

PERSONAL BEST

M&Ms help start 200-mile race director's running career

By David Sherfinski
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Unlike the Boss, Bob Fleshner wasn't exactly born to run.

He played basketball in high school, and did run cross-country one season to stay in shape, though he "absolutely detested it."

But while at George Washington University Law School in 1979, Fleshner had just finished an entire 2-pound bag of M&Ms, and was "thoroughly disgusted," he recalled. So he picked himself up — and started running.

"I've been running ever since — for 30 years," he said.

The 54-year-old Bethesda resident actually does more than just run. He now serves as the race director for the American Odyssey Relay, a 200-mile race that starts in Gettysburg, Pa., and finishes in Washington. This year's race will be April 23 to 24.

Fleshner has run in three such relays — one in New Hampshire in 2002, and two in California, in '03 and '04, where he said he fell in love with the concept. His best memory from the races?

"Running over the Golden Gate Bridge at 2 o'clock in the morning under a full moon," he said. "If you don't get emotional during that, you're pretty passionless."

The races typically consist of a team of 12 with 36 legs of running, for a total of three legs per runner. The first six runners ("Van 1") complete a cycle while the other half of the team has four to five hours to tour the area or just hang out.



Bethesda resident Bob Fleshner, 54, serves as director for a 200-mile race that starts in Gettysburg, Pa., and finishes in D.C.

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Once the first runner hits the transition area, he hands over his wrist bracelet and the van zooms to the next transition. The runners cycle through, 1 to 12, with a vehicle switch after every six runners.

But by the third rotation through what's typically 12 runners, the race hits nightfall. Though runners in the right spot get to jog across the Golden Gate, the process can get tricky.

"It's a little spooky, and it's easy to get lost," he said. The van eases along about a quarter-to-half-mile ahead of the runner until the driver gets a "thumbs up," then speeds ahead so the runner can concen-

trate on the race.

The logistics behind running a race are difficult enough, but as for planning something so ambitious, well, Fleshner summed it up with somewhat of an understatement.

"I would call it a logistical challenge," he said, noting that American Odyssey organizers meet with local residents along the route to let them know what will be going on.

Indeed, locals are crucial to the development process, because they know the lay of the land better than any out-of-towner could — the best views and the safest routes, for example. The idea, Fleshner said, is

to "run where the locals run."

The second annual race will wind from Gettysburg through the Antietam Battlefield in Sharpsburg, Md., and onto the C&O Canal, the Appalachian Trail and through Harpers Ferry before entering Great Falls Park in Potomac.

The relay will finish up on the District's southwest waterfront, where Fleshner will undoubtedly be enthusiastically greeting beleaguered trekkers at the Finish Line Festival with music, food and beverages.

But runners may have to supply their own M&Ms.

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Bob Fleshner

- » Race director for the American Odyssey relay
- » Has run in 24 marathons.
- » Ran his first marathon, the Marine Corps Marathon, in 1981.
- » In 2006, created Xtend Fitness and Health, a venture that featured the development of online software programs to measure fitness levels that helps companies track data to potentially lower their health care costs.

The American Odyssey Relay

- » April 23 to 24
- » 200-mile race that begins in Gettysburg, Pa., and finishes at the southwest waterfront in D.C.
- » Race includes "Team Dane," comprised of only one runner — extreme runner Dane Rauschenberg is running the entire 200 miles himself.
- » The Bucknell Alumni Fossils will be back to defend their title, having finished first in 23 hours last year.
- » Teams from more than a dozen states have registered, including one from as far away as Redmond, Wash.