

On the Run with the Bay Bandits

How a tragedy transformed an East Bay trail-running group.

by Matt Mitchell



Members of the Bay Bandits, a loose federation of runners led by Chris Thoburn, set off for a trail run on a Monday evening in March 2024.

On a fall evening at the Skyline Gate Staging Area in the hills east of Oakland, a group of runners uncoiled themselves in the honeyed evening light. As they idled and stretched next to their cars, doors left ajar revealed evidence of the workday: insulated travel mugs lolled on center consoles, and starched button-downs lay draped over headrests. Their muscles lengthened, the dozen or so athletes made their way toward one of the several trailheads that spool out into Reinhardt Redwood Regional Park.

Every Monday night around 6 p.m., the Bay Bandits descend from this parking lot perch into a web of single-track trails, following their feet for miles in the dark. Less of an official running club and more like a friendly faction, the Bandits host casual runs, mellow than those put on by more hard-line training groups. There are no tryouts, no dues, and all skill levels are welcome. The pace is kept “conversational,” meaning the aerobic demands of the workout shouldn’t be so great as to foreclose speechifying. Finales to most runs take place over beers in the parking lot.

Given how sociable and jokey the Bandits can be from moment to moment, it can take some time to pick up on the seriousness that sometimes shadows the runners. Two years ago, one of their members, Philip Kreycik, passed away from heat exposure while out on a solo run. His death felt maddeningly preventable, which made accepting it all the more difficult. In some ways, the Bandits’ collective refusal to do so has shaped them ever since.

By a quarter after six, a loose group had formed at the edge of the staging area. Chris Thoburn maneuvered his tall frame to the front, his calico dog, Rey, close behind. After he rattled off a sequence of trails summarizing the evening’s route turn-by-turn—West Ridge, Tres Sendas, Steam, Picnic, East Ridge—runners loped away.

When speaking about the Bandits, Thoburn does so pensively, often with somber eyes. A software engineer by

trade, he formed the group in 2018 during a period when he was trying to become a professional ultrarunner and wanted local training partners to sharpen his legs against. The small coterie he recruited included Kreycik, a clean-energy transportation analyst for Pacific Gas & Electric whom Thoburn had met the year before. The two grew quite close, meeting up when their schedules aligned to share miles and talk.

An inveterate endurance athlete and father of two, Kreycik owned some of the fastest times on climbs in the East Bay. Despite his world-class speed, he didn’t seem to harbor any great desire to flaunt it in the presence

of others. “He was the only one of our group that really never wanted to be competitive,” Thoburn recalled. “He was just good, and he was there to focus on friendship.”

In July of 2021, Kreycik disappeared while out on a run in Pleasanton Ridge Regional Park, about a thirty-minute drive from Berkeley. A heat wave had cornered the Bay Area, one of several to wilt much of the west that summer, and Kreycik set off alone under a brutal sun. Once he was reported missing, Thoburn worked tirelessly to retrieve his friend, coordinating volunteer search efforts with those of local agencies, diving into the latest research on heat exhaustion, and trying



Thoburn’s vision for the group emphasizes building community and keeping runners safe.



Runs are designed to expose members to navigating in the dark across a variety of trails.

to force his mind through Kreycik's decision-making in hopes of finding him. Twenty-five days later, he finally did.

As the Bandits filed deeper into the park's bramble of trails, snippets of conversation and the din of foot strikes became a syncopated chant. The evening's route veered abruptly off a wide fire lane into a canopy of coastal redwoods that swallowed the group in a fuzzy darkness. One by one a procession of headlamps blinked to life, turning the trail into a canyon of shadows. A few holdouts ahead carried on in the paucity of light. Leaders typically arrive first at a trail juncture and wait for the rest of the group, strung out behind them, before continuing on.

Heart rates settled during these still moments the Bandits took to regather. Some saw the opportunity to continue the stretching they had started in the parking lot, using their fingers to gently crimp the edges of their legs; others gurgled water from bottles strapped to their hands to wash away the fine dust kicked up in the fray. Breaks in the run opened up what felt like intervals between crashing waves, lasting just long enough for a thought or two to surface before being submerged again.

After Kreycik's death, the size of Thoburn's grief threatened to close him off from the sport entirely. "I lost all of my motivation to run because what had been this place of joy was suddenly a place of pain and sorrow," he said. "But I had to push through that, I had to work through it. I couldn't ignore it."

When Thoburn warily returned to the same trails he had run with Kreycik, his mind fell to circling the missteps of his friend—the fact that Kreycik neglected to take either his phone or any water on the run, and that he set out by himself in near-90-degree heat. "I reflected on those things, on what cost him his life," Thoburn said. "There's stuff we take for granted that's part of our safety net that is easy to accidentally remove, and that's what he did. He accidentally removed his safety net."

Thoburn then asked himself what he could do to protect his community from a similar tragedy. "That was the challenge, and it was like, 'Okay, I think I can take that challenge.'"

It requires a bit of distance to appreciate the depth of care behind Bandit runs; it's something that's only really noticeable once it's pointed out. At a remove, the group's ad hoc-ishness

gives way to a shrewd design containing a tight safety net for members. Everything—from start times to how routes are constructed—is intentional. Runs are hosted deliberately in the evenings to avoid time constraints imposed by work and to familiarize runners with navigating in the dark. Routes are varied each week to expose runners to new swaths of trail so they're less likely to become lost if they choose to strike out on their own.

For Thoburn, who is constantly parsing ways to layer lessons into runs, these small measures converge into a greater resource for his community. The more the Bandits can promote a sense of togetherness, the safer they will be.

Of course, increased numbers are a pivotal part of that equation, something the Bandits have gently encouraged but have been heedful not to force. When Matt Seidel, a design engineer who lives in Oakland, first started attending Bandit runs in the fall of 2021, he said they were lucky if they fielded more than a half dozen people. These days, owing largely to word of mouth and a social media presence that feels unforced, numbers can exceed fifty.

"Incidentally, the number of folks who do this sport is part of your safety net," Thoburn told me. "If there had been more people on the trail that day, the outcome for Phil might have been a little different."

In the days and weeks following Kreycik's disappearance, the volunteer search efforts Thoburn mobilized were nothing short of relentless. More than two thousand people, many of whom had never even met Kreycik, poured in from every corner of the Bay Area to comb the sunbaked hillsides of Pleasanton Ridge. Lucy Andrews, a PhD student at UC Berkeley who fell in with the Bandits during the pandemic, said this helped foreshadow what the group would eventually become.

"I think the Bandits' reorientation was motivated by having seen community arise in moments of tragedy and then realizing that that was actually maybe what mattered most," she said. "I think

knowing that Phil's death was tragic and avoidable also led to a desire for spaces that helped us all keep each other safe."

On August 3, 2021, nearly a month after Kreycik's disappearance, Thoburn returned to the trailhead where Kreycik had started his run. By that point, law enforcement had drastically scaled back their search, leaving a resolute group of volunteers to continue scouring the ridges west of Pleasanton.

Thoburn, accompanied by two friends, set off into the park to visit coordinates corresponding to tips they had received over the previous week. After the first two locations turned up nothing, they pressed on to their final spot of the day: an area just below the park's Northridge Trail where volunteers had reported the smell of decay.

As the three drew closer, the scent they picked up ripened, eventually leading them to the base of a squat oak tree. Beneath the canopy's low shelter, behind a curtain of thick foliage, lay Kreycik's remains.

After suffering in the afternoon heat and losing his way, Kreycik likely sought refuge in the oak's shade in a last-ditch attempt to save himself from the sun. But by then it was too late. "Data from his watch told us later that by the time the first responders had gotten to his car, he was probably dead," Thoburn said.

When the Bandits arrived back at the Skyline Gate Staging Area around 8 p.m., night had fallen. Off to the west, the amber glow from Oakland paled the sky a milky yellow, and ruby sequins from passing planes traced flight paths overhead. Next to the parking lot, steam curled off the rounded shoulders of runners propped up with their hands on their knees, their faces glazed in sweat. Thoburn and Seidel dashed off to their cars and returned with folded camp chairs they carried like firewood and coolers filled with drinks.

As cathartic as running can feel, there's almost always a touch of anguish involved; some of the high it stirs springs from the relief of having



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Post-run, Thoburn and the other runners wind down in the Skyline Gate Staging Area parking lot.

stopped. On this particular evening, the Bandits relished this feeling, their voices lilting in the dark. Seidel, dressed in a Day-Glo green getup that made him look vaguely bioluminescent, reclined against a low split-rail wooden fence and used his sinewy legs to pin his beer in his lap as we talked. Over the next half hour or so, Bandits slowly began to

withdraw to their cars. They left much like they had arrived, in drifts, returning to the quotidian details of the workweek. Darkness would arrive a few minutes earlier the following Monday, the fall days continuing to shorten as winter drew near. But the Bandits, faces aglow beneath their headlamps, would continue to light each other's way. ♦