

The Chase

By Will Harlan

I'm not a runner. I'm a chaser.

When I was four-years-old, I chased my dad each night on his two mile jog around the neighborhood. In high school, my buddies and I lit a fireworks fountain beside a police car, just for the thrill of the chase (we got away—barely). In college, I climbed the stadium wall and evaded the pursuit of security guards to watch the Braves win the World Series.

After my prankish college days, I turned to trail running. I didn't pay much attention to splits or times; I simply loved the feeling of scampering through the forest eluding a chase pack or reeling in the lead harrier. I ended up winning a few events, but I always viewed races more like a grown-up game of cops and robbers.

Then I got a job, got married, and became a dad. Instead of chasing the trail, I was chasing my naked three-year-old son around the living room.

I woke up one day and found myself in a 35-year-old body. Gone were the lithe, spring-loaded legs of my youth. It was time to face a hard truth: I would never be as fast as I once was.

But I felt like I still had some kick left in me. So I dreamed up one final challenge: an unsupported 72-mile solo run on the Appalachian Trail across Great Smoky Mountains Park, the wildest, tallest, and most rugged terrain in the East. No checkpoints or crew support. No competitors or companions. Just me and the mountains.

I woke up at 2 am and drove to Davenport Gap on the eastern edge of the Smokies. In the dark, I shouldered my pack, clicked on my headlamp, and began running up the Appalachian Trail. For my 72-mile journey, I carried only a small pack of food and water, along with a hand-drawn map of springs along the trail.

The half-million acres of Great Smoky Mountains National Park is home to more than 1,500 black bears—roughly two bears per square mile. As I bounded up the moonlit trail, I felt their glowing eyes watching me silently through the rhododendron thickets and rocky hollows. I thanked them for allowing me to pass through their home in the middle of the night.

I reached Mount Cammerer around twilight. Giant old-growth hemlocks, yellow poplars, and sugar maples lined the trail, and I brushed my fingers across their furrowed bark. It was intoxicating to exchange my breath with ancient trees.

The morning sun crested the peaks and burned a hole through the gauzy clouds. I plunged down to Tri-Corner Knob Shelter and bushwhacked about a quarter-mile to refill my water from a spring. I felt the weight of the full water bottles digging into my back.

I checked my watch—ten minutes slower than I had hoped. I hadn't really trained for this adventure. Work and family commitments had increased, and our organic farm had kept me busy weeding gardens, planting squash, and milking goats, leaving little time for training.

But there was no time left for excuses: I was a 35-year-old dad and husband, and this was probably my last chance to chase the Smokies speed record. Regardless of my finishing time, I wanted to pour every ounce of myself into the effort. Whenever I felt my pace slowing, I asked one question: is this the best I can give?

The cool, wet, north-facing trail that I had run in the early morning twisted south, becoming a bed of dry rubble underfoot. I rolled through the Sawteeth, a section of jagged, narrow ridgeline trail. Sweat-drenched and thirst-slaked, I refilled my water pack at Icewater Spring near 6,000-foot Mount Kephart.

Nearby, I heard a hermit thrush's gurgled song—which sounded like notes from my son's bathtub water flute. The thrush's liquid melody echoed through the deep forest. He could have been courting a female or defending his territory, but he seemed to be singing simply for the joy of it. Could I do the same? Did I always need an ego-enlarging reason—a goal, a race, a finish line? Could I run not to enhance myself, but to lose it in the silence of the forest?

Violets and trillium blanketed the trail near the Charlies Bunion overlook. I almost didn't stop, but I forced myself to enjoy a panoramic pause. For three decades, I had been running too fast to really notice the scenery. It was all just a blurry tunnel of green. But atop the Bunion, I was beginning to glimpse the value of stopping—or at least slowing down slightly—to smell the wildflowers.

I nimbly danced down the boulder-strewn trail toward Newfound Gap, but my progress slowed on the eight-mile climb up to 6,643-foot Clingmans Dome, the highest point on the entire Appalachian Trail. For the first time, I began doubting my ability to finish. My wobbly legs buckled, my breathing was raspy, my head cloudy.

Nauseated, I forced myself to swallow a few bites of soggy sandwich. The tart homemade berry jam reminded me of my son, who helped me gather the berries from our garden. His raspberry-smearing smile buoyed my spirits. I finally crested Clingmans and plunged down the mountain toward the next spring at Silers Bald, where I again had to run a half-mile off-trail to reach the spring.

The dark silhouette of Thunderhead Mountain loomed in the distance. On the rocky roller coaster trail to Thunderhead, I scabbled on all-fours, then crab-walked down

a boulder-cut seam and slid down scree, only to climb sharply again up a rocky ravine. In the mid-afternoon heat, a mirage of faces appeared in my mind: my wife's radiant smile, my son's chubby cheeks, the warm, wrinkled eyes of my aging parents. None of these people cared if I held a speed record across the Smokies. My time mattered only to a handful of elite runners whom I rarely saw or spoke to. Why was I trying so hard to impress these people?

Finally I topped out in the grassy fields of Thunderhead. Above the tree line, the naked mountains bared their raw skeletal hues and curves. The tall, wind-dimpled sedge covered the deeply rutted trail, and twice I twisted my ankle stumbling blindly through the narrow gully.

I was parched and pummeled by the time I reached the spring at Spence Field. I was way behind my goal pace. I would need to run the final 16 miles in under two hours.

I had nothing left. My ankles throbbed. My sweaty, sunburned skin was chafed raw. My feet had been bludgeoned into swollen nubs. I sat broken-down beside the trail and untied my shoelaces.

Then I heard the fluted trill of the hermit thrush again. And it occurred to me suddenly:
even though I was running solo and unsupported, I was hardly alone. With me all along were the faces of family, the memories of friends, and the footsteps of countless runners—well-heeled elite athletes and barefoot Tarahumara goat herders—with whom I had shared the trail. Even the hermit thrush, the insects buzzing around my ears, and the worms that would someday consume my flesh were part of my journey.

Perhaps it was the effects of sleep-deprivation and severe dehydration, but it seemed to me right then that the boundaries of the self are porous, and one life bleeds into another.

Sure, it was the shell of my body that I was dragging across the Smokies, but the stuff inside wasn't mine alone. It had been shaped and shared by all that I had met.

I got back on my feet.

Soon I was gliding down the spongy trail past Russell Field and along Mollies Ridge. My blistered, bloodied feet screamed with each step. But I had one last chance to run as fast as my legs and lungs would carry me, and that feeling was far more powerful than the pain.

I wasn't chasing a speed record. I was chasing the kid that I would never be again. I was chasing that five-year-old boy running the neighborhood streets with dad, the fourth grader outrunning everyone on the playground, the invincible teenager lining up for his first race. I was pursuing that fading feeling of boundless, endless youth.

I chased the shadow of my former self all the way up to Doe Knob, where I was stopped in my tracks by the largest bear I'd ever seen.

The bear stared at me. I froze. Then I cast my eyes sideways. Claw marks scoured the downed trees around me. The gouged trail was pocked with craters where the bear had been digging for grubs.

For several silent minutes, we just stood there. Adrenaline coursed through my body, but I felt surprisingly steady. I could not allow myself to feel fear.

Then the bear sauntered slowly behind a laurel thicket twenty yards off-trail, still watching me. I began walking forward, singing the most soothing melody I could think of—a lullaby I had sung with my son the night before: “I’ve got peace like a river, I’ve got peace like a river, I’ve got peace like a river in my soul...”

I sang past the bear, over the knob, and down the switchbacks to the Fontana Dam finish. That peaceful river carried me all the way home.

I crossed Great Smoky Mountains National Park in 15 hours 45 minutes—a new self-supported record, and over an hour faster than I had ever run it before. But in those final miles, something more important had happened: I had stepped out of time—and my ego-driven self—to touch something far deeper. I had felt it in the pre-dawn darkness, heard it in the song of the hermit thrush, and seen it in the bear’s bottomless brown eyes. It was the presence of a wild energy far greater than myself.

Afterward, I crumpled into an exhausted pile of flesh and watched the sun melt into the mountains. I was not young anymore, and that was okay. My time in the spotlight was over. But I was still shining. And that inner light was somehow connected to the flash of fireflies illuminating the mountains.

Will Harlan’s run was dedicated to protecting Smokies and Southern Appalachia from mountaintop removal mining. Learn more at ilovemountains.org