

# Catch a





# Fire(trail)

By Sarah Lavender Smith  
Photos by Rod McLean

Founded by a Bay Area trail-running legend, the Dick Collins Firetrails 50-miler continues a tradition of being rookie friendly and blue-collar casual.

As the sun rises on the hills behind Oakland, Victor Ballesteros (l) and Hal Koerner climb the MacDonald Grade in Anthony Chabot Regional Park, around mile 9 in the Dick Collins Firetrails 50.



**O**n the second Saturday of last October, a breeze blew east from San Francisco to the darkened shores of Lake Chabot and fanned the anticipation of 159 jittery runners at the start of the Dick Collins Firetrails 50. The wind, carrying the scent of eucalyptus from the dense groves in these hills near Oakland, made runners rub bare arms and blow into cold hands. Even back-of-the-packers geared up and greeted each other with a tighter tempo.

Wedge between the East Bay Area's cities and suburbs, the race pays tribute to the trailblazer who created it 26 years ago. For many, it's their first 50-miler. For others, it's their last chance of the year to qualify for the Western States 100-Mile Endurance Run. For the legendary husband-and-wife race directors Carl Andersen and Ann Trason, it's an opportunity to channel all the intensity they brought to their competitive running into directing a race they love. "We carry on this tradition so we can put something back into the sport," said Andersen, otherwise known to some Bay Area runners as the "Quad Dipsea King" for his all-time record and two separate age-group records on that famed course.

As runners mentally prepared to climb 7800 feet on the glorious greenbelt stretching from Hayward to Berkeley and back, some locals glanced with curiosity at an unexpected out-of-towner. 2007 Western States winner Hal Koerner, coming off a win at Angeles Crest 100 just four weeks earlier (where he recorded the second-fastest time ever), signed up at the last minute and drove down with six buddies from Ashland, Oregon. "The race has always been on my radar, mainly because Ann and Carl are the RDs," he said before the start. "They are two great people and inspirational runners you want to be around. And the hills above Oakland are so picturesque and inviting that I couldn't help but try to grab on to the waning moments of summer running."

Racers knew that anything could happen on this race day. After all, it's the time of year when the Bay Area marks the anniversaries of major earthquakes, firestorms, floods and stock-market crashes. This particular year, the event provided a blessed escape from the prior week's financial meltdown that

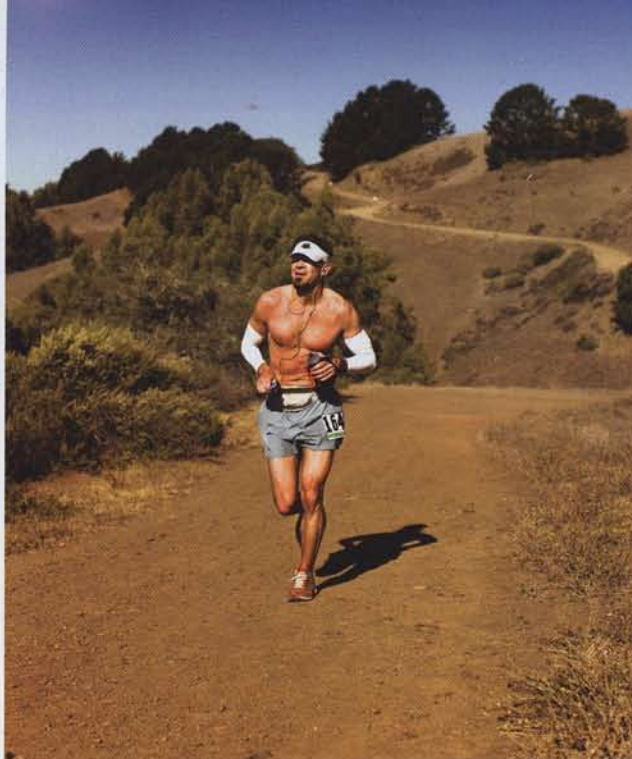
sunk the Dow and sent D.C. into a tailspin. "Seize the day," one might say—or as this crowd would translate *carpe diem*, "Hit the trail and run like hell!"

**K**oerner, 32, took a spot at the start near Victor Ballesteros, 38, of San Rafael, California, who won the previous year as a 50-mile rookie with the third-fastest time in the event's history. In the women's field, many past winners and local favorites were absent, but 33-year-old Darceie Gorman, a top trail runner and marathon winner in her hometown of Salt Lake City, had traveled here to escape Utah's early snow and make her 50-mile debut.

This year, the cool temps and mud-free footing made for ideal conditions. Would Trason's and Andersen's seemingly untouchable course records finally fall?

Andersen, preoccupied with checking in runners and moving pallets of water, brightened when asked about the prospect of seeing his record of 6:26, set at age 34 in 1994, blown away. "It would be great! Ann and I have always felt weird that we put on this race and are the record holders," he said before adding, with the admiring tone he uses when speaking about his more-famous wife, "I think my record might be easier to break. Ann did this race [in 1987, at age 28] on a lark after riding her bike for eight weeks without running at all, so she feels her record [of 7:31] is soft, but obviously any record that Ann sets is way out there."

With minutes to go before the 6:30 a.m. start, Andersen hastily directed runners to the edge of a darkened path and addressed

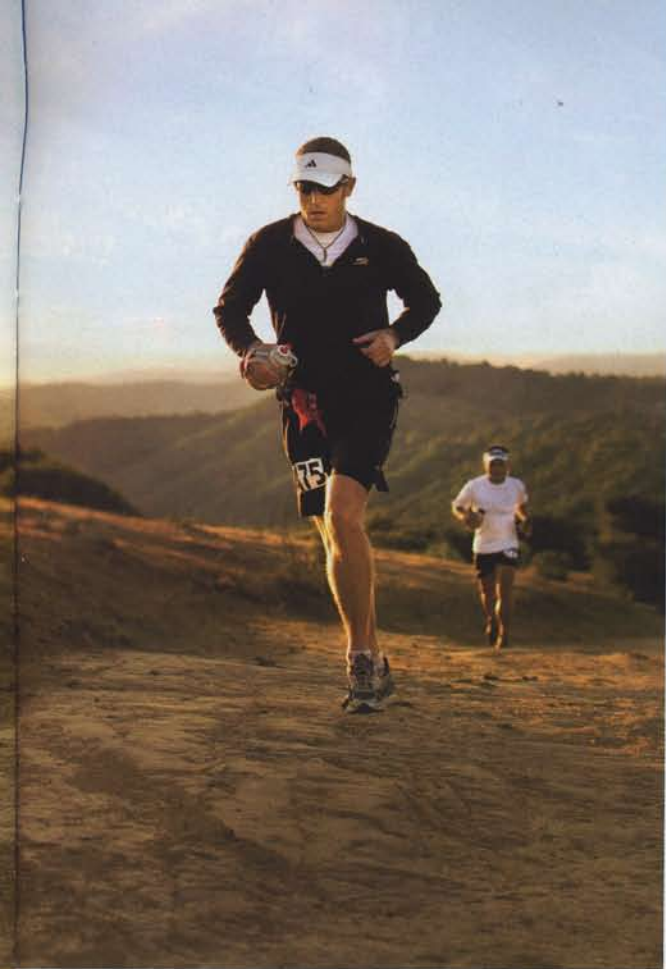


the headlamps flickering like lighters held by concert fans. "Ann and I have been putting on this race for nine years, and Dick Collins before us," he said. "We're really glad to have all of you out here and hope you have a wonderful day." And then Koerner, Ballesteros and all the others went out fast, no doubt eager to get past the paved stretch curving around the lake.

The real trail starts after a single-file wooden bridge in mile two. Heading up the first switchbacks, the orange glow of sunrise and the crimson sheen of poison oak came into view, while a glance over the shoulder revealed the twinkling lights of the East Bay cityscape reflecting off the water's glassy expanse. It won't be long before runners reach a ridgeline boasting the Bay Area's best vistas.

The seasonal winds, which put people in the tinder-dry hills on edge, do have one benefit: They blow away pollution and polish the views to hyper-clarity so that mid-way on the course, at 1800 feet, runners gaze on the Golden Gate Bridge framed by the sparkling skirt of San Francisco and the majestic rise of Mount Tamalpais. To the east, they see forested canyons and softly sculpted hills that buck the 'burbs and rise to the double-humped Mount





**"If people knew this view existed, they would travel from all over the world to see it." —Kevin Swisher**

Diablo. On this clear day you can even make out the Sierra Nevada.

"If people knew this view existed, they would travel from all over the world to see it," said Kevin Swisher, a competitive trail runner in the East Bay and Dick Collins Firetrails 50 veteran. "This race embodies everything that's great about living and running here."

Along with wide-angle shots of the bay and the mountains, the course captures close-ups of redwoods flanked by ferns and meadows baked to golden brown. The terrain is as varied as the views: wide, flat fire roads entice runners to lengthen their stride, and steep, narrow climbs threaten to trip them with roots and rocks. Some stretches seem sliced from the Sierra foothills, or maybe from a remote corner of Mendocino, but, no—when you're on the Firetrails 50, you're never far from urban centers stereotyped by crime and counterculture, or by rabid Raiders and Bears. Oakland and Berkeley manage to capture all that the greater region has to offer trail runners, right in its extended backyard.

As summer winds down, it's not uncommon to hear one Northern California trail runner ask another with a straight face, "You gonna do the Dick?"

So goes the shorthand for the challenge to cap the season with the Dick Collins Firetrails 50, a race that some contend stands on equal footing with the better-known trail events across the bay, the Quad Dipsea and Miwok 100K.

"I've run on all the trails that make up the Miwok and Quad courses, and they rock on all counts, but I think the Dick Collins is equally as beautiful and just as challenging, and has all the right combinations of terrain to keep it interesting," said Ballesteros, predicting the Firetrails may go the way of the growing number of races that fill in minutes. "It's funny how we always want to share our favorite

places until the cat's out of the bag and it's a mob fest."

The race's namesake, who died at 63 of heart failure in

1997 after completing more than 200 ultras and nearly 150 marathons, probably would want the race to preserve its low-profile, old-school vibe. That's the kind of guy he was, say those who knew him.

Trason, perhaps best known for setting the women's Western States 100 course record during her 14 wins there, speaks of Collins reverently. "His death was a shock to all of us because the guy was running every ultra event on the calendar," she said. "He was everywhere—just no-nonsense Dick, who always had a smile on his face. He put a lot into the community."

When Collins established the race in 1983, linking five of the East Bay's regional parks, he laid the roots for local trail races that now fill the calendar. "He went to the park district and said, 'I want to put on a 50-mile race.' People were like, 'You can't run that far,'" said Trason. Collins showed them otherwise and encouraged other area race directors to establish more trail events.

After Collins' death, Trason and Andersen became co-RDs in 1999 when an interim

director stepped aside. "I just thought it should continue in Dick's spirit, which is more as a blue-collar race," said Trason. "It's not really sexy. It's the kind of race I'd like to go to, where you just kind of run, and have a picnic at the end and well-stocked aid stations."

The event also felt "blue collar" because Collins made sure to offer it at an affordable cost, and volunteers took good care of the runners. According to 11-time finisher Mike Palmer, who knew Collins, "It was a no-frills, back-to-basics experience: no pre-race dinner with speeches, and no extravaganzas on race day." While Trason and Andersen have enhanced the event, Palmer said, "The basic spirit of the race from the Dick Collins days remains."

The event always could boast of many features that draw first-timers and keep them hooked, such as a well-marked course that's difficult but not extreme, and special awards for rookies and 10-time finishers. How, then, could Trason and Andersen enhance the original while staying true to its character?

First, they altered the course slightly to add a bit more singletrack, including Trason's favorite stretch: the Cascade Trail in Anthony Chabot Regional Park, near mile 45 on the return, a winding, shady chute through a tunnel formed by canopies of bay laurel, blackberry brambles and other tangled vines. Hugging a canyon filled

#### CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT

Hal Koerner pulls ahead after the turnaround point, around mile 29, climbing the ridgeline in Tilden Regional Park near Berkeley.

Runners on the MacDonald Grade, mile 9.

Lora Liu, 25, one of 28 "rookies" in the 50-miler, runs the final stretch on the path next to Lake Chabot.





with autumn birdsong, the trail spits out in a creek bed to the final 5K, a lakeside path leading back to Lake Chabot Marina.

Trason also raised the bar on the post-race buffet, tapping her hidden talents as a gardener and cook. All the soup comes from stock she makes from vegetables harvested from her garden. All the perfect pies, along with each cookie at the aid stations, come out of her oven. "The week before, that's what I'm doing when I should be doing other things," said Trason. "Carl says, 'Why are you doing this?' And I'm like, 'Because it's a family event.'"

Most significantly, Trason and Andersen broadened the event's appeal in 2003 by tacking on a companion race, the Golden Hills Trail Marathon, which is held point-to-point on roughly the second half of the 50-mile course at the same time the Firetrails 50 participants run out-and-back. "I love point-

to-point, and I was hoping people who did the marathon would jump to the 50," said Trason. "Also, we needed more runners to keep the entry fee low and provide a high-quality race."

The marathoners start in Berkeley's Tilden Park at 9 a.m. and after a few miles begin to see the 50-mile frontrunners headed for the turnaround point, where runners cheer each other on. Head-on high-fives and fresh-legged marathoners pushing the pace inspire the 50-milers for a speedy second half.

**E**arly in the race, it wasn't clear which 50-miler would meet the marathoners first. Koerner, Ballesteros and Jean Pommier of Cupertino, California, who won two Bay Area 50Ks earlier in the year, emerged from the redwood forest fairly close together at mile 15's Skyline Gate. "We ran together almost all the way up to Skyline Gate and didn't really talk," said Ballesteros. "It didn't feel competitive. It just felt like we were running out there, and that was really fun."

Seven miles later, cresting the course's peak, the story started to change. There, Koerner took in the top-of-the-world views and passed a bench with a memorial for another world-class Bay Area runner, Power Bar founder Brian Maxwell, whose life was cut short in 2004 by a heart attack. Then, Koerner hit what would be both the best and worst part of the race for him: the four-



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mile, 1200-foot plunge to the turnaround.

It was a high point mentally, he later said, because "going down to the halfway point and seeing all the marathoners [who were starting their race], and then coming back and seeing the other 50-milers, was awesome—a lot of encouragement both ways." He needed that encouragement to dull the pain. "Going down that hill, because it's so steep and so hard, my feet were killing me." Laughing, he added, "Sometimes if you beat 'em up enough, they'll go numb."

Koerner took off after the turnaround and began to cruise around mile 35. Ahead of him, 24-year-old Leor Pantilat was on his way toward setting a new Golden Hills Trail Marathon record in 3:16. But Andersen's and Trason's records in the 50 would remain safe for at least another year. Koerner pushed ahead for a decisive victory in 6:43 (the fifth-fastest time on record), followed by Ballesteros in 6:50. On the women's side, Gorman brushed off four bee stings to win in 8:16 (15<sup>th</sup> overall), followed by 50-year-old Kelly Ridgeway at 8:38. Caren Spore, women's winner of the Firetrails 50 the previous two years, opted for the marathon this time, winning it in 3:49.

At the finish, Trason and Andersen heaped praise on the participants and handed out the event's signature prizes—wine bottles for trophies and wine glasses for all finishers—along with high-tech T-shirts and jackets (another change from the Collins days). Endings are always bittersweet, but

this year's finish may have been more so for them since it's likely their penultimate year directing the event. "It needs new blood," said Trason, explaining why they are looking to hand off the RD baton. "I started doing this to give something back to the event. Next year it'll be 10 years, and I'm wondering if that's enough give-back."

On that afternoon, however, neither they nor anyone else needed to think about what might come Monday and beyond. The picnic felt like a happy hour as wine glasses clinked, the wind lost its punch, the warm sun set and everyone exhaled.

"I now see why so many runners list Firetrails as their favorite run," wrote finisher Diane Forrest of Sacramento in an online forum. "Great volunteers, perfectly marked course, frequent aid stations, ideal weather, incredible views and even a BBQ still going when I finished at 6:32 p.m."

Runners felt united not only by camaraderie forged on the trail, but also by gratitude for those who nurtured an event that lives up to its namesake: an original then, a classic now.

*Sarah Lavender Smith is a Bay Area writer who holds the women's course record (by just three seconds) in the Golden Hills Trail Marathon.*

**ABOVE:** Darcie Gorman cruises on the Bridle Trail, a fast streamside section through Redwood Regional Park in Oakland, on her way toward winning the Dick Collins Firetrails 50.



# Catching Up with Ann Trason

I met Ann Trason 12 years ago, when I lived a block away from her in Kensington, California, just north of Berkeley. *There she goes again*, I'd tell myself each time her lean body darted by on the sidewalk. She would typically run around the corner to a trailhead, her shoulder-length straight hair bouncing with her springy stride. The short, quick cadence of her legs looked effortless yet almost antsy, as though she was impatient to get past the warm-up through the neighborhood.

When I asked around about her, I discovered an athlete in her mid-30s accomplishing unthinkable feats. To list just a few: In 1994, she set course records that still stand at the Western States 100-Mile Endurance Run (17:37) and Leadville Trail 100 (18:06); in 1995, she set a world record in the World 100K Challenge with 7:00:47 (a 6:46 pace); and in 1996, she scored another victory at Western States just 12 days after winning the 56-mile Comrades Marathon in South Africa (a "double" she repeated in 1997). She was no less than the Joan Benoit of the ultra-distance world, redefining what female runners could do and inspiring a new generation.

Trason's unmatched ultra career began at age 24, when she entered the 1985 American River 50 Miler, having never even done a marathon. It was 108 degrees and she didn't know to carry a water bottle, but she won—and set a course record. (Eight years later, she went back and dropped her time by an hour to establish the 6:09 course record that still stands.) Her speed and versatility also turned in a marathon PR of 2:39 in 1992. In all, she won Western States 14 times, most recently in 2003.

In 1997 we got to know each other while she was recovering from

a ruptured hamstring—one of several injuries, including a torn ACL, that led to multiple surgeries over the next decade. When she invited me on a short run, I felt like a girl who's given a soccer ball and told that Mia Hamm wants to come over and kick it around.

Like the terrain she runs in, Trason's personality can seem remote, tough and demanding. Beneath that exterior, however, I found someone who's warm, supportive and humble. If you run by her while she's volunteering at an aid station, she'll call out, "You can do it—you're just gonna love that hill!" Or if you tell her she's been called the greatest female ultrarunner ever, she'll shake her head, look down and say, "Nah, I wouldn't say that. There are so many good runners these days."

Trason, now 48, doesn't like giving interviews or having her picture taken, but she agreed to talk a couple of weeks before the Dick Collins Firetrails 50, which she co-directs with her husband, Carl Andersen. We met at the turnaround point for the out-and-back race in Berkeley's Tilden Park, which is at the bottom of a canyon shaped like a massive bowl and filled with oak and bay woodlands.

She emerged from a dusty Subaru Outback wearing a gray fleece pullover and looking as

though she hadn't aged much since we first met. Her light brown hair still framed her long, angular face and ruddy complexion, and her 5-foot, 4-inch body appeared as thin as in the mid-1990s, when she weighed 102 pounds. After she took a seat at a picnic table, one of her legs vibrated like a hummingbird's wing while her fingers gathered and twirled fallen pine needles on the table. She relaxed, however, when asked about her friend and mentor Dick Collins, who started the race 26 years ago.



**Q:** Tell me something about the race's namesake and what he meant to you?

**Ann Trason:** My favorite Dick Collins story is from a 24-hour track run in Santa Rosa in 1986 or '87. It was pouring rain, and I said, "Dick, why are we doing this?" And he said, "What's wrong with you? Last year, it was freezing, so if it's raining, at least it means it's warmer." And I realized, I had the wrong attitude! So whenever I found myself in a race nipping something I had no control over, I always thought of Dick.

**Q:** Many people know about your Western States streak, but may not know you did not finish your first two attempts there, first in '87 from knee problems and then in '88 near the finish line from dehydration. What did you learn?

**AT:** Probably not to push it as hard and train better. The DNFs made me realize I needed to do a lot more thinking out there than just running.

**Q:** It's been five years since you ran Western States. Would you do it again?

**AT:** I'd like to, but I don't think my body can handle it. But if I ever feel able, I'll do it. I would need to get a lot stronger, and I have all these biomechanical problems.

**Q:** Why do you yearn to do a 100-miler again?

**AT:** It's a journey, experiencing something different. I always say it's a life in a day.

**Q:** How does someone like you, who pushed through pain so many times in order to finish, know when to drop out?

**AT:** I'm not good at that. I guess when you can't go another step. I worry now that I wouldn't have that desire. At, like mile 60, would I care? Or just say, "That chair is lookin' real good." [laughs] I feel like I've gotten soft and out of shape and don't feel like an ultrarunner.

**Q:** How much have you been running?

**AT:** I had to take some time off because of my back. I was running quite a bit—slowly, and enjoying it—and I was doing a 50-mile run every month. I did that for 18 months; then herniated a disc. I'm running again, but not pain free.

**Q:** Out of all your accomplishments, what are you most proud of?

**AT:** The consistency—that I could come out and finish Western States as many times as I did, through all the different things that happened. One of the hardest ones was when Carl and I both ran it. He had been leading and I got [to an aid station with about 15 miles to go], and he was sitting in a chair, totally white, and looking sick. I didn't want to leave. My pacer was pulling me, saying, "You have to leave." And I did.

**Q:** Do you have any regrets about your running career?

**AT:** I can't think of any at the moment. Now, I just wish I could go out and run every day. I took it for granted. I knew I'd slow down and get older, but I didn't know there would be a cliff. [laughs]

**Q:** Who's been your biggest inspiration?

**AT:** It's funny, it's more the courses that have inspired me. I love where I've been, and that's inspired me to try harder. Carl inspires me. Our greatest times have been out running together and exploring, and that's probably what got me to run as much as I used to.

**Q:** Do you think there will be a point when you say, "I'm retired, that's it," or do you want to be another Helen Klein, racing in your 80s?

**AT:** I feel pretty retired right now; I don't think I'll be like Helen, nah-uh. My body can handle it. I'd like to go out and do 100 miles one more time just to show I could do it, but I don't need to race. I really enjoy just running and being outside.

**Q:** Do you have any advice for ultrarunners about staying healthy?

**AT:** Come back [from injuries] slowly. I always tried to do too much, too quickly.

— Sarah Lavender Smith