

The Hounds of Hash House

by PETER FREDENBURG

From a casual beginning one indulgent night in Kuala Lumpur 55 years ago, the Hash House Harriers — social drinkers with a running problem — now count about 1,200 “kennels” in 140 countries. On on, indeed



EVEN IF YOU don't know a Hash House Harrier from Snoopy, it's a cinch that you've encountered hasher "scent." In urban areas it's normally a chalk-drawn arrow with the words "On on" or "On home." In the countryside, it may be a fistful of flour slapped against a rock or tree, or a trail of paper squares stamped with the image of a hare. If it's fresh, the scent leads to a pack of sweaty "hounds" standing around drinking beer and loudly berating the "hare" for laying a run that was too strenuous, too easy, too confusing or too obvious. Meanwhile, they accuse one another of such infractions as short-cutting, front-running or wear-

An unsuspecting haggis falls victim to a knife-wielding, Robbie Burns-reciting hasher at the annual Hong Kong Haggis Hash.

ing a funny hat. These complaints — real, imagined or plainly invented — offer excuses for countless "down-downs," punishments (or rewards) requiring individuals to gulp a beer at one go, while the pack chants the count-down — "... three, two, one. On yer head!" — which is where the undrank portion goes.

Hash House Harriers (HHH) are, as they say, social drinkers with a running problem. These days they're everywhere. From a casual beginning one beery night in Kuala Lumpur 55 years ago, the movement has grown to some 1,200 "kennels" in nearly 140 countries, with an estimated following of 80,000. HHH clubs display the kind of variety that only determined disorganization can spawn. A few of the older chapters rigidly maintain a male-only tradition, while other kennels function more or less as singles' clubs. Chapters with a lot of married couples sometimes sponsor groups for children, or Hash House Horrors.

Kuala Lumpur, which has about a dozen clubs meeting on a weekly basis, recently launched a monthly Full Moon Hash. Hong Kong is reputed to have among its ten or so kennels a shadowy Gourmet HHH, which eschews the traditional foamy post-run meal, or "on-on," for an evening of fine dining.

"If you don't like a particular Hash because it's too athletic, too slow or too drunken, you join another," explains Howard McKay, co-founder of the Wan Chai HHH and co-owner of The Wanchai Folk Club, better known as The Wanch, Hong Kong's Hash bar. "It's that way around the world."

As Hashers like to say: "If you've half a mind to join the Hash — that's all you need!"

The world's first harriers were hunting dogs bred in Britain in the 18th century for their tracking ability and their indefatigability. By the following century, so-called harrier clubs were running a kind of cross-country race called "hare and hounds" or "paper hunt," which featured packs of human hounds pursuing human hares over a course of eight to 16 kilometres. The sport soon faded with the popularization of rugby and cricket. Then, in British Malaya in the 1920s, harrier clubs made a comeback. Royal Navy personnel based in Singapore staged "lunatic paper chases" that ended in

“alcoholic binges” every week. In 1932, Frederick “Horse” Thomson, one of the four recognized founding fathers of HHH, ran with such a group in Johore Bahru. According to Kuala Lumpur’s HHH arch enthusiast John Duncan, Thomson’s club “was so magically organized that it had no name.” Six years later, two other founding fathers, A. S. “G” Gispert and Ronald “Torch” Bennett, ran with a group in Malacca called the Springgit Harriers.

The focus narrows to the Royal Selangor Club, the expatriate social centre of Kuala Lumpur. The story is Duncan’s: “Following an excessively indulgent party at the Selangor Club one Friday night, G decided to haul his ample frame around the sports field, thus hoping to balance out the law of increasing supply and diminishing output. Gradually others followed suit, and Cecil [Cecil Lee, the fourth founding father] recalls that by the end of 1938 the Hash House Harriers were launched.”

Lee states that it was the mysterious G who dreamed up the name, the tie that binds the original Kuala Lumpur club, now commonly called Mother Hash, to its 1,200 daughters. “Hash House” was the nickname given to the Selangor chambers by its residents. “The name was *not*, in fact, due to bad food in the chambers,” insists Lee, now an 81-year-old retiree in Surrey, England. “The food was good. It was just a joke.”

The HHH managed to rack up 117 runs before the Japanese invasion in December 1941 forced a hiatus. The war scattered the members; G died defending Singapore a couple of months later. “He was a delightful chap,” recalls Lee. “Great fun and good company — and a good accountant. Funny little roly-poly guy, not at all an athlete.”

G remains the most enigmatic of the founding fathers, not only because of his early death, but because of his talent for getting the ball rolling and then letting others worry about where it bounced (exercise club or not, the HHH has long recognized conservation of energy as the highest virtue). “He never held office, though he started it,” Lee continues. “He made me and Horse Thompson the joint masters. Being joint masters, we had no work — it was only after the war that we had some organization. We just got beer, ginger beer and ice. And I suppose someone put out a flier to say where the run was.”

A year after the war ended, the surviving members regrouped. Torch Bennett managed to lodge a successful compensation claim for the club’s lost assets: a tin bath for icing the beer, about 30 mugs for drinking it and two old bags that the hare and his assistant used for carrying paper scent.

The long-running Malayan Emergency followed in 1948, and the Hashers’ habit of breaking curfew made them unpopular with officialdom. This in spite of the Cheras Incident, in which, while out on a run, they stumbled upon a bandit encampment and tipped off the police, who nabbed three of the culprits the following morning (the Hashers divided the reward). Late in the 1950s, membership dwindled to about 15, with perhaps a dozen of these showing up any given week. HHH was fading away.

There was, incidently, a lost tribe of Hashers far away in the Italian Riviera town of Bordighera. A Gurkha officer, who had enjoyed running with the HHH while visiting his brother in Kuala Lumpur before the war, had established the Royal Bordighera HHH in 1947, in association with a grandson of



Hot on the heels of the hare: paper scraps lay the “scent” for the pack. Falsies and checks provide added zest.

King Victor Emmanuel III, with whom he had done time in an Italian POW camp. The RBHHH appears to have folded early in the 1960s, its existence coming to light only after its refounding in 1984.

Back in Malaysia, the ’60s brought a Hashing revival, with a second club appearing in Singapore in 1962. Brunei and Kuching followed in 1963, and Sandakan, Kota Kinabalu and Ipoh in 1964 (the year the Hash House was demolished, leaving the Long Bar of the Royal Selangor Club the spiritual home of the HHH). Penang formed a chapter in 1965, and 1966 saw the advent of the first women’s club, the Brunei Hen House Harriers. The following year the first clubs beyond Malaysia and Singapore appeared in the Australian cities of Hobart and Sydney. When Mother Hash celebrated its 1,500th run in 1973, there were 35 kennels worldwide; by the time of the first InterHash in 1978, this number had risen to about 100.

InterHash ’78 was jointly sponsored by the three clubs then existing in Hong Kong, and it drew about 800 Hashers, despite the threat of a Kuala Lumpur boycott because of the imposition of a nonrefundable US\$10 registration fee. “The first time that visiting harriers had to pay for their own beer!” sniffed an indignant Malaysian hound.

“The Kuala Lumpur people were uptight about fees,” offers Wan Chai’s Howard McKay. “They thought we should somehow miraculously procure sponsorship.”

The five kennels of Kuala Lumpur hosted the next InterHash in 1980 — boldly charging US\$50 per hound. About 1,240 attended, and Jakarta InterHash ’82 drew roughly the same number. When Sydney won the right to host InterHash ’84, many grumbled about the event drifting from the Hash heartland of Southeast Asia. Attendance nevertheless climbed to 1,560, drawn from nearly 400 HHH chapters worldwide. InterHash ’86 in the Thai resort of Pattaya brought together more than 2,000 Hashers, though the registration fee had by this time soared to US\$80. Mother’s Golden Jubilee in 1988 (US\$150) drew a similar number, and the Bali InterHash the same year set the standing, and perhaps hair-raising, record of 2,700 Hash House Harriers in a single place. There were at this point close to 800 kennels. With Phuket InterHash ’92 recording attendance at 2,300, it appears that the explosive growth of InterHash has finally reached a plateau, largely because of competition from the ever-more-frequent “nash hash” (national) events. A further constraint is the lack of an international organization, other than a one-man operation in Bangkok run by Tim “Magic” Hughes.

“I started building the data base in 1984 after the Sydney InterHash, because we were to put on the ’86 InterHash in

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Pattaya," Hughes recalls. "While we were getting ready for it, it seemed like a good idea to update. From that sprang *Harrier International* magazine, the handbooks and *On, On! Hash History*."

Hashing works like this. Having reconnoitred the site in advance, the hare and his assistant arrive a few hours before the scheduled start and begin laying scent. From time to time, the hare breaks the trail with a "check," usually marked with a circle. The trail picks up again about a hundred metres from the check, but so do "falsies," red herrings meant to confuse the pack. Runs vary in length and difficulty, with some offering "Rambo" and "wimp" variations, but in general the trail is an hour-long loop. As the pack assembles for the run, the beer master ensures that the drinks are properly iced, while the "hash cash" (treasurer) prowls around collecting dues and visitors' fees and, if it's a special run, selling souvenir T-shirts. At the appointed hour, the "hash horn" gives a long blow, and to shouts of "On on!" the pack leaps — well, straggles — out. When the frontrunners reach a check, they shout "Check!" and fan out, searching for the continuation of the scent. When slower runners reach the check, they cry a plaintive "Are you?" to which the frontrunners reply "Checking!" if they are either looking for scent, investigating a possible falsie or slyly grabbing a breather. If someone has found the true scent, the reply is "On on!" and a long blow of the horn.

Every Hasher knows that the only real rule is that "there are no rules," but they're rabid when it comes to tradition. Habitual front-running, passing or failing to shout "On on!" when appropriate, all suggest competitiveness and are grounds for a down-down. The principle of conservation of energy, however, makes short-cutting a trickier question. "It's against the rules to get caught short-cutting," Duncan finally admits when pressed on the point. "Of course, it's also a good way to get lost. If you do get lost, the procedure is to get back on paper [scent] and wait for the hare to come round and pick you up" — which he'll do if the post-run head count is short.

Then come the down-downs, which some kennels perform sitting, pants removed, on a block of ice. These are

accompanied by a number of traditional songs too idiotic to print. Then it's off to the on-on, generally at a nearby restaurant, where the kennel hasn't been before and is therefore welcome. After this comes the on-on-on . . .

The spread of the HHH has resulted in more than just increased sales of knee-wraps, beer and headache remedies. Even the good deeds, such as Hong Kong's annual Santa Hash to benefit disadvantaged children, pale next to the Gispert Miracle, which began one day in Hong Kong about five years ago, as Charlie Gispert, G's grandson, opened the local paper and read an article about something he'd never heard of called the Hash House Harriers. "I saw my name, which is very unusual," he recalls. "I knew it was my family — A. S. Gispert, too much of a coincidence. I cut the article out and sent it to my father in England, who was very interested. He wanted to find out about his father. Meanwhile, I didn't have a job. A friend was working in The Wanch and said they were looking for a barman. Howard recognized my family name."

Charlie Gispert got the job but soon left for better-paying work. Simon Gispert, Charlie's father, picks up the story: "I didn't know anything about the Hash. I was five, coming on six, when my father was killed in '42. The circumstances of his last days were vague, but I got more detail along with the discovery of his Hash connection."

Simon Gispert attended last year's Phuket InterHash as the guest of the HHH. He's returning to the Hash heartland next month. "I didn't do any running in Phuket," he admits. "I work as a graphic designer, so I don't get much exercise. But I've slimmed down a bit, and when I'm in Thailand and Kuala Lumpur next April — and Australia — it's just a possibility."

"Somehow the idea has cottoned on," replies Cecil Lee when asked to explain the Hash phenomenon. "It gradually dawned on me, how it grew and grew like topsy. I think it's the name. There were many other groups of harriers, but this one had a catchy name, and that's the thing that stuck. It was typical of G to give it that name."

On on! 🐾