Running the Shawangunk Ridge Trail

Who needs a marked course?

BY KENNETH A. POSNER

Where's George?

It's 9:00 P.M. I'm standing at checkpoint #6, high in the Shawangunk Mountains. The woods, tangled and dark, envelop us. One volunteer is still here, but I had let search and rescue stand down at dusk. That might have been a bad call.

George is nothing if not motivated and self-reliant. And he's following the Shawangunk Ridge Trail, a footpath blazed through the forest. But some of the blazes are tricky to find, especially at night. And there are no supplemental markings, not a single flour arrow or scrap of engineer tape anywhere on the course. George could be disoriented, not to mention that he's moving through his second night without sleep. He could be stumbling around in a daze. He could be totally lost.

I'm the race director. It's my second night without sleep, too. Now I'm wondering if George brought extra batteries for his headlamp.

Fifteen minutes pass. I'm staring at my watch, blinking back fatigue, trying to figure out what to do if George is crashing through the woods without light, lying injured on a pile of rocks, or simply asleep by the side of the trail.

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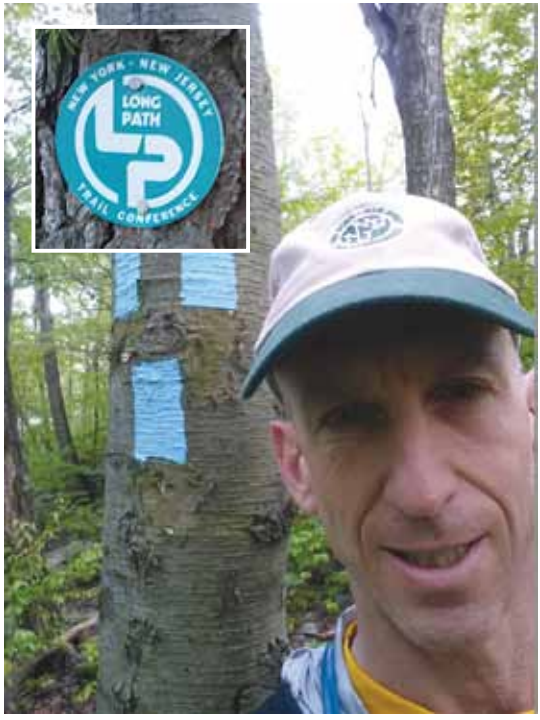
By way of background, I first discovered the Shawangunk Ridge Trail (SRT) during August 2013 while exploring the Long Path, a 350-mile hiking trail in New York's Hudson Valley.

The Long Path's intriguing aqua blazes lured me deep into the Shawangunk Mountains, where the Long Path is aligned with (runs on the same path as) the SRT for roughly 30 miles. I followed the narrow, winding trail through forests of mixed hardwoods, past quiet ponds, over rolling hills. For a mile or two the path paralleled an active railway; a train clattered down the tracks, startling me. A blaze beckoned uphill. Soon I was passing a sea of marsh reeds waving in the sun, surrounded by brilliant green hills. Then the path ducked under a highway and cut through a small town before climbing back onto high ground. I pushed through scrub oak and blueberry, the vegetation scratching my legs, and caught glimpses



Courtesy of Kenneth Posner

▶ Setting off on an attempt to thru-run the Shawangunk Ridge Trail (SRT), at the trail's southern terminus in High Point State Park, where it meets the Appalachian Trail. Inset: The Long Path and the SRT are co-aligned for about 30 miles. Over this stretch, you'll encounter the distinctive blazes for both trails at key intersections. If you miss the blazes, however, you may wander for miles in the wrong direction.

of distant ridges and valleys. The sun set in an incandescent swirl. Snatches of music from somewhere deep in the valley drifted on the dusk breeze.

A few miles later, the Long Path veered up and over the ridgeline and angled off toward the Catskills, while the SRT continued straight. I said good-bye to this strange little trail in the Shawangunks but vowed to return.

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If you're not familiar with the Shawangunks, these mountains are formed of a distinctive white conglomerate composed of quartzite and silicon. Summit ledges gleam where they were scoured and polished by ancient glaciers. The slopes are covered in great blocks that have cracked away from the cliffs. Rocks lie scattered across the trails. Under a full moon, the conglomerate seems to glow in the dark.

The conglomerate accumulated from the erosion of the Taconic Mountains, which formed 500 million years ago when ancestral Europe collided against the coast of North America. Over the next hundred million years, the Taconics eroded until nothing remained but the rolling hills of eastern New York. Sediment from these mountains accumulated in strata and then compressed into plates of conglomerate. Two hundred million years ago, these plates were tilted out of the ground by the collision of ancestral Africa with North America, which buckled the earth's crust from Alabama to Maine, creating the Appalachians. Indeed, the Shawangunks mark the western edge of the Great Appalachian Valley.

Fast forward to the present. Many of New York's largest parks, including Harriman, the Catskills, and the Adirondacks, sprang into existence through legislation during the 19th century. Starting only 50 years ago, private organizations began to

acquire parcels in the Shawangunks, with a vision of preserving a greenway that would one day connect the entire mountain range. These organizations include the Open Space Institute, the Nature Conservancy, the Wallkill Valley Land Trust, the Mohonk Preserve, and the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference. The Trail Conference conceived of the idea of a single trail that would traverse the entire mountain range, and its volunteers developed and blazed the SRT, which they continue to maintain.

The work of these organizations is not complete, however. In certain areas, commercial development poses a risk to the integrity of the greenway and the SRT.

It occurred to me that holding a race along the SRT would help elevate the trail's profile, bring out more users, and encourage support for further conservation. But before I could organize a race, I first had to scout out the full extent of this curious trail.

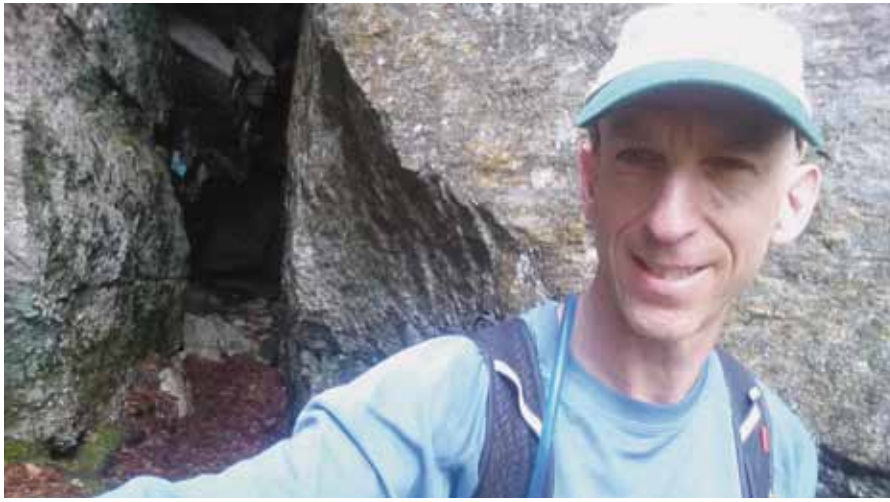
The chance to do so occurred later that fall. I started at the SRT's southern terminus, located at a junction with the Appalachian Trail in High Point State Park, New Jersey. I took a moment to scan the panoramic views as an icy wind danced across the summit. The white conglomerate cliffs of Minnewaska State Park were sparkling in the morning sun, some 40 or 50 miles distant.

And then I was off, running slowly but steadily through the woods. After a few miles, I reached the intersection with the Long Path, bringing me back on familiar territory. I ran through the afternoon, into the evening, and until the sun rose again. Past a waterfall high on the ridge, the Long Path turned left, and this time I stuck to the SRT. It took me along a range of low cliffs with vistas of the distant Catskill Mountains. Then the trail dropped into a field of conglomerate boulders deep in the woods, squeezed through a fissure in the rocks, scrambled up the face of a cliff, and ducked beneath a frozen waterfall. This was a narrow, rocky, technical, challenging, and somewhat crazy trail and a journey through a magical landscape.

Then it started raining. I lost track of the blazes but kept going in what I thought was the right direction, looking for the turnoff to Rosendale, New York, the SRT's northern terminus. I couldn't find it. Out came my phone; I tried to access the mapping function, but rain was beading up on the touch screen, obscuring the display, and my fingers were going numb. Overwhelmed by the forces of nature, I gave up. (The turnoff was a quarter mile away.)

I took another stab at thru-running the SRT the following May. This time I headed out from High Point in the early evening. The sun dropped behind a bank of clouds, illuminating the horizon in a band of orange light, punctuated by a lone squall.

This time the rocky trails were familiar. I found the turnoff to Rosendale and ran along an old rail bed in the dark, accompanied by the weird sounds of frogs and katydids calling from nearby marshlands. And then I was crossing a railway



Courtesy of Kenneth Posner

▲ Emerging from a "squeeze"-through rock fissure on the Shawangunk Ridge Trail.

trestle high above rushing water. I had arrived in Rosendale. It had taken me 29 hours to complete the SRT's 74-mile length, an unimpressive time by ultrarunning standards. But since no one had ever run the SRT before, this was the fastest known time and hence a record of sorts.

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Now I began to ponder the format for a race. According to conventional wisdom, trail races should have abundantly stocked aid stations, friendly volunteers, and carefully marked courses. But why follow the straight and narrow? I wanted to evoke the feeling of adventure I had experienced while exploring the Long Path and SRT. Accordingly, I decided there would be no aid stations and no supplemental markings. While we would have checkpoints for safety, the runners would have to be self-sufficient. They could filter water from streams. They could bring their own food. No one would hold their hands.

Navigation would be interesting. On the Long Path and SRT I had struggled in several places to follow the blazes. When you're running on a rough trail, you look down—so you don't trip on rocks and roots. This makes it easy to miss a blaze painted chest high on a tree. Further, the colors and spacing of the Long Path and SRT blazes keep changing as these long-distance trails hop among a network of local paths. Miss a key blaze at a trail junction, and you could go miles out of your way before recognizing the mistake. Worried that you might have missed a turn? Better retrace your steps to the last junction and start over. Wander off the path at night? Good luck finding it again.

Well, this was all part of the challenge of thru-running. It was part of the adventure.

Henry David Thoreau, 19th-century transcendentalist and author of *Walden*, once wrote, "For a man needs only to be turned round once with his eyes shut in this world to be lost."

And it is only then, he continued, that "we appreciate the vastness and strangeness of nature."

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The next step was to arrange a permit. I recruited my friend Todd Jennings to help organize and direct the race, and together we called upon the superintendent of Minnewaska State Park Preserve, the largest preserve in the Shawangunks. Todd and I explained how the race would start in the morning and go through the night, just like any other ultramarathon. The superintendent pointed out that the park is closed during the hours of darkness. Todd and I were taken aback.

Then he asked, "Why would you want people to run through the most beautiful part of the Shawangunks in the dark?"

He had raised a good point. We decided to start the 74-mile race Friday evening. We agreed to set up checkpoints and establish cutoff times to ensure everyone was through Minnewaska before dark.

Then he asked another question. "Have you thought about search and rescue?"

We had not, but we allowed it might be a good idea.

Now we moved into high gear to organize the race. The Trail Conference put out the word to its members. People began to sign up.

I took a group out for a training run on the course. The thick vegetation I had pushed through previously had gotten worse; in some places, we couldn't see the ground. Hearing of this, Trail Conference volunteers sprang into action, organizing several weekend outings to hack back the shrub oak and blueberry and mow the tall grass that encroached upon the trail.

Because of the piecemeal fashion in which the Shawangunks have been preserved, there are several jurisdictions through which the SRT passes. We submitted six permit applications. At the last moment, we had to submit three more.

The deadline was looming to order shirts and finishers' medals, but we didn't know how many, as people were still signing up.

The Trail Conference had promised maps for the participants, but we hadn't gotten them yet. I stopped by its headquarters Friday morning, the day of the race, to pick them up. Then I had to drive to the finish line in Rosendale to shuttle the five runners in the 74-mile division to the start at High Point. I arrived late. Then I had to stop for gas. We were slipping behind schedule. The illusion of control was beginning to waver.

Blaise Pascal, 17th-century mathematician and father of probability theory, once wrote, "We sail within a vast sphere, ever drifting with uncertainty, driven from end to end." Indeed, organizing a race is no easy matter. Possibly it's as difficult as following a little-used trail in the middle of the night and certainly just as confusing.

High Point State Park, Friday, September 19, 2014, 6:25 P.M.

I'm standing below the Memorial Tower at High Point State Park in New Jersey, about to deliver the race briefing to the five participants, including George, who are taking on all 74 miles of the SRT in the inaugural edition of the race. A 32-mile division on the northern half of the SRT will start tomorrow morning, and on Sunday we'll hold a 20-mile event.

I shout, "Go!" Philip takes an early lead. He flies through the parking lot at the base of the tower, following the blazes without hesitation. Map and compass clutched in one hand, he vaults over a guardrail, plunges into the tree line, and disappears in shadows.

David Clarke, field team leader from New Jersey Search and Rescue (NJSAR), walks up to confer. If someone gets lost or injured, it's his mission to locate and extract them.

At an altitude of 1,803 feet, High Point is indeed the highest point in New Jersey. Up here the late September evening is cool and breezy. From this vantage, Dave and I can see the Shawangunk Mountains spiraling off to the northeast. Forty miles distant, just barely visible along the horizon, a line of white cliffs is gleaming in the dusk. Down below us, lights are coming on in the valley. The sun sets in a golden flare.

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▲ Five hardy runners who would take on the 74-mile Shawangunk Ridge Trail, standing at High Point State Park with the northern Shawangunks visible in the distance. Left to right: Craig Palmer, Jeremy Fulton, George Grzyb, Paul Fost, and Philip Whitten.

I leave High Point, drive a couple of miles, and pull over onto the side of the road. The runners will emerge from the woods here, run along the asphalt for a half mile, and then turn into the forest again. I wonder how they're doing following the SRT. Darkness is falling quickly. I punch the hazard lights.

Almost immediately, Philip springs from the woods and is on the road running uphill before I can point which way to go.

A few minutes pass. I walk a hundred yards into the woods. Lights are bouncing through the trees. Paul and Craig are soon in sight, and a few minutes later George passes by.

I walk farther into the woods looking for Jeremy. Some time passes before his light appears. A few moments later, he's alongside me. He pauses and pans the beam in a wide arc, scanning for the next blaze. This section of the SRT is not heavily traveled, and the treadway is faint. He heads off—in the wrong direction. I shout for him. He corrects course.

I drive a couple of miles ahead, waiting for Jeremy to leave the woods onto another paved road. He trots along under my close gaze.

Now I'm waiting at the next trailhead. Philip must have beaten me here; I never see him. Over the next hour, Paul, Craig, and George pass through. Jeremy arrives a little while later.

Back in the car, I drive to the first checkpoint and find NJSAR on station. I'm astonished to hear that Philip is already through.

We stand around waiting for the others. It's a cold night, windy and dank. The NJSAR team members are bundled up in bright orange jackets.

I offer to get pizza. Heads shake. Standard operating procedures call for each team member to bring 48 hours' worth of food—just in case they get sent out for real. Mostly they stand around, waiting, monitoring, on call. For a SAR team member, the opportunity to actually rescue a missing person is pretty rare.

It's after midnight now. I'm starting to worry. Despite the care with which I had made the calculations, Philip is now well ahead of my projections for the front of the field. Jeremy is well behind projections for the back. Small as it is, the field is spreading out over a much greater distance than I had imagined. I need to get moving; I need to catch up with Philip.

Soon I'm pulling into checkpoint #2. A team from NJSAR is already here. Minutes later, Philip shows up. He's on a torrid pace. If he keeps it up, he's going to shatter my record. I'm ecstatic that we've gotten such a strong athlete to participate. A strong performance will help make the inaugural race a success.

Philip pauses for a half step, mentions that he's been suffering from nausea, and then hikes up a steep bank and vanishes into the forest.

The phone's ringing. It's David at checkpoint #1. There's still no sign of Jeremy. I hesitate and decide to leave David minding the rear while I move forward to checkpoint #3.

Now it's sometime after 3:00 A.M. I'm at checkpoint #3, huddled in my vehicle, with the engine running and the heat on full strength.

The phone rings. It's David. There's still no sign of Jeremy. He never made it to the first checkpoint. An SAR team is backtracking along the trail looking for him.

I wish I could call Jeremy. We required the runners to carry cell phones so they could call us if they got lost. But to conserve battery life, most of them have the power off.

The phone rings again. This time it's Jeremy. He got turned around, he explains. Now he's lost the trail. He doesn't know where he is. He's going to sit in place and wait for daybreak. He needs to hang up; the battery is almost dead.

What's the last landmark he can recall? He was walking along train tracks. Then he followed the blazes uphill and back into the woods.

Now I'm on the phone with David, at the same time flipping back and forth between two maps, directing him to Jeremy's most likely location.

A few minutes later, the phone rings. They've found him.

Around 5:00 A.M., Philip shows up. He's four or five hours ahead of my split when I thru-ran the trail. But his nausea has gotten worse. He has been throwing up and can't keep anything down.

I've got to hold him up, because under our permit, runners aren't permitted into Minnewaska State Park until 5:30 A.M. I usher Philip into my vehicle. He collapses in the back seat, huddled in a blanket.

A few minutes later NJSAR drops off Jeremy.

The skies lighten a little after 6:00 A.M. We're now roughly 12 hours into the race. After an hour's break, Philip has pulled himself together and is out of the vehicle, heading up South Gully to Sam's Point, a preserve that sits high on the mountain, about halfway between the start of the SRT at High Point and the finish in Rosendale. The South Gully trail is very steep, rising 1,500 feet in three miles. Even with his break, Philip is still on pace to set a new record.

I meet him at the parking area in Sam's Point an hour or so later. He's done. He can't shake the stomach bug. I'm disappointed the run has ended for him, but Paul, Craig, and George are still on the course.

The phone rings. It's Paul. He and Craig are nearing checkpoint #3, but they're ready to call it quits. They covered 40 miles, moving steadily through the night, working together to stay on course. But the rough trail was more than they had bargained for.

I drive back to checkpoint #3 to pick them up. I had left the timesheet on a clipboard. I see George's initials on the paper. He passed through at 8:06 A.M., while I was up at Sam's Point. He's still moving—and two hours ahead of my split.

Five started . . . and now there is only one.

A little later that morning, I post an update on Facebook. "George is the last of the 74-milers, and he's on track to set a new record." People love it. Everyone is cheering for him.

* * *

Sam's Point Search and Rescue comes on station at 6:30 A.M., relieving the New Jersey unit, which stands down. One of the Sam's Point SAR teams spots George inside Minnewaska State Park at 10:10 A.M. And then he is logged passing through checkpoint #4 at 4:30 P.M. He should be arriving here, at checkpoint #5, momentarily.

I hope so. It's 5:45 P.M., almost 24 hours since the race started, and deep in the woods it's starting to get dark again.

The 32-mile division has already passed through checkpoint #5, and I have accountability for every participant. George is the last runner in Minnewaska State Park, and he needs to be out before dark so I can report 100 percent compliance with the permit.

As an extra control, an SAR team is sweeping the trail from checkpoint #4 to checkpoint #5. If George is slowing down or having problems, they'll catch him from behind.

I look at my watch. It's getting late. I walk a half mile into the woods, looking for George. I don't see him; instead I encounter the SAR team.

"Did you see George?"

They stare at me blankly.

How could they have missed him? I drill them with questions. They brief me on every person they saw: full descriptions. Evidently they were paying attention.

So where is George?

I pull out the map. If he went downhill, there's a lot of green space, countless acres of empty forest.

I need to talk to the SAR team leader. There's no cell service here. I run back to the checkpoint, unsure of what to do.

And then George comes barreling out of the woods. "You're the last of the 74-milers," I yell at him. He's surprised. I try to brief him on the next section of the trail—but he doesn't stop.

Glancing over his shoulder, he says, "I'm determined to break your record."

* * *

And now it's 9:00 P.M., and I'm standing at checkpoint #6, waiting for George to show up. But he doesn't.

I'm looking at my watch, wondering how I'm going to conduct a nighttime search operation with a single volunteer whose shift ended an hour ago.

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◀ Runners from the 32-mile division of the Shawangunk Ridge Trail race.

The digits on the watch face march onward, ever so slowly. Now I'm thinking, *If he doesn't show up soon, he' ll miss his shot at the record.*

It's 9:30 P.M., and I'm heading down the trail on the side of a steep slope, through a tunnel of twisted trees. Down below, lights flicker in the valley. I walk a full mile. No sign of George. I turn around and retrace my steps to the checkpoint. There is a ranger on duty at the Mohonk Preserve, a private preserve located between Minnewaska and Rosendale. I should call him to report that we have a problem.

I dial the phone. The ranger answers on the third ring. I look up. There's a light flickering through the branches.

"Those are some dark woods," the ranger comments, "Tell George I'm cheering for him."

* * *

It's 12:30 P.M. at the finish line in Rosendale. I'm in my car, dozing. Todd had set up tents festooned with lights. It was quite festive earlier; now it's quiet.

I blink. George has arrived. He's in the tent eating pizza. His time is 31 hours.

I stagger into the tent, still half asleep, and shake George's hand. He might not have broken the record, but he's done a great job.

The first-place award is a ceremonial tomahawk. I explain that the tomahawk was used as a weapon and tool by American Indians and European settlers. It symbolizes the spirit of self-reliance of our forefathers as they moved through the wilderness without guidance or aid.

Now that the event is over, I ask George what he thought of the SRT.

"Damn rugged," he replies. "So close to a major metropolitan area, yet quite removed and rugged. The terrain is the most varied I have seen of any single trail—class 4 rock scrambles, exposed bedrock/slick rock, herd paths, rail trails, road walks, wood roads, etc. Some parts of the traverse were 'meh,' but most were quite beautiful."

He compliments the Trail Conference for preserving this footpath through the Shawangunk Mountains.

How did he get it done? In his words, "My mental challenge was keeping focused, compartmentalizing any pain, and believing in my abilities to complete the traverse."

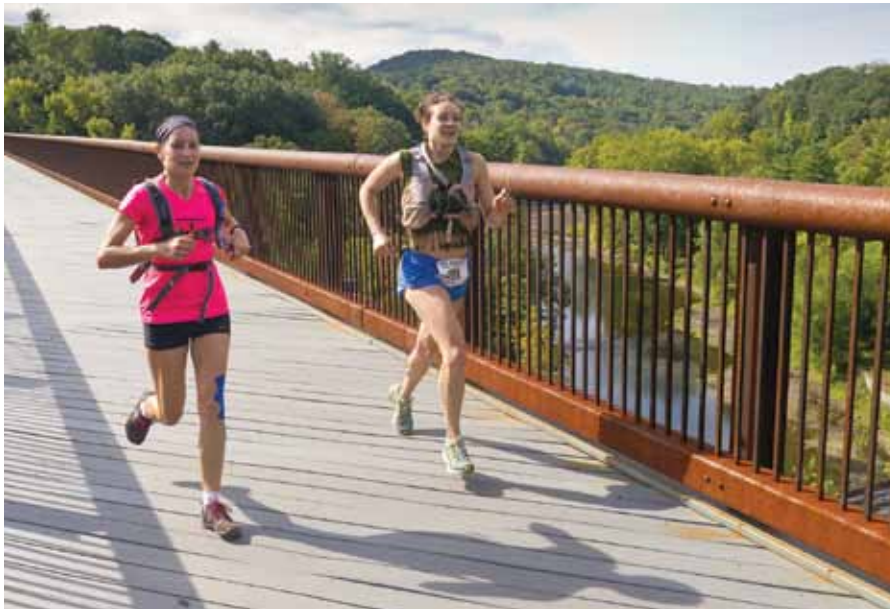
When he heard he was the last of the 74-milers still moving, "The adrenaline kicked in and I had decided right there to make a dedicated push to finish in one go. You should have seen the shit grin on my face and the fire in my eyes!"

* * *

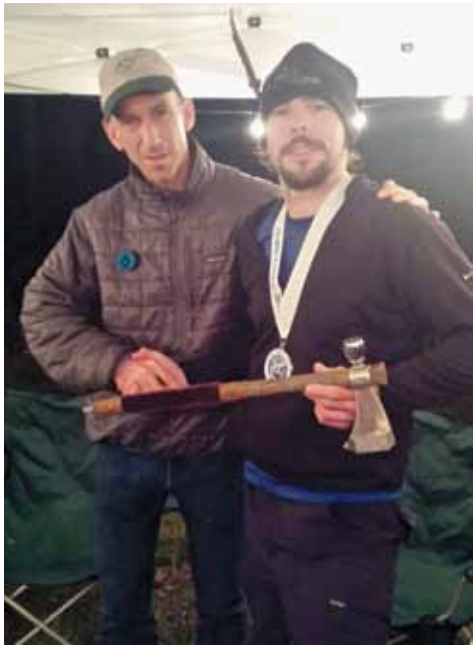
Over the next few weeks, I reflected on what had been accomplished. We had brought some attention to the SRT, a beautiful but little-known trail that traverses one of the earth's last great places, and created a different kind of trail race, one that requires self-reliance and presence of mind.

Participants offered positive feedback. According to a young trail runner named Dylan Armajani:

> The biggest challenge for me was also what made the race so special. In longer endurance events I've become accustomed to becoming a machine where the only thing I have to worry about is that little voice in my head that says "I'm tired, let's stop." Flags tell me where to go, and regular aid stations keep me hydrated and full of fuel. Worrying about



▲ Runners finishing the Shawangunk Ridge Trail race on the restored railway trestle in the town of Rosendale, New York.



Courtesy of Kenneth Posner

▶ George (right) receiving the first place finishers award. The tomahawk symbolizes the spirit of self-reliance.

how much water was left in my bottles, staying on course, and how many energy bars I had left was a foreign feeling for me to experience in a race. I had to consciously choose when to sip water and when to just deal with the feeling of thirst in my throat. It added a whole new layer of consciousness and connectedness to the terrain I was navigating that I had never experienced before. It was both the biggest challenge of the race and also the part I liked the most.

A few weeks later I received an e-mail from Philip. He was planning to come back next year and finish the run. I smiled. Philip would return with a vengeance; he would launch a serious attack on the SRT record.

This got me thinking. I had discovered this strange trail, thru-run it, and organized an event. In the coming years, I would surely run the SRT again, and Todd and I would certainly work to improve and grow the race. OK, but what then?

* * *

One day I was hiking in the woods, trying to find a mountain whose summit had no trail, when an idea occurred to me for a different kind of race. There would be neither aid stations nor markings—there would not even be a trail.

This would be a race against the vastness and strangeness of nature: an event that would celebrate the great sphere of uncertainty through which we are driven, an adventure for those who understand themselves and the land.

Was it reasonable to start dreaming of a new challenge so soon? Undoubtedly not. But I couldn't help imagining what would happen.

I shout the command, "Go!" and then watch as the runners push back branches and peer into the shadows, searching for whatever path they can find that might lead forward. . . .

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