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INSIDE:
Fahrenheit-be-Darned running club story

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Winter runners are a common sight in Fairbanks, often noticed first as specks of light bobbing along the iced-over bike path as their reflective tape catches the light from street lamps and passing cars. They are usually alone, but are sometimes accompanied by other specks, or by a pair of glowing dog eyes.

For some, the prospect of running outside in minus-20 degree air stings of organized masochism. On cold days when winter runners flashed past the warmth and safety of my car, I have felt a brief urge to dash out on the sidewalk, seize them by their fleece-clad shoulders, and demand: “Why?”

Determined to get to the bottom of this and find out for myself why they run, I pulled on my shoes and some reflective tape and showed up at the Running Club North’s meeting spot at 5:30 on a Wednesday night in December. Since 1999, some of Fairbanks’s most tenacious runners have gathered here to participate in Fahrenheit Be Darned training runs. Tracey Martinson and Bob Elder are the organizing forces behind Fairbanks’s thriving running community. The group logs four to 10 miles every winter Wednesday. Sometimes there’s even cocoa afterward.
Winter runners face a variety of obstacles, from icy roads to cold muscles and frostbite. Moving to an indoor treadmill might be convenient and comfortable, but it comes with its own dangers: boredom. A thermometer (inset) might help a runner plan clothing layers, but in Fairbanks it doesn’t provide an excuse to stay home. Running Club North holds a series of winter races that are held regardless of temperature.

Why Run In Winter?

In the University of Alaska Fairbanks Student Recreation Center, a mere 500 yards from the meeting place, a row of state-of-the-art exercise machines sits near a rubberized, heated track. An elliptical machine can provide a challenging workout, complete with “runner’s high,” while asking little in return—no multi-layered apparel; no chilled muscles, runny noses or frosted eyelashes; no chance of getting mowed down by an SUV or slipping and breaking ribs. But indoor running presents what many runners consider a greater danger: boredom.

“The thought of running on a treadmill hasn’t even occurred to me,” said Ed Debevec, who enjoys running as a contrast to a day behind a computer. Andrew Pfeiffer, another newcomer, claims he likes few things less than running inside. Pfeiffer seems undeterred by the memory of his first Fahrenheit Be Darned run, when his friend’s leg crashed through the thinning surface of the Chena river. “It wasn’t too cold,” Pfeiffer said, “but we joked that the club was trying to weed us out on the first day.”

While purists like Debevec and Pfeiffer boycott the gym, others admit to using indoor alternatives on occasion. The Fahrenheit Be Darned runners bring a swath of approaches, goals and attitudes to the trail. Some run seeking relaxation, while others consider running a way to fight off the winter doldrums. Some just enjoy the scenery. “You can run the same route in the summer as in winter, but with the snow and whiteness, it almost seems that you’re in a totally different place,” said Elder.

Many run to prepare for one of Running Club North’s winter races, including the Thanksgiving Turkey Trot and the New Year’s Eve Run. Running Club North’s website repeatedly reminds us that “races will be run regardless of temperature.” Treadmills are ill-suited for marathon training runs. John Eichelberger, a solo runner and professor of volcanology at UAF, claims he runs outdoors in the winter to maintain sanity. Few runners can offer a single reason. Maybe some reasons become clear only after one has donned three pairs of socks.

Warmer With Friends

The first Wednesday I attended, the organizers seemed pleased with the turnout of more than 20 runners. Elder slapped an Internet map marked with highlighter against the plastic window of a ticket booth in the middle of the lobby, and runners clustered around it, stretching as they heard the course description. After a rustle of zippers and elastic, we dashed outside.

The chalky evening air gave Fahrenheit Be Darned a whole new meaning. There was no wind chill, just that trademark Fairbanks absence of heat. As the group trickled down from the University hilltop, the temperature seemed to lower with the altitude. My ski mask quickly froze over and began inflating and deflating like a lung with every breath. I hoped that my muscles could maintain warmth beneath the weight of three pairs of running pants. Cold found the weak spots in
A hard-packed snowmachine trail helps winter runners like Bill McDonnell [ABOVE] escape traffic hazards, Monty Jordan and Tracey Martinson [RIGHT] wrap up a six-mile training run in Fairbanks. "Twenty below used to be my cut off, but it's been moving up," Jordan said.

my fortress of clothing: my wrists, neck and ankles. I don't know how it got to my stomach. UAF's electronic sign flashed a temperature: 20 below. A 120-degree difference in temperature spanned the two inches that separated my tissue from the air. My respect for the minus-50 runners increased with every footstep.

We reached an intersection and everyone looked impatient to keep moving before our sweat froze. I got the feeling I wasn't the only one who would have preferred a quiet trail over a major thoroughfare, but at six in the evening in December, streetlights were a necessity. Around us, tire-polished black ice winked up from the ground. Several runners wore black rubber contrivances over the tips of their shoes—"Ice Grabbers" one runner called them, mentioning that he had tried a makeshift substitute made from duct tape, but it didn't work out so well. Others recommend putting drywall screws through the bottoms of an old pair of shoes.

I fell into pace with a married couple, both hockey players, both wearing Ice Grabbers. As we yelled conversation over the crunch of our footsteps and between gasps of air, our sentences rose in spurts of white. I asked the couple how they steeled themselves for marathons and winter running. The woman laughed and replied, "After childbirth, everything seems easy."

After about three miles, the cold seemed easier to bear, too. I must have been numb, or warm from the exertion, or a combination of the two. The run flashed by. Two months of monogamy to an elliptical machine can make a runner forget how conversation and a little scenery can pass the time.

Limits and Bragging Rights

The group was thinner the next Wednesday; only about 12 people showed up despite the balmy 2 degrees weather. Most of the group seemed to know one another. Conversation revealed their mix of occupations: laborers, pilots, lawyers, professors, statisticians, small business owners, aged between 30 and 70. I counted two other women.

As the run began, I overheated quickly. I had overdressed. I pulled down my face-mask to make talking and breathing easier. The first mile passed as everyone debated the pros and cons of taking the stair-bridge over University Avenue versus waiting for a hole in traffic, and which side-roads would make great finishing chutes for summer races. Every once in a while, someone called out, "Carl!" or pointed out a wicked ice patch. After 20 minutes of
running, only two cars had passed us. This hardly felt like an urban course.

Mid-run, we veered into a residential area to take in the Christmas light spectacle. A few blocks in, we passed three kids having a snowball fight in a yard. As we jogged by, one kid gestured vaguely ahead of us and yelled, “There’s a moose over there,” then resumed whitewashing his buddy.

We called our thanks and kept moving. Two houses down, a large, gangly silhouette ambled nervously from the space between a frozen chokecherry tree and the front of a suburban ranch, then retreated into hiding again.

As we emerged at Airport Way, some runners pulled ahead a bit, while others formed clusters and chatted through their scarves. Towards the end of the run, we turned onto Fairbanks Avenue, formerly a high-traffic entrance to UAF, now closed in favor of a more sprawling scenic entrance. We had the road all to ourselves. Disuse had cloaked the street in a blanket of white that swallowed our shoes well past the ankle. Some runners stuck to the crisscross of four-wheeler tracks, while others intentionally trudged through the deep patches, leaving gaping footprints as they went. I was glad for those three pairs of socks.

As I ran, several runners assured me that healthy lungs do not freeze, even in minus-50 degree weather. But running in such temperatures requires a knowledge of personal limits. Many Fahrenheit Be Damned runners lace up dutifully at 40 below, but most of them shorten their distance at temperatures lower than 25 degrees below zero, which was once the cutoff temperature for Running Club North events. “The greatest danger,” said David

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from 1931-1933 and in the Sitka public school system from 1933-1960.

Molly Rice, 78, died July 30. Born in Chenega, she participated in the Nu-chek Spirit Camp on Hinchinbrook Island and helped with the Suksen language program. She loved beading, picking berries, gathering traditional plants and reading at the St. Michael's Russian Orthodox Church in Cordova.

Shirley Stalder, 83, died Aug. 21 in Fairbanks. She moved to Chitina in 1958 with her husband, Ray, and their four children. They moved to Fairbanks in 1967 and she worked for the Alaska State Troopers as a hearing officer for the Driver Improvement Program. She was a respected community volunteer at University Community Presbyterian Church, the Garden Club and the soup kitchen.

Martin Ronald Strand Sr., 73, died Aug. 14. Born and raised in Sitka, he was a Kaagwaantaan of the Eagle Nest House. In the 1960s he was a radio announcer and news anchor at KIFW and he later held leadership positions in the Alaska Native Brotherhood, Sitka Tribe of Alaska, the Salvation Army and Lions Club.

George Irvin Vincent, 84, died Aug. 21. He came to Alaska in 1960 to work with the Alaska Highway Department. An active member of the National Rifle Association, he organized rifle shoots in the Fairbanks area.

VOICES: continued from page 47

Leonard, a Fahrenheit Be Darned regular, “is setting off on an overly-ambitious run.”

Of course, dressing properly is essential. Running Club North hosts a Web site where winter runners can share their stories and tips. There, seasoned marathoners offer gear suggestions for specific temperature ranges and appreciate the large family of Insulating, wicking, fabrics with names suffixed -ex, -ene and -ate. Again, it’s obvious that everyone has his or her own dressing preferences. Some break out the shorts at 30 degrees, or at least claim to.

That’s another major incentive to running outdoors in the winter— bragging rights. Many of the contributing writers on the the Fahrenheit Be Darned Web site wax poetic when describing the physical effects of cold weather on their gear, bodies and breath. “Hat becomes one with eysbrows at 40 below,” said one.

Apparently, running shoes turn into cinder blocks or two-by-fours in the cold, depending on whom you ask. Maybe describing the cold is one way to show it who’s boss.

Another way to is to show up with friends. Running Club North welcomes newcomers who show up in reflective gear and find their own reasons to run in winter. No guarantees about the weather or the cocoa.

Nancy Slagle is a Fairbanks-raised author, illustrator, freelance writer and Equinox Marathon finisher. She is currently writing and illustrating an Alaska children’s book titled Stu-Colored Snow.

Raven and the Box of Daylight

Raven took the sun from the Box of Daylight and put it in the sky to give us light. A design by Tlingit Odin Lonning, from our Northwest Coast collection.

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