

Show me the way...

John McDonough's advice for leading runs

Our training runs are the glue (or should that be mud? ⁱ) which bind the club together. Within the club there is a huge amount of knowledge about the local terrain which is shared freely, mostly by members volunteering to lead runs. If you haven't led a run yet, why not give it a go? Here's some guidance on how to go about it. As you can tell, there is a scientific basis to this academic treatise – it's got footnotes and everything.

Firstly, talk to Jonathan Gledson or Cathy Fagg; they organise the run list (Runmeisters!).

Once you have agreed a date and a pubⁱⁱ with them or even before, find a buddy to share duties with if you can. The email list Luke sends round every week will give you plenty of choice, or use your networking time in the pub wisely. You can stick to home turf or explore somewhere new; grab an OS map and go.

Next get out and recce the course with your buddy; rights of way can change or be blocked, and the course may be impassable in certain conditions e.g. heavy rain may make streams unfordable or heavy ground a bog. 10k is about right, but leading a short run alternative of about 4 miles is even better for your first time; with large groups lots of stiles or hard climbs can add a lot of time. Be prepared to deviate to avoid problems. I always have shortcuts or alternative loops in mind in case something happens.

Run your course again with your buddy if possible no more than a week before you lead it in the conditions which will be present on run night e.g. in the dark. As the saying goes 'La nuit tous les chats sont noirs'ⁱⁱⁱ. Also in spring things can look completely different when paths are overgrown compared to the bleakness of winter. Again, be prepared to make changes and be flexible. It will also give you an idea of time for the run - just running the course on my own I normally add 50% on to allow for stiles, sheepdogging^{iv} etc.

On the night, get there early and greet your runners. You and your buddy both know the course; if your buddy can't make it tell it to someone else with local knowledge. If you can arrange it, see if someone will run as backmarker for you so that when the group gets stretched they can tell you they are all there when you regroup before setting off for the next bit of the run. You will, of course, be at the front.

Count heads (twice!) before you set off. Runners are natural anarchists so if you need them to stand still while you do it, tell 'em. It's all about communication- shout a lot!

'OK let's go'. 'Diagonally right across the field and come back from the stile'

'Sheepdog'

'No, the other right'

'Regroup'

'Heads'

'Gate please'

'Watch your feet here'

'Log'

Talk to your backmarker and do a headcount every time you do a regroup (and when to regroup is your decision).

Keep talking. It's your run and people will look to you to do it consistently. If in doubt - talk to your buddy or another experienced group member. What if something goes wrong? We've had the odd injury over the years-broken collarbone, knee injuries, back injuries, twisted ankles etc. There are first aiders (Ant and I are St John's trained) and the odd GP in the club (Mark Vogan). Assess the damage and the impact on the group. For example, we had someone turn an ankle on top of the Mendips in sub zero conditions. One of the group members walked him to a nearby friend's house to get a lift back to the pub and the rest of us carried on. You don't want people standing round in the cold. You need to decide what is best for the group, not what the individual wants to do.

What if you lose someone? Apart from the huge amount of stick you will get in the pub, you need to consider other facts. Does the person know the area well? What are conditions like? When were they seen last? Was it their fault for not running fast enough? You will need to make a decision based on the facts - do some people go back and everyone else waits or does the group go on and a couple of people go back to find them. (if you are the lost person and suddenly can't see the group, stop and wait. There's no point getting even more lost). Be reassured that in 13 years of running with the club I have never had the experience of someone not turning up at the pub eventually. If you revel in notoriety, the runs where things go wrong are the ones everyone remembers. And there's no-one in the club who has led a number of runs over the years that hadn't got at least one chalked up against their name^v. Once back at the pub, do a final headcount to make sure everyone is back then you can sign off for the night and have a well deserved drink and pick your next pub for the run list.

ⁱ Or even worse, shaggy. If you can't guess what shiggy is, ask a senior member of the club. And ask about the shiggy monster while you're at it

ⁱⁱ Ideally a good country pub with real ale and cider. Real cider is not transparent. Remember the Blaise Inn? Well, you want the exact antithesis

ⁱⁱⁱ That's French you know. We're a club of cultured sophisticates

^{iv} Sheepdogging is when the lead runners loop back to the rear of the group so the group stays together (and they can show off how fast they are)

^v I led a run recently from the Nova Scotia. I intended to take the group on trails in Leigh Woods, but then the Jo Yeates murder happened. I therefore changed the run so it was a series of straight line sections so I could keep everyone's head torches in clear view. I didn't order sheepdogging on the first section along the towpath as well, it was only the first section. We didn't sheepdog on the second as Nightingale valley is too narrow. As a result, we split into two groups at the top of Nightingale as some people felt the pace was too hot. It fragmented further from there so I ended up with an elite group and leading the fastest run in the history of the club with about a third of the people who started out, which is exactly what club night is not about. D'oh!