

Going the Distance in Pennsylvania

Places and races in the uncommon commonwealth.

BY PHIL HESSER

“Why did I ever agree to running this?” groaned Sarah, my running partner for the day on the infamous stairway to heaven at mile 25 of the R. B. Winter Trail Challenge, otherwise known as the Dam Full (pronounced “Damn Fool”) Marathon. We were halfway up Naked Mountain, forging our way 700 feet to the top of the Tuscarora boulder field from the lowest to the highest elevation of the course at the end of a long day.

At first, I was tempted to quote from the punch line of an old dirty joke about the elephant and the mouse and remind Sarah that, “You love it.” I thought better of it, however. As an avid distance runner in Pennsylvania, she knew that already. And “avid” almost always accompanies “distance runner” in the Keystone State. Those of us who have gone the distance around and about in this uncommon commonwealth know what brings us back to Pennsylvania distance events again and again. Maybe the experience is a bit like the effects of drinking the untreated waters of some of those Pennsylvania creeks: It shakes up your insides, takes up housekeeping, and sends you trotting yet another time.

There’s a lot to like in Pennsylvania distance running and something for just about every marathoner and ultramarathoner. I will leave my running friend Sarah somewhere in the middle of the boulder field for now and clue you in on what is different about Pennsylvania and what is out there for the marathoner.¹

Experiences all over the map

If I were to take any of my overseas friends to see the real United States, I would first escort them to their favorite destination, wherever that may be in the land of dreams and shoot ’em-ups. Then I would show them around the Keystone State so that they could really taste and drink in the American experience. History, anyone?

How could anyone top Philadelphia, Valley Forge, and Gettysburg? The untamed West? It all started around Fort Pitt and was only with great difficulty tamed by canals, railroads, turnpikes, and interstates in Penn's woodlands. The boom and bust of the US economic juggernaut? The energies that built the United States were scratched out of mountains that have yielded coal (anthracite and bituminous), oil, and gas—not to mention tempered by the rivers that have slaked the thirst of power plants, including the notorious Three Mile Island. All of those energies were put to work building the nation with lumber and steel, likewise produced by the commonwealth. The arts scene? Where do you start? The Philadelphia Orchestra or the jazz incubator of Pittsburgh? The Philadelphia Museum of Art or the Andy Warhol Museum? *The Deer Hunter* or *The Blob*? And let's not forget all of that nature within a short drive of any spot on the Pennsylvania map. Amusement parks, anyone? Does Kennywood or Hersheypark mean anything to you coaster fans? Knoebels should. And last but not least, the sports scene—collegiate, minor league, and pros all within cheering (and jeering) distance.

So what is the bottom line for you as a distance runner? First, the friends and family you bring along to your races can be cut loose and encouraged to enjoy themselves—whether shopping, museum hopping, concert going, joyriding, communing with nature, or, yes, eating and drinking. When you taste and drink the American experience in Pennsylvania, you've got a great thing going. Who can forget that the hoagie was born near the Hog Island Shipyard at Philadelphia and reaches near-perfection in the cheesesteaks available at the Reading Terminal Market in Center City? The Keystone State is arguably the salty-snack capital of the world (sorry, Saratoga Springs, New York) with many of the big names



within a pretzel's throw of each other in Pennsylvania Dutch country. The farmers' markets offer a great choice of produce and products, notably those concoctions created in Amish kitchens, including shoofly and whoopie pies. While we're talking about dessert, don't forget deep-fried sticky buns and candy bars—items that will certainly make up for any caloric deficit you incur running over some 42 kilometers. As for the drinks, need I say more than beer (birch and otherwise) and wine, a good deal of which is locally and lovingly produced.

But the bottom “bottom line” for you, distance runners, is in the running itself. You know that there are many places where you can go for a glitzy or gritty experience in the States or around the world. I've been there and done that too and appreciate doing a marquee event myself. However, looking at where the rubber actually hits the road or trail, I say to you that you'll have no more memorable an experience than in Pennsylvania. Some courses will coax you into a PR. Others will sap your lungs and scuff your shins. Still others will ply you with highly digestible bits of nature, history, and heritage. All of them will leave you with an abiding sense of place with venues that are as genuine as the people you encounter. So go for the bright lights or breathtaking vistas wherever they take you, then join us in the Keystone State for the real deal.

Counting the (by)ways

Let's assume that you're ready to go the distance in Pennsy. Now that you have sent out the friends and family to amuse themselves and have already taken on a caloric overload sampling the comestibles and potables before your run, we ought to get you to the starting line. Knowing that one person's indulgence may be another's sugar bomb, permit me to count the ways to enjoy a marathon in Pennsylvania. Consider this a blank check for you to fill in according to your interests and abilities. In doing so, however, I would like to offer four tips and caveats:

1. A good part of Pennsylvania is an up-and-down state. Chalk that up to those geologic processes that provided so much of the wealth of the state in its history. If you're looking for flat and fast courses, have a go at the races mentioned below under that category. Otherwise, prepare yourselves for some hills and a few beautiful views along the way.
2. As you no doubt know, new marathons come and old marathons go (at least, into hiatus) every year. In planning your marathon calendar, make sure that you are not missing a great new marathon not mentioned here and that the ones noted here are still up and running.²
3. The word is out about Pennsylvania distance running, resulting in an increasing number of events filling up well before the race date. So take

advantage of the lesser-known gems noted below or plan on signing up for a race as soon as registration opens.

4. Many of these marathons have companion races so your running friends and family can cover some ground themselves and work up an appetite for a postrace feed as well.

Armed with those thoughts, let's see what might fill your distance-running bill.

Historic and urban

These marathons enable you to get your head around a city and its development from the inside. There are no two better cities to explore than Pittsburgh and Philadelphia.

Dick's Sporting Goods Pittsburgh Marathon (May). This premier event went on hiatus for a few years in a quest for a sponsor and is now back on the block. Expect to make your way across each of three rivers that shaped this city and see many of the distinctive neighborhoods that make up the City of Bridges. Reflecting a history of many communities (separated by the three rivers) later coming together to form one of America's great cities, the Pittsburgh Marathon takes you through five major neighborhoods, each with its distinctive character:



© Dick's Sporting Goods Pittsburgh Marathon

Pittsburgh Marathon

the North Shore and its diversity of 18 communities both urban and residential; South Side, once celebrated as the industrial “workshop of the world” and now known for its trendy neighborhoods and nightspots; Oakland, in the shadow of the University of Pittsburgh, the scene of those twin academic poles of culture and student life; Shadyside and its villagelike life radiating from mansions and working-class housing; and Bloomfield, steeped in its Italian heritage. Prepare yourself for the hill leading to Pitt and a great downhill stretch in your last five miles. Also be prepared for some of the best crowd support you will ever find in a marathon. While you are around and about, be sure to take an incline on the South Side to see the city from on high, and explore Pittsburgh’s other neighborhoods and the nearby former steel towns, checking out the local bars/eateries, almost all of which have their signature (and calorically rich) sandwich or dish.

Philadelphia Marathon (November). This course has been optimized over the years to aid in a good finishing time and a great orientation to historic Philadelphia and its environs. Starting between Eakins Oval and Logan Circle on the Ben Franklin Parkway, it makes its way downtown to Center City, skirting the eating and drinking venues of Chinatown and Old City. It makes a loop of the most-historic districts, passing by Penn’s Landing on the Delaware and going through the historic residential neighborhoods of Society Hill and Queen Village. Completing the loop alongside the mall of Independence National Historical Park, a stone’s throw away from Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell, the course tempts you to linger around the cushy hangouts of the Washington Square and



*Philadelphia
Marathon*

© Philadelphia Marathon

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Rittenhouse Square neighborhoods. Stay the course, however, and continue on your way to the University City district, Philadelphia's first suburb and home to six colleges and universities. The middle miles of the course wind around the green space of Fairmont Park before heading northwest to Manayunk (an Indian name for "where you go to drink"), a hip neighborhood and still a watering hole along the Schuylkill River. Once you have completed the turnaround in Manayunk (where you may run to the beat of the Manayunk Drummer, a fixture of the course for years), you'll find that nothing beats a honey-hued afternoon running along the Schuylkill toward the finish—except, possibly, taking in your carbs before the race in South Philly and posing with upraised arms as Rocky Balboa in the very footsteps of the Italian stallion in front of the Philadelphia Museum of Art following your finish. When you finish braying "Adrian, Adrian" like the pummeled but victorious Rocky, celebrate your finish with a cheesesteak hoagie with all the trimmings and take a little extra time to visit the historic sites and neighborhoods you just passed through.

Fast and flat

These races offer you the chance for a PR while showing you a part of the Keystone State that you don't want to miss.

Erie Marathon at Presque Isle Presented by the Erie Runners Club (September). Held in Presque Isle State Park west of the city of Erie, this marathon may have the flattest course in the nation (less than 300 foot change in elevation), rounding the peninsula that gives the park its name. Highlights of the Erie Marathon, according to one satisfied repeat runner, include a bargain registration price, great scenery, good food, prizes, gels at two points in the course, reasonably priced hotels, and a nice technical fabric shirt. While working on your PR on this two-loop, mostly shaded course (where a world age group record was set in 2003 in the 85 to 89 division), you may be able to sneak in between the trees a few views of Lake Erie as well as the skyline of



*Erie
Marathon*

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Lehigh Valley Marathon

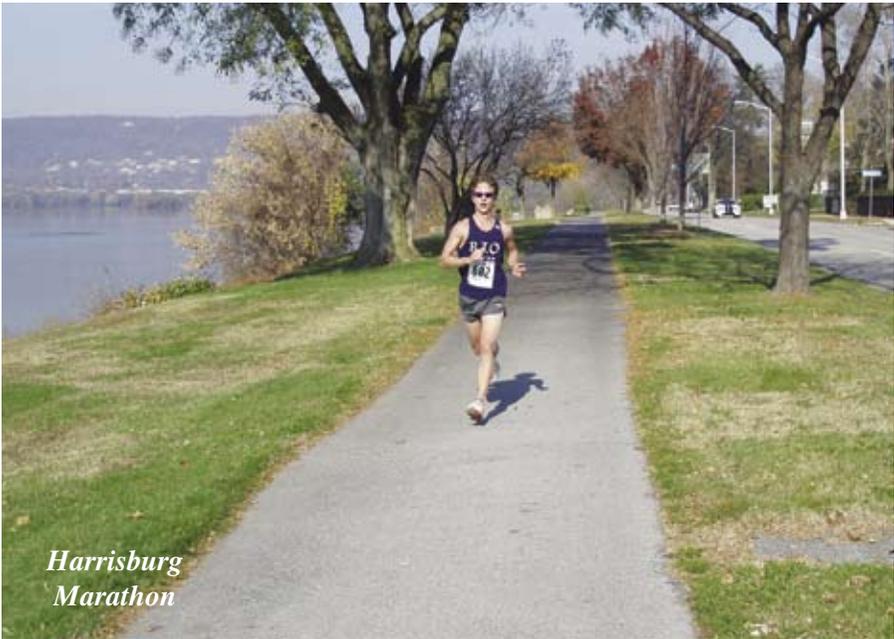


Contributed by Lehigh Valley Health Network Marathon for Via

the city. After the race, check out the Erie Maritime Museum (and maybe get a view of Flagship Niagara, if it is in port), visit local wineries, or check with the local folks about some special chocolates made in the Flagship City.

Lehigh Valley Health Network Marathon for Via (September). I have not run this race, but I have run much of its course in other races and am eager to try it. A benefit organized by the Lehigh Valley Health Network for Via of the Lehigh Valley, a nonprofit agency providing services to children and adults with disabilities, the marathon boasts a course designed by Bart Yasso of *Runner's World* and enjoys a net descent through its three towns. Starting in Allentown, it follows the Lehigh Parkway to the Lehigh River Canal Towpath, passing through Bethlehem's historic quarter before finishing in Center Square in Easton. Enjoy those shaded paths, but be sure to save some energy for the roller coasters of Dorney Park and to burn enough calories to treat yourself to a royal repast at one of the palaces of the "Hot Dog King."

Aspire Urgent Care and Family Medical Harrisburg Marathon (November). This race is organized by the Harrisburg Area YMCA and—despite being in the shadow of the stately Pennsylvania state capitol, designed by its architect to be a palace of art—prides itself on a small-town atmosphere and friendly volunteers. This jaunt through the capital of the commonwealth begins on City Island, circles the capitol building, and heads south to pick up the Capital Greenbelt Path in its



first five miles. For the next 20 or so miles, it continues along the Susquehanna River, doubles back around Wildwood Lake Nature Park, and skirts Harrisburg Area Community College, returning along the river for the finish at City Island. I achieved one of my marathon PRs here and had a great time in the bargain. Not your day for a PR? Console yourself with the fact that Confederate General Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia could not get into Harrisburg to sever the rail lines of this strategic city, having been stopped twice at the battles of Antietam and Gettysburg. Get over your own setback or celebrate your victory over the course by sampling the local brew in one of the area eateries or making a day of it at Hersheypark or the nearby outlets.

Hometown holiday

All Pennsylvania marathons reflect civic pride and benefit from the indefatigable volunteers who make the event happen. The marathons discussed below take that hometown spirit to the nth degree.

River Towns Marathon (May). This marathon brings together two counties to celebrate the heritage and countryside of three towns along the Susquehanna River and the North Branch Division of the Pennsylvania Canal. Starting with a run past the avenues of booths set up for the Danville Spring Fling, the marathon makes its way through the countryside to reach the borough of Catawissa, the meeting point of the canal with several railroads. From there, it follows an old

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railroad right of way along the east shore of the Susquehanna River, crosses the river on a beautiful iron-trestle railroad bridge en route to the village of Rupert (another canal and railroad junction), heads through the Rupert covered bridge over Fishing Creek, and makes a beeline for the west shore of the Susquehanna to arrive in Bloomsburg's Town Park for the halfway point. Providing runners with a second opportunity to run along the Susquehanna and cross the covered and railroad trestle bridges to Catawissa, the course retraces its way down the back roads to Danville, finishing at the Spring Fling. The race is a wonderful way to ring in the spring season and pick up some great food and crafts just steps away from the finish. If you are a covered-bridge fan, take the car to photograph several beautiful examples in the area.

Johnstown Marathon (October). Organized by the Greater Johnstown YMCA for 35 years, this race is the ultimate hometown event. Take the incline car to the start overlooking the city center. Work through the neighborhoods south of Stackhouse Park before descending to Haws Pike leading northwest through the scenic Conemaugh Gap, a gorge 1,350 feet deep. Cross the Conemaugh River to return to town, finishing at Point Stadium, where young future football stars will be following in the footsteps of Johnstowners Pete Duranko, Carlton Haselrig, Jack Ham, Andrew Hawkins, and LaRod Stephens-Howling to compete in the NFL Punt, Pass & Kick competition. While there, be sure to see the two museums dedicated to the Johnstown Flood of 1889, a tragedy that speaks volumes about deforestation and environmental change, the differing fortunes of rich and poor, and the recovery of a people who are as hospitable as they are resilient.

Steamtown Marathon (October). This mostly downhill jaunt (with an elevation drop of 955 feet) from Forest City to downtown Scranton has developed a loyal following. From the moment you arrive in the buses at the starting line in Forest City, you are welcomed by Forest City High School cheerleaders, coddled before the start in a warm gym, relieved (pardon the expression!) with 50 porta-potties at the ready, and bathed in the TLC that you will receive throughout your day on the roads and trails—resplendent in fall foliage. Be sure to leave a little in the tank at the end for a short uphill stretch or two, some great Pennsylvania food and drink in local restaurants of all types, and a tour of the Steamtown National Historic Site, which offers excursion



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rides (where reservations may come in handy) and an orientation to railroads and their role in the development of the area (where they transported local coal all over the country).

Hill and dale

These marathons take you through some beautiful terrain and share four of the jewels of the commonwealth's landscape.

Garden Spot Village Marathon (April). This race (which is new to me) begins in Pennsylvania Dutch country in New Holland at Garden Spot Village, a continuing-care community, and circles around Welsh Mountain, passing through lush farm country (where you might see a farmer working his fields with a horse-drawn plow) and sharing the road with the buggies of the Old Order people (whether Amish or Mennonite) before returning to Garden Spot Village. Plan to do a bit of touring while you are in the neighborhood, enjoying the restaurants, markets, and theater offerings.



Pocono Mountains Run for the Red Marathon (May). Benefiting the American Red Cross of Monroe County, this run takes you point-to-point from Tobyhanna to Stroudsburg, passing Paradise (township, that is) on the way. (And speaking of Paradise, you'll find the famous heart-shaped bathtubs there, should you prefer that sort of experience to going to local casinos or outlet malls.) Whatever you do following the race, enjoy communing with nature on the course, drinking in the brisk air of the mountains and having a look out for local birds, notably raptors. Take in the ambience that established this area as a vacation getaway from Philadelphia and New York starting in the early 19th century and continuing during the heyday of the railroads, rivaling the New York resorts (sorry again, Saratoga Springs). Stick around a while for your rest cure after pounding those 26.2 miles. You may decide to retire in the area eventually, as so many people are doing these days.

God's Country Marathon (June). This race follows the northern tier of Pennsylvania along US Highway 6 in Potter County, starting in Galeton and finishing in Coudersport. Fast and flat course fans be advised: This marathon climbs out from Galeton Area High School over 1,100 feet before mile 18, summiting Denton Hill, the continental divide between the watersheds of the Susquehanna (emptying into Chesapeake Bay) and the Allegheny (leading into the Ohio and Mississippi toward the Gulf of Mexico). Then enjoy the downhill that helps you make up a bit of time before you finish at the Potter County Courthouse. While you are in the neighborhood, check out the Pennsylvania Lumber Museum or Austin



*Pocono Mountains
Run for the Red
Marathon*

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Dam Memorial Park (scene of another flood disaster in the early 20th century) for a bit of God's Country heritage, or visit the many local state parks and plan your skiing or snowmobiling vacation for later in the year. Check with the local people and head just north of the marathon route if you want to visit Headwaters Mountain, the intersection of three watersheds (the two mentioned above, plus the Genesee River flowing into Lake Ontario).

Drake Well Marathon (August). This race almost literally revolves around the birthplace of the modern oil industry, where Colonel Edwin L. Drake succeeded with drilling to extract oil in sufficient quantities to be commercially useful as a fuel source. The Drake Well Marathon revs up your engine with eight miles traversing two hills, downshifts for a quick tour of Titusville, and then sends you into overdrive for an out-and-back bike-path section of 15 shaded miles through Oil Creek State Park. Count on getting plenty of support on the course from the people of the area, who will warm your heart with their cheering but help to cool you down with sprinklers and their own aid stations. Be sure to visit the Drake Well Museum (where you can view a film of Vincent Price portraying Colonel Drake in one of his lesser-known roles) and plan to take an excursion on the Oil Creek & Titusville Railroad.

Dragging your tail on the trail

I've done two great trail marathons in gnarly hills of the commonwealth. One is an annual "spontaneous" event somewhere between Harrisburg and Wilkes-Barre



© Drake Well Marathon

that you might learn about from local trail runners in the know. The other is where we left my running buddy Sarah a few pages ago. Add to these an excellent event staged on a rails-to-trails path.

Bob Potts Marathon (May) celebrates the life of York’s “running icon” (through scholarship money raised by the marathon) and is organized by the running community of the White Rose City. Following a mile run from York College, the course takes an out-and-back route along the York Heritage Rail Trail, tending slightly uphill on the out to give you an equally slight downhill on the back to a finish on the York College track. Along the trail (which, as the route of the Northern Central Railroad, was a vital link from Washington, DC, to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and connections to New York and the west), you will pass through beautiful farmland, historic stations (including Hanover Junction, where President Lincoln transferred from the Northern Central to deliver the Gettysburg Address and where a Civil War museum can be found), the Howard Tunnel (the oldest continually operating railroad tunnel in the world), and locations where bands will serenade you on your way. Send your rail-roadies out to cheer you on from a trailside station or inn. While you are in the area, check out the Colonial Courthouse, a replica of the nation’s fourth (depending on how you count) capitol, where the Articles of Confederation were adopted by the Continental Congress. Or take a factory tour of the Harley-Davidson York Facility or visit the Weightlifting Hall of Fame at York Barbell—but be sure to plan to do this before or after marathon day.



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R. B. Winter Trail Challenge (aka Dam Full Marathon, September). R. B. Winter State Park in Bald Eagle State Forest takes its name from a forester who lived in the area. Locals, however, still know the park by its former name of Halfway Dam, named either for Halfway Run or the Halfway Tavern (sort of midway between Mifflinburg and Centre Hall). The course is shaped like a butterfly, but there the lepidopterous resemblance ends. The Dam Fulls (pronounced “Dam Fools”) who take on the marathon challenge climb 4,600 feet during their sojourn in the forest, including the climbs up the boulder fields of the backsides of Nittany Mountain and Naked Mountain, the latter on the infamous stairway to heaven. Take the Winter Challenge and you will get a real feel for Pennsylvania. In fact, you will feel every stone from pebbles to boulders on this course and understand how the commonwealth was put together—obviously with a variety of glue that no longer holds after so many millennia of ice, wind, water, and roots tearing away at the substructure. But enough geology. Let’s return to ground level and that infamous stairway to heaven.

The bottom (Mason-Dixon) line

To save you any further suspense, suffice it to say that Sarah and I trudged to the top of the stairway, carefully schlepped our way down the continuation of the boulder field on the other side of Naked Mountain, eventually came across some runnable trail at the bottom of the hill, and scudded our way to the finish

Marathons of Pennsylvania

Aspire Urgent Care and Family Medical Harrisburg Marathon—November

www.harrisburgmarathon.com/homeIE.asp

Bob Potts Marathon—May

www.bobpottsrn.com

Dick's Sporting Goods Pittsburgh Marathon—May

www.pittsburghmarathon.com

Drake Well Marathon—August

www.drakewellmarathon.com

Erie Marathon at Presque Isle—September

www.erie-runnersclub.org/marathon/info_2011.php

Garden Spot Village Marathon—April

www.gardenspotvillagemarathon.org/

Gettysburg North-South Marathon—April

www.gettysburgnorthsouthmarathon.com/

God's Country Marathon—June

www.godscountrymarathon.com

Johnstown Marathon—October

www.johnstownpaymca.org/events/events_marathon.shtml

Lehigh Valley Health Network Marathon for Via—September

www.vianet.org/marathon/

Philadelphia Marathon—November

www.philadelphiamarathon.com

Pocono Mountains Run for the Red Marathon—May

www.poconomarathon.org

R. B. Winter Trail Challenge (aka Dam Full Marathon)—September

www.midpenntailblazers.com/trail-race-events/damhalf/index.html

River Towns Marathon—May

<http://web.me.com/earthscapes66/Marathon/Marathon.html>

Steamtown Marathon—October

www.steamtownmarathon.com

before dark and prior to the pizza and chicken running out. Now we both had two weeks to recover our pride and heal our bruised and battered feet before taking on the Bald Eagle Megatransect near Lock Haven, a trail race that—with typical Pennsylvania trail-runners' attitude—hovers just short or just beyond the marathon distance and thus won't be further discussed here.

Worth discussing, however, is Sarah's not-so-rhetorical question, Why am I doing this? Well, if you are going the distance in Pennsylvania, you are getting a lot for your effort—and there *will* be effort in any and all of the above races. You are getting history from Independence Hall to the urban renaissance. You are seeing how a nation came together from trails to turnpikes. You are making friends with genial people of varied ages and backgrounds on all 26 miles and at all of the aid stations. You are leaving your family and friends to have a great time on their own, running alternative distances, brunching, shopping, and touring within a short drive of your racecourse. After your race, you are feasting on hot dogs, hoagies, pretzels, and pie, while slaking your thirst on the local birch beer, spring water, or something with a bit more kick. Let's hope you are staying on to appreciate more of the same on vacation. Whatever you do, you have in some way gained an appreciation for the Keystone State and how its fate has been intertwined with and reflective of the nation it has helped to forge.

After all of this, you may ask me why I am such a booster of a state that is not my birthplace or my residence. In the interest of full disclosure, I should tell you that my wife is a Pennsylvanian, and I guess that I fell for her native state when I fell in love with her. (And I still fall for both my wife and the commonwealth—the latter, when I encounter one of those inevitable rocks or sapling stumps seemingly always in wait for my shuffling feet on the trails.) You may not fall for the love of your life in the uncommon commonwealth (or even trip on the marathon courses described above), but you may well find a soft spot in your heart for the friendship and comradeship of the runners and volunteers who share with you the beauties of motion and scene that I have described above. And you just may be smitten by love of place on a Pennsylvania city avenue or rocky boulder field. Love's funny that way.

Endnotes

1 Ultramarathoners, there are great distance events in Pennsylvania as well. In the interest of space, I will focus on marathons in this article. However, I urge the ultramarathoner or wannabe to look at such events as the 28.4-mile Susquehanna Super Hike and Ultra Trail Run in York and Lancaster counties, the Groundhog Fall 50K in Punxsutawney, the Blues Cruise 50K Trail Ultra near Reading, the Tussey mOUntainBACK 50 Miler near State College, the Laurel Highlands 50K and 70.5 Mile Race from Ohiopyle State Park to near Johnstown, and the Oil Creek 100 Trail Runs (50K, 100K, and 100 miles) at Titusville. The preceding list is just a scratching of the hardscrabble Pennsylvania landscape and worth another article in these pages.



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2 A newcomer to the Pennsylvania marathon scene is the Gettysburg North-South Marathon (having held its inaugural running this past April), which offers a view of the Civil War battle you will not easily duplicate on your own. It follows an out-and-back course that takes you through the battlefield and the country roads surrounding the town. Capturing the spirit of the battle, the marathon divides the entrant field into two teams: North and South. Wearing unique North and South bibs, the runners compete against one another in a scored competition. The overall male and female winners score two points for their side, and age group winners score one point per side. In 2011, the overall winners were both from the South, but age-group victories carried the North to victory. For winning, each entrant running for the North won a custom-printed pint glass with the event logo and a quote from Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. One of my trail buddies loved her experience running the inaugural event. 