



BY JOHN BINGHAM



SHIP SHAPE

A group of runners on a boat dream up an ingenious marathon

I CAN'T COUNT THE NUMBER OF TIMES I've sat in the aftermath of some personal or professional disaster and thought: "It seemed like a good idea at the time." But every now and then a-good-idea-at-the-time *really* is a good idea. The inaugural Great Alaskan Maritime Marathon was one of those ideas.

It all started in 2002, when a group from RUNNER'S WORLD got together on a cruise ship with a bunch of other runners and went to Alaska. As you might expect, the trip was filled with running. We ran circles around the ship's deck. We ran on the treadmills in the ship's gym. Heck, we even ran at 11:30 p.m. so that we could indulge in the midnight chocolate buffet. But the best runs were when we came into port. Local running clubs met us and we got to experience an Alaska that tourists never get to see.

In 2004, we climbed aboard again, this time sailing south from Seward through the Inside Passage and ending in Vancouver. Just like the first cruise, we met the locals for fun runs at every stop. As much fun as all this "fun running" was, however, there was something missing: a sense of competition.

Don't get me wrong. I'm a *big* fan of running just for the fun of it. But the thought at the time was that some good old-fashioned competition could help us organize

our running—adding some purpose to our pleasure. Of course, just having the fastest person win wouldn't work, since everyone would know from the first day of the cruise who the winner would be.

Instead, we came up with the Great Alaskan Maritime Marathon. First thing after setting sail on the 2006 cruise, we had a one-mile time-trial where we all established our "base" pace. Then we held a staged marathon covering 26.2 miles over four days—a two-mile run on the ship's deck, a half-marathon in beautiful Juneau, a 4.9-mile run through the magical Sitka National Historical Park, and a 10-K trail run in the wilderness of Ketchikan. The winner would be the person who came closest to averaging his or her base pace over the four days.

I don't want to say that the competition was fierce, but one woman in the group, whose luggage had gotten lost, ran the time-trial in a borrowed pair of running shoes and her bathrobe. Each day we had a stage winner, à la the Tour de France, and a male and female overall leader.

And the stages themselves were incredible. Imagine being three miles into a half-marathon, running on Douglass Island along the Gastineau Channel, and seeing a humpback whale breaching. Would you stop to take a picture? Most of us did. Or how about looking up and seeing a bald eagle, talons forward, headed right for your salmon-colored running gloves. Needless to say, I totally forgot about my pace for *that* mile.

In the end, the combination of competition and camaraderie made us all feel like winners. And the hospitality shown by the local running clubs (like the cases of beer waiting for us at the end of the half-marathon) was proof of something we all want to believe: that runners anywhere will welcome runners everywhere.

Waddle on, friends. 

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