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Not up for a marathon? Try a relay race.

By [Vicky Hallett](#), Published: February 13



On New Year's Day, [when you vowed](#) to run a marathon this year, it probably seemed like an awesome idea. And then the champagne wore off.

Maybe you researched some training programs and realized you just can't devote the time. Or you saw that as many as 90 percent of folks training for marathons get injured. Or your background is in team sports and the idea of going for a goal solo now seems lonely.

Whatever the reason for your resolution dissolution, I have a backup plan: Run a relay.

Splitting up the work means you don't need to train as hard or as long, plus you're guaranteed to have at least one person cheering for you. In the case of

the [Delaware Marathon](#) (May 13), you could have seven teammates. “A lot of people aren’t going to run 26.2 miles, but they want to be a part of it,” says Wayne Kursch, the director of the race, which is introducing an eight-person relay option this year.

The marathon’s four-person option has been popular, but Kursch realized that even 6.55 miles was a hurdle to entry for some would-be runners. Offering to cut down the distance to a little over a 5K “is a great way to bump up the numbers,” says Kursch, who hopes to lure 3,000 participants.

Plenty of other races are also welcoming runners who don’t want to go the distance. The [Walt Disney World Marathon Weekend](#) featured a relay for the first time last month. The [Marine Corps Historic Half marathon](#) (May 20), launched last year, is growing from 100 teams to 250 teams. And the relay at this year’s inaugural [Rock ‘n’ Roll USA Marathon](#) (March 17) is sold out.

When you hear runners talk “relays” these days, however, chances are they mean the long-distance, overnight kind. There’s nothing new about getting 12 people to take turns covering 200 miles over 30 hours. This year marks the 31st running of Oregon’s [Hood to Coast](#), which has 12,600 participants, making it the largest relay in the world.

In the D.C. region, the granddaddy of overnight relays is [Tom’s Run](#), which was founded in 1999 and stretches from the northwest corner of Maryland to Washington. It’s not a race, which is part of the appeal to participants such as Ben Richter. “The idea is all of the teams finish at the same time, so you have to figure out what everyone’s pace is going to be, and then every team starts at a different time,” says Richter, a vice president of the [D.C. Road Runners Club](#). All that planning leads to a real sense of camaraderie — and a lot of fun.

Recently, there’s been a tremendous surge of interest in overnight relay racing, thanks to a company called [Ragnar](#). It started in 2004 with one event in Utah and now manages 15 across the country, including one that ends in the District (Sept. 21-22). Chief executive Chris Infurchia says Ragnar is mapping out 10 additional courses in the United States, and the next step is taking Ragnar global.

When that happens, you can expect to see 33-year-old Justin Petitt of Columbia on a plane with 11 friends. Like many Ragnar runners, he was fairly inexperienced when he did his first relay in 2010. His only race since high school was a 5K that took nearly 40 minutes. But between the bonding in the van with his teammates, the sense of accomplishment from playing a part in

logging 200 miles and the chance to wear costumes, he was hooked. “I’m nuts about this race,” says Petitt, who has now done four and serves as a Ragnar ambassador.

The key difference between overnight relays and most other long-distance running events is that they’re meant to be social. “A marathon is 90 percent about running. A relay isn’t,” says Bob Fleshner, director for another race in the D.C. region, the [American Odyssey Relay](#) (April 27-28). Although some participants wind up running about 20 miles over three legs, the breaks make that distance feasible for most casual joggers. “As far as training is concerned, if you can do a 10K, you can survive. If you can do 8 to 10 miles comfortably, you’ll enjoy it,” Fleshner says.

Wanting to enjoy an event was precisely why Seth Gottesman started the [Freedom 50 Relay](#) (April 21), in which nine team members cover 50 miles along the C&O Canal. The goal is to be as low-key as possible, says Gottesman, who notes that during last year’s debut, a dog ran one leg. That level of challenge is just his speed nowadays. “With running, you reach a point where there’s diminishing returns, maybe even negative returns,” he says. “I’ve done three marathons. Now, I’m done with that.”

On the other hand, Petitt, the Ragnar fanatic, may just be beginning. “A marathon was something I never thought I’d be able to do,” he says. As his relay experiences have given him confidence, Petitt’s views have changed. “I haven’t signed up for a marathon yet,” he says. “But I’ve thought about it.”