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LIFE OUTSIDE

IN VIRGINIA'S MOUNTAINS

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ANATOMY OF A SWEEP

WHY FINISH LAST?

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ANATOMY OF A SWEEP

What kind of athlete would choose to come in last?

TRAIL MAN
Richard Blackwood, with the Roanoke Chapter of the International Mountain Bicycling Association, leads a group ride on Tuesday nights. He sports a 15-pound pack of supplies when he rides sweep, to be prepared to encourage riders and handle emergencies.

IT'S RACE DAY. You're up early, checking the weather, filling water packs, loading gear. You are going to push some limits today and you want to be prepared.

You arrive for the pre-race meeting, taking in the smell of mown grass, the sound of upbeat tunes, the feel of a welcome breeze. You're warmed up, adrenaline pumping. The starting gun pops. The racers take off.

But you, you're not moving. You're hanging back, waiting for everyone else to go.

That's because today you have volunteered to be a "sweeper" or a "sweep." You've agreed to be the last runner, biker, paddler on the course. You'll help anyone whose hurt, you'll handle equipment failures, pep-talk a racer at their low. You'll carry a heavy pack with extra supplies, be ready to call for help if needed. And you'll clear the course of race markings when the final athletes have pushed through.

It's one of the toughest, most overlooked, most important jobs of any race. And it's not for everyone. Patience, top skills and sometimes even first aid training are required.

But those who sweep embrace even the biggest challenges — long days, distraught athletes, the unpredictability of the outdoors. They say the thrill of seeing a struggling racer cross the finish line can be better than crossing it themselves. Giving back to a sports community that has nurtured them can be priceless. And then there's the sheer joy of spending a day outside in some of the world's most beautiful places — without the pressure of coming home with a medal.

"Sweeping is, without a doubt, my favorite thing to do at a race," says Matt Allenbaugh, a Roanoke Parks and Recreation Outdoor Recreation supervisor. "You get to do the course, you get to chat with people, you're not in a big hurry. Unless something bad happens, it doesn't even feel like work."

FLIPPING THROUGH A DICTIONARY won't turn up this definition of "to sweep." But those who run, ride, paddle — even cross country ski, explore caves or group hike — all know what it means.

First and foremost, it's about giving time to support other athletes. Sweeping is not exclusive to racing, either. Group mountain bike rides and trail runs, road bike tours, plus paddle boarding, kayaking and canoe trips all typically have a leader and a sweeper.

As Outdoor Recreation Coordinator for Roanoke Parks and Recreation, Katherine Andrew has swept

BY CHRISTINA NIFONG | PHOTOS BY HEATHER ROUSSEAU

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SWEEPERS AT WORK
Top: Michelle Scarfe, of Just the Right Gear junior mountain biking teams, keeps tabs on even her youngest riders.
Lower: Amy Paderick (left) and Jeremy Skiff sweep the course at a recent Mountain Junkies running event.

nearly every type of outdoor activity. She has towed boats for kayakers, helped capsized paddlers back into their canoes, supplied paddles to boarders who've dropped theirs. She's changed bike tires and cleaned cuts and bruises. She's talked scared spelunkers into pressing on. She's carried extra water and snacks — and even trekking poles and jackets— for hikers who are fading.

She's endured her share of whining and participant frustration.

"Someone is at their most vulnerable when they're doing something that pushes them," she says.

But Andrew says she's also enjoyed those hours bringing up the rear. "You travel at a lot slower pace at the back," she explains. "You see more wildlife, you notice a lot more."

If there's a sport that calls for sweeps more than any other, it might be mountain biking. In it, speeds are fast, gear can falter and rides often go deep into back country where the chance of encountering help can be nearly nonexistent.

Just ask Richard Blackwood, an avid mountain biker and the rides coordinator for the Roanoke Chapter of the International Mountain Bicycling Association. A mountain biker since before mountain biking was big, Blackwood typically trail rides three times a week plus leads a Tuesday RIMBA group ride.

When he's riding sweep, Blackwood slides on his 15-pound pack full of chain links, tires and bolts, plus a first aid kit equipped to help eight to 10 people, extra water, granola bars and clothing.

He also shifts his attitude.

"It took me a while to learn, you have to get into a different mindset," he says. "If you go in expecting a hard ride and a great workout, you're going to drive yourself and everybody else nuts."

But Blackwood knows the importance of getting help on the trail. He's broken his collar bone twice in his time on two wheels. In November, he was bombing down a fire road in the dark when he fell, hard. Then, he needed the space blanket and ace bandage he had in his pack.

"When I broke my collar bone in 2011, it was four miles back to the car. It could have been really bad if I'd been there out by myself," he says.

Michelle Scarfe has swept hikes as a Wilderness Adventure guide and mountain bike races more recently. These days, she's one of 10 coaches for the Just the Right Gear junior mountain biking team, serving kids ages 4 to 18 years old. Every Wednesday night, she swaps with a parent volunteer, some weeks she's leader, some weeks sweeper. Scarfe prefers sweeper.

"When I'm in front, I feel the pressure of everyone behind me," she explains. "There are too many things to think about: Am I going too fast, too slow? Where is the last person? Is everything okay? When I'm in the back, I can see everyone. I know I can take care of them."

While some rides can be opportunities to instruct and inspire, others can be downright scary. Scarfe was leading a group of kids when she stepped two inches from a rattlesnake. At a Mountain Junkies trail race at Carvins Cove one year, a runner saw a bear and was so shaken she could barely speak miles later as the sweeps helped her cross the finish line, remembers race director and Mountain Junkies co-owner Josh Gilbert.

"Every week at practice I think about whether or not someone's going to get hurt," says Scarfe. "You only have so much control. All the coaches are wilderness first aid trained, but that's not something you ever want to use."

ON A RECENT SUNNY SATURDAY, Jeremy Skiff and Amy Paderick arrived at a Mountain Junkies 10K and half-marathon trail race. They knew the drill. Skiff had been lining up at Mountain Junkies races for the last seven years. But this one would be different.

Though he'd been running 50K ultras, though he competed in the Boston Marathon in April, though he regularly earned a spot on his events' winning podiums, Skiff and Paderick would be sweeping that day's race.

AT THE READY
Richard Blackwood shifts his attitude—from hard-riding competitor to patient supporter—when he takes on the sweeping role.

You've agreed to be the last runner, biker, paddler. You'll help anyone whose hurt, you'll handle equipment failures, pep-talk a racer at their low.

Skiff had recently faced some disappointing MRI results. He had severe osteoarthritis in his hip and a femoral head fracture. The doctor said his trail racing days were over.

Skiff was shocked. Trail running was how he spent his weekends. Mountain Junkies racers had become his friends, his community. What now?

Show up to the course and help out in whatever way he could.

"It was definitely an eye opener for us," Skiff says. In past races, "we run real fast, we get an award, we go home. [This time we saw] there's a lot of people out there that come across that line and there's no one there for them."

Skiff and Paderick embraced their roles as cheerleaders, support staff, course cleaners.

If runners are struggling, Skiff says, "I want to make sure they're okay. Get them to laugh about something. If they say they can't do this or that, we tell them to take it one step at a time. We walk with them. We're there for them. We let them know they're not alone."

Paderick poked pink course flags into her outfit, as she cleared the trails. Skiff wound race tape into a soccer-sized ball. The two danced across the finish line to cheers and applause.

"There's no better way for us to spend our day than with the Mountain Junkies," Paderick says. "It's healing for us to do it together, to be able to give back to people who have given so much to us."

The two say, though the Trail Nut race was their first time sweeping, it won't be their last.

"Even if we can't run next year," says Paderick, "we'll try to be at as many races as we can."