of the participants are in it for the fun and camaraderie that comes from spending more than 24 hours in a smelly van with five of their friends.

The idea to form a team was the brainchild of Carin Michel, from the Office of Technical Service's Resource Center, and Steve Clinger, from the Headquarters Office of Operations. Both avid athletes, Carin and Steve thought it would be fun to team up with 10 other coworkers and complete the relay. (Carin was later overheard confessing that she floated the idea only as a joke, and was a bit chagrined when Steve was able to round up 10 additional team members.) As team captain, Steve used his exceptional organizational skills to mastermind the event, keeping everyone organized, informed, and motivated during the months leading up to the race. Joining Carin and Steve on the team were: Oscar Bedolla, Richard Brennan, Darren Buck, Allen Greenberg, Bob Sheehan, and Mark Swanlund from Headquarters; Kyle Pickett from the Resource Center; Matt Smoker and Karyn Vandervoort from the Pennsylvania Division; and the lone, brave, non-FHWA representative, Don Burger from the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA).



Oscar Bedolla sums up the mood in Van 1.

Team relays generally involve teams of 12 runners who are transported in two minivans along the race course. Each runner runs three legs of varying distance and difficulty over the course of the event. The runners must run in numerical order, and cannot divert from that order throughout the event. Each runner runs a leg, passes the baton—in this case a rubber bracelet—to the next runner, and then rides in the van until their turn to run comes up again. The vans leapfrog along the course, dropping off and picking up runners at the checkpoints. The team is split into two vans so that runners 1-6 are in “Van One” and runners 7-12 are in “Van Two.” Before the race, each team has to provide the race directors with an estimated schedule of transitions and finishing time. This is done so that team starting times can be staggered and helps the teams all finish around the same time.

The day started at noon on Friday in Gettysburg, PA as the Van One runners started on their legs. The first few legs were brutal, with steep ascents and descents, including one notorious section with a 3-mile ascent. As the runners from Van One hydrated, stretched, carbo-loaded, and tackled their legs with true professionalism, the runners from Van Two could be seen sitting around the base camp telling jokes, getting hydrated, and whining about having to start running in a few hours. The excellent athletes in Van One kept pace with their estimated schedule, with only

one mishap, as runner Don Burger decided to add some distance to his leg by taking a scenic tour of the area. Some call this “getting lost” but Don assured us that he planned it all.



Runner Don Burger keeps a fast pace through one of his three segments of the AO relay.

Van Two kicked off their series of legs around 5 p.m. on Friday feeling encouraged by the setting sun and the waning heat. Everyone ran well and kept on pace, running about 30 miles before handing off to the Van One runners again at about 10 p.m. Outfitted with reflective vests and headlamps, Van One once again kept on their paces and turned in excellent times. During this time, Van Two “slept” in the parking lot of Boonsboro High School. For the teammates, sleep consisted mainly of staring at the ceiling of an increasingly-pungent minivan while wishing that your teammate’s foot was not on your head, and that the people in the van parked next to you would stop screaming.



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The break was short-lived as Van Two needed to start running again around 2 a.m. While the denizens of Van One made their own fitful attempts at sleep, Van Two runners started the task of running through the night. All went well until Carin decided to run the wrong part of the course and got lost in the middle of Antietam Battlefield at 4 a.m., significantly delaying the bracelet hand off to Richard. Luckily, Richard turned on the speed and was able to make up some of Carin's lost time. As he ran through the historic Bloody Lane section of the Battlefield, he was helped along by two ghosts who handed him a bottle of water. This was a monumental event, as Rich was finally able to quell his lifelong fear of ghosts, not to mention get some much needed hydration, thanks to the two generous apparitions.



Don Burger hands off to Allen Greenberg during a relay transition.

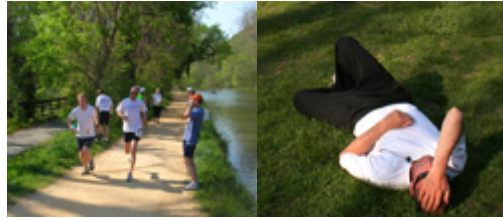
As dawn broke, the final runner in Van Two—Darren—plodded through the remaining segment of the Battlefield, handing off the bracelet to Van One for their final legs. At this point, the lack of sleep began to work its magic and Van Two began a meandering tour through rural Maryland in search of a Starbucks and a decent bagel. It was at that Starbucks that a few team members temporarily lost their command of the English language. Meanwhile, Van One encountered their own surreal experiences, as the transition areas were becoming more and more elaborate for the weary runners. Volunteers at each transition were competing with each other to display the most spirit. Themes included a tropical luau (complete with leis); a Scottish encampment (complete with kilts) and the tour de force—Santa's village. This stop was complete with a bubble blowing elf and a Santa who demanded that runners sit on his lap. Matt took one for the team after blazing through his last leg. Thanks, Matt.



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At White's Ferry along the Potomac, the two vans reunited briefly before Van Two embarked on the final leg of the race in 95 degree heat. This last punishing stretch traveled down the historic C&O Canal towpath, into Georgetown, and eventually to the finish line in West Potomac Park where a haggard Darren, as the team's final runner, was greeted by his sweaty and slightly delirious teammates. The group ran through the finish line together in varying states of dehydration and sleep deprivation. As the team poked through the litter lining the now-dilapidated

rental vans for their belongings, and separated for the first time in more than 29 hours in search of comfortable beds and hot meals, they knew they had accomplished something remarkable. The *American Odyssey Relay* was truly a journey of spirit, team work, and dedication. Not only had they run 204 miles, they had also formed friendships that would outlast any distance.



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They also walked away with some lasting nicknames . . .