

Are You Ready for a Different Walking Experience?

This is the first of a four-part series on long distance walk relays. In this issue, the focus is on the basics: what is a long distance relay, how they are set up, and commonly used terms.

Do you walk? Okay, sure, if you are mobile you walk every day. But I mean taking a walk out in nature. Do you enjoy walking in the warmth of a sunny day or beneath the beauty of a starry sky? Do you walk fast or prefer to stroll? Do you like walking alone or with friends? Are you looking for a new walking experience? If any of this describes you, then walking in a relay might be something you could enjoy.



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What Is a Relay?

A relay is a competition for a group of people to get from point A to point B with each team member taking turns to cover a section of the course.

For most people the word "relay" brings to mind a four person team competing for gold in the

Olympics. The starter gun sounds and runners sprint in their lanes passing a baton to a runner waiting further down the track, each completing a portion of the designated distance until the finish.

A walking relay is an extension of that same idea. People walk in teams, each walking a portion of a course, and passing a "baton" to the next walker at a designated area along the course. The ultimate expansion then would be a long distance relay. A walking relay can be for speed or for the challenge of simply finishing the event while abiding by the rules of walking.

Ten years ago relays were an anomaly of the Northwest. We still boast the greatest number with the Willamette Valley Relay (WVR), Rainier to Pacific, Hood to Coast / Portland to Coast. However, running relays are growing in number: Marin, CA: The Relay, WI: The Great Race, CO: Wild West Relay, UT: Watsach Back Relay, NH: Reach the Beach.

How Did Walking Competitions Originate?

In England during the period A.D. 1100 to 1300, "footmen" accompanied their mas-

ter's coaches on long trips by alternating running and walking. This tradition inspired British walking competitions of six days or 24 hours in the 1700s.

These walking events were a major factor leading to the founding of the modern Olympic Games and the sport of Track and Field. The original decathlon included a half mile walk and racewalking has been an individual event in the Olympics since 1908.

What Comprises a Relay?

A relay is comprised of dozens of teams, hundreds of people, vehicles, equipment, and a lot of excitement. Basically there are two types of teams; eight person teams and twelve person teams. Sometimes teams are any number in between. After that the teams are further broken down into categories based on age, gender, and speed. There are teams of men, of women, and mixed teams. Some teams are in the relay for the competition and the challenge of speed, and if it's available some relays have a category just for pure walking enjoyment.

The course of a relay is broken into segments that are referred to as "legs." The standard configuration of a course is 24 legs. Each person on an eight member team will walk three legs of the course and twelve person team members each walk two legs. Ideally the length of the race could be divided by 24 and all legs would be equal. Realistically that's impossible so legs will range from slightly more than 3 miles in length to just over 8 miles long.

At the end of each leg there is a staging or exchange area. This is where a walker hands off the "baton" to the next walker. It's also a place for teams to gather and cheer, stretch and take a short break. Each staging area needs room for parking and for volunteers to monitor the hand off and direct van traffic.

Typically teams divide into two groups. The first group, Van One, starts early and walks the first six legs. At the end of the sixth leg there's a large staging area called a "major exchange." It has to be large enough for Van One to meet up with Van



Two. The walker's in Van One get a rest and the walkers in Van Two complete the next six legs. "Major exchanges" are repeated at the end of legs twelve and eighteen. The relay is a continuous walk until all teams and walkers cross the finish. Depending on the length of the relay, teams finish in times ranging from 23 to 35 hours.

There's no way to adequately describe the elation when your team completes a walk like this. It's shared and at the same time it's intensely personal. One thing is for sure, you are ready to celebrate. And there's always a fabulous party at the end. Good music, good food, and good stories to tell.

The most important relay component is volunteers. They are the fuel that makes the engine run. Volunteers hand out T-shirts, direct traffic, answer dozens of questions, complete paper work. Volunteers are husbands, wives, best friends, sons, daughters, co-workers, cousins — people who just love being outdoors and want to help. They work hard keeping the course safe and walkers pointed in the right direction and generally have as much fun as the walkers do. Volunteers rock!

So that's a walk relay. Many wonderful miles spent with your friend, family, coworkers, or new friend-to-be. It's a time to build team spirit or celebrate your personal accomplishments. It can be a terrific weekend of walking. ■