

# Odyssey race reaches Panhandle

*The 205-mile relay journey arrives in Shepherdstown around 3 a.m.*

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SHEPHERDSTOWN — They held a party in the middle of the night at the Bavarian Inn, and people just ran and ran and ran to get there.

A buzz of adrenaline permeated the cool morning air as the first of the partygoers arrived at about 3:30 a.m. Saturday. A trickle at first evolved into a steadier stream with time wearing on, as they came fashionably later wearing miner-looking lamps on their heads to signal their arrival.

The second American Odyssey Relay Run Adventure visited West Virginia for the first time on a 205-mile journey for teams of usually a dozen runners covering a path from Gettysburg, Pa., to Washington, D.C.

Someone called the transition point a "carnival."

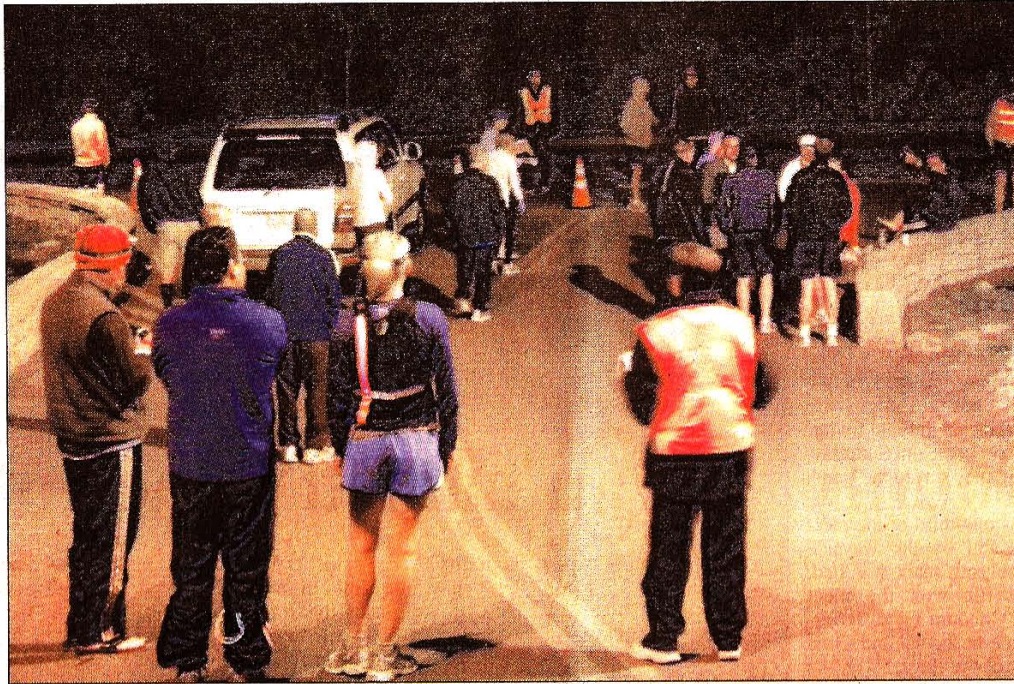
Someone else chimed in to say "insanity."

It was the ultimate runner's high. Arriving runners seemed not to be cognizant of the hour, or that they had just finished almost a six-mile run, maybe their second or third such effort since the Odyssey had begun earlier Friday. Their teammates, festive and spirited, who were ferried throughout the course in vans to await their turns to run, cheered; some strategized.

It wasn't about winning necessarily, but the adventure of being together with friends, comrades, maybe co-workers in a different type of athletic endeavor — the thrill of an off-the-wall event.

"It's hard to get people to commit," said Stacey Falkner, a member of the First Defenders team of Lewistown, Pa.

"Plus, it's 4 a.m., and we're having this conversation," she added, an obvious nod to the objections some



Journal photo by Rick Kozlowski

Runners wait for the next leg of the America Odyssey Relay Run Adventure to begin early Saturday morning in Shepherdstown.

runners might use to pass on an opportunity to participate.

The First Defenders were short the optimal 12-person team, even though they do these types of races all the time. A commitment of 24-36 hours is needed, not to mention the recovery time driven by the insomnia created by the specter of it all.

The First Defenders first started out in a 50-mile relay at State College, Pa., several years ago, then began to venture into longer ones in Vermont, one that finished in the hometown of Falkner's husband, who also runs.

"We saw this one was so close to us, so we said, 'We'll try this one,'"

said Falkner's teammate, Dawn Comly. "We're gluttons for punishment."

Actually for Comly and Falkner, who ran in the inaugural event in 2009, they welcomed temperatures in the low-40s overnight, an absolute delight compared to daytime temperatures in the 90s last year and stagnant and hot air throughout the night.

Seeing people out on the course also was a bonus, they said.

"In Vermont, I can run a six-mile leg and never see anybody," Falkner said.

It was obvious, though, that people who tried it the first time caught the bug.

The Cheetahs Who Prosper were back, as were many other teams, and not far away from home for an event that attracted some 1,400 runners on 126 teams representing 34 states and the District of Columbia, as well as Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

Some of the license plates on the transport vehicles detailed the participants' locations.

"We're all diehards," said Cheetahs team member Henry Dunbar of Arlington, Va. "It's a little crazy."

He was running his third relay and had another planned for next month.

Teammate Katie Hipkins, a Smithsburg, Md., resident, who was

wrapped in a West Virginia University blanket as they awaited for the arrival of another teammate, called the event, "fun."

The Cheetahs faced a little trepidation earlier in the evening when one of their runners got lost on the course. They fanned out, trying to help her. Before they could reach her, though, the lost runner had righted herself.

The fact that the event was taking place when it took place proved fortuitous to a man who had fallen from a retaining wall below the Bavarian and lay injured in the roadway around 3 a.m. There were people there to summon emergency help.

Arriving runners moving from their vans to the exchange area upon seeing the lights from police and ambulance worried that one of their own had suffered a tough fate.

Others were oblivious to anything beyond the realm of running, however.

One van, rimmed around its top by Christmas lights, certainly had to be in the running for a decorative prize.

Shortly after pulling into the parking lot, the vehicle with Florida tags shut off the lights in what appeared to be an effort to get shut-eye.

The adrenaline rush prevented many of the runners from getting more than a few moments of sleep, however.

One of the arriving vans offered a message on its window, "It's all won or lost in the first 100 yards" — which happened to be the team's name.

Contrary to the team's belief, though, the race was won or lost over 360,800 yards — or 205 miles.

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