

Remembering the Centipede: 40th Anniversary

“Run fast , run slow, run together”. This sense of camaraderie was the spark that created the first Centipede at Bay to Breakers back in 1978. The Centipede was invented by the Aggies Running Club at UC Davis. Although he refuses to take credit for the conception of this revolutionary running style, consistently remarking that “it was a collaborative effort”, Dwayne “Peanut” Harms is certainly in the middle of the story. We were lucky enough to have the chance to talk to Peanut and learn a little more about the story of the first Centipede.

The Idea:

Peanut recalls creating the Centipede with a charming simplicity and nostalgia. “It’s like yesterday for me ” remarked Peanut when discussing the founding of the Centipede. The first idea of the Centipede was inspired by the club’s group runs. Peanut said that the conversation went a little like, “If we can run together in a group, why don’t we tie ourselves together when we go down to Bay to Breakers!” The Centipede was not a concerted effort to transform the landscape of a nationally renowned race. More importantly, it was a group of students looking for a good time. It was an easily accessible and contagiously fun idea. These two aspects remain the driving forces behind the Centipede’s staying power at the Bay to Breakers.

The Creation:

The Aggies were searching for a way to have a laugh when they accidentally set the running world on fire. The next step to the founding of the Centipede was the creation of the costume. This fabled event took place in the Women's Gymnasium on campus. Trash bags were the material of choice, likely because they were cheap and readily available in college apartments. The trash bags were cut in half to be stretched out into sheets and connected by duct-tape. When discussing the choice of 13 people for the standard number of runners in a Centipede, Peanut said the discussion went “13 sounds good, it’s an unlucky number so we’ll pick that”. Similarly, the Centipede had each runner separated by 5 feet “because it sounded like a good idea”. Another important aspect to the famous centipede costume is the “Twinkie Feelers” which were invented by Aggie runner Ed Schlegel. The Twinkie Feelers were made of available coat hangers and styrofoam balls. Working at these costumes by feel and without serious calculation, the Aggies were not trying to reinvent the wheel. Rather, the group was just trying to make the most of their Sunday morning Bay to Breakers run.

The Centipede in Action:

Once the costume was complete, the group of runners headed to the race with a plan to start from the back of the pack, weave through the crowd and “be friendly”. “We just wanted to have a good time” Peanut emphasized. As history tells us, the Centipede was a hit at the race. So much so that the Centipede was on the front page of the San Francisco Chronicle the next day. “That was the year the Bay to Breakers stopped being a race and started being an event”. People would soon follow the trend and make their own Centipedes, cementing the beginning of a long running tradition at Bay to Breakers.

Another layer to the story of the Centipede is Centipede racing. As Peanut put it, “The faster you run the sooner the fun”. The Aggies Running Club was full of fast racers, boasting mostly sub 5 minute mile runners. In fact, The Aggies would often place among the Elite runners at major races which caused major buzz. This speed began the phase of Centipede expansion, the group began setting world records for Centipede racing and traveling across the country to run races as a Centipede. The team was given sponsors to run major races and Peanut remembers going to these races and signing autographs of Centipede fans.

Recollection of the Centipede:

Although he recognizes that it was a fun ride, Peanut made sure to drive home this point during our conversation, “It’s all about the fun, sometimes things get lost in the commercialism and sponsors but the Centipede was about the fun”. This spirit is what makes the Centipede and Bay to Breakers so special. Bay to Breakers is a place where people come to enjoy themselves in a city that is chronicled as accepting all types of people and culture. The Centipede is an example of this freedom of self expression and unity that makes Bay to Breakers so great and why it is so much more than just a 12k run through San Francisco.

“Run fast , run slow, run together” - Dwayne “Peanut” Harms