THE BEER
AN ORAL HISTORY

By Tania Haas

In December 2014, a relatively unknown and unremarkable university runner named Lewis Kent found himself in the race of his life. He was competing against the best in the world at the Beer Mile World Classic. The race consists of four laps around the 400m track. The only catch: runners must start each lap by chugging one five per cent alcohol beer. Kent, who grew up in Mississauga, Ont., held his own against the six others, including Olympian and six-time U.S. national champion Nick Symmonds and former Canadian marathon champion Jim Finlayson, who at 42, was twice Kent’s age, but also the former beer mile world record holder.

Corey Gallagher, a letter carrier from Winnipeg and also an unknown in the greater world of track, won the race with 5:00:23. At 5:32, Kent came in fifth beating Symmonds, but trailing Finlayson (5:21).

One year later, Kent holds the world record at an astonishing 4:47, and along with it a two-year sponsorship deal with Brooks. Gallagher is a close second (4:48) and a brand ambassador with Under Armour. The two have become arguably two of the most famous runners in Canada.

Discrepancies in time and astonishing turnarounds – such is the nature of the beer mile. Once reserved for covert varsity end-of-season celebrations, the run high-tailed into the mainstream in 2015 (chances are even your grandma saw Kent on The Ellen DeGeneres Show).

A competition fuelled by a social lubricant and known diuretic has infiltrated the running scene to the chagrin of purists. But to its champions, the beer mile is a combination of liquid courage, camaraderie and Canadian domination.
On their second-to-last lap, Lap Kent opens up a lead over Gallagher and the rest of the pack.
Things get a little messy for Corey Gallagher at the start, but World champ Lewis Kent leads by example.

BELOW Gallagher and Kent are the first to finish a beer and lead out the race.

OPPOSITE Introductions to the Austin, Texas crowd.
**Preamble:** Don’t be an idiot. Be safe and have a designated driver. Be legal (no underage drinking). Have fun.

1. Each competitor drinks four cans of beer and runs four laps, ideally on a track (start - beer, then lap, then beer, then lap, then beer, then lap - finish).
2. Beer must be consumed before the lap is begun, within the transition area which is the 10 m zone before the start/finish line on a 400m track.
3. The race begins with the drinking of the first beer in the last meter of the transition zone to ensure the competitors run a complete mile (1,609 m).
4. Women also drink four beers in four laps (past rule lists only required ladies to drink three beers).
5. Competitors must drink canned beer and the cans should not be less than 355 ml (the standard can volume) or 12 oz. (the imperial equivalent). Bottles may be substituted for cans as long as they are at least 12 oz. (355 ml) in volume.
6. No specialized cans or bottles may be used that give an advantage by allowing the beer to pour at a faster rate. i.e. “super mega mouth cans” or “wide mouth bottles” are prohibited.
7. Beer cans must not be tampered with in any manner, i.e. no shotgunning or puncturing of the can except for opening the can by the tab at the top. The same applies with bottles - no straws or other aids are allowed in order to aid in the speed of pouring.
8. Beer must be a minimum of 5 per cent alcohol by volume. Hard ciders and lemonades will not suffice. The beer must be a fermented alcoholic beverage brewed from malted cereal grains and flavoured with hops.
9. Each beer can must not be opened until the competitor enters the transition zone on each lap.
10. Competitors who vomit before they finish the race must complete one penalty lap at the end of the race (immediately after the completion of their fourth lap). Note: Vomiting more than once during the race still requires only one penalty lap at the end.

Note: It is strongly recommended, when attempting official records, to tip the empty beer can or bottle over your head at the end of a chug to verify an empty vessel.

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**Humble Beginnings in Southern Ontario**

A group of Ontario high schoolers and college kids are credited with the invention and standardization of the rules of the beer mile, though they may have called it something different.

It was 1989, when seven Burlington-based runners attempted to outrun the alcohol after an August evening workout. The plan was to down a beer and sprint a lap, and repeat it four times until four beers were consumed and a mile was run.

Details are hard to confirm – underage drinking and trespassing may have taken place. One participant may have sprayed the contents of his stomach on the field. The winner may have had to be carried home – but a tradition was established that night.

The beer mile was then exported to Queen’s University, where it became the Kingston Classic, an end-of-season (unsanctioned) ritual for collegiate runners.

With Queen’s milers improvising to improve their time (sipping beer through straws or shotgunning cans), the Official Kingston Rules were created in the early 1990s to standardize the race. In the early days of the internet, the rules were posted online and boards were updated, shared and compared. Eventually the race and rules disseminated to the U.S.
Pan Am bronze medallist in the marathon Rachel Hannah, who is also a registered dietitian at Medcan, educated us on the impacts of beer to a runner’s body.

**Absorption Starts with First Sip**
Absorption starts as soon as you ingest alcohol from your tongue to your esophagus but the majority of the alcohol lands in the small intestine, where it then travels all over your body.

**From Small Intestine to Liver**
The alcohol not absorbed by the small intestine is delivered to the liver, which can process 0.5 ounces of pure alcohol per half hour, which is about six to 12 ounces of beer. The byproducts of alcohol are converted to fatty acids stored in the liver then transferred to the bloodstream. The more alcohol you drink the more you raise the levels of lipids in your blood. A high level of triglycerides is one indicator of cardiovascular disease.

Alcohol is metabolized in the body as fat. The by-products of alcohol metabolism are converted to fatty acids, which are stored in the liver and sent to the bloodstream. The more alcohol you drink, the more you raise the level of lipids in your blood, which is a risk factor for heart disease.

A significant factor for runners who drink alcohol moderately or regularly is the caloric content of alcohol: 12 oz. of beer contains about 150 calories.

**Carbonation, Burping and Digestion**
Many beer milers speak about the foam and air in their stomach from gulping back highly carbonated beers. The carbon dioxide expands in the stomach and has to escape eventually putting the runner through some discomfort. Meanwhile the body is trying to absorb and metabolize while the runner’s blood is being drawn to the muscles and not necessarily the digestive tract at equal measure.

**Too Much of a Good Thing**
Alcohol’s association with mortality exists on a J-shaped curve, meaning that mortality increases along the consumption of three or more drinks per day. Too much alcohol consumed regularly can increase your risk of heart disease. It can also increase risk of stroke, liver damage, and cancers of the mouth, esophagus, stomach, liver, breast and colon.

**Heart, Lungs, Skin and Brain**
From your liver, the alcohol travels through your bloodstream to your heart. Since alcohol is a depressant, not a stimulant, it causes the heart muscle to reduce the strength of its contractions. This results in the heart pumping slightly less blood, lower blood pressure because of relaxed blood vessels. Your lungs are next on alcohol’s blood journey... followed by your skin. This is why you have beer breath and the beer sweats. Twenty or so minutes after first ingestion, runners may start to feel effects such as lightheadedness, impaired judgement or blurred vision as the body processes all the collected alcohol in the system. Runners report feeling tipsy or inebriated around 20 minutes after their first drink.
“I created a website for running pages in 1994, before search engines,” says Patrick Butler, founder of beermile.com. “It worked like Yahoo, as a curation of sites run by university teams or enthusiasts. I can’t remember if I found the Kingston site or if they found me, but I saw they had a section devoted to their beer mile with rules and best times. Friends on my track team had heard about the beer mile and we decided to try it for the first time using the Kingston rules in 1995 and 1996.”

By the end of 1999, Butler was hosting beer mile results on beermile.com from runners in the U.S., Canada and around the world. The increase of entries posted on the site coincided with the spread of social media and video sharing. By 2005, the beer mile was approaching critical mass.

“We do everything all in,” says Seanna Robinson, a former runner at Queen’s University who held the female beer mile world record for 17 years at 6:42. “Distance runners are by nature intense and nerdy. They’ll find a fun, low-key thing and make it competitive and quantify it and analyze it and obsess over it. It’s their nature. Being one of them, I get it.”

**Canadian Domination**

One of the original Kingston seven was an Olympian at the 1992 and 1996 Olympics, Graham Hood, and then there’s Jim Finlayson, the runner who validated the race past its tipping point.

In 2005, the former Canadian marathon champion, three-time competitor in the IAAF World Cross Country-Championships and winner of the Royal Victoria Marathon downd four Guinesses and ran a mile as part of a fundraising event. While his beer of choice didn’t meet official standards (four per cent alcohol), his time drew attention. During a 2007 attempt, he swigged Granville Island Winter Ale (at 6.5 per cent) and ran 5:09. That time was left unbeaten for five years, during which the run surged in popularity.

Beermile.com traffic boomed, and then American James Nielsen posted a video to YouTube in April 2014 that changed everything.

Nielsen, a Canadian who relocated to California after running for an American college, broke the five-minute mark (4:57) on a running track in northern California, with his wife filming his solo pursuit. Breaking the five-minute barrier had seemed impossible, and was compared (albeit in a tongue-in-cheek manner) to Roger Bannister breaking the four-minute mile and what came after that. Nielsen would go on to co-found the Beer Mile World Classic based in San Francisco – the race that started it all for Lewis Kent.

In December that year, FloTrack hosted the inaugural Beer Mile World Championship in Austin, Texas, where Winnipeg-based Corey Gallagher won in the elite runner category (5:00:23). Gallagher first ran the beer mile as a track team member at the University of Manitoba during 2005.

“There was a tradition the week after the CIS (Canadian Interuniversity Sport) events,” Gallagher recalls. “The team would get together and shovel the outdoor track for the purpose of running a beer mile the next day. CIS was always the first week in March so you can imagine how much snow we still had here in the Prairies. More than 20 people would be out there shovelling the outdoor university track for eight hours.”

Gallagher remembers 20 to 30 people running, including a few brave souls running in -20 C in nothing but a Speedo. Ahead of the Austin race in 2014, Gallagher was picked up by Under Armour as a brand ambassador.
James Nielsen goes under 5 minutes with 4:57 and ushers the race into a new era.

Before the championship run, Under Armour appoints Corey Gallagher as a brand ambassador.

Dec. 3, Inaugural Beer Mile World Championship in Austin:
Corey Gallagher places first with fellow Canadians in third (Finlayson) and fifth (Kent).

Beer Mile World Classic, in San Francisco Calif:
Lewis Kent wins with 5:07.7. Canada wins the team title with runners also placing third (Jim Finlayson) and sixth (Jeff Mountjoy).

Brooks announces two-year sponsorship with Lewis Kent.

Beer Mile World Championship, Austin:
The second and third women were Canadian, and six of the ten elite men were Canadian. A new world record is set by Lewis Kent; close second went to Corey Gallagher, who beat his last time by 11 seconds.
“Corey has a humble attitude and clear passion for the sport that really fit with our brand,” says Jasmine Maietta, senior director of brand marketing at Under Armour. “We look to support athletes who are taking it to the next level and provide them with product that gives them an edge when they’re reaching theirs.”

But Gallagher’s claim as beer mile king didn’t last for long.

A little over eight months after his win in Austin, two new world records were posted online within 24 hours. On Aug. 7, 2015, Australian Josh Harris, 25, posted his 4:56 solo run, followed by Lewis Kent finishing in 4:55.78. A few weeks later, the two competed in the first Beer Mile World Classic in San Francisco.

Harris vomited before his third beer (the announcer reported “Chunder from Down Under!”), which led to a time-sucking penalty lap. James Nielsen was disqualified for leaving too much beer and foam. Kent placed first in 5:07.7. A few months later he earned the world title with his 4:47 finish. High profile upsets and shrinking times make the race appealing to fans.

“Seeing Lewis drop 45 seconds from his time from 2014 to 2015 mostly indicates to me the beer mile is still in its infancy,” says Finlayson.

“People are learning how to race this event, even though there are recorded times from 20 years ago. I think what we have is a fairly new event, part of which is skill-based – drinking quickly while out of breath,” Finlayson says. He also feels that there’s a lot of room for improvement simply by practicing, and a lot of room for changes on the depth charts as more people take it seriously. “I keep competing largely because of the skill component. This year when I ran my 5:01, my running splits were nearly identical to my 2014 Austin race, but I drank 20 seconds faster cumulatively, and so I had a huge improvement simply by practicing.” Finlayson, like most other serious beer milers, practices with water from a beer bottle, mostly, but sometimes with beer. “It’s all about the movement, making it fluid and graceful and quick,” he says of his chugging technique.

Kent credits his roommate, a non-runner, for helping him perfect his chugging.

“He has looked at training for the beer mile at a very serious level. From the chug to the amount of work needed, he’s really dissected every layer, which is what a lot of athletes can relate to,” says Jenine LaFayette, marketing manager at Brooks Canada, which sponsored Kent in the fall of 2015 with a two-year shoe and apparel deal that includes bonuses for big wins. “That pursuit of cracking the science of it we think is really exciting. He is so genuine in his excitement about running, with or without the beer element, which really comes across.”

The Trials of Beer Miles

But even with all the training, there’s no denying the physical distress.

“Many people will think it looks like fun and then try it and realize it is actually very un-fun and extremely hard, and is way better to cheer from the sidelines,” says Robinson.

“I felt pretty bad. It’s an awful thing to put your body through,” says Rachel Hannah, 2015 Pan Am Games bronze medallist in the marathon, of her beer mile experience at Georgia State University. “Though I think I was able to hold it down.”
“How could I forget my first beer mile in 2005,” recalls Gallagher. “I brought up more contents than I put in.”

The discomfort of running with foam slushing in your stomach, running through burping up carbonation, and swallowing beer while out of breath is all part of the allure.

“I think what we have here is an event that feels accessible. There are a lot of fast drinkers at pubs who run a bit and think they can take a serious crack at the event,” says Finlayson. “We also have some personalities developing in a sporting event, which seems to be somewhat absent in straight running circles. This isn’t to say runners don’t have strong or fantastic personalities, but the beer milers are more, shall we say, expressive.”

The Critics

Not every runner is a fan of the growing appeal and attention.

Beermile.com’s Butler has been asked by runners to remove their names from the website over 500 times due to fears over search engine results impeding job prospects.

An Olympian in the 1,500m and one of the original Kingston crew, Graham Hood, was not interested in commenting on a story about the beer mile. His December 2015 Tweets shed light on his position.

“Glad this beer mile ‘world championship’ is over. Can we all get back to watching actual athletic endeavours [sic] now?” reads one Tweet. He follows up with a fan by explaining the beer mile has its place, and prime time it isn’t.

“Mediocre runners and binge drinking does not equal good sport (my opinion only),” he finishes. The fan responds by saying he was thoroughly entertained by the two hours of coverage he watched.

“I don’t think there’s any reason to think it’s taking away from non-beer mile runners,” says Robinson. “To be at the top, especially now, you have to be a top-tier runner anyway.”

Finlayson goes on to say it’s worth looking at the beer mile differently.

“We can’t look at the beer mile as a running event any more than we can look at it as a drinking event. Runners need to realize this is a different event from theirs, the way triathlon is a different event, or biathlon is different from other Nordic events.”

“I would say 95 per cent of runners think it’s a pretty cool way to bring attention to running,” says Kent, who snuck out of kinesiology classes at Western University this past year to take interviews with Outside Magazine, ESPN, Maclean’s, the Toronto Star and the U.K.’s Daily Mail.

He also took his huge grin and long stride on television last December (ahead of his world record performance) when he challenged a staffer on The Ellen Show.

“There’s nothing really negative about the sport,” says Kent. “You usually have to be an Olympian to get sponsored.”

With beer-focused running clubs, like RunTOBeer and Toronto’s Mikkeller Running Club, popping up across the country, there is ample breeding ground for the next Canadian champion. Even with these clubs, the drinking comes second.

“If people are looking at getting into beer miles they need to know that the top beer milers in the world are runners first,” says Gallagher. “They’re all pretty quick guys that log some good miles.”

Tania Haas loves to run but fears the beer mile. She writes about travel and fitness.
**BEER CHOICES OF THE CHAMPS**

**Lewis Kent (2015)**  
Amsterdam Blonde, Bottle

**Corey Gallagher (2015)**  
BudLight Platinum, Bottle

**Jim Finlayson (2005, 2007)**  
Guiness  
Granville Island’s Winter Ale, Bottle

**Seanna Robinson (no date)**  
Molson Canadian or Sapporo,  
Can but prefers bottle

**James Nielson (2014)**  
Budweiser, Can

**Nick Symmonds (2012)**  
Coors, Can

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**BEER MILE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP RESULTS**

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<th>Women</th>
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| 1       | Elizabeth Herndon  
For Wayne, Ind. | 6:17 |
| 2       | Andrea Fisher  
Austin, Texas | 6:28 |
| 3       | Kara Dewalt  
Darby, Mont. | 6:35 |
| 4       | Chris Kimbrough  
Austin, Texas | 6:37 |
| 5       | Juliane Masciana  
Austin, Texas | 6:48 |

<table>
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<th>Men</th>
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| 1       | Lewis Kent  
Mississauga, Ont. | 4:47 |
| 2       | Corey Gallagher  
Winnipeg | 4:48 |
| 3       | Michael Johnson  
San Luis Obispo, Calif. | 5:06 |
| 4       | Jim Finlayson  
Victoria | 5:08 |
| 5       | Michael Cunningham  
New York | 5:15 |

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| 1       | Erin O’Mara  
Linden, Mich. | 6:08 |
| 2       | Kirsty Jahn  
Vancouver | 6:38 |
| 3       | Lianne Girard  
Oakville, Ont. | 6:42 |

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<tr>
<th>Men</th>
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</table>
| 1       | Corey Gallagher  
Winnipeg | 5:00 |
| 2       | Michael Cunningham  
Brewster, N.Y. | 5:07 |
| 3       | Jim Finlayson  
Victoria | 5:21 |
| 4       | Brian Anderson  
Bloomington, Minn. | 5:30 |
| 5       | Lewis Kent  
Mississauga, Ont. | 5:32 |

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OPPOSITE  
Lewis Kent, the 2015 Beer Mile World champion, accepting his trophy  
For Lewis Kent victory tastes like Corona