

Ragged Run

HOW TO BRIBE YOUR WAY IN, TAKE A FEW SHORTCUTS ALONG THE WAY, AND GRATIFY YOUR SOUL AT THE DIPSEA, THE MOST ENGAGING RACE OF ALL. BY KARA DOUGLASS THOM

As a kid, I spent a lot of time jumping out of trees. Extreme sport enthusiasts now use the term “catching air.” I remember the thrill, but my bravery and age are inversely related and so I am loath to even hop on a snowboard.

As a runner, I don't expect to take flight. And I didn't realize I would want to — or need to — until I found the Dipsea, a 7.1-mile California trail race held every June that takes runners across Mount Tamalpais, from Mill Valley to Stinson Beach.

When I first ran the Dipsea in 1997, I didn't know a thing about trail running. I was traveling to San Francisco on business for a week and hoped I could find a good 5K or 10K to run. The Dipsea caught my eye as I searched online, so I called the



race director two weeks before my trip and asked how I could enter.

She said, “Honey, this race has been filled for months.” I sank. “But I'm going to let you in anyway,” she said. “Just check in with me on race day at the trouble desk.”

Trouble?

Not as far as getting into the race. But after running 400 yards or so, I discovered the course goes vertical. To be exact,

runners must ascend 676 steps, about the equivalent of climbing a 25-story building. That was trouble.

I also learned that the majority of the race is on dirt, through bushes and trees, stumbling over rocks and roots. In fact, there isn't a mandated course at all. Runners can take shortcuts if they dare.

Another unique feature is the staggered start. Most entrants receive a handi-

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cap according to age and sex. But “scratch” runners don’t get a head start. These are spirited, young participants who come from behind to pass every runner to the finish. That was trouble, too.

I rounded the tangents and looked up and across Mount Tamalpais in the direc-

THERE ARE THREE WAYS TO GET A RACE NUMBER: RUN FAST ENOUGH THE PREVIOUS YEAR TO GET INVITED BACK, TAKE YOUR CHANCES ON THE LOTTERY, OR OFFER A BRIBE.

tion of the Golden Gate, Marin County hanging below and out of my view. I relaxed into the momentum and allowed my feet to turn over at will. It would have been more difficult to stop. The only way down – comfortably – was to run like a child. I abandoned reserve, sanity, fear, and let myself go, but only after I glanced down to make sure my shoelaces were tied.

And then I opened my arms and let the wind pull them back behind me; the lift of the air I was rushing toward pulled them up like wings. I spilled down the hill.

It was as close to flying as I’ve ever come.

THE GREATEST RACE

In 1904 two members of the prestigious San Francisco Olympic Club (the oldest athletic club in the country, formed in 1860) challenged each other to a race across 2,600-foot Mount Tamalpais. With a new electric rail line to Mill Valley, and



the opening that year of a hotel called the Dipsea, on what is now known as Stinson Beach, the two runners had a start and finish for their point-to-point adventure.

According to the book *Dipsea: The Greatest Race*, by Barry Spitz, only a week after their match the two Olympians formed a subgroup within the club, known as the Dipsea Indians, and began organizing an official event for other interested club members, called the Dipsea Race.

In 1905, 84 men ran in the inaugural event, and it is now considered to be the second oldest U.S. footrace after the Boston Marathon. Since the first race, runners have been given the freedom to get from start to finish however they choose. Runners who familiarize themselves with the area can find shortcuts that suit them, like jumping down embankments or crawling up moss-covered ledges.

TAKING FLIGHT

The time-honored course begins at ground-zero elevation in Mill Valley’s Lytton Square. Once atop the fabled 676 steps, the course wends its way farther up through a residential area and finally to the top of its first ascent at Windy Gap,

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elevation approximately 650 feet. The next mile is downhill, and the road diverges into two paths: the "easier route" and "suicide." Suicide is the historic runners' route, and the spirit of the Dipsea Indians is embodied in today's scratch runners, who hurl themselves down the narrow path.

For the next 2.5 miles, runners climb approximately 1,200 feet to reach the highest elevation in the course at 1,360 feet. The good news is you can check out Muir Woods on the way up. At the high point, you emerge from the dense rain forest into the sun and the race's only water station. The next mile is a series of short climbs and descents with glimpses of the ocean, heralding the finish.

"Dipsea is a crazy trail because you're either going uphill or downhill," says Dipsea veteran Mike McManus. Now 36, he began running the race as a 9-year-old and has competed in the event 20 times. "The Dipsea is more of a hiking trail. It's not your normal running trail, which is easier to negotiate." Add to that the frenzy of runners trying to pass as many people as possible. Imagine 1,500 people running through a narrow hallway, with only one door seven miles away, and then someone yells, "Fire!"

LADY LUCK

Running Dipsea was a circus for my senses: the smell of pine at the start, the taste of the ocean at the finish; overturned redwoods with underbellies that looked like giant sea creatures; flashes of dark moss in dense dark forests or sunny meadows with golden grasses sweeping at my shoulders. It was as if I were running inside a jewel.

Indeed, I had stumbled on a rare and precious event, and one valued as such by runners. Each year the race office receives 3,000 applications, but only 1,500 lucky people are assigned race numbers. And once they finish, they all want to come back.

There are three ways to get a revered Dipsea race number: Run fast enough the previous year to get invited back, take your chances on the lottery, or offer a bribe by bidding through an auction, for which one hundred spaces are set aside for those who send the most money above the \$25 entry fee. The monetary bribes fund the Dipsea Foundation, the non-profit organization set up to maintain and preserve the trail. Officials appreciate hefty donations, but a creative plea can also make your request stand out. I won't give away my secret

SHIRLEY MATSON OF LARKSPUR, CALIFORNIA, PASSES THROUGH WINDY GAP DURING THE DIPSEA. MATSON WAS THE OVERALL WINNER IN 2001.



ALAN DEPMARIN I.J.


DOING DIPSEA

You don't have to get into the Dipsea race to experience the historic trail. Anyone can hike or run the well-marked Dipsea Trail year-round (www.dipsea.org); just be sure to pack water and enough bus fare to get back to Mill Valley.

"I don't think there's a better urban area in the country to get on trails," says Mike McManus, a 20-time Dipsea finisher who grew up running in Oakland but now lives in West Linn, a suburb of Portland, and is the national sales manager for running specialty sales at Adidas. He says the Bay area has an extensive network of trails and suggests any route on Mount Tamalpais (www.tamalpa.runners.org or 415-721-3791). If you're interested in exploring the Bay Area unpaved, check out the following places for maps, directions, and the inside scoop on the trails:

- Angel Island - (415) 435-1915
- East Bay Regional Park District - (510) 562-7275
- Marin Headlands - (415) 331-1540
- Mount Tamalpais - (415) 388-2070
- Muir Woods - (415) 338-2595
- Point Reyes National Seashore - (415) 464-5100

because to get in, I have to rely on my creativity as opposed to my speed or net worth. Fortunately, Dipsea is not only my runway to flight, but also my muse.

When I returned to race in 2001, it was as exhilarating as I remembered it. Before me was the contrast of blue on blue, the sky draining into the sea. The sun, still low in the sky, was shining on my head, making my hair warm, but the air was cool and refreshing. I was so grateful to be in that place. I took on the 676 steps with a vengeance and, with more trail running under my belt, confidence allowed me to give way to gravity and test my imaginary parachute. 

KARA DOUGLASS THOM IS A DALLAS-BASED WRITER, RUNNER, AND TRIATHLETE. SHE IS THE AUTHOR OF *BECOMING AN IRONMAN: FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH THE ULTIMATE ENDURANCE EVENT* (BREAKAWAY BOOKS, 2001) AND WRITES A MONTHLY COLUMN FOR "FUNCORE" TRIATHLETES AT XTRI.COM.