

So You Think You Can Race?

You'll reach new limits of endurance—or die trying.

By the time Joe Decker lumbered to the finish line at last year's PEAK Death Race, an ultra-endurance competition in Pittsfield, Vermont, he was clearly ready to stop moving. Over the course of 28 hours, Decker, a 40-year-old Californian whom Guinness World Records had once labeled "The World's Fittest Man," had jumped, run, and lifted in ways that made a triathlon look like a Jazzercise class.

The highlights included crawling under a maze of barbed wire, cohefting a 14-foot, 300-pound wooden footbridge up and down a mountain, pushing 15 wheelbarrows of sheep manure a mile each way, even translating ancient Greek—all on his way to

covering some 45 miles of ground and capturing first place in a race field that began with 89 but concluded with just 19 finishers.

It was grueling, perhaps a little ridiculous, and certainly one of the hardest races that Decker, a regular addict of these kinds of competitions, had ever signed up for. Which is to say, race co-founders Joe DeSena and Andy Weinberg had done their job.

Contrary to its name, or the three-word waiver ("You may die!") that all its athletes must sign, the Death Race, held each June, isn't supposed to kill you. Set on the grounds of DeSena's luxury eco-friendly inn and spa, Amee Farm, the race is about pushing athletes to find their limits and shutting out the voices telling them to quit.

"The people who compete in triathlons are incredible athletes, but if they get a grain of sand between their toes they have to drop out of the race—it's a disaster,"

says DeSena, a veteran ultra-endurance competitor himself, who once, on a whim, ran the 300 miles from New York City to Killington, Vermont. "We live in a world where anything that goes wrong in life becomes monumental, and that causes you to quit."

Beyond DeSena and Weinberg's moral stand against more-tightly managed races with their planned water breaks and start times, or a life that's devoid of dirt and pain, the Death Race is an inherently Vermont competition, infused with tasks that local farmers need done on their land, from chopping wood to schlepping dirt to cleaning out a barn.

Five years in, the race is catching on. Through their umbrella organization, PEAK Races, DeSena and Weinberg are turning Pittsfield into a hub of extreme competition. A winter Death Race has been added to the mix, as well as a lineup of shorter competitions, including a 30-mile trail run, that give competitors a taste of the bigger event. The goal, DeSena explains, is to show people you don't need to be a Joe Decker to get out of your comfort zone. You just need to put one foot in front of the other and keep going.

"We're not crazy in Pittsfield," DeSena quips. "Everybody else is."

—Ian Aldrich

This summer's Death Race is scheduled for Saturday, June 25. Think you've got what it takes to compete? Visit youmaydie.com for details.

