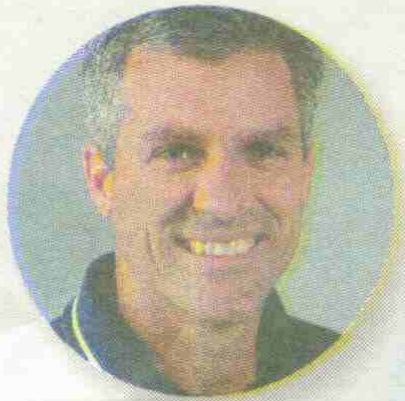


## [Forever Fit / Bill Ward]



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When the first triathlons were staged, the participants were often viewed as eccentrics, exercise freaks or just plain off their rockers. But nearly 30 years later, the sport is global, a multimillion-dollar industry and one of the hottest tickets at the Summer Olympics.

Maybe in a few more decades, the same will be said for off-road running and multievent races. True, they have been around for several years in various formats. But many of the more established events feature intimidating distances beyond marathons — even 100-milers.

Thanks to off-road running enthu-

siasts such as Jim Hartnett and Ricky Howe, these competitions — often called adventure races — have become one of the fastest-growing endurance events in the Tampa Bay area. The two men have joined forces as race directors of a series of local off-road events that are sometimes attracting more runners than some of the area's more established road races.

Their most recent event, the Picnic Island Adventure Run, attracted a crowd of more than 400 people, most of whom knew full well the 3.3-mile race would require them to get their shoes soaking wet and muddy, navigate their way through mangroves and tree branches, crawl under cargo netting, and jump and climb over obstacles.

"A lot of people have something of a mental block about getting off the roads and getting their shoes wet," says Hartnett, a seasoned veteran of both road and off-road races. "But once they do it and see how different it is, a lot of them say, 'Wow, the roads are so boring now.'"

Tampa's Grant Hall is one of those converts. He says he has always considered himself a serious runner. But like many in his sport, the majority of

his training and racing wound up being performed on the roads. Not only can that be a monotonous place to run, the pounding can lead to injuries. And with this being Florida, road running usually means flat, unchanging and uninteresting routes.

“Most times when you’re running the roads, you’re just looking straight ahead and focused on getting to the finish line,” says 39-year-old Hall, a native of northern England. “There’s nothing particularly exciting about that sort of running and racing.”

But then Hall discovered Hartnett and Howe’s original off-road race, the Flatwoods Four Trail Run in northwest Tampa. That event, first staged in 2002, includes a 4-mile course on wooded trails that often feature wildlife along the way. It’s not the type of race you attempt to run your lifetime best time on — and that’s one of the things that made it appealing to Hall.

“Most of these adventure races are held in places that are just gorgeous to run through and take it all in — it’s just a totally different experience,” Hall says. “It’s a real fun run, but at the same

time, it’s very, very challenging.”

Howe thinks the combination of something new and challenging is one of the big attractions of adventure racing. With constantly changing footing and natural and manmade obstacles, runners need to pay close attention to every step along the course.

“It’s not something you put your headphones on and cruise,” Howe says. “It’s considerably more challenging than road racing. Really, it’s almost an entirely different sport.”

If you’re really getting into this sort of thing, Hartnett and Howe also stage the Florida Challenge Trail Run, a half-marathon in Alafia State Park, as well as the Talon Adventure Race, an eight- to 12-hour event that includes mountain biking, trail running and kayak paddling. That’s also staged in Alafia State Park.

This fall, they hope to create an “urban trail” off-road event in the Channel District downtown. This would feature running along sidewalks, up and down stairs, and navigating around and over manmade obstacles.

For information on local trail runs, visit [www.TampaRaces.com](http://www.TampaRaces.com).



Photos by Justin Sawyer for TampaRaces.com