



By Sheila Reesor

ON SUNDAY, MAY 2, 2010, a team of Canadian Ski Patrol volunteers, athletic therapists, a physician and Emergency Medical Services assembled to support the Sporting Life 10K in Toronto and saved the life of a runner on the course. As one paramedic on-site said at the time, runners are safer on the course than anywhere else.

It's great news for any runner, since numbers of participants at most Canadian races have multiplied in recent years. Some 14,000 runners now register for the Sporting Life 10K. Not too long ago that total was 2,000. In 1975, there were just 146 runners in Ottawa's National Capital Marathon. Numbers today top 40,000.

How many of these runners ever notice what kind of medical support there is on course? Why would they? They're a strong, healthy, fit population. Other than those who tempt fate, running with an illness, injury or severe allergy of some kind, most don't even think about who might be on course or at the finish line to help should something stop them in their tracks.

What about that remote section on course, road closures with locked barricades, or those 19,000 other runners on course? An injured runner may be in the middle of a city, literally minutes or blocks from a hospital, but unless a medical team can get through to administer immediate medical assistance he or she might as well be on the moon.

Fortunately, a group of volunteers from the Canadian Ski Patrol System (CSPS) specializes in getting injured or sick people out of remote or difficult locations. Outdoor sports enthusiasts themselves, they are particularly adept at getting to inaccessible areas and thrive in extreme weather conditions. They also have enough medical knowledge and first-aid training to help until they can put patients safely into the hands of the medical professionals required.

Runners often get a puzzled look when they see ski patrollers on course. After a double take they'll say something like "Hey, where's your toboggan?" What many don't realize is that, beyond being Canada's leading provider of snow sliding safety and rescue services in winter, in the off-season, the ski patrol offers their services to everything from local 5K runs to international marathons. From the Klondike Trail of 98 Road Relay in the Yukon to the Valley Harvest Marathon in Nova Scotia, they're out there.

# Lifesavers on the Course

**THEY'RE USED TO GETTING TO REMOTE LOCATIONS IN A HURRY. THEY'RE EXPERIENCED FIRST RESPONDERS.**

**YOU MAY NEVER NOTICE THEM, BUT SKI PATROLLERS PLAY A HUGE ROLE IN MOST ROAD AND TRAIL RACES.**





Photo: Courtesy of the Canada Running Series

» Two members of the CSPS on patrol at the 2009 Sporting Life Toronto 10K



**LAST YEAR, THE CANADIAN SKI PATROL SYSTEM PRESENTED SIX NATIONAL LIFESAVING AWARDS TO WORTHY PATROLLERS AND NOT ONE OF THE INCIDENTS OCCURRED ON A SKI HILL.**



**Above »** Roger Wetherall on site at the 2011 Sporting Life Toronto 10K

**Opposite »** Russ Pyper at the 2010 Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront Marathon

**Below »** The CSPS crew at the 2010 Oasis Zoo Run in Toronto



## Ski Patrollers Busy in Summer

CSPS INVOLVEMENT IN THESE EVENTS BEGAN IN THE 90S and has since grown organically. It started with the odd patroller, running a race or volunteering in another capacity, recognizing the need for additional medical support. These people then joined race committees and rallied ski patrol colleagues to join them in supporting certain events. Word of mouth travels fast in the race community. With no self promotion whatsoever, one race led to another.

Today, race coordinators everywhere see patrollers as self-sufficient first responders who can adapt to individual event requirements by coordinating the entire medical team or filling in the gaps on bike or foot. They bring the tools, expertise, equipment, people, know-how – and they work well with professional medical services.

“The success of our events across Canada simply wouldn’t be possible without the support and dedication of our colleagues at the CSPS,” says Kathryn Stanton, owner of the 5 Peaks trail running series. “All our participants have to worry about is the enjoyment of the terrain and the excitement of achieving their personal goals, the CSPS has the safety covered.”

Greg McCormick, a ski patroller for 15 years, has coordinated medical support for the P.E.I. Marathon, two Terry Fox Anniversary runs in 2005 and 2010, and he was there for BridgeFest ’97, ’98 and ’99, the historic festival that celebrated the opening of the Confederation Bridge.

Organizers put complete faith in McCormick’s capable hands to coordinate the medical support, with very minimal direction or interference. They have a system. The organizer is happy knowing the medical coverage is well in hand with the same, consistent, reliable service. McCormick understands that, in return for a small donation to the CSPS, he must recruit enough patrollers to cover the course, fully brief EMS and Police, attend volunteer committee meetings, and secure all medical supplies, vehicles and radios for the day.

Other CSPS coordinators offer similar services across Canada. Roger Wetherall organizes medical coverage for all of the Canada Running Series events in Toronto, including the Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront Marathon. In Manitoba, Jason Devloo oversees the Manitoba Marathon, Beaches Half-Marathon, Bird’s Hill Duathlon Series and the Trail Runners Series. Then there’s Sandy Gillis in Halifax, Nick Cartwright in Ottawa, Tom Smith in London, Greg Cooke in Calgary, Louise Charron in Edmonton, Carol Carter in Vancouver and Tim Sellars in Whitehorse. Together, these patrollers and their teams have contributed over 116 years of support for marathons, 5 Peaks trail runs and adventure races.

Needless to say, patrollers spend a lot of time volunteering on top of their day jobs as engineers, teachers, police officers, fire fighters, bus drivers, executives and students. Between May and October, most weekends and evenings are filled. Sure it’s a lot of work, but for them it’s an opportunity to meet other active patrollers, practice skills, recruit and raise needed funds.

Ron Lewis has been patrolling for 13 years. For the past six he has been coordinating medical coverage for Central Alberta’s 5 Peaks trail running events. He also organizes 20 to 30 patrollers annually for the K100, a 100-mile relay in Kananaskis country, where 200 teams of 12 hardcore individuals do 10 running legs of a gruelling course covering everything from bush to highway.

## Dramatic Rescues

ONE OF LEWIS'S BEST STORIES comes from a 5 Peaks run on a wet, cold October day, on the 16K Telephone Loop of West Bragg Creek (between Nakiska and Calgary). Remote, rough and cut off, this trail encircles a mountain with one parking lot access point. It all started with a report of an injured racer. Backtracking on course, they found him deep in the boggy back country, a good 7K from support. "His foot slid under a root or something, but his body kept going," Lewis says. He had fractured his lower leg. Not only that, the team found themselves in a spot where they couldn't get any radio transmission. Moving patrollers to higher ground, they set up a relay to reach home base.

After the racer's leg was splinted, they balanced him on the seat of a mountain bike for transport. Two patrollers pushed the bike with him on it for three kilometres where they met a conservation officer on a quad. He transported the patient the rest of the way to a waiting ambulance. The entire response took two and a half hours.

Stories like this are fortunately rare. More often, patrollers wind up treating their own people who fall off bikes, or happen to set a tent up over a bees nest. Other distractions include non-medical issues, like a marriage proposal one year in the middle of the race on top of the Confederation Bridge (she said "yes"). Then there was the search for an elite runner who ran past the back country turnaround at the K100 relay. No markers were up yet because he was two hours ahead of the pack.

## Runners Express Gratitude

IF PATROLLERS DO ANY FIRST AID, they find the usual rolled ankles, strains, cuts, scrapes, blisters, bumps, stings, friction burns (in tender areas), cramps and dehydration found with any outdoor race. Remembered best by their injuries, patients will drop by the medical tent a year later to say thanks, re-introducing themselves as "the broken humerus from Rattlesnake Point," or "the asthma attack from the Acura 10 Miler."

Now and then, patrollers encounter concussions and deeper gashes, like the non-racer at the Scotiabank Calgary Marathon who was struck by the door of a portable toilet. Roger Wetherall remembers a woman who fell 3K into a 10K race in Toronto. "At the finish she came to the medical tent covered in blood," he says. "She had a chipped tooth, cut lip and scrapes all over, but she still finished the race."

Being Canadian, most runners know how hot or downright cold it can be in certain parts of the country, or different altitudes, during the summer. Some also know how temperatures change. One year at the Ottawa Marathon, they experienced both extremes in one race. The day started at 12 degrees then climbed to a humid 22 degrees during the race. Imagine dealing with hypothermia and heat exhaustion in the same race.

In spite of the elements, runners most often come to races well hydrated and fuelled, ready to take on the terrain, distance, altitude, or weather conditions. Then there are those who didn't train, bought new shoes yesterday, didn't dress for the weather, pounded down six gel packs they've never tried before, accidentally ran the marathon instead of the half-marathon, ran in spite of having pneumonia, or knew they shouldn't run on that recent injury.

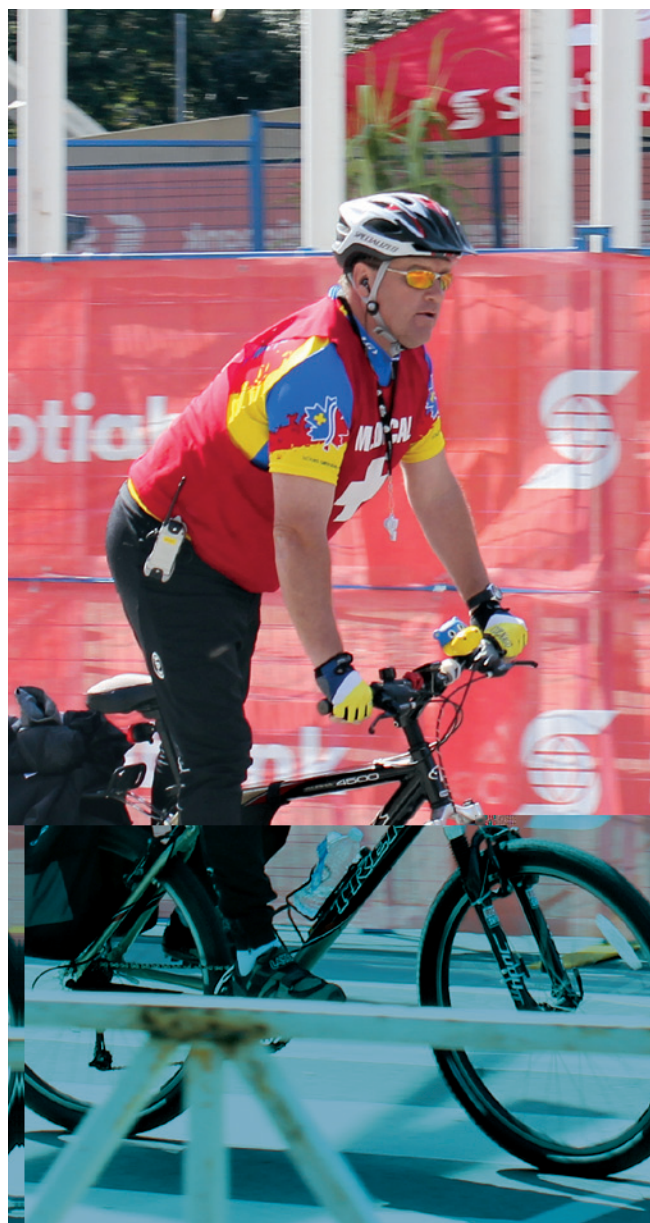


The Canadian Ski Patrol System (CSPS), now celebrating its 70th anniversary, is a national, not-for-profit charitable organization with close to 5,000 nationally certified, federally accredited volunteer members who provide safety, first aid and rescue services to more than 200 ski resorts across Canada.

There once was a bandit runner at a 5 Peaks race in Ontario who turned out to be an insulin dependent diabetic/heart attack survivor who had a severe allergy to bees. He was running alone, with no identification, no medication and no Epi-pen. You can be sure there was no medical information listed on the back of his bib.

More serious are racers who run against their doctor's advice. At one 5 Peaks race in Vancouver, their oldest racer started having breathing problems on course. Only after transporting him out did he mention his recent cardiogram and scheduled tests. Two months later, he followed up to say that without the assistance he received from patrollers that day he would likely not be alive.

Similar reports come from across the country each year. In May 2010, for example, during a humid Sporting Life 10K in downtown Toronto, a patrol bike team responded to a collapsed runner





# Bear in Mind

Each year, at the start of the Yukon River Trail Marathon, organizers give a safety lecture to runners about bears:

**TIP 1** Make sure you are near another runner at all times. Ideally this runner should be a little slower than you. If you meet a bear, you should be safe. You just have to run away faster than the other runner.

**TIP 2** Carry a bell or whistle to make lots of noise, so that you do not surprise a bear. Black bears will shy away from humans in most cases.

**TIP 3** Be aware of the signs of bears. Bear scat can be easily identified. Black bear scat will have berries in it at this time of year and grizzly bear scat will often have bells and whistles.



**“HIS FOOT SLID UNDER A ROOT OR SOMETHING, BUT HIS BODY KEPT GOING.”**

— SKI PATROLLER RON LEWIS, DESCRIBING A RESCUE EFFORT AT A TRAIL RACE IN ALBERTA

on course, arriving to find another runner already performing CPR. As EMS also arrived, one patroller took over compressions while the other re-directed 14,000 runners. The team worked efficiently, attaching an automated external defibrillator (AED) and continuing with CPR, then transferring the patient to the ambulance for transport to hospital.

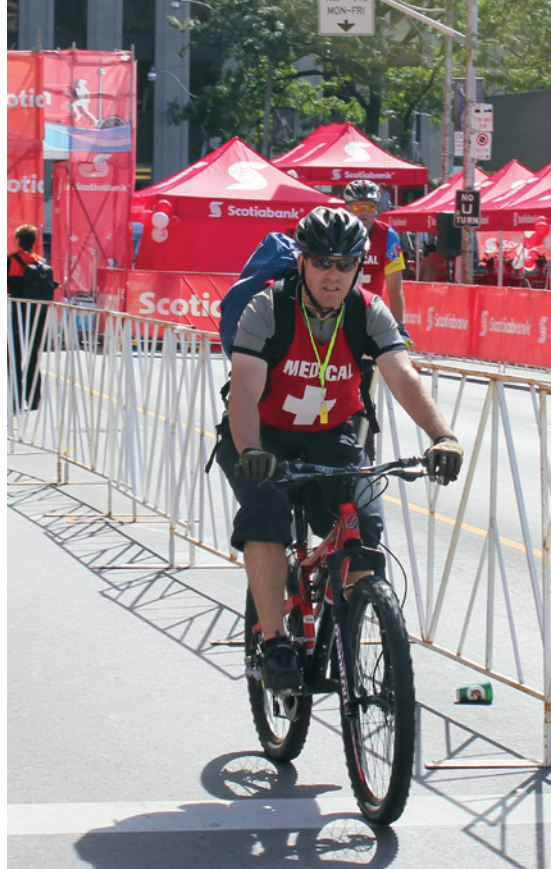
EMS had been stationed at that location on course. The runner who started CPR was a physician who happened to be running beside the patient when he collapsed. Within seconds he received immediate and effective care from a diverse team of strangers. And, the closest hospital was St. Michael's Hospital where there is a PCI (percutaneous coronary intervention) lab. Without delay, he underwent an emergency cardiac intervention, restoring blood flow to his heart and resulting in an excellent outcome. The

next day the team received a follow up email from Dr. Bruce Minnes (on-site physician for the race): “The Consultant Cardiologist at St. Mike’s was quite laudatory in his comments about the first responder care and clear that he believed that this was a big save... You folks saved a life. Well done.”

As one paramedic said that day, runners are safer on a race course than they are anywhere else. The good news is that there are 5,000 ski patrol members across Canada, and they don't stop helping people between races. Last year, the CSPS presented six national lifesaving awards to worthy patrollers and not one of the incidents occurred on a ski hill. At work, driving home, on a recreational run or in a race, ski patrollers are out there and they will always stop to help. [B](#)

*Sheila Reesor is a freelance writer based in Brooklin, Ont.*





**Opposite »** The CSPS at the 5 Peaks Sundre Snake Hills Race in Alberta

**Below »** Medical aid at the 2010 Scotiabank Calgary Marathon 2010

**Left »** Greg DeGagne at the 2010 Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront Marathon

**Bottom »** The CSPS medical support team at the 5 Peaks Mount Seymour Race in B.C.



Photos: Charlie Turner, Pat Webster, Kathryn Stanton