

# RUNNER'S WORLD

## Roadblocks Ahead

**Before registering for your next race, research the event to avoid the unexpected.**

By Erin Strout; Image by Gary Rohman

Published May 22, 2014



Not all racecourses are closed to traffic, as these runners learn in Joplin, Mo.

While training for a half marathon a year ago, Mary Johnson was fairly certain a 5K personal best was in reach. Her workouts indicated all systems were go, so she signed up for a local race near her home in Hamden, Conn., to give it her best shot. Johnson found herself at the front of the field with only a handful of men and a sprinkling of women. She felt a sub-20:00 coming her way.

"Then my watch showed 19 minutes pass, then 20 minutes, and I still didn't see the finish line," Johnson says. "I did see a couple of runners ahead of me sort of stop or slow down, and I knew something was wrong. A whole group of us had missed the last turn because we weren't looking for the arrows on the street."

The race results revealed that the top three men clocked times in the 16- to 17-minute range, followed by a minutes-long gap until the rest of the competitors filtered through. Nobody finished in that 18- to 19-minute window.

"We asked the race director why there wasn't a volunteer there," Johnson says. "He put the blame on us for not studying the course map or listening to the pre-race announcements. Now I find out what the course markings are before I race—but really, who studies a course map for 3 miles? It was infuriating."

Knowing what to expect at a race is half the battle in notching new personal records. We might be more apt to take a closer look at a map, for example, if we knew there wouldn't be course marshals pointing us in the right direction. Not all the blame can be heaped on the race organizers—necessary information is often hidden in plain sight, on the race website or buried in the bundles of fliers at packet pickup.

But what are some key things to know before signing up? We asked. Race directors answered.

### Merging Malfunctions

Beware of events that feature multiple race distances. One such legendary episode occurred at the 2009 Philadelphia Marathon when the faster marathon competitors ran into a wall of slower half marathon participants, causing them to weave around and lose precious seconds in the final mile of

the course. When a race advertises multiple distances, find out if the race times will be staggered and if the courses merge. With multiple races, will aid stations be more congested? Will the road narrow at the point where the fields converge?

Jerry Frostick, co-director of the Shamrock Marathon in Virginia Beach, Va., says his organization changed the start time of the marathon to avoid any problems the front of the pack might have with the half marathon participants, who now begin 90 minutes before the longer race. "We welcome and encourage walkers—I just wish people didn't use headphones. When our announcer starts our final wave of half marathoners, he gives them instructions to be aware that these [lead marathoners] are not out there to have nearly the same kind of fun they are—they're trying to win money," Frostick says. "Race directors have an obligation to give a clear course that doesn't require unnecessary weaving."



This way or that way? Even when courses are clearly marked, it's up to the runners to research the route.

### **Thirst Quenching**

Frostick is a stickler for an organized aid station. At the Shamrock Marathon, each station offers water first, followed by electrolyte sports drink, then more water. The sports drink is in a green cup; the water is in a white cup. Every aid station is set up exactly the same. "It should be uniform," he says. "I don't want to have to think as a runner."

If hydration is important in a race, take some time to find out how the stations are organized. Is fluid available on both sides of the road to ease congestion? If there's an out-and-back, will you be dodging runners coming the opposite direction to get a cup? Are volunteers trained to tell you which is water and which is sports drink? Are the stations set up at logical points on the course? "We try to be explicit about all of these things," Frostick says.

### **No Parking**

Sometimes the most critical components of a race come before you even start running. As road races have grown in popularity, some organizations haven't kept up with the parking demand or adjusted the frequency or number of shuttles from parking areas to the starting lines. Having some idea of how parking and transportation is set up—and whether you can make alternative plans to avoid the traffic jams—will ease race-morning stress.

Wayne Kursh, director of the Delaware Marathon and several other shorter races in the Delaware area, says that when a friend missed a race in Washington, D.C., because the traffic into the parking area was so backed up, he started making it an organizational priority at his own races. "We put up huge signs beginning as soon as people get off the highway, and we also send an email blast about parking before the race," Kursh says. "At one of our races,

we work with the city to not ticket metered parking the morning of our event, as well as local businesses with parking lots. So many people travel to do races now that you need to make it easy for tourists who are unfamiliar with the area."

### **Eyes on the Prize**

For races that offer cash or other prizes, knowing the categories and the rules for winning an overall place or age group will save griping at the podium. Some races allow double dipping (winning an age group and an overall award, for example) and others don't. Some races go by gun time and others go by chip time—or, if they're really getting into the weeds, they base overall prizes on gun time and age group awards on chip time. Regardless, it's on the athletes to read all about the prize structure or ask prior to the event. "I don't mean to pick on this group specifically, but every year it seems like the second-place masters woman complains because she would've gotten first in the 45-49 age group, but we don't allow double dipping," Frostick says.

### **Who's the Boss?**

The running industry is growing, and it's not unusual anymore for companies to produce races to earn a piece of the pie. For some runners it doesn't matter. But others can tell when a race is being directed by a fellow runner and choose events based on that knowledge. More often than not, a race director with a running history won't skimp on timing and scoring costs, additional (and well-placed) Porta-Potties or the need for a well-marked course that accommodates the size of the field. "This sport is not rocket science, but if you're spending good money on a race, it's good to know who is managing the event," Kursh says. "Serious runners know the difference."