

WEEKEND

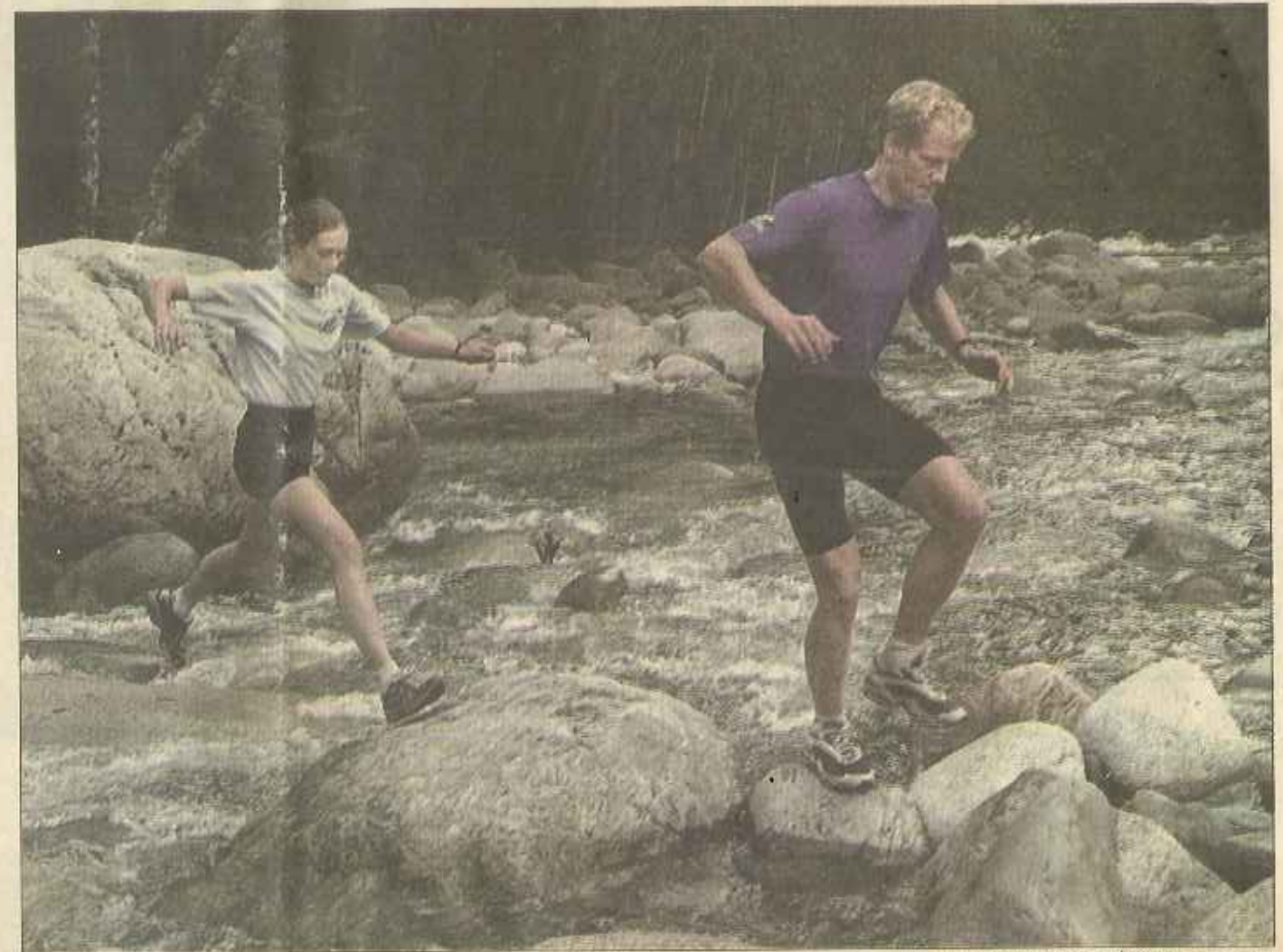
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Hardy runners stride along steep trails and mountain paths, seeking more natural surroundings for a run. It's a new, rigorous activity perfectly matched to the rugged terrain of local mountains.

BLAZING A NEW TRAIL



PETER BATTISTONI PHOTOS/Vancouver Sun

SURE FOOTED: Kevin Valley (above, right) and partner Nicky Hastings jump from rock to rock while crossing Lynn Creek during a trail run in North Vancouver. Below, the same runners tackle a trail in the forest. The growing sport of trail or mountain running encompasses any running done off road.

DOUG WARD
VANCOUVER SUN

Thousands of people complete the fabled West Coast Trail every year but no one has ever finished it faster than Kevin Valley.

The North Vancouver architect travelled the 77-kilometre trek in 10 hours and 13 minutes, about five days faster than your typical West Coast Trail hiker.

Valley and his trail-running friend Frank Wolf completed the trail in less than half a day because



They ran. Valley and Wolf are local stars in the growing sport of trail or mountain running.

These days runners are increasingly found on trails previously only home to hikers, mountain bikers and the odd black bear.

Many local sports shoe stores now offer models designed for trail or mountain runners.

And each year brings new off-road running races, including this year's Adidas Five Peaks Mountain Running series.

Valley said that the magic of trail running sustained him during the West Coast Trail traverse.

"It was one of the coolest things I've ever done," said Valley.

He and Wolf passed about 150 hikers that day two years ago. The hikers they saw were laden with heavy packs and expressed astonishment at the two scantily-clad runners who carried with them nothing more than water bottles and energy bars.

"People say we should have slowed down and smelled the roses. But by running it, you feel everything. Because of the endorphins, it's a much more intense experience than plodding along with a large pack."

Intense, but not easy. The West Coast Trail steadily depleted their glycogen, leaving both runners exhausted and with tunnel vision near the end.

At one point, while Wolf went searching for water, Valley sat down and inadvertently fell asleep.

"The last two kilometres were really tough. We both had a hard time focusing. A sort of an out-of-body experience. We came to the finish line ecstatic but then freaked out when we realized we hadn't left any food in our tent.

"We had to go around and beg for food from the people who were just starting out on the trail." Valley has never run a 10-km. road race or a marathon. But few runners can stay with Valley, 35, when it comes to ripping up and down trails. Although, given the risen popularity of the sport, a younger crowd of runners will inevitably be leaving him in the dust.

The number of participants in trail or mountain races rose sharply this year, said Greg Sproule, who organized the Five Peaks series.

"People are tired of running on



the road and all the pounding the joints take."

He said that the rise of trail running fits with the overall explosion of outdoor recreation in B.C.

"People get a sense of satisfaction from having conquered Whistler or Blackcomb Mountain that they don't get from running along Kits Beach."

Trail or mountain running was a sport waiting to happen.

Scenery alleviates some of the monotony that inevitably comes with long training runs. And soft dirt and undulating terrain is easier on the shins than pavement.

These were the reasons why the trails of Stanley Park and Pacific Spirit Park have long been the favorite training terrain for many of Vancouver's best distance runners.

Trail running really took off in recent years thanks to the popularity of the Grouse Grind.

"So many people did the Grind and then decided they want to try trails somewhere else," said Jean Violeau, manager of Red Wing Shoes in Burnaby.

Violeau said trail running mainly appeals to people who are reasonably fit and ready for a new challenge.

His store now stocks 26 models of shoes designed specifically for trail running with prices ranging from \$119 to \$199.

"It's something people are really tapping into these days. Trail run-

ning is really booming," said trail runner Valley.

"When I first started doing it five years ago, the only people I'd see were hikers and they'd ask me why I was running.

"Now I'm encountering other runners. And the hikers no longer think I'm crazy."

Valley and his partner, Nicky Hastings, train on the North Shore Mountain trails near their Lynn Valley home.

The couple discovered trail running after quitting the competitive road cycling scene. They were looking for a way to keep fit but found road running too hard on the body.

They began to hike and to do the Grouse Grind. "We found it was more fun on the trail if we went lightweight and ran," said Hastings, a 31-year-old cartographer.

Valley was soon entering off-road races, winning the annual Grouse Grind race twice and finishing second in the annual 50 km. Knee Knackers race, which covers the Baden-Powell trail from Horse-shoe Bay to Deep Cove.

A spot in the Knee Knackers race is so coveted that a lottery is held to choose the participants.

Two years ago, Valley and Hastings attempted to run the Stein Valley trail. Their goal was to complete the 88 kilometres (and more than 2,000 metres of vertical) in one day. They were joined by Wolf, Valley's accomplice on the West Coast trail run.

Their run went according to plan until they found that a fire had wiped out a large section of the Stein trail. They were forced to

spend the night in the wilderness, dressed only in their shorts and T-shirts. Fortunately, they had brought a space blanket, which resembles a sheet of aluminum foil. They wrapped themselves in the blanket and managed to retain their body heat through the night.

Most trail or mountain running is less extreme. The Lower Mainland, especially the North Shore, has endless networks of trails that are well-marked and runner-friendly.

And they all beat the soullessness of the road, according to Valley. "Trail running is more interesting and intense than running on the road," said Valley.

"You can get into a zen state when you're running through nature. Running on the road just seems like exercise."



Check the following sources for information on the West Coast Trail:

- <http://www.sooke.net.com/sooke/activity/trails/wctguide.html> produced by Pacific Rim National Park Reserve and Qu'as West Coast Trail Group.

- *The West Coast Trail* by Tim Leadem (Douglas & McIntyre, 1972, ISBN 1-55054-017-3) now in its seventh edition, includes large scale maps.



SUSPENDED ANIMATION: Nicky Hastings leads Kevin Valley across the Lynn Valley suspension bridge during a run in North Vancouver, which has many ideal trails for mountain running.