

## By Rick Platt

The most interesting, adventurous and offbeat running events in Williamsburg are those organized and directed by Ellen Alexander of Happy Cat Events, a one-woman company whose races are ultramarathons or trail runs in parks like York River State Park, Freedom Park, Warhill Sports Complex and the Greensprings Trail. Her events have included the Singletrack Maniac 50K, the Midnight and March Maniac 11- or 13-hour races, and the Greensprings Trail 24 Hour Run.

The latest iteration of her creative mind was last Saturday's Terrible 12 endurance test on the Warhill Nature Trail, which was the successor to last year's Alphabet Soup 7-Hour Run at Greensprings. It was not exactly a 12 hour run, instead an 11-hour test, as all participants were required to take a one-hour break sometime overnight to volunteer, recording numbers and times, or just cheering on the others. The race started at 7 p.m. from the baseball fields pavilion, and ended at 7 a.m., so participants could enjoy both a beautiful sunset, and a relatively cool morning at sunrise. The weather was perfect for an August race, temps in the mid-70s dropping into the 60s with lower humidity.

The site was a tradeoff, switching from Greensprings to Warhill. The crushed-stone surface at Greensprings is much easier on the feet than the all-too-often stoney or rocky sections on the Warhill trail. And Greensprings is almost entirely flat, whereas Warhill has lots of hills every 3.7-mile lap. But the convenience of the baseball fields pavilion can't be beat, with a clean spacious restroom (as opposed to porta-johns), and a lighted pavilion with tables for food and gear. The goal was to accumulate as many 3.7 mile loops as possible, with one-mile out-and-backs allowed in the final hour.

Five runners bettered 50 miles during their 11 hours of running or walking. Brendan O'Brien, 27, of Richmond totaled 57.5 miles, followed by women's winner Justine Koksal, 33, of Coinjock, N.C. (51.8 miles), Noah Dahm, 27, of Hopewell (51.1), Matthew Duncan, 38, of Virginia Beach (50.1) and women's runner-up Svitlana Honcharova, 27, of Williamsburg (50.1). Completing the top ten were Ethan Ford, 34, of Richmond (49.1), Mark Titcomb, 32, of Williamsburg (49.1), Iryna Dorovska, 36, of Toano (48.1), Kevin Grierson, 60, of Virginia Beach (47.4) and Bobby Buchter, 40, of Norfolk (44.4).

Other Williamsburg runners over the marathon distance (26.2 miles) were Drew Skeens, 36 (37.0 miles), Tricia Wingard, 53 (33.3), Michael Hill, 54 (33.3), Roddy Broome, 71 (33.3) and Shannon Foxx Day, 43 (29.6). There were 56 official finishers, down to 7.4 miles (two laps).

Race director Alexander emailed, much in jest, "The cloud cover for stargazing was terrible, the humidity in the woods was terrible, the rocks on the trail were terrible, the awards were terrible (leftover from other races), BUT the people, the spirit, the inspiration...anything but

terrible! The mandatory volunteer hour was my favorite. Each runner had to spend one of the 12 hours in, what we now refer to as, "Trail Jail". They helped me check in runners (and walkers) on their loops, but also talked, cheered on and met other participants. It was a great way to give back and a great way to cramp up in the middle of a terrible race. I look forward to next year!"

Men's winner Brendan O'Brien emailed, "I liked the idea of an overnight run - I think it's what attracted a majority of runners to the race. There's nuances about running at night you typically wouldn't consider until you do it. No sleep also brings a different level of difficulty to an ultra. Honestly, at first I didn't care for the idea of a mandatory hour pause - I thought it would mess up my rhythm, but after stopping, getting off my legs for an hour, and adequately fueling for the next 5 hours - I was grateful for it. The trail was beautiful for the 2 or so hours of daylight we had. The terrain was great, crushed gravel, wide trails, and no roots. I enjoyed all the wildlife. Low point of the race was between 3-4 am. I was in the ballpark of 40 miles, tired, hungry, and my body was hurting. I was able to get some food and recover after an hour or so and finished the race strong(ish)."

Women's winner and early overall leader Justine Koksall emailed, "I only ran until about 3:30 am. I was out of headlamp battery. I could have used my phone for light, but I felt like I got in a good, long training run in preparation for my race next month, and that it was a good place to stop. I didn't want to be too beat up and have to take time off. My volunteer shift was from 6-7 am. I LOVED volunteering. It gave me the opportunity to meet and talk to Ellen and so many other runners. I particularly enjoyed getting to see all the runners and their enthusiasm as they went out for additional loops. Such a great idea, and I think more races should offer this. The rolling hills kept the race engaging. I enjoyed it a lot. It was my first overnight race, and I was nervous about feeling sleepy. I didn't feel sleepy at all. The highlight was the volunteer shift and getting to cheer for the runners. That was a lot of fun."

Svitlana Honcharova, who led the first two laps (overall, men and women combined), before doing her volunteer shift, texted, "It was my first time running all night, not sleeping at all. I wanted to quit after 8 laps, then got mad at myself for wanting to quit and wound up doing 13 loops plus out-and-backs. After I volunteered, I went back to running, I was third place, then I catch up as second female. After race I went home, showered, ate and took 2 hour nap before I worked from 11:50 a.m. to 6:10 p.m. with a big pain, all my body was so sore."

Third-place Iryna Dorovska emailed, "This is my second longer race (besides marathons). I have completed 24h endurance race last year in October and have covered 62 miles in about 18 hours. This time I had way less time and I feel I was way more successful! Finishing 3rd female and 8th overall is a big deal to me! I loved the trail despite how hilly it was! And I truly enjoyed race overnight, my friends and family know I am not a morning person! So later race starts - happier I am! Volunteering hour turned for me into a "jail time"! I didn't want to stop -

everyone knows bad things happen once you stop/sit down! I desperately wanted to get going back on the trail but rules are rules and Ellen is VERY fair! I love Ellen, she is very well organised, easy going, friendly!!! She is awesome!!!”

Kevin Grierson emailed, “I like the idea of an overnight run, which avoids the heat issues we had with the Soupy 7 and its successor, the Alphabet Soup 7-hour run. Heat adaptation is not my strong suit. The volunteer hour was an interesting twist, but it definitely made the run more difficult. I volunteered from 9-10; the first two hours after my volunteer hour were a lot more difficult than I expected. I definitely prefer the Greensprings Trail course. The gravel surface on the Warhill trail is pretty unforgiving over the course of multiple laps. The “gravel” on the trail after you cross the road near the community garden feels more like the rocks they use on railroad tracks! Even with a max cushion shoe (Altra Olympus) my feet felt like hamburger by the end of the race. I almost quit the race about 5 laps in, in the second hour after my volunteer service. Everything felt sore, and a heel injury (the one that derailed my 5-year running streak a couple of years ago) was really starting to bother me. But then I got mad at myself for wanting to quit and pushed on for another 7 hours. Had another rough spot the last couple of hours of the race, when my calves started locking up. At one point my right calf cramped so hard I couldn’t walk. Thankfully pickle juice helped with the cramps, and I was able to run out the last few miles.

**Below portions for Ellen Alexander and the race website, since Gazette article limited to 1500 words.**

Mark Titcomb emailed, “It is a great event and for ultramarathons the hardest section is the night portions. A race solely at night fits great into training and gives a chance at overcoming the mental challenges that come with a long night on the trail. The runner/volunteer format is great. Give all the runners a chance to interact and support each other, more than other races. Hammered home that it is a community event by runners, for runners. Hills make it more challenging but give more variety to the race and let you work some different muscles. A lot of the race can get a bit monotonous after 8 hours but the hills gave milestones on each loop and let you feel like you were still making progress. The goal I came in with was to just be consistent. Not go out too fast, and not slow down too much over the course of the night. Around 3 am when there were still 4 hours in the event was the low point for me. Far enough in that you're tired but not so far that the end feels close. Wanted to just lay down and go to sleep but all the experienced people at basecamp gave encouragement. Knowing that everyone there volunteering was going through the same thing and feeling the same way as you make it easier to take their advice and get back out there. Highlight was sticking it out to sunrise and having the whole world expand from your little cone of light from your headlamp to all the colors, beautiful trees, and warm light that covered the forest.”

Tricia Wingard emailed, “I loved being on the trail from basically sunset to sunrise. I am extremely afraid of the dark, but I wanted to face my fears. I like that the Warhill Trail has

elevation change throughout, although the trail make-up (gravel) was a bit harsher on the feet over time. It's also nice to have a different trail option from the Greensprings 24-hour (which will be my next race). I really liked the "forced volunteerism" hour. I think I called it forced sitting when I stopped. It was nice to connect with others and my legs actually felt better when I went back out on the trail for my 7th loop. I don't know that I had any low points but I did have some mini panic attacks when I was alone in the dark and couldn't see any other headlamps nearby. My high point was definitely completing that final lap and being on the trail for first light/sunrise. It felt amazing to realize I had survived the not-so-terrible twelve."