

## Considerations for Pace Assistance at Marathons

Pace assistance can be highly advantageous for marathon and half marathoner racers to improve their performance. There are USATF and often event specific rules for pace assistance. This article is intended for recreational runners, so they needn't be too concerned about these rules.

Many large and longer distance races these days provide pace assistance in the form of "Pace Groups". These groups have a leader who carries a pace sign [e.g., 9:30] and runs the pace very accurately. No scientific explanation exists for why humans, and most pack mammals, run faster with peers. They just do. If provided, consider using a Pace Group if you are running your first half or full marathon. Be careful picking the appropriate Pace Group. If it's too fast and you can't keep up, there is a likelihood you'll "hit the wall" and have to walk some. For a discussion of this, read my "Considerations for First Time Marathoners", [https://www.ridersite.org/Coach/Articles\\_pdf/Considerations%20for%20First%20Time%20Marathoners.pdf](https://www.ridersite.org/Coach/Articles_pdf/Considerations%20for%20First%20Time%20Marathoners.pdf)

I recommend you pick a Pace Group that is one notch slower than you intend to run. Keep in mind that you can always use the strategy described in "Considerations for..." and at the half way point, start picking up your pace and catch the faster group ahead of you. However, this is far easier said than done and it's risky.

Pace Groups have two negatives:

- They are generally set for 30sec intervals [e.g 9:00, 9:30min/mi, etc.]. If you are certain you can average 9:10, there is a dilemma. 9:00 may just be a bit too fast and 9:30 means your time will be about 9 minutes slower than you could have done.
- Pace Groups are designed to have a very consistent pace, this can be tough to maintain near the end. Most folks try to keep up with their group far too long if it is too fast for them [which is normal] and risk "hitting the wall".

If you arrange for a Personal Pacer, it solves both of these potential problems. The only requirement is that your pacer is considerably faster than you so he/she has no problem running your speed.

- Thus, you are free to run at whatever pace you want.
- And two, he/she can adjust the pace to accommodate your needs at any time, e.g., You are going great at mile 22, so you can pick up the pace.

Now, we'll address the Pacer's responsibilities and joint considerations.

The Runner must decide which miles will be most helpful prior to the race; e.g., mile 20 to just before the finish. Perhaps one mile each at 10, 15, 20, and 25. I'd recommend mile 20 or 21 to the finish; that's when the going gets damn tough and a Pacer can be of terrific help.

Even though you and the Runner have a plan; be prepared for the possibility that the Runner may ask you drop off, that he/she would rather go it alone to the end. Don't be surprised, this is not uncommon. Don't try to change his/her mind, tell the Runner he/she is looking super and you'll be at the finish waiting with open arms

Finding your Runner in the pack may be far more difficult than you can imagine. He/she'll be buried in the middle of hundreds of other runners. **This is important:** Both of you must wear something that has a distinct color. You'll play hell trying to pick each other out by face and body. Trust me on this; my wife and daughters came to cheer me at about 15 marathons thru the years and always found it difficult to pick me out in the pack. Also, **important:** plan to meet a very short distance just beyond your agreed upon specific course mile markers, e.g., 21.

As you are running together, let the Runner set the pace. Be careful on this, keep an eye on the pace your GPS or FR60 shows. Try to stay about 1/2 of a stride ahead of him/her, no more.

Don't talk to the Runner, let him/her concentrate on running and not what you are saying. Occasionally say things like "you are looking really good", "smooth" etc. Absolutely NO questions which will break his/her concentration to answer them. Do not even mention things like your pace is slowing. Caveat: near the end, if you become concerned about your runner's pace being too fast and you are certain he/she is laboring excessively, bring it to the runner's attention. But, don't argue or try to persuade. You can answer questions with very short answers.

**Important:** Practice pacing with the Runner before the big event. Both of you will feel more confident that it will work on race day and you can work out any unexpected kinks.

Drive the whole course the day before. Go to the spots where you plan to start pacing the Runner and carefully mark the area(s) on the map. Remember, on race day things will look quite different because there will be thousands of spectators lining the course and parking on all the side streets. Plan on where you hope to park.

Take your map with you on race day and mark where you park your car. Things may look entirely different after the race.

Leave ample spare time for things to go wrong when you are going to the pacing pickup points. The disappointment felt when your Pacer isn't there, especially the last 6 miles, is unbelievable. It sounds dopey, I know; but it can be almost devastating. I know because it happened to me.

On race day, some things are obvious and easy. See the start and any easy viewing places near the start.

Agree before the race where you will meet at the finish line. It can be extremely frustrating trying to find each other among thousands of finishers. Don't forget to arrange for a way to retrieve your car later on, after the race, awards ceremony and cleanup.

I have a great memory from 1985, when I PR ed at the MCM and qualified for Boston when the required time was a lot tougher than it is today. I had my Pacer pick me up at mile 22 to help me into the finish. The race saliently stands out in my mind, like it was just yesterday. I found I was out-running my Pacer I was flying at my 10K race pace for almost 4 miles at the end of a marathon! I passed people on Iwo Jima hill like they were standing still. I felt great afterwards, to say the least.

Pacers also can also be quite helpful by helping their runner shower and and get cleaned up after the race. Most marathon runners are rather sore, especially if they ran a hard race, and welcome the help.

Alan Rider .....

35 marathons; 4 Bostons, 3 in the 1980s [qualifying time: <3:10]; USATF National Masters Marathon Championship. 3d place age-group; Shamrock Marathon, age-group 1<sup>st</sup>, two 2ds, and several 3ds..5ths]