

## 2021 Relay Team Profile: Tara and Sean and Doug and Jaimie

Conversations can have very tangible consequences, including the creative kind.

One recent conversation prompted four State College runners to form a relay team for the Tussey Mountainback 50 Mile Relay and Ultramarathon, set for Oct. 31 in Rothrock State Forest.

Some have run the event before and remember favorite moments, and for others it will be a whole new experience.

"I don't remember offhand how many times, but I've run the race as an ultra and on teams ranging from 2 to 6 people," said Tara Murray Grove, a librarian at Penn State. "I've also reported on the race for the *Centre Daily Times*, which was just as much fun as running it. A favorite moment would have to be finishing the last quarter mile or so of the ultra with a whole crew of friends—many of whom I've run on Mountainback teams with—running alongside me. A least favorite moment would be the 10 or so miles before that when my body decided it was done running for the day."

"I have never run this race," said Sean Devlin, product manager for a small technology company. "But I have done the Tussey Teasers (a series of short races in spring and summer on parts of the course). My favorite moment was the race to Whipple Dam, after the hill climb!"

Those who run the race and then come back to do it again must have a good reason.

"The location is great! I don't have to deal with flights or hotel rooms," said Doug Schunk, a chemistry and forensic science teacher at State College Area High School, drumline instructor with the State High Marching Band and assistant coach for the State College boys cross country team. "I can sleep in my own bed and be at my house getting ready with less than an hour until gun time. The relay is especially fun because you can run it with friends and enjoy the day out in the woods."

Schunk also appreciates the course's mostly gravel road surface.

"For me, I'm not a big fan of trails. I have enough trouble not tripping on even sidewalks. The ultra is perfect for me because it's fire roads with crushed gravel. That's about as trailly as I get."

"The Teasers convinced me," said Devlin, "plus the idea of running it as part of a team is more fun. I'm excited to be part of the big event for the first time."

A single conversation can be all it takes to set team building into action.

"Tara reached out to me about organizing a team this year," said Jaimie Wright, a writer and editor, "and I immediately thought of Doug and Sean. Tara and I thought it would be fun to put together a master's team (all runners at least 40 years old), and Doug recently joined

the rest of us in becoming a master's runner. Doug and I also run track workouts together on Wednesday mornings. My family hangs out quite a bit with Sean's family, and he and I talk about running. I figured it would be fun to run together, rather than talk about it, and our families could join us at the finish line."

Wright said a lot of the team members' training has been on their own.

"We generally train separately, but it would be fun to get together for one or two group runs before race day!"

Devlin said his running season so far has generally been good.

"I had some nagging body tweaks early in the year, but the Teasers were essential to keep me motivated."

Each participating relay team needs to choose in advance a rotation order the runners will follow through the 12 sections of the course. In this case, the four runners will each run one of the first four legs and then repeat the same runner sequence twice more over the rest of the course. The 12 legs range in length—between 2.9 and 5.6 miles—and difficulty.

"We still haven't decided our running order," said Grove. "With a four-person team, there really isn't an easy combination, and all of us seem willing to take on the challenges of the course."

Sometimes the zeal a runner feels for the sport rubs off on family and friends – and sometimes not.

"I wish!" said Wright. "My dream since high school has been to have someone else in my family run with me. When my husband and I were dating (in what he called the "wooing stage"), we trained and ran a marathon together. He said he'd never run another one again, but he runs on occasion. I tried to get my mom to pick up running, but she chose pickleball instead. I've begged my boys to try running—so far, I'm 0 for 3. I was thrilled when my middle son joined the Nittany Valley Track Club, but he gravitated to the javelin because it reminded him of being a ninja. I'm still hopeful one of them will pick up running."

"I have a group of friends in California, where I used to live, who run," said Devlin, "and we keep each other motivated and even met up for races in the former times."

The Mountainback event welcomes both recreational and competitive runners to participate on relay teams of 2 to 8 runners, as well as offering the solo ultramarathon option.

Proceeds from this year's event will support CommonFood Centre County, a non-profit, all-volunteer group whose key mission is to resource underserved and under-employed elderly, single parent families, and low-income families in Centre County and neighboring areas with nutritious food and related services.