

# hit the trails



Krissy Moehl Sybrowsky

## On the Trail...

### AT THE MOUNTAIN MASOCHIST 50M

descent, but also willing—eager, even—to be reviled and rebuked by Horton if he feels that they have not run to their potential. His is a Calvinist, fire-and-brimstone, holier-than-thou, black-and-white world. After giving out awards to the winner of each race, he moves on to listing the first losers. If you don't win, you lose. If you don't run your guts out, you are unworthy. David Horton is known in the ultra community for originating the award for "Best Blood."

Horton is nothing if not a competitor. He's finished over 100 ultras and won 40 percent of them. In 1991 he nabbed the Appalachian Trail speed record, covering the 2,144 miles in 52 days (10 days faster than the old record). That wasn't enough. Like Forrest Gump on dextrine, he raced across the country in 64 days, the third fastest trans-continental time. This is a man who loves to push himself.

He also clearly loves people. Horton teaches a running class at Liberty. At this year's MMTR, at least 10 of his students finished the race. They are disciples. Former student Bethany Hunter, 24, has gone on to become one of the best in the country. She's already won the Massanutten Mountain 100M. This year she was competing against the strongest and deepest women's field ever. As the final race in the Montrail Ultra Cup series, the MMTR attracted a number of ultrarunning big dogs. Jenny Capel and Luann Park showed up, as did Janice Anderson and Ragan Petrie. But whether it was a hometown advantage or fiery threats from her former professor, Hunter broke the course record and finished in 8:14.

Clark Zealand, another Hortonite, wasn't there to defend his record this year, and Coloradan Dave Mackey took it away, finishing in 6:48. The race was close until mile 41, when last year's winner, Sean Andrish, "gave up," according to Horton. Andrish finished 10 minutes later, still the third-fastest time ever, and only the fifth person to break seven hours. Good, but not good enough for David Horton.

The course is not particularly difficult; most is on dirt roads and fire service trails with only small portions that are technical. Still, the finishing times are slow. Everyone talks about "Horton miles." While the race director can't move the Virginia mountains to make them higher or harder, he is known for measuring his

**D**avid Horton is not vanilla. When you mention his name to ultrarunners, you get a strong reaction. Sometimes it's fanatical adoration, similar to the devotion inspired by his boss at Liberty University, the Reverend Jerry Falwell. Sometimes it's a look of horror and disgust—and a stream of unprintable epithets. Often it's just a shrug and a smirk. Whatever people think of him personally, though, there is complete consensus on one thing: He puts on extraordinarily well-organized events. Horton's races—the Mountain Masochist 50M Trail Run, the Promise Land 50K, and the Holiday Lake 50+++K—are Horton's races. The personality of the race director permeates.

Apparently it was Horton's wife who gave his longest-running run its title. Horton decided in 1979, after running the JFK 50M, that he wanted to bring ultrarunning to his town of Lynchburg, VA. When Horton was fishing about for a name, his wife said, "Call it the Mountain Masochist—that's what you all are, anyway." The name stuck, and it works. It appeals to the kind of runner that Horton loves—those for whom suffering is the goal—and is off-putting to those whom Horton dismisses.

The original goal for the Mountain Masochist Trail Run, according to its creator, was to make it the biggest ultrarun on the East Coast. Horton's ambitions have changed over the years. Now, Horton says, he wants the race to have a "homecoming atmosphere."

"What I hate most," he says about the 240 starters in this year's race, "is that I don't know everyone's name." He certainly knows a lot of them. Many have returned year after year, not only to suffer on the course that includes 9,000 feet of climb and 7,000 of

courses on the long side. Most people who have run it believe that the 50 miles of the Mountain Masochist is more like 54 miles.

This year, for some, the race was even longer. A group of malicious hunters moved the white streamers marking the course. A number of the front runners were led astray until Tom Greene, the only person to have completed all 22 editions of the race, came to the crossroads. He realized that the markers were wrong and took the time to take them down. "That was a real act of kindness and confidence," Horton says. Greene still managed to finish in a laudable time of 9:57, winning the grand masters division.

At breakfast the morning after the race, Horton greets a guy wearing his finisher's shirt: "You earned that shirt, buddy." What about the rest of us, I ask? Didn't everyone who finished earn his or her shirt? He thinks for only a second. "No," he says. "If you don't give it everything, if you don't run to your potential, then, in my eyes, you've failed."

This does not surprise me. When I crossed the finish line, 10 hours after starting my first 50 miler, having had an amazing experience chatting with folks on the trail, taking it easy because I knew I wasn't fit enough to race, David Horton greeted me, as he did every other runner, by name.

"Rachel," he said. "I gave you that low number. Why did you run so slow?" Indeed, I had messed things up for him: The first five women finished in the order he'd seeded them.

I'd never met David Horton until the morning of the race. In the dark he handed me my (sixth seed) number and commented that I was smaller than he'd expected. I don't know what he was expecting of me, or what his basis for expectation was, but he told me, that next morning at breakfast that he knew I could have run faster and had lost respect for me because I didn't. Too old,

too arrogant to be intimidated by him, I pushed back.

"I can live without your respect. I'm okay with that," I say.

"I'm using reverse psychology on you," he confided.

"Yes, David, I know," I answered.

"I am 99 percent transparent," Horton said, in a fit of self-reflection. He continued, "I'm also insecure. I feel like a fake, incompetent." In the space of a moment he morphs from a blow-hard, castigating, tough-as-nails, win-one-for-the-Gipper kind of guy, to a sweet, gentle and open man. He says he spends the days before the race feeling like he's "hanging on a cliff by my fingertips."

No doubt this fear of failure, this will to perfection, this drive to overcome either real or perceived inadequacies, is what makes his races so good. It also propels David Horton to continually push his own limits, and to inspire, poke, prod, shame, and challenge everyone around him to find theirs.

—Rachel Toor

## Endless Pursuit

### The Ultimate Tracking System

When my wife saw the little green Garmin Geko GPS unit attached to my bicep with the "Endless Pursuit" arm band she said, "They sure got that right." She was referring to the obsession we trail runners have for finding new, longer, harder, and more remote places to run, and she's right: whoever named this software that collects, maps, tracks and quantifies those quests got it right.

Here's how it works: You turn on your Geko and head out for a run. When you get back, you plug it into your computer, pull up [www.EndlessPursuit.com](http://www.EndlessPursuit.com), and it downloads the data, gives you a chance to name the run, then shows you everything you did: how far, how long, how fast, uphill distance, downhill distance, uphill speed, downhill speed, maximum speed, average pace,

even how long you paused to take a leak behind the trees at 40° N, 101° W. You can see those trees on an aerial photograph or a topographical map with your route superimposed over it; you can chart speed over time and/or altitude, altitude over distance or time, calories over altitude . . . just about any combination you can imagine.

Things get even more interesting if you wear a heart rate monitor that can download data to Endless Pursuit, as then you can see not only how fast you were going but how hard you were working. Other features include the ability to compare the intensity of workouts, both within and across disciplines (running and mountain biking, for example). A calendar function allows you to plan and track weekly and monthly totals. Finally, you can share your "treks" with the Endless Pursuit community, which, at present, seems to be mostly cyclists.

One warning: wearing the GPS unit makes it even more tempting to go on longer, harder and increasingly remote runs. Just ask my wife.

—Jonathan Beverly



Garmin Geko GPS



**Mountain Masochist 50M**  
October 18, 2003  
Lynchburg, VA

**Matt Yeager won this year's Best Blood. Top left, Horton makes Liberty U's strength coach do 50 push-ups after 50 miles.**