

The 11th Annual Reach the Beach Relay

Cannon Mountain to Hampton Beach, New Hampshire, September 18–19, 2009

At 2:40 pm on September 18, a 12-member team from Essex Running Club, calling itself *ERC – Beach or Bust*, began the Reach the Beach Relay, a 207-mile race that its organizers call the longest relay in the country. It consists of 36 legs—three for each runner, going up and down mountains and through forests, valleys, towns, state parks, the dark of night, the stirring break of day, and the gloriously sunny afternoon nearly 26 hours later along the ocean at Hampton Beach. It was an adventure unlike any an ERC group had undertaken—more than twice as long, in distance and time, as the River to Sea Relay. It required leaving New Jersey on Thursday, renting two 15-passenger vans, driving to the New Hampshire woods for an overnight stay, and making a Friday morning trek to the Cannon Mountain ski resort before we could even start the race. We were seeded among the top 31 teams in a field of more than 400 starters and wound up 39th among 398 finishers in 25 hours 42 minutes 21 seconds—7:26 pace if you're scoring at home.

But the race was about far more than numbers. As you can see from what follows, Reach the Beach made an indelible impression on all 12 of us: Tom Eaton (the captain), Desmond Duncker, Brian Foster, Matt Casse, Tom Daniels, Doug Williams, Susan Mello, Ted Bongiovanni, Chris Jaworski, Mick Close, John Fabbro, and Phil Coffin. Here are accounts (abridged, believe it or not, from the exuberant originals) of our thoughts before and after, and a leg-by-leg look at our remarkable RTB experience. —Phil Coffin

PROLOGUE

Tom E. The dream for me began two and a half years ago, shortly after Phil asked me to be on his River to Sea team. I had never heard of relay races like this, so I poked around on the Internet and came across Reach the Beach. This race immediately appealed to me, as I had lived in New Hampshire as a kid and thought it would be loads of fun. I sent Phil a note to see if he had heard of it, and he told me he had wanted to do this race for years. He also told me I should organize a team and be its captain. Since I hadn't done even River to Sea yet, I laughed it off, but the thought never really left my mind.

The next year, I half-heartedly asked around to see if anyone was interested. I received some positive response—from Phil, Mick, Susan, and Chris—but wasn't ready to commit.

This past year, I decided to make a serious push to get a team together. I knew I wanted a team that would be fun to be with and that would be prepared to comfortably run the required distance and terrain. In the end, we couldn't have had a better team.

Tom D. RTB was memorable. We had a restful prestart evening at the lakeside bungalow of Tom's Auntie Gladly in the White Mountain foothills—a perfect way to bring everyone together over pasta and carbo-loaded adult beverages. A few of us strolled about or went for light runs to get the cobwebs out, including Des, whom we nearly lost because of his no-taper policy and insistence that Garmin's can find unmarked houses even on dark nights in the wilderness. Once we reached the Cannon Mountain start area—well, to say it was an adrenaline rush is an understatement. We saw 100-plus crazily decorated vans, and hundreds of runners milling about, at 2000-foot elevation. The setting had the feel of an Everest base camp, with all the scenery and anticipation. Starting a race in about 375th place—the clock had already been running more than 7 hours—we wondered if we had been too honest in submitting our times, because most of the runners around us looked younger, slimmer,

and fitter. Eventually we climbed up the mountain to the starting chute, which was in between two chairlifts. With the temperatures in the 40s and big, cold raindrops pelting us, we wondered aloud, "What have we gotten ourselves into?" But the words *Live Free, Die Running*, which someone had scrawled on a poster board near the start, said it all.

Doug. When Tom first mentioned this relay in early 2009, I was intrigued. It sounded like a tough event but a good time. Tom was quite persuasive when he described what we were in for, so I signed up. Part of me didn't think we could get a full team. Several months passed before I really started thinking about what I had signed up for. The nervousness started to creep in during the final few weeks leading up to the event. Once Tom started his first leg, though, I knew the relay was going to be something special.

Susan. *The Female Perspective.* Okay, let's get this out on the table. I was *dreading* this race. I told Tom over a year earlier that, after reading about this relay for years, I would be interested in running in it. Unfortunately, he didn't know I'm not big on commitment. After sending him my \$90 registration fee in March with the caveat that I wasn't sure I would run, and ignoring his e-mails for most of the spring and summer, I showed up at our first race meeting, but I still wouldn't commit. I was tired after a stressful summer working long hours, and my running showed it. To top it off, Tom apologetically informed me at the end of August that I was the only female and that he was frantically trying to recruit another runner. Luckily, John came to the rescue, and I signed up. More than once I wondered what had I gotten myself into—running a 207-mile race through the night with 11 guys, all of whom were much better runners than I. I finally decided I would have to rely on what I am sure are my abnormally high levels of testosterone to get me through it.

John. It felt a little strange getting in a car on a Thursday morning with a bunch of running buddies to drive to New Hampshire. I was a bit appre-

hensive, feeling I wasn't fast enough to be running with such a speedy group. As we made our way into NH, the beautiful scenery and peacefulness of the area helped me relax. We made it to the cabin, which was in a beautiful spot, and unpacked. Ted and Susan were a well-orchestrated team in the kitchen, so I did what any well-trained male would do: I went for a walk. There was a small lake a short distance away that sealed the deal for me—I'm ready to move north now.

THE RACE

(Van 1, *Silver Bullet*, handled the first 6 legs.)

Leg 1, 2:41 pm, 7.95 miles, 53:09, 6:41 pace

Tom E. The week before the race, I was so nervous about all the planning that I hadn't thought much about my running. But when we pulled into the parking lot at Cannon Mountain and saw all the vans and very fit-looking runners, my stomach started doing back-flips. The later it got, the thinner, taller, and faster those runners looked, and I was worried about keeping up. The fact that it was raining and I was worried about the team doing the run in the rain and cold didn't help, but it was hard not to have a good time with everyone getting excited. When we finally started, with nine other teams, three runners took off like a shot. I settled in at a pace that was a bit fast, but it was downhill, and I couldn't help myself. A mile in, the man running with me asked if he thought we could catch the guys in front. I told him that, with all the adrenaline I had pumping, I was already going too fast and should slow down, so he took off. I tried to make sure no one else passed me after that. During the run, the weather went from cool, cloudy, and rainy to hot and sunny. I took off my hat and gloves the first time I saw my crew. It was so good to have the race under way, and, once I relaxed, I felt I had run better than expected.

Leg 2, 3:34 pm, 8.96 miles, 65:25, 7:18 pace

Desmond. I started my first leg knowing that it was rated hard. It had a couple of downhill miles, and then the rest was uphill. With fresh legs, I

flew through the first 4 miles. The hills on the last 5 miles were difficult, but amazingly I pushed through them to finish strong. Whereas Tom had estimated that I would run around 7:50 pace, I instead averaged 7:18, surprising myself with how strong I felt.

Leg 3, 4:40 pm, 3.88 miles, 26:27, 6:49 pace

Brian. This was rated easy, but I thought it was my most difficult leg. The majority of it was on a pretty busy paved road. The scenery was beautiful, just mountains all around. The weather had mostly cleared up since Tom's leg; it was cool and just a bit windy. I wasn't able to pass anyone, and no one passed me, so I was running all alone. I found the last mile very difficult—a hill and then a grassy hill before handing off to Matt. Matt's was a short leg, so I had to hop right into the van and try to stretch out in the backseat.

Leg 4: 5:06 pm, 2.99 miles, 18:12, 6:17 pace

Matt. I was lucky enough to start at my favorite time of day—dusk. And the weather and lighting were absolutely perfect. The dry, cool air coupled with the mountain scenery reminded me of my running days in Colorado. I was wearing a Garmin watch for the first time, and this was incredibly helpful. Entering the leg, I had no idea why it was rated moderate instead of easy, considering it was short and all downhill. But halfway through I found out that running downhill can be tougher on the legs than running uphill. My quads were on fire. I kept reminding myself I had two long runs to go, and I did all I could to stop myself from running too fast.

Leg 5, 5:25 pm, 5.5 miles, 39:44, 7:13 pace

Tom D. Exhilaration. By now the adrenaline was flowing. New Hampshire is beautiful in the fall, and being there brought back memories of my years in college. It was 5:00 pm, so the sun was starting to dip below the mountaintops, bringing the temperature down quickly. With dusk nearing, I was the first to don the required night gear, which in my case was a lightweight reflective vest with blinkers. The vest kept the warmth in. My 5.5 miles were on Route 302, gradually winding its way down and through the White Mountains. Other than for a few team vans, a handful of logging trucks, and the four runners I passed and the two who went by, it was quiet, peaceful, and quite pleasant. Although I know that my overall pace was nowhere near it, my Garmin said that I hit 5:28 pace in a couple of spots, which reminded how much I love downhill running and cool temperatures.

Leg 6, 6:04 pm, 8.62 miles, 61:11, 7:06 pace

Doug. I was relieved that it was finally my time to run. I received the tag from Tom D, and off I went. This leg was mostly downhill. I was really happy to be running at this time of day. It was slightly before the sun was going to set, so the temperatures were perfect, and the scenery was fantastic. Much of the tension from the buildup to this event faded during this run.

(Van 2, *White Lightning*, handled the next 6 legs.)

Leg 7, 7:06 pm, 7.23 miles, 57:11, 7:55 pace

Susan. After seeing Tom off at the very rainy and cold start, Van 2 headed to the first vehicle transition area, where the race started to seem more real. As I had never run with a headlamp, I opted for a small flashlight instead. Being the first runner in Van 2, I had the benefit of the entire team seeing me off. It was just getting dark when Doug came flying into the transition area and passed me the "baton," a reflective wrist wrap. About 2 miles into my run, I became disappointed when I was passed by another runner; the teams behind us were all very fast, and my testosterone wasn't much of a match for the male runners chasing us. It was quickly getting dark, and difficult to see my van mates when they stopped to offer support (we hadn't yet learned they needed to use flashlights). At one point, my left contact lens popped out, so I put it in my pocket—I didn't want to take the time to stop to replace it. Running with blurry vision in the dark, following the bouncing light from the handheld flashlight, was quite interesting! I hadn't been able to get my Garmin to locate satellites, so I couldn't track my miles and had to try to determine my distance based on elapsed time. At 56 minutes, I figured I had 4 to 5 minutes left. When I saw the blinking red light of another runner in front of me, I started to pick up the pace. Then I was surprised to see the flashing lights signaling an exchange area. I was running hard to catch up to some runners. It was really exciting to have my van mates cheering me on and to pass the baton to Ted. As we made our way to the van in the dark (flashlights, guys?), I was definitely pumped.

Leg 8, 8:03 pm, 6.6 miles, 48:25, 7:19 pace

Ted. It felt really good to finally run after what had seemed like an eternity of waiting. I went out way too fast—did my first mile in 6:53—and then reined it in. Cool. As I raced toward the next exchange point, a runner who passed me, or tried to pass me, said, "Watch it, camper, you've got two legs to go." Fair enough, camper!

Leg 9, 8:51 pm, 3.53 miles, 27:24, 7:46 pace

Chris. I had been antsy to run since the beginning of the relay. Now, 6 hours later, I'd finally get my turn. But it was dark. I had tried to get some sleep in Van 2 while waiting for our teammates in Van 1 to finish their last leg, but my brain was being its chatty self. *You're dressed to run, you're ready, all you gotta do is ... it'll be dark during your leg ... where is your night gear packed? ... reflective vest, blinkers, headlamp, flashlight ... Susan and Ted will need theirs for Legs 7 and 8, too ... you'd better go check.* So I did. All our night gear, we quickly learned, was in the other van. After discussion with Van 1 members, it was decided that they would stop supporting their final runner, Doug, with 3 miles to go and hightail it to the transition area to give us the gift of light. Good thing, because Susan wouldn't have been allowed to proceed without it—night gear was required between 5:30 pm and 7 am.

So Ted came dashing in and handed me the baton, and off I ran. This was a no-support leg, both because it was short and parts of the route

were too narrow. This supposedly easy leg felt uphill all the way. A side stitch didn't help. What may have affected my pace the most, however, was dealing with the running surface (potholed road, no real shoulder, uneven gravel "sidewalk") while looking out for the occasional car coming the opposite way. I aimed my headlamp eight to 10 feet ahead, so I could follow the route, and trained my flashlight on the ground two feet in front of me, so I could avoid potholes. Every so often, I used the flashlight to scan telephone poles for the reflective arrow signs marking the course. Although I almost never look for runners coming up behind me, I turned around several times to make sure that others were following, and that I hadn't gone off-course. When I passed another runner, or another passed me, I skipped the usual "Nice job" and "Good going" and went with my best Bela Lugosi voice, saying, "Good eeev-ning!"

Leg 10, 9:18 pm, 2.81 miles, 22:51, 8:08 pace

Mick. This leg was short and rated easy. My adrenaline was pumping as I waited in the dark at the exchange area. It had been almost 7 hours since the start, and the team was doing well. The scenery had been beautiful in the White Mountains, particularly coming through Crawford Notch, but there wasn't much to see now that night had fallen. I was worried about letting the team down with a slow time but didn't know how my calves would hold up if I pushed too hard. Anticipation increased as each runner arrived, and it wasn't long before Chris appeared out of the darkness and handed off to me. I tried to settle into a good pace and not go out too fast, but I was quickly passed by two runners. I knew that the first 2 miles were mostly uphill, so I figured I would try to stay with those runners as long as I could. This plan seemed to work, and I felt more comfortable having them in front of me, as we were running with traffic on a narrow country road with no shoulder. I was wearing a headlamp and carrying a flashlight, but it still wasn't easy to see the road. We started to pick up the pace once we crested the hill and headed downhill toward the next exchange. With about a half-mile to go, I was able to see the blinking lights marking the exchange area. I pushed hard and managed to pull ahead of the other two runners, only to be passed by someone else. I shouted for John as I approached the exchange and then felt good that he had the baton. I was a little disappointed with my time, but, with an elevation gain of 200 feet over the first 2 miles, this leg may have been harder than expected.

Leg 11, 9:41 pm, 7.54 miles, 56:26, 7:29 pace

John. My first leg had a "pretty good steep" of about 1.25 miles in the middle. I was happy to finally be running, but it was so dark I had no idea of my surroundings. The headlamp was giving me about six feet of vision, and the blinking lights of fellow runners were the only other signs of life. I had heard reports of how many runners my teammates had passed on their legs, so I hoped to do my part and pass a few myself. In the middle of my steep climb, I had no idea how much

farther the hill went because of the darkness. Suddenly, a tall woman with long, flowing blonde hair appeared at my side. I thought she was an angel coming to carry me over the mountain, but my hopes were dashed when she ran by. Although she may have been wearing a reflective vest and a blinking light, it looked like her feet weren't touching the ground. The rest of my leg was much of the same—annoying fast runners leaving me in the dust. I finished with a bit of postrace euphoria, but my ego had been slightly damaged by the onslaught of runners leaving me in the dark of the New Hampshire mountains.

Leg 12, 10:38 pm, 3.87 miles, 30:50, 7:58 pace
Phil. I had waited all day (and part of the night) for this. I'd been apprehensive seeing Susan run in the dark and later would be unnerved by how dark it was for Ted's long run in the middle of the night. But this was great—a paved path and a gravel road with traffic barred, then an almost empty road before hitting a main road with a wide, safe shoulder. Running in such total darkness was a novelty, but the lights (headlamp, vest lamp, blinkers, mini-flashlight) worked great, though I think they upset animals in the woods, based on the rustling off the path I heard. I could not get over how good my knee felt.

Leg 13, 11:09 pm, 3.91 miles, 26:18, 6:44 pace
Tom E. This was my night leg, and I got very lucky with it: It was short, and the road I was on had a wide shoulder and little traffic. I passed a couple of people but was unable to catch the runner carrying a blinking green flashlight—a guy I had been chasing the entire leg. I think we must have been running the same pace, as he always seemed the same distance in front of me.

Leg 14, 11:35 pm, 7.79 miles, 57:30, 7:23 pace
Desmond. This was another difficult leg for me, though it had been rated moderate. I found the dark and the cold night air disconcerting. It was eons since I had last run in the dark, and on this leg I was supposed to run with the traffic. But the darkness was total. Only the headlights of passing cars and my flashlight kept me going. On the hills, I was reminded of an old saying: "The worst race is the one you're running now." By the time the flashing lights on the road gave away the chute at the exchange point, I was exhausted. My body was screaming for rest. Later, after relaying our last runner at Leg 18, we would drive to Leg 24 to find Tent City and try to get some rest. (All the tents appeared occupied, but Doug and I would find a vacant one. So, we'd get a few hours' sleep before starting again in the morning.)

Leg 15, 12:32 am, 8.24 miles, 56:05, 6:48 pace
Brian. My night leg was my favorite leg. It was along Squam Lake. Although I couldn't see anything five feet from my face, I could hear water lapping against rocks on the shore. I got on pace quickly, and my legs felt great. The leg rolled all 8.24 miles, but running up the hills in the dark seemed easy. As I had no idea how long each hill was, or how steep, I let my body react and just take me up and down. No one passed me, but

I passed six runners (seeing their blinking lights allowed me to reel them in).

Leg 16, 1:28 am, 6.5 miles, 46:03, 7:04 pace
Matt. This leg was rated hard, and the maps had shown me I was in for a couple of serious hills. With my quads still sore from the 3-mile downhill I had run 8 hours earlier, I was determined to take the first hill at a moderate pace. But I didn't have much choice anyway—within 100 yards of the exchange area I was slowed to a 10-minute pace because of the extreme grade. Despite that pace, I was encouraged by passing three runners within the first mile. The leg continued uphill for most of its first 3 miles and then descended for most of the final 3.5. I felt incredibly good, and I really enjoyed running through the dark of night, searching for the next blinking light in the distance to catch.

Leg 17, 2:14 am, 7.39 miles, 60:03, 8:08 pace
Tom D. Eeriness. Exchange areas were well-lit oases, bustling with activity. Typically they were at community centers, schools, and town halls, and flashing police lights at these places pierced the darkness. But nothing had prepared me for my 1:30 am start in the dark on an unfamiliar course. Unlike before, now I really needed to dress like Special Tom, with a headlamp, a reflective vest, and several blinking lights. We were near Lake Winnepesaukee, where the temperatures had dropped into the low 40s. After running about half a mile in a quasi-well-lit area of town, past a gas station, a diner, and a bridge, I was in complete darkness. And then the hill. Try to imagine the hills of Mt. Hebron, Bradford, and Eagle Rock combined. It was a 1-mile, relentless, merciless, lonely climb on a cold, dark, moonless night. My legs were going on autopilot; if this were not a relay with teammates waiting for me at the top, I probably would have walked it. It was so painful. The only things I saw with the help of my headlamp's light over 59 minutes were my van mates and the two runners I passed. Plus the guy who ran by me with more flashing lights than a Christmas tree and who interrupted my peaceful, stargazing reverie and awakened my olfactory senses with his malodorous scent wafting past. That guy and his poor hygiene would never have survived riding in our van.

Leg 18, 3:15 am, 4.89 miles, 36:51, 7:32 pace
Doug. This leg still haunts me. It came after I had watched Matt and Tom D run mostly uphill; I had been so glad I wasn't the person assigned one of those legs. However, I had slept for only about 10 minutes in a parking lot earlier, so I felt shaky going out. Then I was spooked by the total darkness—and feared I might step on a fist-size rock and end up lying in the middle of a road. I was concerned I'd get lost as well, so I picked up the pace to follow a runner with a blinking light about three quarters of a mile ahead. The last part of this leg was uphill, but it felt great seeing all 11 of my teammates when I made the tag to Susan. That was the great perk of being the last runner in Van 1—each time I finished, the whole team was there!

Leg 19, 3:51 am, 4.33 miles, 34:50, 8:03 pace
Susan. Phone rang at 3:09 am, confusing me in my half-sleeping state. It was Ted calling from his sleeping bag to tell me that Van 1 was ahead of schedule. I jumped up, grabbed my bag, and went into the school at the transition area to find a bathroom so I could change clothes. All the bathrooms were locked! Now I was scrambling. The portajohn I found was pitch black, so I ditched that idea, too, and went back to the van. I kicked Mick out of the backseat so I could change. I was frantically trying to zip up my sports bra—you know, the one that would be so convenient to slip out of later without the guys noticing!—but it wasn't cooperating. I thought of asking a teammate to zip me up but quickly decided against that as I fumbled for a different bra in the dim light. And I still had to brush my teeth! Finally I headed over with John to the exchange area. I wanted to warm up but worried I'd miss Doug coming in—there is nothing more distressing than seeing a runner finish with no teammate waiting to start the next leg. Van 2 showed up, I relaxed, and once again the entire team was cheering as Doug came in and I took off into the darkness. This night leg was eerier than my first, as there were fewer teams around and virtually no traffic, other than the vans crewing. Up came a turn, and the runner ahead yelled out as she almost passed it by—I think but for her, I would have missed it. While running, I searched for the signs marking the course, convinced more than once I must've missed a turn. The night was silent, the air cool, and I continued to race. This time I had my Garmin to show me the distance. Then, at last, I was relieved to see the exchange area ahead. Ted the Energizer bunny cheered me in, and I handed off to him.

Leg 20, 4:26 am, 9.23 miles, 76:00, 8:14 pace
Ted. I watched for Susan's swerving flashlight and reflective foot bands. While waiting, trying to wake up after slugging a cup of yesterday's cold coffee, I modeled my legs for the volunteers at the exchange area, to which they responded: "Well, at least you have some meat on them, unlike some of these other folks." That's me, Meaty Legs. This run was the one I'd been dreading—after a slight downhill, I had to run for 5 miles up what seemed to be a never ending series of Bradfords. I just kept putting one foot in front of the other. One runner passed me on a hill, and then I passed a bunch of runners coming down the other side. Descents are something I do well; I let my legs go as fast as they can carry me. I don't think I was ever so happy to see Chris—except for when he remembered that all our reflective gear was in the other van. Come to think of it, I'm always happy to see Chris, but after completing that leg, I was almost delirious.

Leg 21, 5:42 am, 7.26 miles, 59:24, 8:11 pace
Chris. Still no sleep. Susan convinced me to lie down and try to rest. What a lifesaver she was! I didn't fall asleep but did go into restful hibernation. The brain and body switches were turned off. When it was time to get ready to run, the switches flipped back on just like that. Power up!

Phil profiled this leg for me. Go a mile, bear right, then just keep going, or something like that. There'd be a long downhill, then an uphill (Phil referenced Mt. Hebron Road), then more down and more up. I told him I wasn't so concerned about the hills—I just wanted to keep on course.

I brought a sweatshirt to the exchange point so I wouldn't be shivering while waiting. I guess I should've gotten there earlier, because almost as soon as Phil started helping me put the sweatshirt on, I heard our team number announced and Ted calling my name! What a jumbled-up flurry of activity! Phil tugged off the sweatshirt while I jumped out of it; Ted handed me the wrist wrap; and I clicked on my flashlight, hit *Start* on my Garmin, and tried adjusting my headlamp all while trotting away. Five seconds later, in the dark, I realized my glasses had gotten jostled and were hanging down at chest level. I put the glasses back on but couldn't get the headlamp secured without stopping, so I didn't. I tucked the headlamp into my vest and followed the road using only the flashlight.

And what a sweet road it was! Long sight lines, mostly undeveloped land on either side, few potholes and cars, and the sky still black but with dark blue hints of dawn. Another runner had skipped ahead during my exchange-point confusion. I tried to stay with her, but she pulled farther, farther away, and we were *both* trucking on that long downhill, which I was now glad Phil had told me about! I ran as fast as I could (7:18 pace over 2 miles) to try to "pre-compensate" for what I'd lose when the uphills kicked in! Soon I saw, far in the distance, in the valley below, a large body of water and the lightening sky. Wonderful!

Then I was heading uphill. When my legs began to slow down, I shortened my stride and felt them start motoring again. And here is where I caught up to my first runner on this leg. Over the next few miles, I'd pass seven more, and be passed by three. Farther along, I so wanted to stop and walk, but I kept thinking of how well everyone was running and how we were lopping tens of minutes off our projected time. I wanted to maintain that progress. I also received a boost from the last person who passed me on this leg—a guy who said "Nice pace" as he went by. I perhaps naively took that to mean I had made him work for a good while to catch me! He also said we had only a little more than a mile to go. That perked me right up, too. I knew I could muster the will to run just one more mile. I even tried staying with that guy. I much prefer setting my sights on a moving person—bonding with another runner—over trying to make it from one inanimate object (telephone pole) to another! That guy really helped me get to the finish.

I wish I were out on that road right now.

Leg 22, 6:42 am, 5.55 miles, 45:37, 8:13 pace
Mick. It was 6:30, around daybreak, when I was preparing for my second leg. Boy Scouts were cooking breakfast, but I had to pass. I hadn't expected needing to wear night gear for this leg, but the team was well ahead of schedule, and the rules state you must wear it until 7 am. We were about 16 hours into the race, and I was start-

ing to feel more tired, though I had been able to get a few hours' rest in the van. This time, in the light, I could see Chris approaching, and soon I was heading off. I saw four or five runners ahead, which gave me some extra incentive. I was able to pass all of them over the first couple of miles, including one who was wearing a kilt, but after that there was no one else in sight, so I began to focus on holding pace. This leg had some long uphill and downhill sections, but they were not very steep. Most of the leg was on a state highway with a wide shoulder, and we were running against the traffic, so I felt much safer than I had on my first leg. My teammates gave me water and encouragement at the 2-mile mark. I started to fade toward the end of this leg, so I was happy when I finally saw the turnoff for the next exchange area. It was in a nice office park by some water. I picked up the pace, and then once again I was handing off to John and heading back to the van. There was little time to rest when the six runners from our van were in action—except for some recovery time in the backseat after each leg. I was happier with my pace for this leg but a bit concerned about how my calves were going to feel for the final leg in about 8 hours.

Leg 23, 7:27 am, 6.24 miles, 46:57, 7:31 pace
John. I caught a few minutes of sleep on a floor in a school and was feeling cold, tired, and hungry when our van was called back into action. Seeing the efforts my teammates were putting into completing their legs, I got motivated to run. My second leg had an easy rating, but I had a feeling that nothing would be easy at this point. It was invigorating watching the sun come up over the mountains, and the darkness was replaced with a bright blue sky. About 2 miles into my leg, I passed a Dunkin' Donuts and noticed lots of vans in the parking lot. All of a sudden, I had a sinking feeling that my teammates had left me for the temptation of hot coffee and Boston cream doughnuts. My heart was uplifted when I saw Chris and Mick at the side of the road with my morning pick-me-up of Clif Shot Bloks and water. I finished feeling satisfied not only with my run but also with the warm-and-fuzzy feeling of being part of a great team. I got in the back of the van and heard U2 playing. I was relieved I had rated higher than Dunkin' Donuts but wondered how I'd have stacked up against Starbucks. We drove to the next transition area and enjoyed basking in the warm sunlight. The anticipation of reaching the beach was high, and we were all pumped to finish our last leg of this journey ... and to have access to real bathrooms.

Leg 24, 8:14 am, 6.87 miles, 53:35, 7:48 pace
Phil. I hadn't felt this good on a run in more than a year because of my lingering knee problems. Nothing hurt. I felt strong, despite getting probably less than 2 hours of sleep split up over several tries. On a rolling course, I felt as if I could open up my stride and actually race. The final 1.2 miles was in Bear Brook State Park, with about the first three quarters of that gradually but continuously uphill. I still felt good at the crest, so I poured all I had into the finish, buoyed by

the hubbub of the transition area and the cheers of teammates, especially Tom D. There I executed a US Olympic team-type (that is, bad) handoff to Tom E. Oops! Sorry for dropping the baton, team!

Leg 25, 9:08 am, 9.42 miles, 66:01, 7:00 pace
Tom E. I was a bit worried about this leg, as it was my third and was rated hard for the distance and the terrain (the first 5 miles were mostly up). But I managed to get about 2.5 hours of sleep in the van and felt pretty good when I woke up. A little stiff, and my quads were sore, but not too bad overall. When Phil came tearing down the hill into the transition area, my adrenaline started pumping again, and I just tried to settle into a good rhythm. I was passed early by a couple of speedsters but started picking people off and got 15 of them. The miles went by faster than I had expected, and I was excited to know my Bradford repeats had paid off. At mile 5, I knew it was mostly downhill to the end, and I pushed as hard as I could. With about 2 miles to go, I was getting really hot but knew my crew was ahead getting Des ready for his leg, so there was no water to be had. At that point, my "angels from heaven" arrived in the form of five women from another team (some dressed in disco outfits) pulling up next to me in their van and offering me water. That gave me the extra boost to push to the end, and, though I had hoped to end up with a pace under 7 minutes per mile, my legs were getting tired, and I ended up averaging 7:00 exactly. I handed off to Des and realized that my running was done. What a day!

Leg 26, 10:14 am, 4.2 miles, 31:47, 7:34 pace
Desmond. My legs were definitely tired. I hadn't studied the profile for this run, and it was probably a good idea not to. The first 2.25 miles were a brutal hill. It finally hit me that this was New Hampshire—flat roads are rare. After the initial hill, I received a 1-mile downhill that I used to my advantage to pass seven other runners or so. But I was also passed by a runner I then kept in my sights. These final miles were the most mentally challenging for me, but completing them meant completing my third and final leg. I tried to keep my pace up so I'd finish respectably. During this late leg, even 8-minute miles were difficult. Soon, however, I was relieved! I must say, this relay felt like a marathon in terms of how much stress it put on my legs.

Leg 27, 10:46 am, 8.54 miles, 59:06, 6:55 pace
Brian. I woke up at 8 am, after about 2 hours of sleep, and my legs felt extremely stiff. I was not too excited about the upcoming miles, and no one else in the van seemed eager to begin racing again either—but all that would quickly change. Seeing Phil working so hard to finish Leg 24 and hearing van members describe how they had exceeded time expectations were all the motivation I needed. My final leg was mostly rolling until mile 7 and then straight up until mile 8 before a downhill finish. I felt pretty loose when Desmond came in. It was gorgeous, sunny, probably in the 60s ... perfect weather. My goal was to stay under

7-minute pace, and I knew I was going to lose almost 15 seconds over that final, uphill mile. The rolling hills were not too bad. I was able to pass 12 people, mostly there, and my attempts to catch them kept my mind off the climbs. Tom D had informed me of the challenges of my leg, so after I passed my second largest hill, between miles 5 and 6, I knew I had a mile to get ready for the hill at mile 7. That hill hurt bad. When I reached the top and was finally able to open my stride toward the finish, my legs began to feel as if they were going to cramp. I was trying to move as quickly as I could on the downhill when I heard a few team members cheering me in, but all I was capable of thinking was these damn muscles better not give out on me. Fortunately, they held strong, and I passed the baton again to Matt. Before this leg, Matt had pressed me to keep the streak of not being passed alive, and I had been able to oblige. Now, while passing the baton to him, I urged him to do the same. (He did.) I was thankful that I was done and that I had been able to meet my goal of running all three legs under 7 minutes per mile. Now I could just focus on supporting the team and reaching the beach!

Leg 28, 11:45 am, 5.53 miles, 36:02, 6:31 pace
Matt. Starting this leg around noon, I was feeling ridiculously sore and fatigued. My two previous efforts and 2 hours of sleep had caught up with me. Even though the temperatures were in the 60s, the sun was out, and it felt *hot*. This leg was the flattest and easiest of the three, but I was actually missing the earlier uphill climbs and the momentum of the downhills. By this point, we had caught up to a lot of other teams. It truly felt as if I were running a local 5K, as I was now surrounded by other racers for the first time and was pushing it as hard as I could coming down the stretch.

Leg 29, 12:21 pm, 4.08 miles, 31:25, 7:42 pace
Tom D. Fatigue. Tom E told me that my third leg would be like a cool-down run the morning after a 13-mile run. He is a good salesman. It was more like doing a 4-mile race as your third run in less than 20 hours after 2 hours of sleep in a musty van with a bunch of other guys snoring. No complaining, but this leg was much harder than I had anticipated—like having sandbags strapped to your thighs and being timed because you don't want to let your teammates down. It was early afternoon, and the rolling hills through suburbia were a welcome relief from my relentless uphill climb 10 hours earlier, but my legs were worn down, and I had little left. I never felt so good as when I saw Doug at the exchange area, made the final turn, and sprinted the last 200 yards.

Leg 30, 12:52 pm, 5.58 miles, 39:59, 7:10 pace
Doug. I was pumped! This leg was somewhat rolling but not too challenging. At one point after I had passed a few younger runners, an older guy stuck his head out his team's van window and said, "Way to reel in those youngsters." I was able to see the finish for a while and was energized by that.

Leg 31, 1:32 pm, 6.69 miles, 54:55, 8:13 pace
Susan. It was great to crew after my second leg, to see the stars against the deep blue sky of early morning as Ted finished his leg, to greet the Boy Scouts selling breakfast, to support Chris as dawn broke, and finally to feel the light of day and take energy from it as we cheered on Mick, John, and Phil. This was New Hampshire, everything you would imagine it to be. Waiting at the last transition area was the hardest. It was such a beautiful morning, and teams were everywhere. Sleep was elusive. When the time came to get ready, I tried to warm up, but my legs were heavy, and I started to worry. Doug came in, and I took off to the final cheers of the ERC team. Despite the heavy legs, I covered the first mile in 7:52, but then the uphills started—not long, but enough of them. My pace was erratic; I ran slow uphill but made up some time on the downhills. I got a stitch and drafted for a long time behind a guy with a rubber chicken; after the stitch wore off, a little before 5 miles, I passed chicken guy and began to concentrate on picking up the pace. I often run the last mile of my runs harder, so I focused on doing the same here. Chicken guy passed me coming up to the finish, but that was okay, because he pulled me in behind him. Ted took off, and Phil, John, and I jumped into the van to finish crewing the race. Finally I could have a Diet Coke!

Leg 32, 2:27 pm, 2.2 miles, 14:42, 6:41 pace
Ted. Final stretch—I had only 2.2 miles to run and didn't want to leave anything out on the course. At Phil's urging, I warmed up briefly, and then I just trucked through Exeter. No one passed me, and I passed a bunch of folks, including a couple of kids on skateboards. This leg is where excitement overtook fatigue. I was positively gleeful when I returned to the van to take over driving—and used the opportunity to deejay some of my favorite U2 songs as we picked up runners on the way to the finish.

Leg 33, 2:42 pm, 1.99 miles, 13:59, 7:02 pace
Chris. Now I had only a couple of miles left to go, and in broad daylight no less! But my other runs, and maybe more so the lack of sleep, had really sapped me. I was also nervous, shifting from one foot to the other, squatting, pacing back and forth, bouncing around on the grass, and glancing at each runner coming into view and hoping the next would be Ted. I was eager to take the tag, to run, and I did not want *anyone* to pass me at this late stage. When Ted handed me the baton for the third and final time, I took off like a wind-sucking bat out of hell with lead wings. My brain said go, my legs said no—they seemed unresponsive. And yet, somehow, on the uphill section Des had warned me about, I passed a runner. It was also here where my van mates drove by slowly, cheering, and here where I figured that it was time to repay the gesture with a loud cheer of my own—for them—and I did! I'd go on to pass four more runners on this leg, and no one got close to catching me. What a good feeling it was to hand off the wrist wrap to Mick for his final run of the relay!

Leg 34, 2:56 pm, 4.01 miles, 32:15, 8:03 pace
Mick. The tension and excitement were building as we now neared the end. We were catching many teams, and the exchange areas were much busier. At the final transition area, I had managed to sleep for about an hour on the grass, but that was during the full sun, and when I got up I was soaked in sweat. It was about 24 hours since we had started the relay. It was a beautiful day, sunny and clear with a cool breeze. I was feeling very anxious because my legs were sore, and I didn't want to let the team down so close to the finish. We had done so well and were less than 12 miles from the beach.

It had been such a thrill to be on this team. The organization had been amazing, the chemistry great, and no one had become sick. I'd had such a blast with everyone. One thing I'll never forget is Phil sprinting into the transition area at the end of Leg 24 with a huge grin on his face and handing off the baton (sort of!) to Tom E.

I was tired and low on energy, so I ate some Powerbar Gel Blasts, and they gave me a boost. Soon my teammates showed up telling me that Chris was only 5 minutes away. It wasn't long before he came charging into the exchange area and handed off to me one last time.

I started to run as best I could and was spurred on by two people who tried to pass me. There were lots of people ahead, so I tried to keep focusing on picking them off, one by one. This leg was relatively flat with some rolling hills, and I seemed to have settled into a good pace. Now if only I could hold it there! We were going through a more built-up area, and I really had to watch out for the traffic. After about 3 miles, the police were holding runners up at a major intersection to have them cross on the green. I saw at least five runners waiting for the red light to change, but I was still approximately 50 yards away when the light turned green. I had to break into a sprint to make it there and across, and I very happily did, just in time. Then I needed to take a few minutes to recover before making my final push over the last half-mile.

I was happy to see John waiting for me. I handed him the baton and was finally able to relax knowing I had completed all three of my legs. It sure felt great heading back to the van this time. We would soon be at the beach celebrating, with Essex member Catherine Alessi, who had come to welcome us.

Leg 35, 3:28 pm, 3.41 miles, 25:18, 7:25 pace
John. On my last leg, which had an easy rating, I started out sore and tired. My body was weak, but my mind kept pushing me through the pain. I was inspired by the efforts of my teammates and was feeding off that energy over the first 2 miles. Then my mind drifted back to college days and my friend Jeff, captain of the cross-country team, who had gotten me into running and passed away at age 38. My mind continued to wander. I was soon brought back to reality by the sight of Phil's cute legs, and found myself handing off the baton for the last time. I climbed into the back of the van, heard Bono belting a line of a song, and then saw an amazing sight, the ocean.

Leg 36, 3:53 pm, 4.09 miles, 30:11, 7:23 pace
Phil. By this time, my quads were sore, but from effort, not something breaking down. Here near the shore it was sunny—what a difference from our start 25 hours earlier and 2040 feet higher. My legs were tired, so for the last couple of miles I focused on reaching the oceanfront promenade. Who knew that New Hampshire had such a lovely beach? Curving, wide, a mix of loose sand and darker, hard-packed sand you could run on. With late afternoon slanting in from my right, and the blue-blue-blue ocean on my left, I felt as if nature were funneling me to the finish. And I was so amped—it was as if I had all the excitement and adrenaline (what was left of it!) of the entire team carrying me. After crossing 50 or 75 yards of sand, I was joined by half the team, but I was so pumped I couldn't force myself to slow to a jog for the final 100 yards to the finish.

EPILOGUE

Tom D. The finish of Reach the Beach was like River to Sea on steroids. Imagine more than 800 vans strewn over two football fields by the ocean, 5000 people cheering each team in as its name was announced, and music blaring all around. This was a runner's Woodstock. Here, unlike at R2C, a gathering area was set up 100 yards before the finish line so that each team could join its last member for the run to and through the final chute. Van 2 got caught in traffic and missed our group run to the finish with Phil, but, when our six teammates arrived, all 12 of us performed a reenactment for a group-finish photo. Then we took the mandatory dip in the ocean, joined the barbecue-fest under the tent, and did some van cleanup. After driving back to suburban Boston to return our rigs, and transferring to our three cars for the ride back to New Jersey, I shut my eyes and curled up in the backseat. I woke up 3.5 hours later in Glen Ridge, wondering how Susan, with John as her copilot, had driven home so quickly. And she was worried about testosterone levels? Yes, the Reach the Beach Relay was quite memorable!

Tom E. Van 1, a.k.a. the Silver Bullet, was lots of fun. We laughed the whole way, and there was never any tension. Everyone ran extremely well and worked quite smoothly together. It was very cool to see everyone consistently running faster than we had projected. It was also great fun to talk with other runners and see all their wacky team names, van decorations, and costumes. Unfortunately, Susan has told me that, if we ever decide to run as a costumed team, she is out!

Brian. I don't think Tom could have assembled a more cohesive unit. This was easily the most fun I've had in any racing event. In a lot of ways, running this relay was like an old college road trip, with all the laughs included but with running replacing the beer.

Matt. Running with and for the ERC team was so motivating and inspiring—a great experience! It was a blast, too. When I wasn't running, eating

M&Ms, or trying to sleep, I was laughing. I am all ready to sign up for next year.

Phil. This was a unique experience for me, and I really do mean one of a kind. As much as I love River to Sea, this was very different. Each six-person half of the team runs what amounts to a separate race—they're almost like two teams, as their interaction is so limited. Crewing is harder (it's eerie and anxiety-producing at night) and easier (you're not stopping as often as in R2C). Susan's first night run unsettled me because the shoulders of the roads were so narrow and there was so much traffic—much of it the ultrawide vans every team had. Ted's middle-of-the-night run was long (9.2 miles), hard (hills upon hills), and run in such desolate darkness that once I couldn't identify him when he ran past me, and I missed giving him the Gatorade he wanted. But there were unexpected delights, like Chris's run from darkness into earliest daylight and Mick's sunrise run. There were simple pleasures. Brushing my teeth at 3 am while standing near a row of portapotties (clean teeth never felt so good). The smell of doughnuts being fried on a camp stove by Boy Scouts at the end of Chris's sunup run. Washing off with bottled water while standing outside the van at some transition area. A delicious nap in the afternoon sun while waiting for our final handoff from Van 1. Excited phone calls from Van 1 members, with updates about how far ahead of projections they had pushed. Seeing and hearing Chris's great excitement on his final run, when he roared like a lion as we drove by, and gave us the biggest smile in New Hampshire, and John's quiet excitement in the sights, sounds, and sensations that occurred to a relay newbie. The great smell of ocean air when I hit the promenade in Hampton Beach. Maybe it was the sleep deprivation (3 to 4 hours of sleep over 42 hours), but it seemed as if our senses were highly acute. (Even the lukewarm McDonald's fries on the way home tasted great.) A great experience for me.

Chris. I've been to quite a few extraordinary running events, but the Reach the Beach Relay may very well take the cake! Footrace, journey run, mountain-to-shore migration, caravan, exercise in community building, moving feast, group sleep-in, celebration of life ... the list goes on. Some pretty special things can happen when people stretch themselves physically and mentally and work together. I'm reminded of these words from Roger Robinson, writing in 1994:

The real importance of this remarkable social movement [of running] has not yet been recognized, because it's "just sport." Well, it's not just sport. It is perhaps the biggest peaceful participant activity in history. It's a mass social movement geared on an unprecedented scale to positive values—health, communality, egalitarianism, celebration.

A frequent topic of conversation over our three days together was the book *Born to Run: A Hidden Tribe, Superathletes, and the Greatest*

Race the World Has Never Seen, by Christopher McDougall. Several of us had read or were reading this book. Perhaps my favorite line from it is: "The reason we race isn't so much to beat each other ... but to be *with* each other." That certainly felt true for me this weekend, and I suspect for many of my teammates. Of course, that didn't stop me from trying to pass the runner up ahead, and the one after that, and the next ...

Ted. Thanks to everyone on the team and in the club for their tremendous support, and of course thanks to Tom Eaton for organizing, and leading us to the beach.

Susan. I'm so glad Tom was persistent, because I had a great time. My real worry had not been that I would be running only with guys but that I would drastically slow us down. Although I was slower, everyone made me feel I was an important contributor. Once I got back home, I started thinking about how I could train to be faster next year. And the whole "sole chick" thing? Hopefully no one else noticed, at least not in a way that negatively affected his ability to otherwise enjoy this race, because it certainly didn't affect mine. Thank goodness for testosterone.

Doug. I really enjoyed this relay. I liked seeing the other van's members more often during the later stages of the race. The euphoric shock I felt on the beach in New Hampshire was fantastic. Tom pulled it off. We did great.

John. When I got home and crawled into bed, I figured I would be out in a second, but my mind kept mulling over the events of the previous 48 hours. As I tossed and turned, I realized that this was one of those experiences that I will always look back on with fondness and gratitude toward my fellow runners for being part of such a great River to Beach Relay team. But just before my eyes closed, I had one final thought: Next year I'm going to bring some Springsteen.

BY THE NUMBERS

Time: 25:42:21.

Average pace: 7:26.

Overall place: 39th out of 398 finishers.

Division place: 8th out of 35.

The winners, *Hello Kitty*, averaged 5:54/mile.

The top ultra team (6 people) averaged 6:19.

ERC runners' totals for Reach the Beach are:

Van 1	Miles	Pace	Van 2	Miles	Pace
Tom E	21.28	6:50	Susan	18.25	8:03
Des	20.95	7:23	Ted	18.04	7:43
Brian	20.66	6:51	Chris	12.78	7:53
Matt	14.95	6:42	Mick	12.37	8:09
Tom D	16.97	7:44	John	17.19	7:29
Doug	19.09	7:14	Phil	14.83	7:44