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Beyond the Pavement

Road runners are heading for the dirt; 'It's so much more fun,' says one



HAPPY TRAILS Tony Leach is one of many runners who wanted to get back into nature.

By Ashley Mateo

FOR TWO decades, Tony Leach would set his alarm for 5 a.m. to sneak in a run before his family woke up, logging between 20 and 60 miles a week in pursuit of shaving a few minutes off his marathon time. Then he decided he was tired of all that.

"I wanted to get out into nature more, and do events where I wasn't pressuring myself," says the San Francisco Bay Area runner.

So, like many other runners these days, he headed for the hills. Trail running, or running on unpaved surfaces, has never been more popular: A 2026 report from The Sports & Fitness Industry Association found participation has increased 30% over the past three years.

"You're starting to see some of those core road runners reach their limits," says Steve Holmberg, founder of Insight Accelerator, a consumer research and strategy consultancy for sports and outdoor brands.

Professional marathoners like 2020 Olympic bronze medalist Molly Seidel, who recently placed second in the Black Canyon 100K, her debut at the distance, and 2018 Boston Marathon champion Des Linden, who retired from road racing in 2025 and just finished third at the 2026 Marathon des Sables, a six-day stage race in Morocco's Sahara, are leading the charge.

"Runners have done a 10K, then a half marathon, then a marathon," says Holmberg. "They're saying, 'I want what's next.' "

Now, Leach, 42, typically logs one big trail run—usually 15-plus miles—per week alongside his other workouts. "It's so much more fun, and how fast I do it feels like it matters a lot less," he says.

Ashley Porter, a marathon runner in Washington, D.C., started mixing trail runs into her training to prepare for a running relay race in Utah's Zion National Park this month. "It's my first time consistently trail running," Porter, 39, says; in the past, she'd always prioritized training on the roads. "This seemed like an opportunity to try something new that's rooted in an activity I already love."

'I didn't vibe with road running as much as trail,' says Denver's Annika Ivanoff, who switched to dirt after one marathon.

Annika Ivanoff, a 27-year-old runner in Denver, ran one marathon before moving to dirt. "I didn't vibe with road running as much as trail," she says. "I started running as a way to process my grief over losing my dad, and I found that finding my breaking point out on a trail gave me good clarity."

The majority of trail runners are running more on dirt and gravel paths within city limits or nearby open spaces than technical mountain trails. The cities with the highest percentage of runs on dirt include Austin, Texas; Detroit; Seattle; Denver; San Francisco; Pittsburgh; Portland, Ore.; and the median distance recorded was just over four miles, according to data from fitness tracking app Strava.

"We like to think of trail running as incredibly rugged and gnarly and muddy when the reality is most people are running on a beautiful double-track that's pretty firm—it feels more like a road than a trail," says Holmberg.

The Best Beginner Trails in the U.S.

Some professional runners pick their favorites

1 | Doudy Draw in Boulder, Colo. "Doudy Draw offers short loop options or an out-and-back, so you don't have to commit to a full loop," says Hillary Allen, a Boulder-based runner for Brooks. "It's a great entry-level trail."

2 | Campbell Mesa Loop in Flagstaff, Ariz. "There's actually five loops all between 2 and 6 miles," says Olympic marathoner Molly Seidel.

3 | Fred's Railroad Trail in Seattle "Fred's Railroad Trail is a great way to start and then choose from a mix of single track and wide gravel paths, some hilly and some flatter sections," says ultrarunner and coach Joe McConaughy.



One of the Campbell Mesa Loops in Flagstaff, Ariz.

4 | Potomac Heritage Trail in Arlington County, Va. "It's easy for most people and smaller segments can provide a great workout," says ultrarunner Mike Wardian.

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