**Fighting for a Hallowed and Grueling Ground**

**By** [**WINNIE HU**](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/h/winnie_hu/index.html)OCT

There are many who dread Cemetery Hill.Tucked into the backwoods of Van Cortlandt Park, it was once the burial ground of the Van Cortlandt family who owned much of this land in the northern Bronx. But Cemetery Hill is now better known — and feared — as a steep, ankle-twisting obstacle on a 3.1-mile cross-country course that is as legendary for its difficulty as for its rugged beauty.“You know, I just died on Cemetery Hill,” recalled Gene McCarthy, 57, the president of Merrell, the outdoor company, who was introduced to the course as a high school freshman in 1970 and ran it so often that he had practically every root, rock and hole memorized.The Van Cortlandt Park course has become known as a mecca of cross-country running, a grueling test of endurance and will through dense woods and an undulating stretch of hills and dales that can make the paved streets of the New York City Marathon look relatively tame. One story repeated with pride by runners and their coaches over the years is that at least one race organizer deemed it too challenging and opted instead for the flatter terrain of the Meadowlands in New Jersey.But as Van Cortlandt’s cross-country course reaches the century mark this year, sections of it have been badly eroded by washouts, falling timber and pounding feet. So a coalition of park advocates and running clubs is leading a campaign to pay homage to a course that has been the training ground of generations of top runners. This fall, they have organized a series of “Run for the Trail” races — including a reunion for course veterans the day after Thanksgiving — to raise money to improve and to preserve the course for years to come.“People have always thought this trail, and this park, are just here,” said Margot Perron, a city park administrator and president of the Van Cortlandt Park Conservancy. “They didn’t think they needed to help, and now we’re asking.”The cross-country course was pieced together by city park officials in 1913 from existing trails in Van Cortlandt Park, a 1,146-acre recreational oasis that is also home to two public golf courses where the cross-country races are said to have started. Later, in the 1930s, as Robert Moses built highways that cut up Van Cortlandt Park, the city built a bridge for the runners over the Henry Hudson Parkway.The course received a nearly $1 million makeover in 1997 that, among other things, covered the entire length with a layer of crushed stone to even out spots made treacherous by exposed roots and rocks. Course markers were also installed with a tortoise-and-hare motif — the hare is in front at the start but then the order reverses — though so many runners still lost their way and wound up in Westchester County that park officials started requiring races to have marshals on hand to provide directions.Today, the Van Cortlandt course is one of the most heavily used in the country. Marathon runners train there, as do members of the Van Cortlandt Track Club, some of whom move nearby for easier access. In 2013, it will host 12 collegiate cross-country competitions; most other courses host no more than one in a single year, according to the United States Track and Field and Cross Country Coaches Association.

The course is also home to the Manhattan College High School Cross Country Invitational, an annual race started in the early ‘70s that has grown to 10,200 high school runners from 14 states, the District of Columbia and Canada. Ed Bowes, the founder and meet director, said that participants had run through downpours and fierce winds and around the occasional horse. “Cross country in itself is supposed to be tough — uphill, downhill, through woods,” he said. “It wasn’t meant to be easy.”

The course even has its own language. It starts on “the flats,” a grassy expanse that was once a parade ground for military exercises, and where in 2002 the Rolling Stones took off in a yellow blimp to promote a new tour (they did not run the course). It passes through “the cowpath,” a narrow tree-flanked trail where runners fall into single file, and over Cemetery Hill and across “the runners’ bridge.”

Then it winds through a loop called simply “the back hills,” which has earned respect among runners like David Cintron, 45, a governmental relations manager, who says he runs it several times a week. “I want it to be challenging,” he said. “Otherwise I just stay on the treadmill.”

The hills are not the only challenge. Howard Adams, a cross-country coach at Hunter High School, recalled that several years ago he sent a promising new runner on a 1.5-mile stretch of the course. As others completed the stretch, the runner was still not back.

“We were trying to figure out what happened to him,” the coach said. “He took so long we thought he twisted his ankle. When he finally came out, he said it was so serene he didn’t want to come out.”

On a recent autumn day on the cross-country course, two workers raked leaves and pulled weeds. They were hired this year with $15,000 raised by the conservancy from private donations, including $5,000 from Nike. On busy days, they said it was hard to get any work done with all the runners stampeding toward them. Over on Cemetery Hill, which is also called Vault Hill, runners flew by the burial vaults that played a role in the city’s history. During the Revolutionary War, Augustus Van Cortlandt, the city clerk, hid city records there for safe keeping. These days the only battles around Cemetery Hill are among runners.

Mr. McCarthy, who started a Hall of Fame for Van Cortlandt runners in 2011, said that the course became a formative experience for many youths who, confronted by its rugged terrain, rose to the occasion, some of them setting records in the process. “For a lot of kids, it’s like ‘Yeah, I ran Van Cortlandt,’” he recalled. “It becomes almost a box to check.”