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Cross Country: The Original Mud Run

More than 200 years ago they ran through thickets, leaped hedges and didn't shower.

By **ROGER ROBINSON** AUG 22, 2013



THAMES HARE AND HOUNDS

Mud runs seem to be new and trendy, but they are a variant on an old way of running for fun—almost 200 years old. We can date it to 1819 for schoolboys and 1867 as a sport for adults. That's when a group of Londoners began to get together on Saturday afternoons to run over natural terrain outside the city. They called their runs a steeplechase, or hare and hounds paper hunt.

If that sounds soft, it wasn't. They chose "the roughest and boggiest parts of Wimbledon Common." They waded through one notorious, muddy section named the Dismal Swamp, struggled over a switchback of steep gullies, swam rivers, leaped fences and hedges, got tangled by thickets and lashed by "cold driving

rain.” They ran in gales, snow and pea-soup fog. Because they were busy Victorian-era city workers who could not start running, even on Saturday, until 4 p.m., they often ran most of the distance in the dark. Moonlight on the lake was much admired. Courses went up to 20 miles, plus false trails. They were regularly running more than 4 hours. Oh, and there were no showers. You sat knees-up in a Victorian hip bath filled from a huge enamel jug. After you scrubbed, if you were macho enough, you lifted the heavy iron bath and tipped the soiled water over your own head.

Mud-run warriors of today, try time-traveling back to 1868.

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That was the year when these enthusiasts formed a club called Thames Hare and Hounds. It's the world's oldest adult running organization and played a key part in the early history of running. They initiated the first team races, against the “Gentlemen of Hampstead.” They put on the first allcomers race, inviting the north of England's best runner, “Choppy” Warburton. When they failed to run him off his legs, they tried to drown him, taking the course through “a very wide and deep

part of the ancient Hog's Mill River." Choppy proved the best swimmer and won the race.

Stories like that light up the club's new history, *Follow the Saltire: The Annals of Thames Hare and Hounds, 1868-2012*. It's written partly by top journalist John Bryant, author of *The London Marathon*, with other master storytellers, ancient and modern. There was the day the best runner was "delayed by a morass at the bottom of a ravine." There was the bitterly cold day when the "very difficult country" included waist-deep black mud and a swim across the River Wandle, where they tried to throw their jerseys over before plunging in. There was the weary runner who was "overcome by his feelings at the sight of the last hill" and took a (horse-drawn) cab home. And there was the Canadian doctor who joined in 1874 and persuaded the club to try lacrosse, so they were the first in London to play that sport, too. They combined it with a warm-up run and a handicap half-mile race to ensure they got enough exercise.

It wasn't all mud games. They also discovered the essential human joy of running fast over natural surfaces. Paperchases morphed into cross country racing, and a major new sport was created, the cradle of the whole modern running movement. In 1877, only 10 years after the first hare and hounds run, they established the Championship of England, open to all comers, still one of the world's great races. By the 1880s there were races in France and Belgium, and in 1903 the first international championship was held.

The sport had reached the United States by 1890, when the fledgling Amateur Athletic Union founded the U.S. cross country championship. First winner was William Day of New Jersey AC, the team title going to Prospect Harriers of Brooklyn. Collegiate racing began by 1899, dominated in early years by Cornell University, according to Marc Bloom's indispensable book *Cross-Country Running* (1978).

Often the going was tough. Bloom cites a report that the 1908 New York public schools race near Long Island City was run over "several hills, rough edges and stony patches of ground and tangled masses of shrubbery." That sounds similar to my own most-recent outing in England with Thames Hare and Hounds in April this year, up and down the tangled rough hills of the scenic Wye Valley. Thames

wouldn't dream of calling it a Warrior or Mud Run. But, as the Bible says, there is nothing new under the sun. Especially with something as old and enjoyable as running.

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