

The Region

200-MILE RELAY RACE

On the Long Road to Washington, Running Into 'So Much Fun'

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They stayed awake for two days, nodding off for just minutes at a time as the van bumped along country roads.

Every few hours, they were awakened from their fitful sleep, were dropped on an unfamiliar road and ran as hard as they could for three, five or even eight miles, often in the darkness, with nothing but a headlamp for light.

Most people would call this torture.

But for a group of Iraq war veterans, the mayor of the District, an animal trainer from Walt Disney World and a stay-at-home mom home-schooling four children, this odd exercise was considered a great time.

The grueling event was a 200-mile relay race from Gettysburg, Pa., to Washington, the first of its kind in the nation's capital.

"Oh, it's so much fun," said Angie Humble, 39, the stay-at-home mom and team captain who also ran three legs of her race.

The runners began Friday, and late yesterday afternoon, most were still on the course.

Each team had two support vans, and most had 12 runners, who alternated the relay so each person ran three of the course's 36 legs.

"It's like a triathlon, but different," an exhausted Mayor Adrian M. Fenty (D) said after he finished his team's final leg, running along the C&O Canal, then onto the Mall, where his team was second overall, finishing in 24 hours 16 minutes.

The 108 teams in the American Odyssey Relay included "Four Score and Seven Blisters Ago," "Running From Our Wives" and "Can I Get in the Van? No, Ya Stink!"

The vans were stocked with snacks, water, extra shoes, sleeping bags and lots and lots of maps.

"We urged each runner to print out the maps and run with them. But that's not always so easy," said Bob Flesher, the race director.

Fenty underscored the point. "I got lost on my first leg. I ran an extra mile and a half," said the mayor.



Patrick Weatherbee of Grand Rapids, Mich., has an audience as he runs through the countryside of Smithsburg, Md., on one leg of the American Odyssey Relay. At right, a team of Bucknell University alumni crosses the finish line at West Potomac Park first, nearly 24 hours after leaving Gettysburg, Pa. The race attracted 108 teams.

who went renegade somewhere near the fields of Smithsburg, Md. "I went the wrong way. It was my own fault."

Flesher knew that putting out signs on the course would be tough.

"I mean, 200 miles of signs. People would take them for fun. And when we get here, the Park Police took down our signs on the Mall," he said.

The road also held some troublesome obstacles.

"One of our runners ran into a

sign, an electronic sign. Like the kind that says 'Slow down, Caution' and flashes an arrow," said Shanna Pentico, 40, who came from Sarasota, Fla., to run on Humble's team. The two were roommates in college.

One team of Army soldiers comprised a company that just returned from a 15-month tour in Iraq.

"It was like the whole 15 months compacted into 24 hours," said Chief Warrant Officer Jessica Ohle, 42, who began organizing her sol-

diers nine months ago while they were in Baghdad.

They even reenacted boot camp for one runner, Sgt. Jonas Reynolds, who had one of the toughest legs of the race, a climb of nearly six miles. The team van, which often pulls up alongside a runner a few times for support during a leg, visited him 12 times.

"We wanted to cheer him on," Ohle said.

Reynolds wasn't so sure: "You wanted to make sure I didn't stop and walk."



BY MICHAEL TEMCHINE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST