

NH Runners Take on the Rockies in Colorado Outward Bound Relay

By Peter Vendituoli

We flew out of Boston to Denver on Wednesday September 18th to compete as a Masters Team (all runners over 40 years old) in the Colorado Outward Bound Relay that covered 170 miles and 4 mountain passes. Each runner has to run 3 legs of varying distances and difficulty for total of 30 legs. Our goal was to compete with last year's Master team that won in 24 hours 59 minutes. We had a solid team of Gate City Striders runners that included Walter Swanborn, Wayne Mcleod, Bob Pelletier, Dave Sargent, Mike Haggerty, Carl Hefflinger, Dave Ferris, Damien Rowe and myself. What we did not have was Bill Gray, our 10th runner, who was out with a bad back, and we did not have any training at elevation to know how it was going to effect us during our relay.

It was raining when we got into Denver on Wednesday and snowing in the mountains. Our plan was to get a couple of days to acclimate to elevation prior to our race. We stayed in Golden, Colorado, home of the Coors Brewery, the first night. That afternoon, we tried to remove some of our apprehension of elevation effects by going for a short 30 minute run in Golden on a paved bike path that head up into dirt trail. We all felt the change in oxygen at the 5800+ foot elevation, but all of us were able to run without any side effects. After we got back from our run, Dave Sargent was on his cell phone with the race director trying to get our 10th runner. The race director, Kate Borgelt, was confident that by her putting the word out to all the teams - we would be able to get a 10th runner from one of the running clubs. There were only 4 Masters teams and we wanted to come up with a Masters runner so we compete in that division rather than an Open or Men's division. At dinner that night, we came up with back-up plan. If we did not get another runner, the first 3 runners would end up doing 4 legs each - combined over 20 miles. In addition, all of the other runners doing just 3 legs would get longer and more difficult legs than before. We all agreed on this backup plan since we wanted to compete as a Masters team. But we really hoped that we would get a 10th runner to be more competitive.

After packing up and leaving Golden on Thursday, we all wanted to experience the potential effects of higher elevation closer to what we were going to be running at during the race. So we decided to drive to Idaho Springs where the race started. On our drive up Route 70 to Idaho Springs, we came to an opening where we had a magnificent view of snow covered mountains in the distance. With that view, Wayne, who had the toughest leg - a 13 mile leg up and over one of the four mountain passes on a single track trail, started our rally cry for the race - "Bring It On". We, flatlanders, were ready to run and attack the mountains on each of our legs. From Idaho Springs, we drove up to Echo Lake to see a snow covered Mt. Evans (14,254 ft) towering above us. Around Echo Lake, the ground was covered with several inches of snow. Even with snow and temperatures in the 30's, we all walked and jogged a short distance around the small lake to get a feel of running at 10,800 feet. Again no major problems, but we all knew were no longer in New Hampshire at just above sea level. We continued our drive on Route 103 to see amazing views of Chief Mountain (11,709 ft) and Squaw Mountain (11,486 ft) and commented that the tops of these mountains were as high as we would be going on our 2 highest legs. Everyone still was ready to "bring it own". We drove back into Denver to enjoy a baseball game between the Colorado Rockies and St. Louis Cardinals at Coors Field. What was a cool 30's temperature in the mountains quickly changed to sunny and 75 at the game. The game was a typical Coors field slugfest where the St. Louis Cardinals hit 3 home runs in a row as we were leaving. Even during the game, Dave was working the phones. Dave got a message from the Race Director that one of the Master Teams out of Ft. Collins had a Masters runner for our team who had run a Marathon this year. After leaving voice mail at his office at HP, Dave finally got a call back from Tim who wanted to do the relay. He would meet us at 8:30 at the start of the race in Idaho Springs (since the Colorado Masters Team that he was travelling with was starting at 9:00). All the race starts were staggered depending on each team's projected finish based on their best 10K times. The Relay started with the first wave at 5:00 am and ended with the elite teams starting at 10:30 am. Even with Dave adding 6 to 8 minutes to all our best 10K times, the race director wanted to start us with the elite group. Dave got the race director to agree to start our team, Run Free or Die/New Hampshire, at 8:00 am since we did not know the full effects of elevation on our performance.

That night at Beau Jo's in Idaho Springs, we all enjoyed an all you can eat pizza and salad dinner while meeting many of the other teams. There were teams from Ohio, Iowa, and Virginia as well as most from Colorado. Most of the local Colorado teams did not make the dinner. Although there were only 4 Masters teams, there were 101 total teams running in the Relay. It was an early night was we got ready for our long day and night of running ahead. Unfortunately, for most of us, we did not get much sleep as the historic Idaho Springs Resort Inn was quite noisy since people were leaving at all hours for the start of their race.

Friday September 20th at 7:59 am, Walter Swanborn started the first leg out of Idaho Springs at an elevation of 7450 feet. Walter's 1st leg was a 4.4 Mile "easy" leg with a climb of 670 feet while following Route 70. Van 1 drove off with Wayne Mcleod (2nd runner), Bob Pelletier (3rd runner), Dave Sargent (4th runner), and Mike Haggerty (5th runner) to the 2nd

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exchange point. After finding Tim, Van 2 took off to the 6th exchange point. Unlike most other relays, the 2nd Van was not able to follow the 1st Van's legs so there were not 202 vans at each exchange point. After finishing his leg, Walter warned "Do not start to fast." The 2nd leg (4.1M) run by Wayne and 3rd leg (3.1M) run by Bob were again "easy" legs at "lower" elevations and with relatively small increases in elevation. At the end of Leg 3, we were 1 hour and 36 minutes in to the race.

Then the fun started! Dave Sargent ran through historic Georgetown to a difficult 1519 feet climb in a little more than 4 miles. This 10K leg was probably steeper than the Mt. Washington Road Race and it approached 10,000 feet. Dave said that it was hard to breathe during the climb as he felt the reduced oxygen at the altitude. There were many hairpin turns that headed up to Guanella Pass. Dave made us all proud with his unbelievable 59:40 in a leg that other teams called extremely difficult. Mike continued the climb up to Guanella Pass on the 5th leg. The paved road turned to dirt after a mile. Mike's leg was no easier as he climbed almost a 1,000 feet in 4.1 miles as he approached 11,000 feet. Both Dave and Mike's legs had no down hills - just straight up with varying degrees of steepness.

During the 3 hours and 18 minutes of the first 5 legs, Van 2 eagerly awaited all morning at Exchange Point 6 to "bring it on" and start running. Carl took us up and over Guanella Pass in a severely underrated "moderate" 6th leg. This leg was 2 miles straight up like the end of the Pack Monadnock Race except on an unpaved road at 11,500 feet in 40 degree weather. Although Carl felt like he was walking, he kept a steady pace passing several runners. The top of the pass was a treat (especially if you were not running) of a 360° panoramic views of snow covered mountains. Carl finished his leg with 1 1/2 mile sprint downhill with on dirt road with rough washboards with a tail wind. Dave Ferris continued the steep descent down. His first 2 miles continued on the same dirt road with rough washboard surface that made for very uneven running as traffic from both directions kicked up dust. The last 4+ miles were paved and dropped 1600 feet over a total of 6.4 miles. I also continued the downhill running with another 1,000 foot drop over 5.2 miles that changed between pavement, dirt road and back to pavement. Even with steep down hills, it was tough for Dave or I to break 7 minute miles at elevation. Tim took leg 9 into the wind and uphill on the busy RT 285 for 3.2 miles. By now temperatures in the early afternoon had soared into the 70's on the open pavement of RT 285. So, a warm sun and car/truck exhaust fumes greeted Damien as he ran the 1,100 foot climb in 4.3 miles on Leg 10. Again, there were spectacular snow covered mountains in the distance as a backdrop as Damien ran his leg. Damien compared this leg run to the Mt. Ascutney race except that he was running into a strong headwind with fumes at 10,000 feet with alot less air to breath.

Meanwhile Van 1 waited patiently without any cell phone service until Van 2 appeared to warn them that Damien was only a 1 mile away. So now, 6 hours and 20 minutes in to the race, Van 1 was back in action for their 2nd set of legs. Walter started Leg 11 up a single track sand and dirt packed trail with moderate uphill and downhill sections all over 10,000 feet. Walter described his leg as a "trail runners heaven" because he was rewarded with a fantastic view of 100 square mile meadow surrounded by 14,000 foot snow covered mountains. That view was like an American Express add that stated cost of race: \$85 - Cost of view: - priceless. Again our priceless run continued on with Wayne ready to "bring on" - the infamous Leg 12 that went up and over Georgia Pass that the was described as the the most difficult leg of the relay. Wayne described this 13 mile single track trail as "mud, rocks, roots, and guts." This leg was 1,581 feet up over 6 miles to Georgia Pass (11,585 ft) that had snow dust over amber waves of grain. Then Wayne proceeded down hill 2,000 feet over 7 miles crossing log footbridges, rocks and roots while running at a race pace. Meanwhile, Van 1 had to drive almost 60 miles to go around the mountain that Wayne was crossing to get to the next exchange point. A local Colorado runner commented that 2 hours for this leg was excellent. Wayne truly leveled the mountain pass with his time of 2:11 that inspired us all to run that hard on our legs. Bob took the sweaty velcro wristband "baton" for Leg 13 and continued running down on a hard dirt road for 2.9 miles finishing at 9,251 feet elevation. Dave ran the 3.9 miles of rolling hills on Leg 14 that changed from dirt to paved roads. Mike ran on the paved Blue River Bikeway path through the town of Frisco. Since it was just getting dark during this leg, Mike had to run with his reflective vest. Mike had an excellent sprint at the end of his 6 mile run to catch up to another runner as he handed off to Carl for Leg 16.

At the half way point in legs, we were 10 hours and 27 minutes into the race with most of the "hard" legs completed. But both vans were dealing with varying degrees of altitude sickness. After having driven through the beautiful Breckenridge resort town, Van 2 completed its ride to exchange point #16 in the town of Frisco. An example of the altitude sickness encountered by Van 2 is that most of us wanted to visit the bathroom before getting something to eat even through we last ate a "meal" (not just Cliff Bars) before the start of the race. The effects of altitude sickness varied from moderate to severe headaches and nausea. But the team did an outstanding job of combatting dehydration by drinking what seemed like excessive amounts of water. Wayne drank 32 ounces from his camel backpack during his mountain pass run for Leg 12. He finished and drank another 32 ounces. All runners got the each of the Vans to drive ahead and provide water during their run - if at all possible (it was not always possible - especially on the bike paths that were not open to the roads and highways).

Carl started his hard uphill run on 10K Leg 16 on the bike path in dusk chasing a runner from Virginia that he battled back and forth over 4 uphill miles. He would gain some ground on the flats and the Virginia runner would pull away on the uphills. Fortunately for Carl, the race finished with almost two miles a relatively level terrain. As Carl finished in the Copper Mountain resort, he was bubbling with excitement since his relay leg was actually a race directly against someone

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that he won passing 6 other runners in the process. "That was a fun relay leg". Dave took off out of the Copper Mountain resort with the full moon coming up as he was battling nausea from altitude sickness. Let's just say that altitude sickness won over Dave during his run, but he did not stop battling our last long hard uphill leg. Dave's 772 elevation climb over 5.4 miles at an elevation of 10,582 ft that ended with a cruel 50+ steps of stairs to the handoff point to me for Leg 18. My leg was a downhill one that was rated "hard" because it was 1,824 feet screaming down over 8.8 miles. Although I carried a small thin maglite, it was not needed since the full moon lit my bike path and showed its white reflections on Black Lake No.1 and No.2 on my leg. This path ran parallel to Route 70, so I had to deal with high beam headlights in my eyes during my first 5 miles. I was actually looking forward to the slight uphill when I went under the highway and ended up on the other side just to take a break from the pounding on my legs running downhill. As my leg finished, I could see the lights of Vail below me. Tim took over Leg 19 and actually completed the descent down to Vail. This leg had a more reasonable downhill of 542 feet over 5.5 Miles. Damien took Leg 20 through Vail's streets back onto a bike path. His leg seemed much farther than the 5.8 miles listed since he handed off at the outskirts of Vail. The comments from Tim, Damien, and subsequent runners were "to numb for comment" especially since temperatures dropped in to the low 30's for the remaining night legs while fatigue was settling in after completion of 2 sets of legs for everyone.

Meanwhile Van 1 was not successful in getting any sleep while waiting for the 2nd Van to complete its legs. At this point, we are 15 hours and 25 minutes into the race - it is approaching midnight. The bad news is there are 10 tired runners with 1 more leg to run, but the good news is that all the remaining legs are "easy" downhill or flat at much lower elevations. Walter runs the slightly downhill (-300 ft) 4.5 miles of Leg 21 along Route 6 at just over a 7:30 minute a mile pace. Wayne runs his relatively flat (-230 feet) 4.5 mile Leg 22 again at just over a 7:30 minute a mile pace. Pretty darn good for a 3rd leg at midnight without much sleep. For Leg 23, Bob takes over a long relatively flat (-310 ft) but long 8.3 miles that he grinds out in a 1 hour and 5 minutes. Dave gets in the groove running the 7.8 miles of Leg 24 at just over a fast 7 minute a mile pace. Dave especially enjoyed running downhill at 6,500 feet versus the severe uphill challenge at 10,000 feet that his 1st leg provided him. Mike's Leg 25 also followed Route 6 going slight downhill 6.3 miles. Mike also ran sub 8 minute miles on his 3rd leg and was greeted by the Van 2 runners yelling that he was done. While waiting for Van 1 runners to complete their legs, Van 2 runners were able to grab a couple of hours of sleep. Before Mike arrives, Van 2 found out that the other Masters team that started an hour later than us - had almost caught up to us. We were running to hold the Masters record for a few minutes until the eventual Master team winner rolls in. As Carl started Leg 26, we were now 19 hours and 25 minutes into the race and it was 3:30 am. Our initial goal of finishing in 24 hours was well within sight. Carl's leg was flat to slightly downhill. We raced ahead to get Carl water at the midpoint of his 6.8 mile leg cheering him on loudly. Carl sped along in the moonlit night at just over 7:00 minute a mile. Dave started Leg 27 by going onto Route 70 by accident. The instructions that stated "If you have gone over the green bridge, you have gone to far.

Continue straight on the bridge.." were not that clear either. Luckily, another van set Dave straight on the right path. Since Dave wanted water, we found a safe place off of Route 70 and were able to get to water to Dave at the mid point of his 5.5 Mile leg. Van 2 went ahead to the next leg off of Route 70 that was 6 miles ahead (that is a hint).. We wondered why Dave was not there after 55 minutes and it finally hit us that were at Leg 29's exchange point - not Leg 28. Dave saved his best for his last leg with his 42:05 run. We raced at breakneck speed back down Route 70 to Leg 28 while I laced my sneakers in the van. My leg weaved besides and under Route 70 on a bike path that followed the. I was not sure



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