

METER

THE RUNNER'S REVIEW

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ANDY WATERMANN

Thames Hare & Hounds

The world's oldest cross country club takes
Meter to where modern XC began.

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Winning at Winter

Without cross country, running wouldn't be the sport it is today. What started in the elite private schools of Victorian England never quite made the leap to the codifying cloisters of Britain's top universities in the way that, say, rugby or soccer did. It meant the sport developed more organically among a ragtag assortment of amateur clubs, with a constant tension existing between the gentlemen amateurs of southern England and the more rough and ready approach of the North.

London's Thames Hare and Hounds have been in existence from the very beginning. For over 150 years, the club's fortunes have ebbed and flowed with the popularity of the sport, and that history has been meticulously chronicled by the club's archivist, Simon Molden. Meter was fortunate to sit down with Molden and get a history lesson unlike any other in the fall of 2019, and that story is our lead this issue.

Cross country is an increasingly popular branch of the sport in the UK, with individuals often competing well into old age across numerous amateur leagues and standalone races. There's history, camaraderie and club pride at stake right through the winter, from October to March; indeed as I write this, I myself am mentally preparing myself for one of the biggest races of the season: the Southern Men's Championship. It's an anachronism of an event by any measure, pitting competitors against 15 hilly kilometers on London's Hampstead Heath in the muddiest part of January. And yet, despite the inhumanity of the distance (15km in spikes!) there will be over 1,000 men and almost as many women lining up to challenge for their respective titles.

One of the athletes who has a genuine chance this year is Texan Austin Roth. Now based in London, he's a 2:17 marathoner who's using cross country in preparation for the Olympic Trials. How did his foundational experience of Texan XC prepare him for a season of London's Met League? You can find out on page 10.

Elsewhere, we have a reimagining of the fable "The Tortoise and the Hare," pondering what might happen if Hare got himself a training plan, and poetry from Ben Wilkinson, editor of the excellent anthology, "The Result is What You See Today: Poems About Running."

Finally, we close out with author and ultra-runner Katie Arnold who explores the concept of self-respect, and what that means to us as runners as 2020 starts to work through the gears.

Enjoy this issue, and if you would like to contribute to a future issue of Meter, or there's a great story you think we should cover, do get in touch. The email is meter@tracksmith.com.

Andy

COVER PHOTO BY MORGANE BIGAULT
OPPOSITE PAGE PHOTO BY EMILY MAYE

Thames Hare & Hounds

WORDS BY ANDY WATERMAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MORGANE BIGAULT

The world's original cross country club is over 150 years old. Meter joined them in London to discover where real XC began.

“Walter Rye, our first president, was a member of the Thames Rowing Club a couple of miles away down in Putney. They were looking for an activity to do in the winter to keep the rowers fit, so we were effectively born out of a rowing club.”



The great suburban wilderness of Wimbledon Common and Richmond Park form part of a London that refuses to accept its subsistence into the metropolis. It remains London before it was London. Deer stalk the park. The ever-present London hum of traffic noise disappears, blocked by high walls and higher trees. To run here is to step back in time.

Indeed, approaching Thames Hare and Hounds' club house, which sits on the western edge of Wimbledon Common, is a journey best conducted by pre-modern means - the nearest subway is over two miles away, leaving visitors to run the final section through the woods and across the Common. "It's amazing that we still have Wimbledon Common and Richmond Park," says Simon Molden, the club's archivist. "You can easily do a 15 mile run around those two - apart from crossing the A3 - being in open country the whole time."

Back in 1868 when the club was initially formed, this whole area would have been completely rural. "This was the most perfect area to run cross country, and with the railway, you could be here from central London in much less than an hour. We're not far from the Thames river here either, so there was - is - endless cross country running."

You read that right: Thames Hare and Hounds formed in 1868 - on October 17 to be precise - making it the oldest cross country running club in the world. "Walter Rye, our first president, was a member of the Thames Rowing Club a couple of miles away down in Putney. They were looking for an activity to do in the winter to keep the rowers fit, so we were effectively born out of a rowing club." Pre-dating the formation of the club, the rowers had held a number of 'Thames Handicap Steeplechases' in 1867. These events were apparently well-received as they led directly to the formation of the club. If you look back at early photographs of club athletes, their singlets sport the same black cross that the club's athletes wear today. "Look back at the clubs of that age, they have an insignia that is very simple," says Molden. "It was all about something that could be easily fashioned at home. The Saltire (cross), broadly, was two bits of black ribbon, sewn onto the running vest. It was all about creating a homemade kit."

Technology changes, but the effort required to run fast over challenging terrain remains a constant. THAH's original testing ground remains just as testing today as it was a century and a half ago, and provides the perfect setting for numerous races every year, from low-key Saturday handicap races (for which we joined in September 2019) to Surrey League XC races and the pinnacle of the Thames year, the Varsity Match between Oxford and Cambridge.

Cross country started life in the UK as very much sport of the public schools - that is, the large fee paying schools attended by the children of the upper classes. In a game of Hare and Hounds, you would have a group of runners, of whom two would be designated as hares, and it would be their job to lay a trail with a bag of torn up paper, throwing a mark down every so often for the others to follow. "The two hares would go off and lay the trail, and 10 minutes later, the hounds would go off and follow them," says Molden. "The idea was that towards the end, once the hares came into sight (the hounds tended to run together as a pack until the hares came into sight at the end) then it was a race to see who could get to them first. That was called 'the kill'. The whole thing was designed to emulate hunting, and that's where cross country came from."

Over more than a century, these games evolved into the races we know today. But compared to other sports, like say rugby, which took its name from the public school Rugby where the game was

first codified, cross country's route through adolescence was circuitous. "The very first Oxford vs Cambridge Athletic Match, which was track and field in 1864, actually had a steeplechase in - essentially a cross country race at the end of the meet," says Molden. The thing was, Cambridge didn't do steeplechasing, just Oxford, so the following year, when the meet was held in Cambridge, the hosts requested to replace the steeplechase with just a two mile race. "Cross country sort of died out at Oxford and Cambridge for about a decade after that," says Molden. Cross country only came back to university life when Oxford founded a Hare and Hounds club, but that hiatus meant the universities weren't particularly central to the development of the sport, in the way they were in other sports. As Molden explains: "Cross country was all about the clubs, and South West London was where the sport really formulated."

So it was that in 1896, when the universities agreed to hold the Varsity Match on neutral territory, the president of Cambridge approached Thames Hare and Hounds and asked if the club could host their race. It's a race that has been repeated every year since. "That created a relationship between us and Oxford and Cambridge," says Molden. "What's happened since is that the university runners started joining the club in big numbers. It's a supply chain. Both our men's and women's teams now are probably made up of 50 percent recent graduates. It's one of the things that helps us be as strong as we are."

Thames might be strong now, but it wasn't always so. Before the influx of graduates at the turn of the 20th century, the club looked almost to be on its last legs, with Walter Rye's fanatical amateurism likely the culprit. "He followed the strictest possible definition of amateurism," says Molden. That meant not just doing it for the love, but taking it to the point of being actively non-competitive. "It wasn't about the winning, it was about the taking part," says Molden. "There was a certain disdain to so-called 'pot hunting'."

Amateurism of the Victorian era didn't just refer to the way you raced either: you had to come from a certain background, and at the time you could be expelled from the club if you took part in what would have been called a 'tradesman's meeting', a broad description for anything faintly professional, or involving people from the wrong social class. "It was socially exclusive, male only, and no financial gain," says Molden. "You are essentially doing this because you have the time available. Very much like a lot of sport was in the Victorian era."







It was the arrival of more serious competition from the north of England that led to the club's near demise. Traditionally, racing had been held on a single loop, but to make things more attractive to spectators - and notably for gambling - the National began to be contested on a looped course, roped in. This was anathema to Rye's high standards.

"For Walter Rye it became a bit too serious," says Molden. "So we withdrew and it nearly killed the club. We nearly disappeared in about 1895 as people just weren't joining the club - that year no fixtures were arranged and the secretary reported that the future looked very bleak."

The turning point came with the Varsity Race, and then in the 1920's, following the giant social changes brought about by the Great War, younger members, notably a Mr. Harry Hall, began to broaden the club's horizons, taking them back to the National and re-joining the Cross Country League.

Women joining the club was another big change and didn't occur until 1981 - and even then, it took about four years for women members to gain equal access. "You have to put these things in the context of the time," says Molden. "The older members of the club would have been brought up in the pre-war era, so it was just a different attitude. There was an appetite for modernization among the younger members, that if the club was going to flourish, we had to have women, as again, people just wouldn't join - men or women. It was a generational conflict. There were all kinds of conditions put on it to mollify the older members that it wasn't going to fundamentally change the club. But as with anything, it's been a slow evolution and now it's a totally mixed club. We don't really go in for revolution. Things will happen, you just have to let them."

The club started life in the - then - village of Roehampton, with their own room above an outbuilding at the Kings Head Pub in the center of town. The clubhouse remained virtually unchanged for over 100 years, until a fire gutted the building in the summer of 1975 and they were left homeless. That's when they moved to their current home, among cricket, rugby, soccer and golf clubs on the edge of Wimbledon Common. The space isn't grand, but it's theirs: "It's great for the Varsity Race. You have all the parents, the supporters, the runners - it's heaving."

In recent years across the UK cross country running has experienced a revival with London's Metropolitan and Surrey Leagues leading the way. Thames are increasingly a force to be reckoned with, with their women's team dominant in the 2019 Southern Championships and the men's team placing seventh.

Men's cross country captain Richard Ollington is inspired by the performances he sees around him: "I think in the US, they see college as the peak of cross country, but in the UK, you graduate and keep up the sport, and improve still. It's a lifelong sport, not a till-your-early-twenties sport. I'm loving the sport at 25, but I look up and there are people in their 40s, 50s, 60s, still running and socializing."

South West London remains a hotbed of running. It was in Bushy Park in 2004 that parkrun held its first ever event - what started as 15 runners is now a global community of over three million - and it's in Teddington, at St Mary's University, that many international athletes base themselves for the European summer season.

While spotting Mo Farah on a summer shakeout might be exciting for some, for anyone with a sense of history, running in these parks, on these trails and over these hills, the thrill of knowing

this is where cross country began is incomparable. Over 150 years later, it's still the purest, least adulterated form of the sport there is - long may that continue. [M](#)



A Texan in London



WORDS BY AUSTIN ROTH
IMAGE BY ANDY WATERMANN

Texas-born Marathon Trials Qualifier Austin Roth lives in London, where he has spent the winter racing cross country in the Metropolitan League, a series of five races held in Greater London parks between October and February. How does 21st British XC compare to the US?

“I have never felt that running was more of an action sport than here in England.”

You grew up in Texas and I think you went to University of Texas too, right? So what were your first experiences of cross country like? What were the courses like?

I was born and raised in Texas, growing up in Dallas and heading off to the University of Texas for five years. I even did a three-year stint in Houston before making my way across the pond.

I was thrown into XC in the seventh grade at Norbuck Park. Even at 13 I was early to the game for most American kids. I had run some track the previous season – mostly the 800m – and a couple of road 5ks, but that was my first foray into racing peers. We ran two miles, and I won every race I was in, so in the eighth grade I ran with the local high school junior varsity team in a couple of races and was on their top seven.

In general, cross country in Texas is dusty, and I’m not sure I’ve ever seen anything dustier than a XC course that’s been baked by the Texas summer. In Dallas it would still get up to 52-53 degrees (centigrade, I’ve been in Europe a long time) on a very regular basis in September, so that’s what the sport was: a sweaty, dry endeavor. I definitely place Texas courses on one end of a spectrum and British courses on the other, as I don’t think I ran even one race in Texas that remotely prepared me for the mud I’ve run through in the past few months. This being said, Texas isn’t the pancake most people assume – it’s got some lumps in it. But in summary, Texas XC is its own endeavor.

If you had to explain US high school and collegiate cross country to a UK audience, how would you describe it?

Cross country leagues in the states are, for the most part, structured through the educational system. If you run for your high school, you often run head to head against local schools week in, week out just as you would against local clubs in an English XC league. In Texas, with it being a state of 30 million, even qualifying beyond your local district can be a challenge. While I won my district my senior year, I was consistently stopped out at the regional meet by future State and National Champions. Nowadays, you have a whole host of post-season races, including Foot Locker, NXN, and Club Nats all within a few weeks of each other, but the bread and butter of racing in high school tends to be with your school team, a set of seven varsity men / women who you train with every morning, and pass just as often in the halls of your school while on the way to class.

Collegiate XC is the same, only harder. Just take the top 10 percent of all high schoolers and throw them into a system with a vastly deeper set of resources and incentives to win, and with potential scholarships and professional contracts on the line. It’s cut-throat, and everyone wants a position to travel with the team and earn their stripes as a school letterman. You have to run well to earn your jacket, and in a lot of cases, you have to run well just to keep a spot on the team.

Beyond the structure and competition, it’s important to talk about the cultural aspect of XC in the US, as it becomes very much a lifestyle and an identity – more so than I think it is in the UK. Phrases such as ‘XC nerd’ and ‘track star’ might be antiquated but they are real descriptors of a high school student, and I certainly owned the first of the two. With early morning practices, weekend meets, the team and your teammates end up becoming the center of your social life. The intensity of high school and collegiate XC in the US can’t be matched, and that intensity is hard to appreciate until it’s gone. The camaraderie, passion, and spirit you develop with these men/women in just a few short years is hard to find in the workplace, or within the post-collegiate scene in the US. I’ll never be able to run for Lake Highland’s High School or the University of Texas ever again.

How serious is collegiate cross country? The idea of having multiple group sessions every week and super structured training plans would be anathema to anyone who studied in the UK.

Multiple group sessions every week is an understatement. Multiple group sessions every day is more accurate, at least of what I experienced at the University of Texas. While I know schools approach group sessions differently, at the University of Texas, we met five days per week, and then met three days a week in the gym for a strength sessions.

At the end of the day, it felt like a full-time endeavor in and of itself, with at least 30 hours per week being devoted to the sport. Even more was spent enveloped in the team environment, with an average day looking like:

7:00 – 8:15 – group run
8:15 – 9:50 – cool down / recovery
10:00 – 2:00 – classes
5:30 – 5:00 – weights
5:00 – 6:00 recovery / physical therapy

You surely sacrifice a lot for such a schedule, whether it’s a piece of your social life or in the worst scenario, academic performance. If you’re sacrificing the former, you end up just holding onto the team environment even more and the sense of common struggle to make the grades and perform to expectations. That being said, it’s doable, you just have to pick your battles, decide what experience you want to dive into. While you may not be able to get the best of the social/academic/athletic trifecta all at once, you can surely pick the two that are most important.

You now work for JP Morgan in London and you’ll be running Trials in Atlanta (off the back of a 2:17:04 at Grandma’s, and 2:18:05 at Valencia). You’ve also been running club cross country in London. How did that come about and what were your first impressions?

I knew I wanted the British XC experience, but I think it scared me for the most part! Fitting an entire XC season into a marathon training schedule always seemed tough, especially given the lengthy five-month window for MET league races, but the reputation of the sport also didn’t help. The mud, hills, and rain were not exactly appealing! That being said, I saw a clean opening for a full XC season following an awkward time period between Grandmas Marathon and the Trials. All it took was a few choice words from Paul (Martelletti – a London legend and 2:17 guy) to recruit me out to Victoria Park Harriers, and the rest is history.

Could you describe some of the defining elements of the courses you’ve raced on for a US audience?

Well, mud, to start with! I’ll freely admit that courses in the northern half of the US do tend to be sloppier than in Texas, no doubt about that. Just watch NXN and the US Club XC National,

which took place just these past weeks, and you can see that Northern courses aren’t pristine by any means. The British mud, however, just sticks. This is mud that envelops your entire foot, leaving a high-water mark ankle deep. The worst type of mud doesn’t splash when you run through it, it’s just thick enough to shift with your body weight like a banana peel. Anything less than a half-inch spike is just worthless in the sport of British XC.

Mud has been a constant, but the technical aspects of the courses are unparalleled in the US, or at least in Texas. Whether single-track trails – also muddy – being navigated at 5:00 per mile, or the full river crossing at Uxbridge, you have to really keep your eye on where you’re going. One of my favorite features at the last race was a massive tree in the middle of the trail with the option of passing either left or right. It felt like it was taunting some tired and indecisive runner to make a mistake.

I reminisce back to the first fixture of the season at Claybury, which featured a monster of a hill that I’ve really had a hard time explaining to people. You’re moving so slowly up this 200-meter hill you’re almost walking – like the slow cranking of up the hill of a roller coaster. You get to the top and then immediately plummet down what is, at this point in the day, the time of the last race, an eye-popping oil slick of a downhill which EMPTIES DIRECTLY INTO A DRY CREEK! Not only do you have to somehow slow down enough to pivot away from running directly into the creek, which for me means risking taking out a weak angle injured in a freshman year basketball game, but you have to once again dodge runners, race marshals, or any other form of competitor who may be taking advantage of you at your most vulnerable.

I have never felt that running was more of an action sport than here in England. That hill at Claybury was truly a terrifying experience, and I hear it’s going to be repeated at Ally Pally. Mostly I’m just trying to be careful.

As someone who travels back and forth to the US a lot, there’s a sense for me that in the US, XC finishes when you leave college. Is there a big demographic difference in the races here?

For me, my XC career ended when I graduated from the University of Texas. When moving to England, I had the sense in the back of my mind that XC here was a bit unique, but I had no idea of the almost life-long allegiances that runners form with their clubs. The first and second claim system speaks for this, in that sure, runners move, go off to school, and may take their first claim with them as they go. The second claim is significant though, and tells a lot about the culture of XC in the UK. What does a runner reserve their second claim for? I don’t have a second claim, because East London has generally been my home since I’ve lived here, but from what I gather, they’re reserved for hometown clubs: the club which you may run for while visiting family, or in the odd race when back for the holidays. This in itself is a great thread that’s woven through the community here, in that English runners get to take this history with them wherever they go. I’m on my way back to Dallas, TX as I write this, and while Dallas surely has a thriving running community, one that I’m proud of and enjoy participating in when I’m back in town, there is no centralized group that I call a home club.

This tie to your roots, in my opinion, is why you see runners from age 11 to master’s week in and week out, sloshing through the mud – they’re representing the hometown team, and in a lot of instances have been doing so for decades and decades. Imagine if to run for the University of Texas you had to grow up in the city of Austin! To me this seems insane, but the NCAA would

be a much different league if this was the case. Like, maybe you move to Portland and get to run first claim for the Portland Pilots, but still run the occasional Turkey Trot for the Texas Longhorns when home for Thanksgiving.

There’s a real team spirit in cross country races here too, which you don’t find so much on the road. Does that remind you of college cross country?

Absolutely! The team spirit is very similar, but different in a number of ways. I look back on collegiate XC as a hyper intense, but short period of my life. The rivalries were extreme, training was high stakes – always for a position to travel to championship meets – and there were real consequences to not performing at your best. We would, as many teams do, yell and chant before each race, getting red in the face and hyped up. So intimidating, a bunch of distance runners are.

For the most part, while I feel a similar team competition in Britain, i.e. chasing down the Highgate Harriers for lead position – the spirit and camaraderie is much more collegial than in the US. Runners here are truly in it for the atmosphere, community, and love of the sport. There’s no scholarship on the line, pro contract looming (at least for most), or underlying academic pressure. What do you get when you take these things away? It’s just pure racing.

So yes, I do feel very much of the same spirit here, but with a slightly different angle. This is my first season with VPH, so I am obviously new to the environment, but am excited to see how the familial nature of the club evolves year in and year out. In the NCAA, you’re baptized by fire in a sense, dropped off in a new city at 18, but the clubs system here is a long-term endeavor, which makes it hard for me to judge the real spirit of the league off a few races alone.

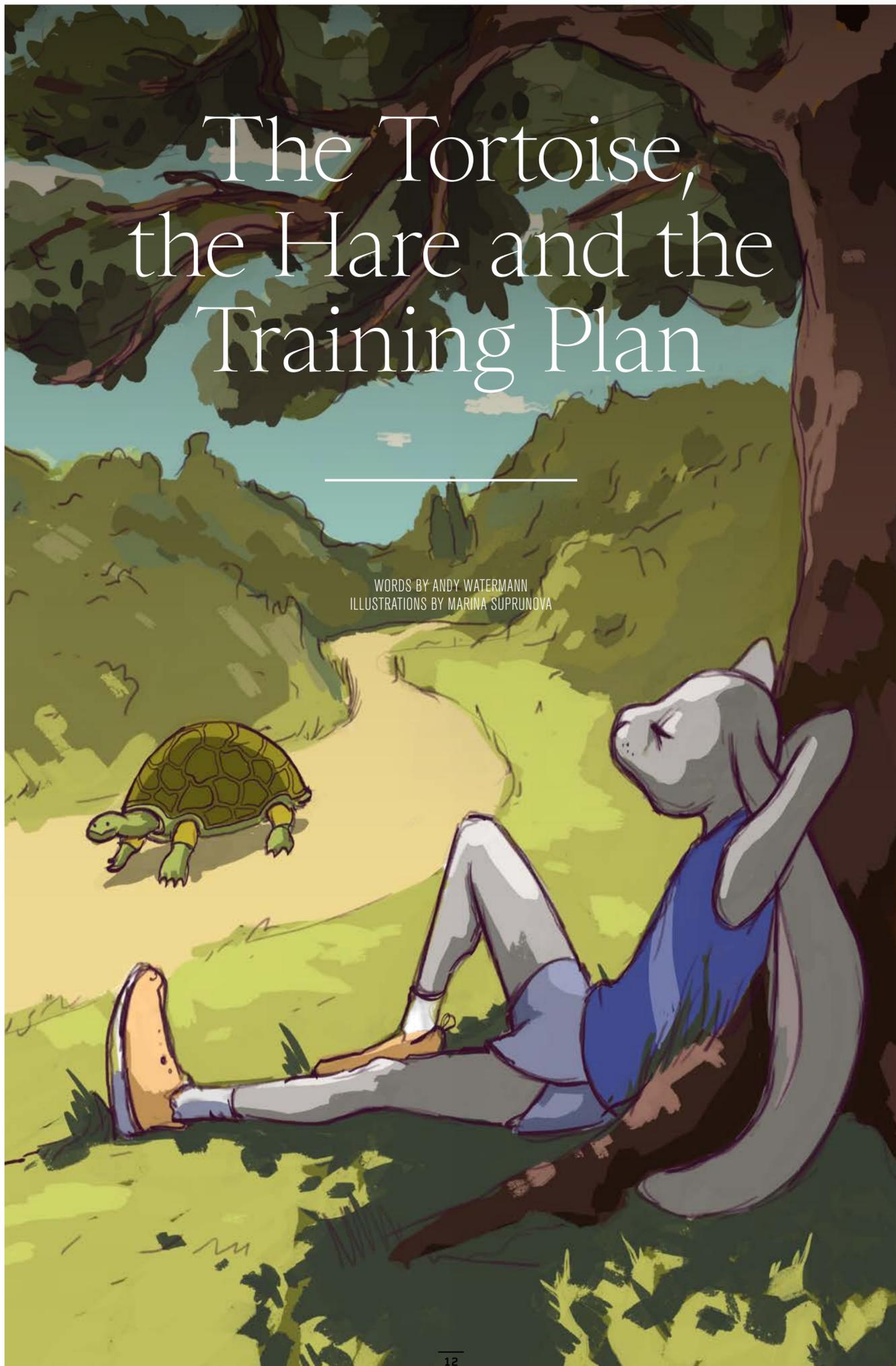
When you look back, a lot of athletes ran cross country as preparation for marathons, right through Bekele and Geoffrey Kamworor. But it’s less common in the West now. How are you finding running a cross country season is contributing to your Trials training?

It’s hard to know this being my first season, but I feel really good about the XC and am a big proponent of the competitive diversity and challenge of XC. I work a full-time job in finance and do my best not to complain about long-hours, but anyone working full-time and running 100+ miles a week will understand that the fine details of preparing for a marathon are sometimes missed. For example, it’s challenging to find the perfect rolling tempo course to simulate the Atlanta Trials course, and even so I wouldn’t likely be able to travel to one during a weekday before work. I feel that the MET league races are a great opportunity to add some critical tools to my belt in the perfect scenario – racing! XC is my practice for Atlanta – staying calm through technical single-track trails, relaxing through hundreds of meters of mud, where it feels as if every footstep slides out from under you, or up and down the monster cliff face hills these courses throw at you. Gaining this experience, all while competing against the best London has to offer is absolutely something I’ll be able to take into my mentality in the Olympic Trials. Cliché, but it’s absolutely building mental toughness.

Some have said that the Olympic Trials course is like XC on the road – so why not? 🏃

The Tortoise, the Hare and the Training Plan

WORDS BY ANDY WATERMANN
ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARINA SUPRUNOVA



Of course, you'll already know the story of the Tortoise and the Hare: Hare thinks it's funny that Tortoise is so slow. "How do you ever get anywhere?" he asks, astounded at Tortoise's lack of pace. "Oh I get there - and sooner than you think," says Tortoise, offended.

One thing leads to another and before you know it, Fox is waving a flag to start Tortoise and Hare off on a race. Well, it's not going to be much of a race is it?

Hare, with his natural athleticism, inevitably takes the lead and stretches it out to the point where Tortoise is no longer in sight.

So he decides to take a nap. He lays out under a tree and promptly falls into a deep, restful sleep. Big mistake. While Hare dozes, Tortoise comes past and takes the win.

Now, it sounds unlikely, but it's very much the truth - Tortoise is the champion. The race doesn't always go to the swift!

But what happens next? Well, that's the thing the story never tells you. Hare, as you might imagine is furious. FURIOUS!

The race was his, but he lost through sheer arrogance. Oh he won't be making that mistake again, no siree.

Tortoise is sceptical of the idea of a rematch but agrees to the idea. What's he got to lose?

Hare meanwhile goes away and gets down to business. He institutes a training plan: Mornings consist of a short jog, followed by stretching and breakfast. During the day he relaxes, naps and does some cross training - mostly digging holes.



As dusk begins to fall he goes for his second run of the day, either fast paced intervals or a longer tempo session through the forests and fields. Fox warns him to take it easy: "Don't overdo it and get injured!" he says. Tortoise meanwhile keeps doing what he always does, which is not very much, at a very slow pace.

On the day of the rematch, Hare and Tortoise line up once more, with Fox in attendance as the chief timekeeper. This time round, knowing there was a surprise result last time, many of the other animals have come along to spectate, including an exuberant group of moles.

Fox sets the runners off and this time, Hare once more takes the lead, but with less aggression than the first time.

The lead extends, and by the time he reaches the tree under which he took that fateful nap, Tortoise is out of sight, but very much front of mind.

Hare pauses, briefly. He looks at the tree, steels his resolve, and pushes ahead once more. Minutes later, he crosses the line victorious.

When Tortoise eventually crosses the finish line, Hare approaches him with a brotherly hug.



"Thank you, Tortoise," he says. "You taught me the value of hard work and persistence." "You're welcome," says Tortoise humbly.

From that day on, Tortoise and Hare become great friends. Whenever Tortoise needs a fast favor, he calls for Hare. And whenever Hare needs to slow down and talk through his problems, Tortoise is always there to lend an ear.

The race doesn't always go to the swift.

But you don't always have to cross the line first to be a winner.



2020

The Year of Running Meticulous and Wild

WORDS BY KATIE ARNOLD

It's here: 2020 – an auspicious new year promising clarity, perspective, and hopefully a bit of equanimity. Not to mention the Olympics! With so much inspiration and motivation on the horizon, I've decided to do things a little differently. For the first time in years, I'm not making resolutions. Instead, I'm orienting my year around a word that's been on my mind lately:

Self-respect.

Self-respect is different than self-care. It's not just how we treat ourselves; it's also how we talk to and carry ourselves. It's fiercer and sterner, just a bit more rigorous, in all the right ways. It's about advocating for your dreams and ideas, standing up for your own voice and power and for what you know to be true. It's taking care of ourselves by knowing when to be gentle on ourselves and when to double-down on courage and conviction.

I recently discovered Joan Didion's terrific and timeless 1961 essay, "On Self-Respect," in which she writes, "self-respect is a discipline, a habit of mind that can never be faked but can be developed, trained, coaxed forth... To have that sense of one's intrinsic worth which constitutes self-respect is to potentially have everything."

What does self-respect have to do with running? For me, it means focusing on the process rather than narrowly fixating on the end result. It means showing up for myself every day – on the days when my running feels fast and effortless, and the days when it's sticky and heavy with doubt, when I want to lie down on the trail just to sense the earth spinning beneath me.

Self-respect is knowing when to take a day off to let my body and spirit rest and recover. It's giving myself permission for regular massages to stay healthy. It's listening to my coach, trusting that he has my best interest and highest potential in mind. And trusting myself to trust him.

Trickier still, it's also letting go of the need to please. As Didion writes, "The dismal fact is that self-respect has nothing to do with the approval of others." Instead it has everything to do with how we value ourselves.

A few weeks ago I went to a yoga class on a hunch. Like many runners I know, I often feel like a caged animal in the studio, but a weird impulse told me to go, and I'm so glad I listened. The teacher was talking about the new year and decade, when she said – I'm paraphrasing – stay on your path and if people can't or won't come along with you,

keep moving forward anyway. Do you know the feeling when you know something deep inside to your very core and have been trying to live it, and then someone says it a little differently and it's as if you're hearing it for the first time? That's how it was that night. A lightbulb: I thought, YES, that's self-respect.

CHURCH OF THE SUNDAY LONG RUN

by Ben Wilkinson

Wake before dawn. Don shorts and harrier tee, tie laces silently. Percolate coffee, careful to sip as it cools and you turn your thoughts to the road ahead.

The warmup mile you must respect: pay attention to breath, your pulse a compass needle, at first wavering, then dead set. Nod to those fellow devotees

you meet at intervals as your GPS watch counts the miles. Before you know it, you are at the zen heart, truly midrun in woods you knew as a child.

Never shirk from the final hill, light pulsing through clouds. Birdsong will cheer you home, a city waking as sweat anoints your brow. You see it now.

Self-respect is coaxed from the things we love and want to do, that feed our spirit and fill our well. For me in 2020, that means more meditation as a cornerstone of my mental and physical training. It may sound weird, but sitting still is a lot like running. Both teach you how to focus on form, consistency, and posture. Both train you to keep coming back no matter how you feel, no matter what stories you tell yourself – about glory or failure. On the cushion, as in a long run, you notice your thoughts, but you learn not to be

carried away by them; you practice letting them pass without getting hooked on an unhelpful narrative, like clouds in the sky. You simply return to what is right in front of you, right now, in this moment.

But self-respect is the harder stuff, too. It's returning phone calls and emails I've been putting off, tending to home chores that I sometimes shirk in order to run, and being more accountable in how I respond to others and more vigilant about how I talk to myself.

In other words, self-respect is about being both meticulous and wild. I recently heard these words used to describe Zen during a meditation retreat. I interpreted them to mean that you must be meticulous in your sitting and posture – and also your running – but wild enough in your heart and mind to understand that nothing is as it seems, and life is everything all at once. I love these two adjectives together because like most things Zen, they seem paradoxical and yet somehow they make complete sense. It's also how I run: half-feral but focused; intentional in my strategy but always pushing the edges of my known world, disappearing into the mountains and trails and coming home dirty and tired – and changed.

The nifty thing about self-respect is that you don't have to make a single other resolution – dial it in and everything else will fall into place. Determined to roll your legs or stretch more? Self-respect. Clear your email inbox? Ditto. It's the ultimate catch-all, the essential building block from which fruitful things will naturally flow. I think of it like the base in an endurance training plan, but instead of mileage, you're developing inner strength, conviction, and kindness. Shore up a solid base and you'll be unstoppable in whatever you do, no matter how you do.

And this brings me to the real and serious reason I'm not making resolutions this year. Because I already have all the tools and answers inside of me. You do, too. We all do. We don't have to prove ourselves or improve ourselves. We just have to love who we are as we are and keep going.

Katie Arnold is the 2018 Leadville 100 women's champion and author of RUNNING HOME: A Memoir, published last year by Random House and coming this spring in paperback. She's at work on her next book about the Zen of Running and leads FLOW running and writing retreats around the country. For a complete schedule, check out www.katiearnold.net. 

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PUBLISHER Matt Taylor
CREATIVE DIRECTOR Rafael Oliveira
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CONTACT
Web: www.tracksmith.com
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