

# BUGGING THE OPPOSITION

*Human centipedes are infesting long-distance races*

BY GLENN KRAMON

Directors of the nation's most prestigious marathons may soon be appalled to learn that their most popular entry may weigh in at almost a ton. It's the "human centipede" (SCORECARD, June 10, '85), composed of 13 fleet northern California men who run tied together, and it's vowing to enter the New York City Marathon this fall and perhaps the Boston Marathon next year. The team thinks that at one of those two

races it might even beat the 2:20:00 time necessary to qualify for the 1988 U.S. Olympic Marathon Trials.

"Can you imagine a centipede running through the boroughs of New York, in front of millions of people? They would go nuts," says Dwayne (Peanut) Harms, 35, captain of the Aggie Running Club centipede. But Fred Lebow, director of the New York City Marathon, is anti 'pede because he thinks it would impede other runners. Phooey, says Harms, who adds that the Aggie centipede is determined to run in New York even if it has to crash the race.

One race in which the Aggie centipede is more than welcome is San Francisco's annual 7.46-mile Bay to Breakers, where it has become as well known as the elite athletes who receive thousands of dollars in appearance money. The Aggie centipede has helped turn this once-obscure race into one of the world's largest participant sporting events, with more than 100,000 runners finishing last May 18. Since the first Aggie centipede tiptoed (130 toes in all) into the race nine years ago, the Bay to Breakers field has grown by more than 500%. The course is now clogged with 'pede imitators and other costumed characters who measure a good time in laughs, not minutes.

Inspired by the Aggies, centipedes have entered races in Salt Lake City; Davenport, Iowa; Charlotte, N.C.; and Danville, Calif. Indeed, the phenomenon has grown so much that the Aggie centipede has two sponsors, Pepsi and Reebok.

The Aggie Running Club was formed in 1977 by a group of runners at the University of Cal-

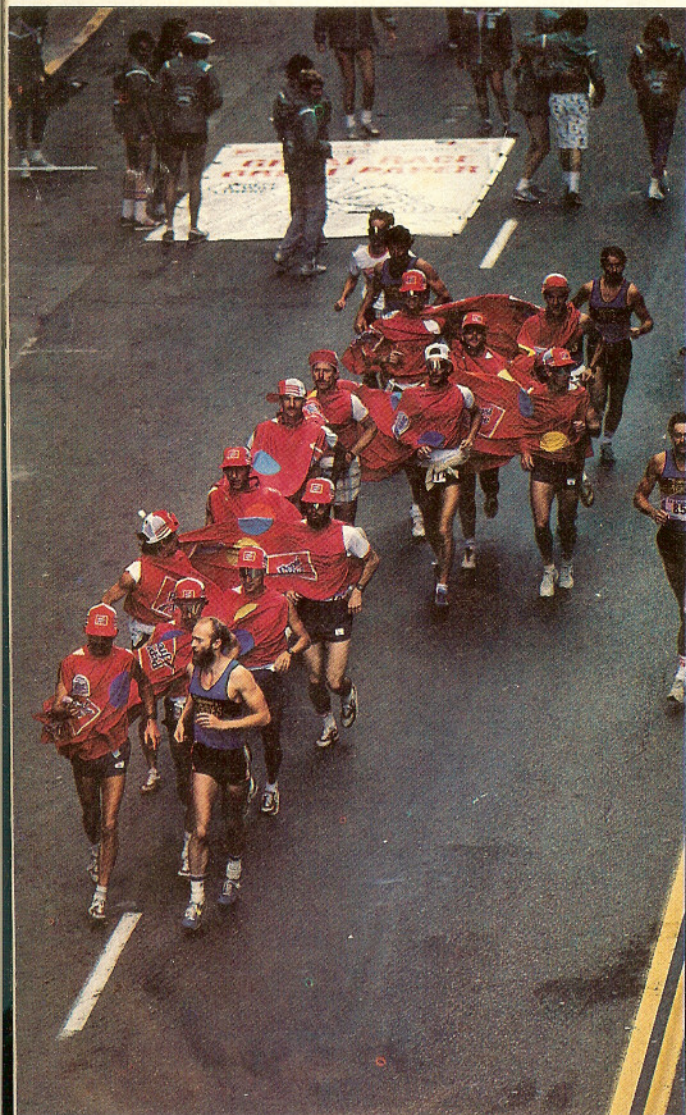
ifornia-Davis, from which they took the name Aggies. Some people joined for the competition, some for the camaraderie. The club now has 150 members, including 40 women, who will have their own centipede in this year's Bay to Breakers on May 17. 'Pede participants think they have found the ideal challenge for veteran runners for whom even a hilly course like that of the Bay to Breakers is no longer stimulating.

Centipede runners are burdened by the ties that bind—everything from bed sheets to computer cables—and by the often unwieldy costumes many of them wear. Recent Bay to Breakers entries have included a 70-foot whale with moving parts, and an ambulance chased by attorneys waving business cards. It's not hard to imagine how difficult it is for groups of 13 to 60 people to run in sync.

With little strong competition from other arthropods, the Aggie centipede took to boasting that it could outrace any woman, and, indeed, it had never lost to a woman in the Bay to Breakers. In 1985, however, Joan Benoit Samuelson, who won the Olympic gold medal in the marathon the previous summer, stomped on the Aggie 'pede. Ignoring the ceaseless chatter from the Aggies, she set a women's course record with a pace of 5:21 per mile and defeated the Aggies by more than a minute. Embarrassed, the team surrounded her and vowed to get revenge in 1986.

But on the eve of last year's race the Aggies hardly looked like a team bent on getting even. They threw their traditional pre-Breakers bash and, as always, got less than two hours' sleep. Still, the Aggies awoke for the 8 a.m. race confident that the 5:14 pace they expected to maintain would beat not only Benoit Samuelson but also newcomer Grete Waitz, who that spring had run world bests at distances both shorter and longer than the Bay to Breakers course. The two women and the Aggies were neck and neck for the first two miles. But when Waitz accelerated on Hayes Street's steep, half-mile hill, only the Aggies responded, and Benoit Samuelson was left behind. Spectators were well aware of the Aggies' challenge, and Waitz recalls many women urging her to "beat the centipede."

Although Waitz and her bizarre rival



Before the '86 Bay to Breakers, the Aggies said they would outleg Waitz.





KENNETH LEE

**A San Francisco centipede competed disguised as a bale of fast-moving turtles.**

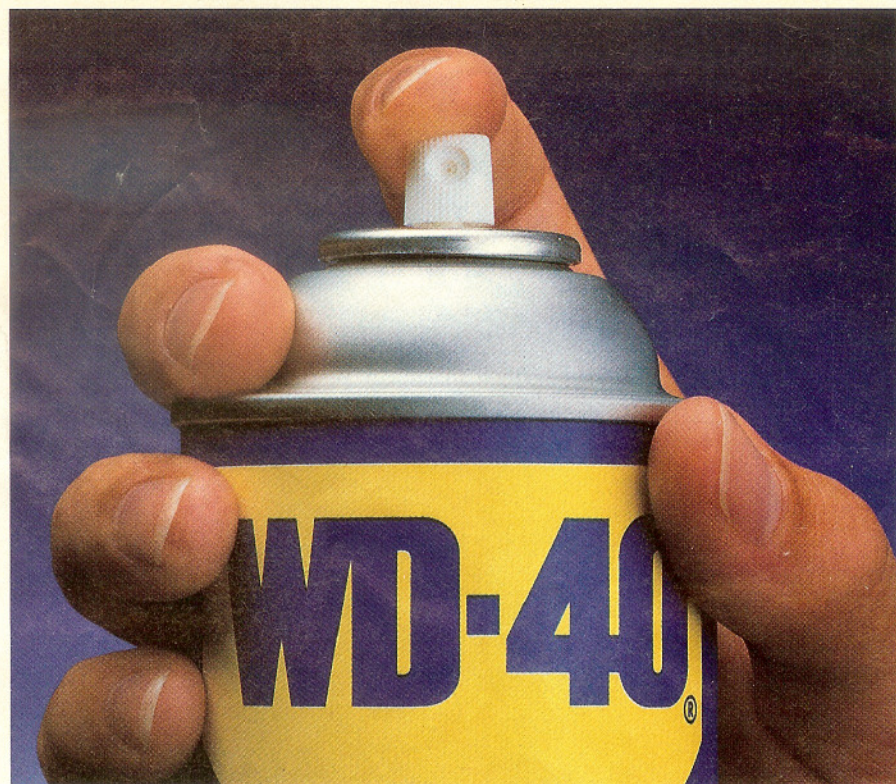
were well behind the eventual men's winner, Ed Eyestone, they were ahead of almost everyone else as they ran the 3.5 miles through misty Golden Gate Park and headed into the final stretch. Rounding the last turn at the edge of the Pacific, with just 240 yards to go, the Aggies were still even with Waitz. "Hey, I ain't going to lose to Grete Waitz," growled one of the faster members of the team. "Let's move it." He and about half of the other Aggies surged, but their tiring teammates didn't. Harms, who leads the 'pede, didn't hear the cry to quicken the pace, and the Aggies tangled up and faltered. Waitz won by five seconds. The centipede did, however, have its best Breakers time ever (38:51) and beat Benoit Samuelson by 18 seconds.

"When I came to Bay to Breakers, I didn't realize how big a thing this centipede was," says Waitz. "After I finished, I realized that to beat them was something special."

The Aggies were gracious in defeat. They called for a rematch this year and then serenaded Waitz with an impromptu rhyme:

*We beat Joanie.  
We know she's no phony.  
In order to beat Grete,  
We gotta get bettah.*

Glenn Kramon gave up the 'pede beat in San Francisco to work for The New York Times.

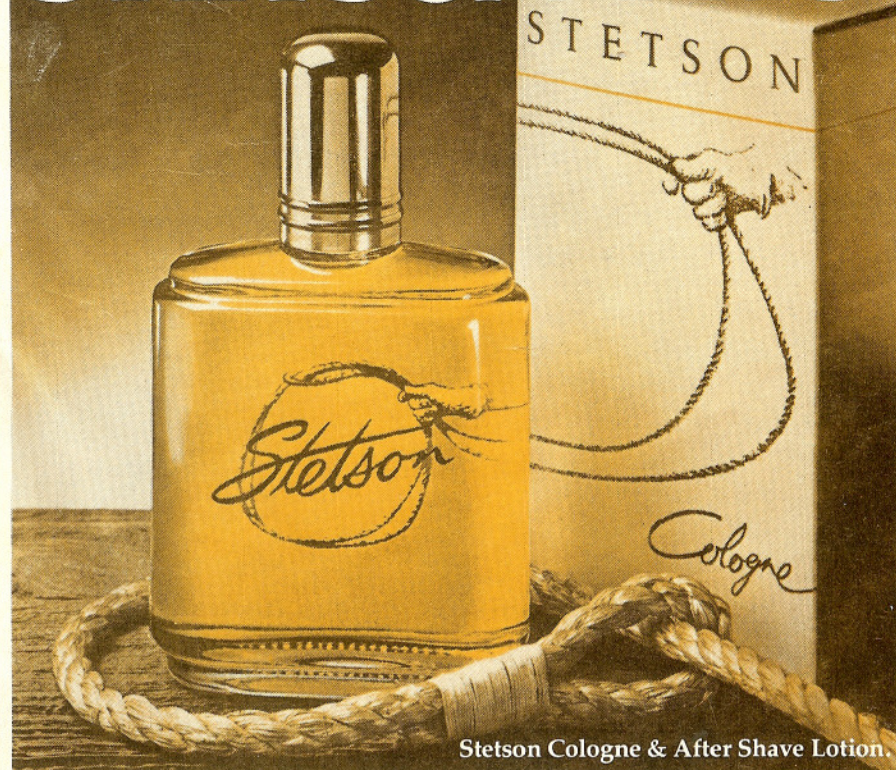


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