

Muddied but unbowed



MuckFest MS offers laughs and obstacles to raise funds.

by James Townsend

After nearly a year and a half of trying to discover why she was feeling weak and tired all the time, Sheila Timmons finally found a doctor in 2013 who diagnosed her with multiple sclerosis. The diagnosis came as quite a shock, but being a go-getter, she quickly began researching MS online.



MuckFest MS participants enjoy laughs and physical challenges.

She discovered a Facebook page for Texas' MuckFest MS 2015, the first year for the fun-filled, muddy 5K obstacle course to raise funds for the National MS Society. Timmons jumped right in. "I'm an outdoorsy kind of girl," she says, "and I decided right away I wanted to do it."

MuckFest MS has proven to be quite popular, according to Annamarie Dober, Society senior manager for development.

"It has been a great way to introduce people to the MS movement," she says. The event has raised \$29 million since its inception. MuckFest MS is being held in Boston, Philadelphia, Denver, Detroit, Chicago, Dallas, and New Jersey in 2018.

The runs provide lots of laughs and some physical challenges.

Typically there are about 18 obstacles to overcome—or bypass if they prove too challenging—including Big Balls (nine or more swinging balls that runners must navigate), Slippy Sloppy (a slip and slide), Swing Set (runners catapult themselves into water from three steel-constructed swinging platforms that the runners stand on and rock to gain momentum), Walk on Water (runners run single-file and jump over round pontoons on a thin walkway that floats on top of the water), and the Spinner (a carousel-like structure with ropes that runners hold onto while spinning over a muddy moat below).

For Timmons, entering MuckFest MS was life-changing. But it took some preparation. In order to deal with her symptoms—the loss of peripheral nerves in her legs, urinary incontinence, sexual dysfunction, bowel slowing, brain fog and loss of appetite—she was taking nearly 25 medications a day. "Then I needed more meds to help with all the side effects.



MuckFest MS has become a family tradition for Sheila Timmons' family, with 14 to 17 runners participating each year.

They were making me crazy! I had to cut back, figure out what was working and what wasn't." Today she takes only two meds: her MS disease-modifying therapy and melatonin.

A family affair

Timmons persuaded her family to join her and became team captain of the Dirty Dudes and Divas. "My brothers all signed up, and my mother and sister-in-law," Timmons says.

Since that first year she participated, MuckFest MS has become a tradition for her family and friends with the team ranging from 14 to 17 runners. "My daughters and girlfriends all run with me now, too. Well, actually, we walk fast," she says. "It's so much fun that I wait all year for it. We laugh and joke the whole distance, mostly with my mom, Sheryl Hayes, about keeping up with the team. She is 60 and a little slower, but she's also our top fundraiser, and we all try to compete with her and each other. Mom's the team treasurer/guru, and she'll go right up to anyone in the grocery store or a restaurant and ask them to donate for the cause."

Timmons laughs when recalling how her brother Ricky tripped at the top of the waterslide and plummeted head first into the mud below. "Then there was the Spinner, where my mom had to hold onto Ricky for dear life. That was really funny," she says.

Dirty Dudes and Divas are fundraising champs, bringing in nearly \$19,000 over the last three years.



Sheila Timmons' team, Dirty Dudes and Divas, raised \$19,000 over the last three years.

Timmons, 40, lives in Alvin, Texas. "It's a little town of about 25,000, some seven miles south of Houston," she says. "I love the small-town atmosphere. Lots of people know each other here and have been very supportive, my husband, Chad, in particular. It shook his world when he first realized things were harder for me, because I have always been the mom who keeps things rolling. The hard part of having MS is knowing my limitations and asking for help. He's truly been my rock and salvation in all this transition. We celebrated 22 years together in January this year."

MuckFest MS also has given Timmons a new sense of meaning. For the first race, she says, she and her family were mostly focused on the fundraising competition. "But then it really began to hit home why we do it: The money we raise [for research] is ... going to help find a cure for the disease someday."

James Townsend is a Boulder, Colorado-based freelance writer.

Learn more about [MuckFest MS](#).