



Valley Ford Relays 2011

Cold Climes, Hot Times at Valley Ford

The story of the 2011 Valley Ford Relay is one that combines numerous subplots and headlines, from see-saw battles among the teams in each category to calculated team record-breaking attempts and all-time individual performances. An unusually cold, foggy morning had no apparent effect on the turnout for the relay race on February 20. A total of 41 teams made up of 155 runners competed, breaking last year's record turnout of 37 teams and 141 individuals. Race director Doug Courtemarche and his Santa Rosa High School cross country crew worked feverishly to get everyone signed in on time, allowing starter Bob Shor to fire his weapon at precisely 9 a.m., abruptly waking residents, be they human, ovine or bovine, in the tiny town a few miles from the coast.



It truly was a cold and foggy morning at the start of the race! – photo by Dave DeSelle

The Empire Runner

Shortly after the fog had cleared, which occurred quickly yet almost imperceptibly during the 3rd leg, competition in the men's, women's and mixed team races each reached their critical moment in deciding the winners. The newly-elected president of the Empire Runners Club, Alex Wolf-Root, anchored his team, Heart & Sole, to the overall victory with a come-from-behind run to take down Peter Egerton and Old Cadavers by a final margin of 29 seconds. Gerald McCormick, Micheal Brew and Jonathan Peck covered the first 3 legs for the winners.

The mixed team Chasing 409 was put together by Brad Zanetti specifically to crack the 1997 50-59 division record set by Pam Ann Airlines, a team that was anchored by the legendary Dan "409" Preston. Val Sell, Zanetti and Shelly Lydon battled Tom's Girls tightly for the first 3 legs and then Paul Berg faced a strong challenge from What's That Smell, a team that steadily snuck up the leaderboard and finished with a fast, young gun named Joe Carrillo. Carrillo cut nearly 3 minutes from Berg's lead but ran out of road at the end, finishing just 17 seconds too late to pull off the surprise. Chasing 409's win was a bonus as they had accomplished their main goal of claiming an age group record, lowering the mark by over 2 minutes.

Women's team champ Tuff Gurlz Knit Cardigans was still back in 3rd place at the final exchange but had an ace up their sleeve in the person of Carrie Joseph, a recent graduate into the masters division. Joseph not only moved into the lead early on her leg, she eventually stretched out the margin of victory to nearly 2 minutes. Tuff Gurlz joining her on the winner's podium included Trishia Lord, Gina Martin and Kris Nied.

A team of Piner High School runners, Wildebeasts II, joined Chasing 409 as the only 2 teams to break divisional records this year when they ousted their predecessors from 2010, Wildebeasts, in the male 13-15 age group. Matthew Mulligan and Will Tran were holdovers from the original team and were joined by fresh blood Ed Lopez and Efren Reyes. The new record is more than a minute-and-a-half faster.

On the individual age-group record parade were three finishers this year. Shirley Fee became the first 70-year-old woman to finish the race, and her downhill direction time of 21:41 was just 10 seconds slower than her 60-69 record set 2 years ago. Don't expect this record to fall anytime soon unless Fee comes back next year. Janet Feldman ran the uphill direction and took 17 seconds off a women's 50-59 division record that was set 16 years ago by Pam Horton. Horton lost 2 records on this day as she was a member of the aforementioned Pam Ann Airlines. On the men's side – or more correctly, boys – 12-year-old Jack Doolittle crushed by 56 seconds the uphill best for 12-and-under runners, clocking 18:09 to knock off Quin Coughlin's mark from 2002. An unfortunate note is that Doolittle's teammate Matt Salazar, also 12, may have run the same course in well under 18 minutes but a timing snafu made it impossible to validate his effort. Look for these boys to raise some eyebrows in years to come.



A notable streak was broken when Tori Meredith, 53, was unable to compete due to injury. Meredith was the only runner who had run in each of the first 20 years of this event. She vowed to start a new streak in 2012.

Leg One: Take Heart, Old Cadaver

Visibility was only a hundred yards or so when the racers rumbled down the first hill from Dinucci's Restaurant in downtown Valley Ford. The runners were technically out of town by the time they rounded the first turn 100 yards later. The cold fog may have made the early first climb a welcome warm up for many in the starting pack.

Peter Gilmore, 33, of the M30-39 team Old Cadavers emerged from a lead group that included Heart & Sole's McCormick, 28, Papa Americano's Michael Zanetti, 19, and Piner High Schooler Jaime Silva, 16, running for What Can Brown Do For You?. A pair of women running for mixed teams, Carrie Peterson-Kirby, 37, leading off for Tom's Girls, and Sell, 46 of Chasing 409, steadily pulled away from a plucky 12-year-old, Aimee Holland, representing one of the A's in D.A.A.M. Good, a team of girls aged 10 to 12.

Gilmore took the measure of McCormick, opening up a 14 –second advantage for Old Cadavers at the first handoff with an impressive mark of 13:43 for the 2.75-mile downhill direction. McCormick's 13:57 registered on the All-Time Valley Ford Relay list for men 20-29, placing him 5th. Silva slipped away from Zanetti but both ended up on the All-Time list for men 16-19, Silva moving into 2nd at 14:09 and Zanetti besting his mark from last year to move into 4th with a 14:26.

Peterson-Kirby pulled away from Sell to take the early mixed team lead for Tom's Girls. Her 17:09 ended up as the fastest downhill leg of the day for women and Sell's 17:34 was 2nd-best on the day. The youngster Holland finished next, giving D.A.A.M. Good the lead for female teams and setting the 3rd-best time ever for her age group with an 18:32.

Andrea Guzman, led off for mixed team Abandoned Sheep! and had them in 3rd in that category at the exchange. The 2nd and 3rd places for women were being closely contested by Val's Girls' leadoff runner Kassidy Pierce and Jocelyn Mendoza of The Four M's, but both were more than 2 minutes in arrears of Holland. Eventual women's winners Tuff Gurlz were back in 5th, in excess of 4 minutes off the lead at this early stage of the race.

Some other notable age group marks were being laid down on the first leg with the 15-year-old Mulligan of Wildebeasts II running 16:01 for the 4th-best all-time 13-15 runner and, at the other end of the age spectrum, 61-year-old Jerry Lyman running the 4th-best all-time in his division with an 18:23.

Leg Two: The Chase is On



Brad Zanetti, 56, master architect of the record run for his mixed 50-59 team Chasing 409, did his part by clocking 16:39 in the uphill direction of the 2.75-mile horseshoe-shaped course. He was the fastest over-50 runner in either direction on the day. His effort made up the 25-second deficit he inherited and he added another 15 seconds for good measure after going by Tom's Girls' Cathy DuBay, 46. DuBay was in the process of establishing the 3rd-best uphill time of the day for women, a 17:19. Who ended up at the top of that list? Cathy DuBay, when she ran the same uphill again, albeit for another team, slicing 10 seconds from her first effort on about 20 minutes rest. Bryan Porter took over for the 3rd-place mixed team, Abandoned Sheep!, closed the gap on Tom's Girls with his 16:37, but could only gain 2 seconds on Zanetti.

The overall lead changed hands when Brew, 23, of Heart & Sole ran down Mike Schwartz, 32 of Old Cadavers and hung on to a slim 6-second lead by the halfway point in the race. Brew ran 14:54 to Schwartz' 15:31 but it was Papa Americano's Vojta Ripa, 21, who turned this into a 3-horse race by getting past Schwartz and challenging Brew, rolling into the exchange with a 14:31, which ended up as the 3rd-best uphill time of the day.

D.A.A.M. Good still held a commanding lead among female teams with DuBay's daughter, Melanie Mathewson, 12, turning in a fine 19:35 uphill leg, the 3rd-best in race history for girls in her division. Slowly But Surely was living up to its name by creeping into 2nd place among women, Tessa Berg, 38, running 20:36 on this leg.

Jack Doolittle set his age group record on leg 2 and was joined on the All-Time list by 2 other males. Alejandro Escutia, 12, turned in the 4th-best all-time mark for his group with a 19:08 and Dale Trowbridge, 70, running for the Golden Geezers, is now the 5th-best ever in the 70-79 division.

Movers: Three runners made the biggest jump in the standings that occurred during leg 2, moving their teams up 7 places. Guy Schott, 48, of Spacesheep Travelers took his team from 13th to 6th while turning in a fine time of 15:35. Larry Meredith, 53, had Going Down With The Sheep on the stampede, improving from 20th to 13th, and Craig Ruggles, took Beat By The Kids up the same number of positions into 28th place. Porter moved his Abandoned Sheep! up 6 spots, as did Mike Carpenter, 48, of Are We Done Yet?. Teams gaining 5 places included Running Behind, with Rob Main, 52, hauling his rear closer to the front; Good Sheep Lollipops right on Main's buns with Dave Goodwin, 53, doing the dirty work; and Tessa Berg's efforts mentioned above for Slowly But Surely.

Leg Three: Gurlz Getting Tuffer

Competition in the female category of teams suddenly became interesting on Leg 3, when Slowly But Surely came on like a glacier to cut D.A.A.M. Good's lead from several minutes to just 2 seconds. Sheila Masi, 56, nearly caught Ashlee Ruggles, 11, in the process. In their rear-view mirrors, just a few seconds back, was the irrepressible Tuff Girls Knit Cardigans team, with Nied, 41, carrying the flag to a 20:36 split. It was going to come down to the final leg.



Which was true in the other 2 categories, as well. Among men, a game of leap frog continued, and the biggest leaper was an Old Cadaver, John Staroba, 31, blazing a 14:33 to move his team from 3rd to 1st at the final exchange. Heart & Sole's Peck, 16, rolled in just 8 seconds after Staroba, setting up a showdown for the overall team title. Another half-minute back was the young Papa Americano squad with Jamie Goldfield, 17, carrying the baton (figuratively). They held a 2-minute lead in the 16-19 division over What Can Brown Do For You? but that team had local high school superstar Luis Luna, 16, waiting in the wings and the question posed by their team name would soon be answered.

In the mixed division, Lydon, a newcomer to the 50+ age group, stretched the lead for Chasing 409 to nearly a minute-and-a-half over Tom's Girls. Lydon's 18:56 on the downhill leg established her as the #2 all-time woman in that division. Both teams, however, were being stalked by Luis Balderas, 18, of What's That Smell? In the biggest move of the day for any team, Balderas gassed past 12 other teams and chopped nearly 3 minutes from the gap to give his crew a shot at Chasing 409 as the last leg began.

Movers: Matching Balderas' blitzkrieg through the team rankings by taking 12 victims was Sean Fitzpatrick, 39, running for In The Nick of Time. Two teams improved by 4 spots during the 3rd leg, Walking Wounded getting it done with the help of Jim Parks, 57, and Justin Donte, 14, getting his Speedos going.

Leg Four: Brave Heart Saves Soles

When all was said and done, youth would triumph on the men's side while experience was the deciding factor among the female teams. And while youth made a frantic charge for the mixed team title a wily veteran had just enough left to fend off the challenge.

Wolf-Root, 24, a graduate of Maria Carrillo High School anchoring for Heart & Sole, quickly erased the 8-second lead given to Peter Egerton, 33, a former Santa Rosa High runner finishing the race for Old Cadavers. Wolf-Root pulled away to an eventual 29-second margin of victory and his 14:03 leg put him on the All-Time 20-29 division list at 5th place. Both teams ran fast enough to make the Top Ten All-Time list at Valley Ford, Heart & Sole sitting at the 7th spot with a combined mark of 57:58 and Old Cadavers right behind them in 8th with a 58:27.

Jose Mendoza, 16, a current Montgomery HS runner, lost over a minute to Luna of What Can Brown Do For You? but was able to nail down third place for Papa Americano and finish with a team time of under one hour. It was the 3rd-fastest M16-19 team in event history. Luna's 13:50 was the fastest uphill time of the day and places him 3rd all-time for the 16-19 division.

Tuff Gurlz Knit Cardigans completed their long climb to the top of the women's race when Joseph, 40, anchored with a 17:18, the 2nd-best uphill time of the day for women and also the 2nd-best masters time in race history. The youngsters claiming to be D.A.A.M. Good showed that they were indeed with Delaney White, 12, bringing them home in 2nd place among female teams. White's time of



21:06 is now the 5th-fastest time ever for girls 10-12 and the team recorded the 2nd-best divisional time in race history. Robin Stovall, 51, brought her team Slowly But Surely home in 3rd place and helped her team earn the 3rd-best all-time mark for women 40-49. Another all-female team, appropriately named The Littles, ran the 3rd-best time ever for girls 15-and under. That team was made up of Olivia Ruggles, 9, Anais Vargaas, 9, MacKenzie Mathewson, 9, and Amanda White, 10.

The mixed race victory was secured for Chasing 409 by Paul Berg, 55, who finished just 17 seconds before the hard-charging youngster Joe Carrillo, 17, of What's That Smell? Carrillo finished in 15:05. Vernon Stafford, 56, who had already run an uphill leg in 18:19 for Operation Sheepskin earlier that morning, finished things off for Abandoned Sheep!, running just one second slower the second time around. That gave the team 3rd place in the mixed division.

Making the individual all-time list during the final leg was Jon Hermstad, 62, running 18:36 to place 4th in the history of his age group.

Movers: The most impact in the team standings during leg 4 was the 5-place improvement by Gerald McCormick, whose Heart & Sole team for which he ran the leadoff leg had already won. McCormick anchored Operation Sheepskin from 18th to 13th place. Sid Andreis, 30, took down 4 teams to get Two Young & Two Old into the top 10, placing 9th overall. In The Nick Of Time continued to move up through the rankings, Nick Utter-Leyton, 22, gaining another 4 spots. That team came from 41st place after leg 1 to 19th at the finish. As noted above, Carrie Joseph completed the come-from-behind win for Tuff Gurlz Knit Cardigans by taking down a total of 4 teams on the final leg.

Larry Meredith



The END