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# **The Race Director's Playbook**

*20 Years of Hard Lessons, Practical Systems, and the  
Things That Actually Work*

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By Zane Holscher

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# Introduction: Why I Wrote This Book

I'm Zane Holscher. I've spent close to two decades building and directing running events, and learning the operations side the hard way. Registration, timing, aid stations, volunteer coordination, safety plans, course marking, permits, and the thousand small decisions that determine whether race day runs smooth or spirals. I also served as the Assistant Team Leader for the U.S. National 24-Hour Running Team at the 2017, 2019, and 2021 IAU World Championships — which means I've sat on both sides of the timing clock, as a team member who depends on the system working (and sometimes it didn't) and as an operations person who has to make sure it does.

My first real race was not a neatly permitted road race with vendor booths and a timing company on speed dial. It was January 2007. I was on deployment in Southwest Asia, and I organized a marathon on a U.S. military base for service members and coalition partners. The conditions weren't ideal. The timeline was compressed. The resources were whatever we could scrape together from a base in the desert.

It worked.

Not because of some magic operational genius. It worked because the plan was simple, I didn't let naysayers and challenges deter me, the communication was clear, and we executed with what we had. Those are the principles I've carried into every race I've run since.

Back home, in 2010, I founded what started as the Destin 50 Beach Ultra and grew over the years into the Destin Beach Ultra Runs — a multi-distance weekend event held on the sand beaches of the Florida Gulf Coast. Over fourteen years, that race weekend became a real

community event built around consistent quality and a mission I believed in: raising money for special operations families.

In 2014, I helped organize Six Days in the Dome in Anchorage, Alaska — an indoor multi-day track event where athletes circle a track around the clock. When people are moving 24 hours a day, you learn very quickly what breaks and what holds. You learn what you must standardize or you'll spend the night putting out fires instead of directing a race.

From 2015 through 2022, I ran International Running Company, a race timing and support company. Timing dozens of events gave me a second angle on race directing. When you're responsible for the clock and the results across multiple events, you see patterns. You see which problems show up every year at every race, and which decisions quietly prevent them. That's a perspective most race directors never get.

I also produced the first (and only) Destin Marathon and Half Marathon —benefiting the Navy SEAL Foundation. It was a road race, which comes with its own realities: permits, traffic plans, police coordination, and a field of runners expecting a traditional, predictable experience. Our first-year budget was approximately \$189,000. We raised \$57,000 in 38 days through a crowdfunding campaign that made us the first marathon in history to be financed that way. We had more than 1,500 runners on the start line. And then we spent two years fighting a county sheriff who denied our permit to repeat the race.

In 2024, we ran the final edition of the Destin Beach Ultra Runs and I started winding down my Race Directing career....for now.

This book is the guide I wish I'd had at the beginning.

## Who This Is For

If you've run a race and thought, I could do this better, this book is for you.

If you've been tapped to direct your running club's annual event and realized there's a lot more to it than you expected, this book is for you.

If you're a charity that wants to raise money through a race and you want to do it right, this book is for you.

If you're a second- or third-year race director who got through year one on adrenaline and luck and wants a more solid foundation going forward, this book is definitely for you.

What this book is not: it's not a textbook. It's not an academic survey of event management theory. It's not a 500-page reference document. It's a practical playbook, written from the inside out, by someone who has done the hard parts and taken the lumps.

Every race I've directed has taught me something. Some of those lessons were cheap. Others cost real money and real sleep. I'm putting all of them in here so you don't have to learn them the same way I did.

## How to Use This Book

Read it front to back the first time. The chapters follow the natural sequence of race planning — from concept to the final post-race email. That sequence matters because decisions made early constrain your options later. The race director who skips the budget chapter and jumps to course design will eventually have to go back and undo work because the numbers didn't support the vision.

After that first read, use it as a reference. The checklists, budget tables, and planning timelines are tools you can return to every year.

A few ground rules for what you'll find in these pages:

**Real numbers.** Every budget figure, cost range, and financial example is based on actual events or real vendor quotes from my experience. I'll flag when numbers are illustrative rather than literal, but I've tried to give you real data rather than round-figure guesses.

**Real stories.** The things that went wrong, the decisions I'd make differently, the moments where something I didn't plan for almost sank a race — those are all in here. I'm not trying to present a polished highlight reel of my career. I'm trying to give you a realistic picture of what race directing actually looks like.

**No fabricated wisdom.** I'm not going to invent experiences or fill pages with theory I haven't tested. If I tell you something works, it's because I've tried it. If I tell you something will hurt you, I've usually felt the pain.

## A Note About Scale

This book covers events ranging from 50-person trail ultras to 1,500-person road marathons to multi-day indoor track events. The principles are consistent across all of them, but the scale changes the stakes significantly. I'll point out where advice scales differently depending on event size, and I'll be explicit when something applies specifically to ultras, specifically to road races, or specifically to large events.

Wherever you're starting — a small local 5K, a trail race with 75 runners, a marathon that's been in your head for five years — the fundamentals are the same: clear purpose, honest budget, solid permits, trained volunteers, a well-marked course, and runners who leave saying they want to come back.

That's what we're building toward.

Let's get to work.

# Chapter 1: The Concept — Purpose, Scope, and Date

Every race starts the same way. You have an idea that feels possible, and then you find out how many decisions sit between the idea and a start line.

Before you book a venue, before you design a logo, before you tell your friends you're doing this — you need to get three things right: the purpose, the scope, and the date. Get those right and the rest of the work is hard but manageable. Get them wrong and you'll spend the entire year digging out.

Define the Purpose in One Sentence

Write it down. One sentence.

Raise money for Special Operations Warrior Foundation. That was mine for the Destin Beach Ultra Runs.

Bring a marathon to the Gulf Coast and generate local economic activity. That was the Destin Marathon.

Give runners a well-supported event in a region with no ultra options within several hours. That was also part of the Beach Ultras story — when I started the Destin 50 in 2010, there were no ultras within driving range for most Florida runners. That void was a real opportunity, and it was specific enough to guide decisions.

Your purpose doesn't need to be inspirational. It needs to be specific enough that you can make real decisions from it.

If your purpose is fundraising, you'll design your event to maximize per-runner donations. You'll care about charity selection, storytelling,

and recognition for top fundraisers. You'll treat the charity as co-equal with the race itself.

If your purpose is a fast PR course, you'll care about certification, flat terrain, corrals, and traffic control. Swag and atmosphere are secondary.

If your purpose is community, you'll care about kid-friendly logistics, post-race experience, parking, and a start time that doesn't require a 4 AM alarm.

If your purpose is profit, you need to know that going in and structure your budget and pricing accordingly — not as an afterthought.

Any of those purposes can work. A race without a clear purpose turns into an expensive, confusing hobby that runners can't quite figure out and sponsors don't want to invest in.

Here's the test: if someone asks you why you're directing this race and your answer takes more than two sentences, your purpose isn't clear enough yet. Get it to one sentence. Then start building.

*An important note- you are probably not going to make money on your race the first year if you are a new race director putting on a new race. But produce a great first year event, you should break even the second year. Produce an outstanding second year event, you should start making money in your third year. This is a long-term commitment, not a get rich quick plan.*

## **Pick the Right Scope for Year One**

Most first-year races fail in planning, not on race day. The cause is almost always scope.

New directors reach for a half marathon or a point-to-point marathon because it sounds impressive and they've already run races like that and assume they understand how they work. The reality is that

complexity has fixed costs. A first-year 5K at a local park is forgiving. A first-year marathon with road closures and traffic plans is almost never forgiving.

I've directed both. The beach ultra started small — it was a 50-miler on sand with a tight field and a very clear operational model. We grew it year over year as we earned the trust of the running community. The Destin Marathon, by contrast, was a first-year event at full scale: 1,500 runners, \$189,000 budget, city road closures, a state highway permit that required a certified traffic engineer, and a title sponsor deal tied to a crowdfunding campaign. It worked, but it required a level of preparation that took over a year and put serious financial risk on the table.

The hard truth: I could execute the marathon at that scale because I had years of race-directing experience behind me. Someone doing their first event at that complexity level is taking a risk that the budget analysis alone doesn't capture.

Start with a version you can run well. A smaller distance, a loop course, fewer road interactions, a venue that already supports events. Earn trust first. Scale later.

A 5K with 200 runners that delivers a great experience will generate more long-term value than a half marathon with 500 runners that delivers a mediocre one. Runners talk. Running communities are small. Your reputation is built one race at a time.

## **The Event Type Decision**

Event Type	Complexity	Yr-1 Risk	Permits	Budget Range
5K (park/path)	Low	Low	Low	\$3,000–\$15,000
10K (park/path)	Low	Low	Low	\$5,000–\$20,000
Half Marathon (road)	Medium	Medium	Medium	\$15,000–\$60,000
Full Marathon (road)	High	High	High	\$50,000–\$200,000+
Trail 25K/50K	Medium	Medium	Low-Medium	\$10,000–\$30,000
50-mile ultra	Medium–High	Medium	Low-Medium	\$15,000–\$50,000
Multi-day indoor	High	High	Low	\$20,000–\$80,000
Point-to-point (any)	+1 tier	+1 risk tier	+1 permit tier	+\$10,000–\$50,000

Note: “permit burden” refers to the complexity of the approval process, not just the fee. A trail race might have low permit fees but require lengthy land manager negotiations.

## Know Your Three Pillars

Every successful race rests on three pillars: Runners, Sponsors, and Staff & Volunteers.

Remove any one of those pillars and the race fails.

No runners = there’s no reason to do any of this.

No sponsors = your budget doesn’t work, your swag is cheaper than it should be, and your margins are gone.

No staff and volunteers = race day is chaos. Your runners notice it immediately.

Every decision you make throughout the planning process should be evaluated through this lens. Does this decision help attract runners? Does it help secure or retain sponsors? Does it make life better or worse for your staff and volunteers?

When those three interests conflict — and they will — you'll need a clear hierarchy. Mine is Runners first, always. If a decision is bad for runners, it doesn't matter how much it helps the budget or saves the volunteers work. Runners are why the race exists. Take care of them and the other two pillars tend to follow.

## **Choose Your Date With Intent**

Date selection is more strategic than most new directors realize. The wrong date can kill your turnout no matter how good the rest of your planning is.

Start with weather. For most of the country, spring and fall work well for running events. Heat and humidity in summer turn road races into survival tests and significantly increase your medical obligations. Winter events work in some regions but limit your geographic draw. If you're racing in a desert climate, you already know the heat window is narrow. Plan around it.

Check competing events. Your local running community has finite bandwidth. If there's already an established half marathon on the same weekend, you're splitting a limited pool. Check every race calendar you can find — local run club websites, Running USA, state running association calendars, Marathon Guide, UltraSignup for trail events. The more similar your event is to an existing one, the more distance you want in the calendar.

Check local conflicts. Major holidays affect parking, law enforcement availability, and how many of your target runners are already committed to family plans. Local festivals, air shows, concerts, or college football games can make traffic and parking a nightmare and reduce your access to off-duty police or EMS.

Think about your officials. If you need road closures, early morning Sunday start times typically generate the least traffic conflict and make

approvals easier. If you need a park, check whether other large events have already reserved it for that weekend.

Logistics for your volunteers. Some seasons make volunteer recruitment harder. Summer weekends compete with vacations. Holidays compete with family obligations. Pick a date where you can realistically staff your event.

## **Date Selection Checklist**

Weather: comfortable temperature range for the distance

No major competing race that weekend with a similar audience in your local area

No major local event that affects parking or law enforcement

Holiday conflicts evaluated

Park/venue availability confirmed for that date

Police/EMS availability estimated

Sufficient lead time for permit process (12 months for road, 6 months for park)

Volunteer recruitment window is realistic

## **The Start Time Decision**

The start time affects everything: participant experience, permit complexity, volunteer availability, photography, heat exposure, and traffic.

Earlier starts are almost always easier to permit and generate less disruption to non-racing traffic. They're also harder for recreational runners who have to drive in from out of town. There's a real tension

there, and you'll never fully resolve it. My approach is to start as early as the permit requires, but no earlier than necessary for safety.

For road races with police support, authorities will often push you toward a pre-dawn start to minimize traffic conflict. For trail ultras, starting before daylight is common and accepted by the field. For community 5Ks with families and first-timers, a 7 or 8 AM start is usually right...or even 9 AM if it is in a park and you don't have to worry about closing roads.

Whatever start time you choose, honor it. Starting late is one of the most disrespectful things a race director can do. Runners have set alarms, skipped breakfast, driven an hour, and warmed up. Starting 15 minutes late because you weren't organized is inexcusable. I'll talk more about start-line operations in Chapter 13, but the discipline starts with the commitment you make when you advertise the start time.

## **The Pre-Launch Reality Check**

Before you open registration, you need honest answers to five questions:

- Can you get the permits? Not “do you think you can” — do you have evidence that the relevant authorities are receptive? Have you contacted the park service, city traffic engineering office, or county sheriff's department? Have you confirmed that your course doesn't require approvals you can't afford or can't obtain in time?
- Can you staff it? Where are your volunteers coming from? What's your core team look like? If the answer is “I'll figure it out later,” that's not a plan — that's hope. Hope is not an operational strategy.
- Can you afford the fixed costs even if registrations come in late? Because they will come in late. The late-registrant problem is universal and relentless. I'll cover this in detail in the budget

- chapter, but you need to know before you launch whether you can float the fixed costs while waiting for registration revenue that arrives weeks before the race.
- Do you have a backup course? If a bridge, trail segment, or road section gets denied or closed, where does the course go? The time to design Plan B is before you commit to Plan A publicly.
- What happens if you have to cancel? Which expenses are non-refundable? If you've paid for permits, insurance, shirt printing, and timing equipment and you cancel two weeks before the race, what's your financial exposure? If you can't absorb that exposure, you need a refund policy that's honest about this.

If you can answer all five of those questions honestly and the answers are acceptable, you have a race concept worth building.

If you can't answer them yet, that's what the next six to twelve months of planning is for.

## **A Final Word on Scope and Ambition**

Starting small is not giving up on the big vision. It's protecting it.

The races that become traditions — the ones runners mark on their calendars eighteen months out, the ones that charities and sponsors fight to be associated with, the ones that build real communities — almost never started big. They started well. They earned repeat runners. They got better every year. They built something worth returning to.

That's the goal. Not a splashy first year followed by a diminished second year and a cancelled third. A first year that plants the seed, a second year that validates it, and a long-term event that becomes part of the fabric of your running community.

Start with that in mind, and every decision in the chapters that follow becomes clearer.



## **Chapter 2: The Budget — Know Your Numbers Before You Spend a Dollar**

A budget is not a formality. It is the decision tool that tells you whether your race is viable before you spend real money.

I build every race budget the same way, regardless of distance or complexity. I split costs into fixed costs and per-runner costs, then I run the numbers at conservative participation levels. Conservative means I assume I'll get fewer runners than I'm hoping for, costs will come in higher than the first quote, and registration will arrive later than I'd like.

This approach has saved me from bad decisions more than once. Things will change as your planning progresses, but at least you have a plan to deviate from.

So we're doing the budget first. Before course design. Before branding. Before you tell anyone the race is happening.

### **The Fundamental Model: Fixed Costs + Per-Runner Costs**

Fixed costs are the bills you'll pay even if only half your expected runners show up. Permits, insurance, traffic plans, EMS contracts, tent and equipment rentals — these are due regardless of how many bibs you hand out. They're the financial floor of your event.

Per-runner costs scale with registrations. Shirts, medals, bibs, aid station food, processing fees, and timing charges that include a

per-participant component all fall into this category. The more runners you get, the higher these costs go — but so does your revenue.

Your break-even is the point where revenue from registrations (at your entry fee) equals total costs. Everything above break-even is margin. Everything below it is a loss.

The formula is simple:

Break-even registration count = Total fixed costs ÷ (Entry fee – Per-runner cost)

If your fixed costs are \$8,000, your per-runner cost is \$15, and your entry fee is \$45, you need:

$$\$8,000 \div (\$45 - \$15) = 267 \text{ runners to break even}$$

Before you commit to a race, you need to know that number and honestly assess whether it's achievable. *I will make one caveat to this—you have to order your bibs, t-shirts, and awards months or weeks in advance of your event. As we will discuss later, the majority of your entries will come in during the last few weeks. So that puts you in a tough position of guessing how many runners you will have. This is a little easier for an established race but extremely difficult for a new event!*

## The Budget Line-Item Master List

Use these ranges to build your first draft. Replace each range with real vendor quotes as soon as possible — and get multiple quotes for anything over \$500.

Line Item	Low	High	Fixed/Variable	Notes
Permits / venue fees	\$0	\$10,000+	Fixed	Parks = low; road races in regulated areas = high

Line Item	Low	High	Fixed/Variable	Notes
Insurance (general liability)	\$275	\$1,500+	Fixed	~\$0.15–\$0.25/participant above base for larger fields
Police / off-duty traffic control	\$400	\$25,000+	Fixed	\$45–\$75/hr/officer; complex closures into 5 figures
Traffic management plan (engineering)	\$0	\$20,000+	Fixed	Required for state roads in many jurisdictions
EMS / medical standby	\$300	\$6,000+	Fixed	Match to event risk, distance, course remoteness
Timing and results	\$350	\$5,000+	Fixed + Variable	Base fee + \$2–\$4/participant for chip timing
Portable toilets	\$525	\$3,500+	Fixed	\$175–\$280/unit; ADA + handwash extra
T-shirts (performance)	\$8/runner	\$25/runner	Variable	Quantity discounts matter; performance > cotton
Finisher medals	\$2/runner	\$9/runner	Variable	Custom design adds cost; order 10% buffer
Finisher buckles (ultras)	\$8/runner	\$22/runner	Variable	Design complexity drives range
Bibs + safety pins	\$0.25/runner	\$0.85/runner	Variable	Custom printing/logos at high end
Aid station food + supplies	\$1.50/runner	\$15/runner	Variable	5K = \$1.50; ultra = \$10–\$15+
Water, ice, cups	\$0.50/runner	\$3/runner	Variable	Climate and distance dependent
Course marking + signage	\$150	\$1,500+	Mostly Fixed	Trail/ultra needs more; road less
Volunteer shirts	\$8/volunteer	\$15/volunteer	Fixed	Plan on 1 shirt per confirmed volunteer
Tents, tables, chairs	\$400	\$3,500+	Fixed	Scale with event size; ADA setups add cost

Line Item	Low	High	Fixed/Variable	Notes
Sound / PA / DJ	\$300	\$2,000+	Fixed	Even a modest PA transforms start-line energy
Awards (age group, overall)	\$150	\$800+	Fixed	Trophies vs. plaques vs. custom items
Marketing and promotion	\$200	\$3,000+	Fixed	Ads, printing, postcards; more in year one
Credit card / platform fees	3%	8%	Variable	Know whether you're absorbing or passing through
Contingency	10% of total	15% of total	Fixed	Non-negotiable — it will get used

## Break-Even Analysis Framework

Before you pick an entry fee, run the break-even math. The formula:

$$\text{Break-even registrations} = \text{Fixed Costs} \div (\text{Entry Fee} - \text{Variable Cost Per Runner})$$

Scenario	Fixed Costs	Variable/Runner	Entry Fee	Break-Even
Small park 5K, 200 runners	\$5,500	\$18	\$40	157 runners
Trail 50K, 200 runners	\$10,000	\$28	\$95	149 runners
Road half marathon, 500 runners	\$22,000	\$32	\$75	512 runners (tight)
Road marathon, 1,500 runners	\$120,000	\$45	\$110	1,846 runners (high risk)

The road marathon line is sobering on purpose. Marathons have high fixed costs (traffic engineering, police, EMS, permits) that don't scale

down if registration underperforms. Know your break-even before you announce a date.

### **Sample Budget: Small Race (200 Runners)**

Scenario: Trail 25K or 50K, park-based, chip timing, performance shirt, finisher medal, basic EMS coverage.

<b>Line Item</b>	<b>Estimated Cost</b>
Permits / venue fees	\$500
Insurance	\$400
Timing (chip)	\$800
EMS / medical	\$600
Portable toilets (3 units)	\$525
T-shirts (200 @ \$12)	\$2,400
Finisher medals (200 @ \$5)	\$1,000
Bibs + safety pins	\$100
Course marking	\$300
Aid station supplies	\$400
Awards	\$200
Marketing	\$300
Contingency (10%)	\$764
<b>Total</b>	<b>~\$8,300</b>

### **Sample Budget: Medium Race (500 Runners)**

Scenario: Road half marathon, city park start/finish with some city street segments, chip timing, performance shirt, finisher medal, DJ, minimal police.

Line Item	Estimated Cost
Permits / venue fees	\$1,500
Insurance	\$650
Police / traffic control (4 officers)	\$1,800
Timing (chip)	\$1,800
EMS / medical	\$1,200
Portable toilets (8 units)	\$1,400
T-shirts (500 @ \$13)	\$6,500
Finisher medals (500 @ \$5)	\$2,500
Bibs + safety pins	\$300
Course marking	\$500
Aid station supplies	\$1,500
DJ / sound	\$800
Awards	\$400
Marketing	\$600
Contingency (10%)	\$2,050
<b>Total</b>	<b>~\$22,500</b>

## Sample Budget: Large Race (1,500 Runners)

Scenario: Road marathon, major city event, certified course, full traffic management, strong medical, premium swag.

Line Item	Estimated Cost
Permits / venue fees	\$5,000
Insurance	\$1,200

Line Item	Estimated Cost
Traffic management plan (engineering)	\$20,000
Police / traffic control	\$13,000
Timing (chip, 1,500 runners)	\$5,500
EMS / medical (ALS + tent)	\$4,000
Portable toilets (30+ units)	\$3,500
T-shirts (1,500 @ \$14)	\$21,000
Finisher medals (1,500 @ \$6)	\$9,000
Bibs + safety pins	\$900
Course marking	\$1,200
Aid station supplies	\$6,000
DJ / sound / PA	\$1,500
Tents / tables / chairs	\$3,000
Awards	\$700
Marketing	\$2,000
Contingency (10%)	\$9,750
<b>Total</b>	<b>~\$107,250</b>

## Example: Road Marathon Reality Check

Road marathons can go from manageable to six figures fast. My first-year Destin Marathon budget was approximately \$189,000.

Major Driver	Example Amount
Traffic management plans + devices + non-volunteer traffic control	\$33,000
Shirts + oversized medals	\$25,000+
All other costs (timing, permits, insurance, venue, rentals, toilets, fuel, printing, signage, EMS, etc.)	\$131,000

A first-year marathon is a fundamentally different business problem than a first-year park 5K, mostly because you cannot cheap your way around traffic control and municipal requirements.

Of the \$33,000 we spent on traffic management for a six-mile course in Destin, approximately \$20,000 went to the required Florida DOT-certified traffic engineering plan alone. Then came the devices, the personnel, and the coordination. If you're planning a road marathon in a regulated jurisdiction, start with that line item and work outward. It will tell you very quickly whether your budget is realistic.

## **Working Backwards: Donations → Sponsorships → Entry Fees**

Most new directors set entry fees by looking at what similar races charge. That's the wrong approach. Entry fees should be the last thing you figure out, not the first.

The sequence I follow:

Step 1: Total up all your costs. Fixed costs plus projected per-runner costs at your expected attendance level.

Step 2: Subtract any grants or donations. Some cities, running clubs, or individuals will donate money to a race — particularly a non-profit event or one filling a genuine community need. Don't count on this, but if you have firm commitments, include them.

Step 3: Subtract projected sponsorship income. Again, only include what you have real reason to believe is achievable. If you don't have confirmed sponsors yet, leave this at zero for planning purposes.

Step 4: The remaining gap is what registration must cover. Now you can calculate the entry fee that covers that gap at your realistic attendance estimate.

Step 5: Reality-check the result against your market. If your math says you need to charge \$150 for a 5K, you either have a very expensive event or an unrealistic cost estimate. If it says \$28 for a half marathon, you may be underestimating your costs.

The goal is an entry fee that's supported by your actual numbers, and give you some wiggle room, not borrowed from your competitors' pricing.

## **The Late Registrant Problem**

Here's one of the most consistent realities in race directing: most runners wait until the last minute to register.

You will open registration six months out and get a rush on day one. Then it will slow dramatically. You'll refresh your registration page more times than you'd like to admit and wonder whether anyone is actually coming. Then, in the final two to three weeks before the race, registration will spike. Sometimes dramatically.

This creates a cash flow problem. Your fixed costs are due months before the race. Your permits, insurance, deposits on equipment rentals, and initial marketing spend all happen long before the registration revenue covers them. You need a plan for floating that gap.

Your options:

1. Personal funds or credit: The most common approach for first-year events. Understand the risk you're taking.
2. Club or organization backing: If you're running under an established non-profit or club, they may be able to front the fixed costs.
3. Early sponsorship deposits: Some sponsors will pay a portion upfront when you sign the agreement. Structure your contracts to facilitate this.
4. Crowdfunding: More on this below. This was my solution for the Destin Marathon and it worked.

Whatever your solution, have one in place before you open registration. The worst position is to start spending on a race whose bills you can't cover if registration comes in slowly.

### Crowdfunding as a Validation Tool

In 2015, I ran a crowdfunding campaign on Indiegogo to fund the Destin Marathon and Half Marathon. We raised \$57,000 in 38 days from 648 individuals across 30 states and 4 countries. It was the first time a marathon had ever been financed this way — a distinction covered by Runner's World and documented on the campaign itself as "the world's first crowdfunded marathon and half marathon" (Indiegogo, 2015; Runner's World, June 2015).

Here's why I did it, and why it might make sense for you:

Traditional registration platforms take your money and hold it until the race happens. If you cancel, runners may or may not get refunds depending on your policy — and there were documented cases of race directors collecting registration fees, canceling events, and not refunding runners. That's not just dishonest; it's the kind of thing that makes people hesitant to sign up for first-year events.

Crowdfunding — particularly an all-or-nothing campaign — inverts this dynamic. You set a funding goal that represents your break-even

(or close to it). If you reach it, the event is financially validated and you keep the funds. If you don't, no one's money is collected and no one is left holding the bag. It protects the runners and it protects you from taking on obligations you can't fulfill.

The Indiegogo campaign strategy that worked for us: - Built an email list of every running media contact we could find and sent personal emails before launch - Prepped friends and family to purchase perks on day one and share immediately - Targeted 30% of goal funded in the first week (to signal momentum) - Perks were structured as actual race entries at below-break-even prices for early backers, then rising tiers - The campaign slumped badly in the middle — we were at \$25,000 for nearly three weeks — and then raised \$25,000 more in the final five days

That last point is worth understanding: the late-registrant problem applies to crowdfunding too. If you run one of these campaigns, do not read the slow middle period as failure. Almost every campaign looks flat in the middle. The end sprint is real.

## **Business Structures**

This is the section where I tell you something that a lot of people don't hear until after something goes wrong.

Do not put race finances through your personal bank account — the one hard rule in this chapter. If someone trips at your race and sues, they go after the assets attached to the entity that ran the race. If that entity is “Zane Holscher, private individual,” they get access to your house, your car, and your retirement savings.

Your options:

Option 1: LLC — A Limited Liability Company creates a legal layer between your personal assets and the race. It's relatively simple to set up through your state government website. Once you're registered,

open a bank account under the LLC name. This is the minimum structure for any race taking money from the public.

Option 2: 501(c)(3) Non-Profit — If your race is primarily a fundraising vehicle for a charitable cause, a non-profit designation has real advantages: tax-exempt status, donor write-offs, and credibility with charity-focused sponsors. The tradedown: the application process takes time and money, and if your gross income exceeds \$50,000 per year, you have significant annual tax reporting obligations.

Option 3: Umbrella under an existing entity — If your race is being organized under an established club, charity, or organization, it can operate under that entity's legal structure. This is the simplest path if you have a willing host organization. Use a separate bank account (doing business as your race name) to keep the finances clean.

Option 4: Personal bank account — DO NOT DO THIS. I've said it once and now I've said it twice.

My recommendation for most people starting their first race: form an LLC. It's simple, it's cheap in most states, and it gives you the protection you need. If fundraising becomes a core part of your mission, explore the 501(c)(3) path in year two or three once you know the race has legs.

Before you finalize your structure, spend an hour with a business accountant or attorney (Or the best AI model) who has experience with small events or non-profits. The tax variables are too specific to your situation for me to cover everyone's scenario here.

The Five Budget Questions You Must Answer Before You Announce the Race

What is my total fixed-cost commitment?

At my expected turnout, what is my total cost per runner?

At my entry fee, what is my break-even registration count?

Can I float the fixed costs while waiting for late registrations?

If I have to cancel, what expenses are non-refundable and what is my actual exposure?

If you can answer all five of those clearly and the answers are acceptable, your budget is ready. If you can't explain your race budget in five minutes to a trusted friend, your budget is too messy to manage under pressure.

One more thing: keep a contingency line of 10 to 15 percent of total budget and do not touch it for planned expenses. Contingency is for surprises. And there will be surprises. Every year. Budget them in, accept them as the cost of running events, and move on.

## **Chapter 3: Permits, Insurance & Legal — The Work That Happens Before Runners Sign Up**

Permits and approvals are where races die quietly.

Not dramatically. There's usually no single crisis moment. It's a series of small failures: the permit timeline that started too late, the verbal yes from an official who got reassigned, the insurance requirement discovered two weeks before the event, the traffic plan that came back from the state with revisions six months in. Each one is manageable if you have time. None of them are manageable if you don't.

The goal of this chapter is to get you organized early, keep you organized through the process, and make sure you understand what you're actually buying when you pay for permits and insurance.

### **Start Earlier Than You Think You Need To**

For a simple park race with a small field, permits can sometimes be obtained in weeks. For a road race, a half marathon, or anything that touches state roads or requires police coordination, think in months. In many jurisdictions, you're competing for limited police staffing windows and limited event permits. Applications are often reviewed on a first-come basis. The earlier you file, the more options you have if changes are required.

My rough timeline benchmarks:

Race Type	Start Permit Process
Small park 5K/10K	6 months before race date
Half marathon (road)	9–12 months before race date
Full marathon (road)	12–18 months before race date
Trail/ultra (land manager)	6–9 months before race date
Multi-jurisdictional event	12–18+ months before race date

For the Destin Marathon, I started the permit process in June 2015 for an April 2016 race. That’s ten months. Even with that lead time, we were still waiting on the final state permit 23 days before the event. And that was after multiple course revisions, multiple engineering plan submissions, and extensive coordination with city, county, and state authorities.

If you think your event is straightforward, assume it isn’t and start early anyway. The cost of starting early is zero. The cost of starting late can be a cancelled race.

## Map Every Authority Your Course Touches

This is the step most first-year directors skip, and it’s the one that causes the most mid-process surprises.

Get out a map of your course and identify every entity that has jurisdiction over any part of it:

City parks: city parks department, city government

City streets: city traffic engineering, city police, sometimes city council approval

County roads: county road and bridge department, county sheriff

State roads or highways: state DOT, state police

Bridges: bridge authority (which may be separate from road authority — I learned this firsthand when the Mid-Bay Bridge authority denied our request to use their bridge for the Destin Marathon)

Trails on federal land: Forest Service, BLM, National Park Service

Private land: landowner written permission

School property: school board

Beach access: city or county beach management office

Each entity can have a separate application process, separate fees, separate insurance requirements, and separate timelines. You won't always know the exact requirements until you contact each one, which is why you need to start this process early.

Pro tip: When you reach out to each authority for the first time, ask specifically: What documentation do you require for event permitting? What is your timeline for review? Are there any known conflicts with my proposed date? This one conversation can save you months of waiting.

## **What Officials Care About (In This Order)**

When you're presenting your event to permit authorities, remember their priorities:

- **Safety.** Does your event plan address traffic control where needed? Do you have medical support proportional to the risk? Are your communication systems adequate? Officials who deny permits almost always cite safety concerns — even when the underlying motivation is something else.
- **Liability.** Do you have adequate insurance? Is your waiver solid? Are you taking on the financial risk if something goes wrong, rather than pushing it onto the jurisdiction?

- Disruption. How long will roads or facilities be affected? Will residents be notified in advance? Will the event clean up after itself? Will it reopen on time?

Lead your application with operational details, not inspiration. Officials aren't evaluating whether your cause is worthy. They're evaluating whether your plan is executable and whether your event creates or reduces risk in their jurisdiction.

The fastest way to get a “no” is to walk into a permit meeting sounding unprepared. Bring maps. Bring a timeline. Bring your insurance certificate. Bring your emergency action plan. Show them you have thought through every question they're about to ask — and several they haven't asked yet.

### The Traffic Management Plan: When You Need One and What It Costs

If your course touches any public road — even briefly — you need to understand the traffic management requirements in your jurisdiction.

For city streets: in many cities, a simple PowerPoint presentation and meeting with the traffic engineering department is enough for a low-traffic residential road with a few hundred runners on a Sunday morning. Some cities have standardized permit processes with clear requirements. Start there.

For state highways: this is where it gets expensive. Many states require a certified traffic management plan prepared by a licensed traffic engineer before they'll consider your application. The plan documents exactly how traffic will be controlled, what devices will be deployed, and how emergency vehicles will be accommodated. For the Destin Marathon:

Our original 26-mile point-to-point course: \$18,000 for the certified traffic management plan

Revised 13-mile course (submitted after the first was rejected): additional \$2,100

We eventually ran on a 6.5-mile out-and-back course after another revision

The engineering plan alone was \$20,100 before we deployed a single traffic cone or paid a single officer. That's a line item most new race directors have never considered.

If your course touches a state highway, contact your state DOT and ask specifically: what are the requirements for a running event permit on state roads? Get the requirements in writing. Then get a quote from a qualified traffic engineer before you commit to that course.

The math might lead you very quickly to a different course.

## **Insurance: What You Need and What It Costs**

General liability insurance for running events is non-negotiable. It protects you (and your LLC) from claims arising from injuries, property damage, or other incidents at your event.

Basic requirements: Most venues and jurisdictions require \$1 million per occurrence / \$2 million aggregate as a minimum. Some require \$2 million per occurrence. Read your venue contract and permit requirements carefully — they'll specify the limits and whether they need to be listed as additional insureds on your policy.

Cost range: - Small events (under 200 runners): starting around \$275–\$400 for the event day - Mid-size events (200–500 runners): \$400–\$800 - Larger events (500–2,000 runners): approximately \$0.15–\$0.25 per participant plus a base fee - Add-ons: Additional insured endorsements, liquor liability (if you have a beer garden), and vendor liability all add cost

Where to get it: Several specialty insurers serve the running event market. USA Track & Field (USATF), Road Runners Club of America (RRCA), and private brokers like K&K Insurance and Next Insurance all have event-specific products. Shop multiple options and compare what's included.

Additional insureds: Your venue, city, county, and sometimes individual officials may require to be listed as additional insureds on your policy. This is standard and should not add significant cost, but you need to collect all the required entities' legal names and add them to the certificate before your permit is approved.

### Waivers

Your event waiver is your legal protection against participants making claims for ordinary risks inherent in running events. It must:

Be presented and accepted as part of the registration process (not handed out at packet pickup)

Be clear, readable, and not buried in fine print

Cover the specific risks of your event

Be signed/accepted by every participant, including those who register on race day

For ultras and trail events with specific environmental risks (heat, altitude, remote terrain, wildlife), make sure the waiver language covers those specific conditions. An attorney who specializes in event liability can review your waiver for a modest fee and is worth every dollar, or some of the best AI LLMs can do it for \$20 a month.

Online registration platforms that capture electronic acceptance of your waiver text are significantly more reliable than paper forms for exactly this reason. If you're accepting paper waivers at race-day registration, have a volunteer specifically tasked with confirming every waiver is signed before a bib is handed out.

## **Building Your Plan B Before You Need It**

In planning for the Destin Marathon we had a plan A and a plan B. What I didn't know was that I would also need a plan C and D as law enforcement kept putting up virtual roadblocks each time we thought we had come up with an approved solution.

Design your Plan B before you open registration. It might be: - A loop course instead of a point-to-point - An entirely different course on different roads - A shift from roads to trails - A modified distance that avoids the most permit-intensive segments

Having Plan B documented before you launch doesn't mean Plan B is likely to happen. It means that if your primary approval falls through, you have options — and your options are already thought through. Also think of plan C & D....

## **Communicating With Neighborhoods**

If your course runs through residential areas, do not surprise the residents.

The most common source of resident complaints against running events is not the event itself — it's the feeling of being blindsided. People who weren't warned wake up to find they can't get out of their driveway. They miss a commitment they didn't know the race would affect. They feel like someone made a decision about their neighborhood without consulting them.

You can substantially reduce this friction with:

Door hangers or flyers distributed two to four weeks before the race

A post on the neighborhood's social media group or HOA email list

Clear, specific information about what road will be closed, from what time to what time, and exactly when it will reopen

Contact information if they have questions or concerns

This communication costs you almost nothing. The goodwill it generates is worth far more. And residents who feel respected are far less likely to file complaints with the city or show up at a permit hearing to oppose your event.

## **The Paper Trail**

Every approval, every verbal conversation, every permit application should have a written record.

I keep a Google Drive folder organized by event, with subfolders for: - Permits (application copies, approval documents, correspondence) - Insurance (certificate, additional insured endorsements) - Vendor contracts (timing, EMS, portable toilets, tents, timing equipment) - Sponsor agreements - Waiver documentation - Correspondence with officials

When an official says yes to something verbally, follow up with a brief email: “Just confirming our conversation today — you’ve approved the use of [location] for [race name] on [date], with the following conditions...” Then save their reply.

Staff changes happen. The parks department contact who gave you a verbal green light might be in a different role or a different city by the time your race comes around. The permit on file protects you. The memory of a phone call does not.

## **When You Have the Green Light**

When the permits are approved, the insurance is in place, and the waivers are set up in your registration system — that is the moment you commit. Not before.

That is the point where you open registration aggressively, lock in your major vendors, and shift from planning mode to execution mode. The green light is your launch signal.

If you open registration before the permits are finalized, you are implicitly promising runners something you don't yet have the legal right to deliver. If the permit falls through, you're in a very difficult position: either you cancel and issue refunds (damaging your reputation and possibly your finances), or you scramble for a Plan B that you should have already had.

The sequence is: concept → budget → permits → registration. In that order. Every time.

## **Chapter 4: Branding — Name It, Logo It, Build It**

Before a runner ever meets your race in person, they encounter your brand. They see the name on a race calendar. They click to your website. They look at the logo on a finisher medal someone posted on Instagram. They get an email from your list.

Every one of those interactions either builds trust or erodes it.

Branding isn't about being clever or flashy. For a running event, branding is about communicating: This is an organized operation run by people who care. That matters enormously because runners have a legitimate fear of first-year events. They've seen registrations disappear. They've seen underprepared races fall apart on course. They've heard the stories. Your branding — from the professionalism of your website to the quality of your first email — tells them whether you're worth the registration fee.

Get the branding right early. It's one of the few things in race directing where the investment you make at the beginning pays dividends for the entire life of the event.

### **The Name**

Your race name is its identity for as long as the race exists. Choose poorly and you'll eventually have to change it, which means rebuilding name recognition you've already earned.

I made a mistake with my first event name: I included the distance. The race was called the “Destin 50 Beach Ultra.” When I added shorter distances to the weekend, the name stopped making sense. We

rebranded to “Destin Beach Ultra Runs.” It wasn’t a disaster, but it cost time and attention that could have gone elsewhere.

Rules for a good race name:

- Easy to remember. If people can’t recall it without looking it up, it’s not working.
- Easy to spell and pronounce. A runner who can’t spell your name can’t search for it. - Tells the runner something. Location, type, vibe — something. “Destin Beach Ultra” tells you location, terrain, and distance category in three words.
- Not already in use. Search running calendars, Google, and trademark databases. Using a name in use by another race creates confusion and potential legal problems.
- Short. Every word you add is a word that has to fit on a bib, a shirt, and a logo.

-No distance in the name — unless you are absolutely certain the race will never add or change distances.

- Matching domain available. More on this below, but before you commit to a name, check that a reasonable domain is available at GoDaddy or Namecheap. If [destinmarathon.com](http://destinmarathon.com) is available and [destinbeachruns.com](http://destinbeachruns.com) is taken, that’s information that should factor into your choice.

Test it out loud. Say it to people who don’t know what it is. Watch their reaction. Does it spark interest? Does it sound like something they’d want to do? Does it stick?

## **The Logo**

Your logo is your brand’s handshake. It appears on bibs, shirts, medals, banners, social media, the website, sponsor materials, and the tattoos of your most dedicated runners. It has to work at every scale from a favicon to a 10-foot banner.

Invest in this. I spent \$300 on a logo for one of my early races and it was some of the best money I spent. A friend who “does some graphic design on the side” is not the right choice for your race logo. Graphic design as a hobby and professional logo design are different skill sets, and the result will tell you which one you hired.

What to look for in a race logo: - Simple. A logo that can't be read when printed small on a bib is not a race logo — it's a piece of art that happens to have your race name on it. - Bold. It needs to read clearly in black and white (for permits, press releases, certain print applications) as well as in color. - Maximum three to four colors. More colors mean more complexity and higher printing costs on shirts, merchandise, and signage. - Sponsor-friendly. Leave visual space that doesn't compete with sponsor logo placement. - Scalable. You need vector files (SVG or EPS format) that can be reproduced at any size without pixelation. Get these from your designer upfront, not as an afterthought.

Where to find designers: Upwork and Fiverr both have professional logo designers at various price points. For \$300–\$500, you should be able to commission two to three initial concepts and get revisions until you're satisfied. Be specific in your brief: describe the race, the location, the feeling you want to convey, and provide visual examples of logos you like and don't like.

Test it before you commit. Print it at bib size (roughly 4 inches × 4 inches). Can you read the race name? Does the image hold up? Put it on a white background and a dark background. Both need to work.

We have also had area runners vote on what logo they liked the best. For the Destin Marathon we chose 4 logos we would be happy with and then let the runners choose the final version.

## **The Domain**

Your domain name is your permanent address on the internet. Choose it once and protect it.

Rules: - Get the .com. It's what people type by default. If .com isn't available, either rethink the name or accept that some percentage of people will type the .com version and find something else. - If your race is a charity or non-profit event, also buy the .org. They're cheap, and it prevents confusion. - Make it as close to the race name as possible. - Shorter is better. The domain goes in emails, on postcards, and in verbal conversations. If you have to spell it out every time, it's too complicated. - Set it to auto-renew. Domain expiration is one of those administrative failures that happens in quiet moments — you're traveling, you're between email addresses, you forget to update a payment method — and suddenly you're trying to buy back your own race's domain from a reseller at 10x the original price. Auto-renew. Period.

GoDaddy, Namecheap, and Google Domains are all reasonable choices. The registrar matters less than the habit of keeping your payment information current and the auto-renew enabled.

## **The Website**

Your website is your race's storefront. It's the place where a runner goes to decide whether to register.

The bar for what a running event website needs to accomplish is not very high, but a lot of races fail to clear it. Here's what your site must have:

The absolute minimums: - Race name, date, location - Clear link to register - Course description with distance(s) - Pricing information -

FAQ page covering parking, packet pickup, shirts, refund policy, and weather - Contact information

Strong additions: - Course map with aid station locations and notable terrain - Elevation profile for trail/road events - Previous year photos (for returning events) - Sponsor recognition - Charity information if fundraising is part of your model - Training resources if appropriate for your audience

Technical requirements: - Mobile-first. More than half of your visitors are on phones. Test the site on your phone before you launch it. - Fast load times. A slow site loses visitors. Compress images. - No broken links. Check them. Then check again in six months. - Registration link in the navigation bar and on the homepage above the fold. Don't make runners hunt for it.

For site-building, Wix and Squarespace are both solid options at approximately \$100–\$200 per year for a basic plan. They're beginner-friendly, mobile-responsive, and don't require any coding knowledge. I built early race sites on Weebly and they served their purpose; the modern alternatives are generally better.

One thing I've learned: update your site when details change. Stale information — old dates, old pricing, old course maps — destroys trust fast. If a runner does research three months before your race and finds information that doesn't match what they find six weeks out, they'll question whether anyone is actually managing this event.

## **Social Media**

Social media is your free megaphone, as long as you use it like one. Grab your handles for each one right away.

Platform strategy: - Facebook: Still the most effective platform for reaching runners over 30. Build a business page (not a personal page), which lets you run ads and see analytics. - Instagram: Critical for

visual storytelling — course photos, race-day shots, charity impact images. Younger demographic, but useful across all age ranges for endurance sports. - X/Twitter: Less useful for most small races, but relevant if you're targeting competitive runners or seeking media attention.

Post consistently. Not daily — that will burn you out — but on a schedule you can sustain for months. Three to four posts per week on Instagram, a few times per week on Facebook. High-quality original photos and video significantly outperform plain text. Drone footage of a trail course, a sunrise over the water, a slow-motion medal ceremony — these are the posts that stop the scroll.

What kills social media momentum: - Posting nothing for two weeks and then spamming promotional content - Only ever posting registration reminders - Never responding to comments or messages - Posting blurry or poorly lit photos

What builds it: - Runner spotlights that tag individuals and make them feel seen - Behind-the-scenes content that shows the work going into the event - Charity impact updates (a story about a specific family helped by your cause does more than any graphic) - Course teasers and trail previews - Countdown posts leading to registration deadlines

One practical rule I follow: do not touch your race's social media after you've had a few glasses of wine. You'll post something that reads well in the moment and looks terrible in the morning. Set your posts to schedule in advance during clear-headed hours. And keep the tone professional — calling out competitor races by name, venting about permit processes, or making sharp political comments have no place on an event's social media account.

## **Email Marketing**

Email is the most underused tool in small race marketing.

It's also the most intimate. A runner who gives you their email address is giving you permission to communicate directly with them. That permission comes with a responsibility: don't abuse it.

Build your list from day one. Include a signup form on your website. Add everyone who registers to the list (they've already opted in by registering). Every person who's run your race in a previous year is on the list.

When to email and when not to: - DO send: registration opening announcements, price increase reminders, major course updates, charity milestones, race week logistics - DON'T send: every blog post, every social media update, every random thought about your event

Mailchimp is free for lists under a few thousand contacts and handles bulk sending, unsubscribes, and basic analytics. It's what I've used and what I recommend for anyone starting out.

Subject line strategy: tell the reader exactly what's in the email. "Registration opens Wednesday — here's what's new" outperforms "Don't miss this!" every time. Runners are busy people. If you don't tell them why to open it, they won't.

## **Your Blog**

A race blog is one of the most valuable communication tools most event directors never use.

Posting once a month in the three to four months before your race serves multiple purposes: - Keeps your race top-of-mind for registered runners - Gives uncommitted potential runners a reason to keep engaging - Provides training motivation and race information in a format that's easy to share - Builds search engine visibility over time

Blog content that works: planning updates, course preparation photos, training tips specific to your race, charity spotlights, volunteer

recruitment posts, and honest behind-the-scenes accounts of the work that goes into building the event.

That last one — transparency about the hard work — is underrated. When runners understand what goes into a race, they appreciate it more. They're more forgiving of imperfections. They become advocates for the event because they feel invested in it.

## **Putting It Together: The Launch Sequence**

Here's the order I recommend for building your race's brand presence:

Name + logo (before anything else — this is your foundation)

Domain registration (immediately after the name is chosen)

Website (basic version live, with just the essentials, a few months before registration opens)

Social media pages (created and populated with a few initial posts before you direct any traffic there)

Email list signup added to website

Registration page setup (ready to go before you announce the opening date publicly)

Registration announcement to social media, email list, and any press contacts simultaneously

The goal is that when the first person hears about your race and goes looking for information, everything they need is already there, professionally presented, and makes them feel confident that this event is in competent hands.

First impressions don't get second chances. Make yours count.

## **Chapter 5: Registration & Technology — Open the Doors Right**

The moment you open registration is the moment your race becomes real for runners. It's also the moment you start accepting financial and logistical commitments that you'll need to honor.

How you set up registration sends a signal. A clean, fast, intuitive registration process says: this event is run by organized people who respect your time. A clunky, confusing, or buggy process says the opposite — and some percentage of the people who encounter it will leave without registering.

Registration is also where you collect the data you'll need to manage the race: names, contact information, shirt sizes, emergency contacts, and the signed waiver that protects both you and the runner. Get this right and race week is manageable. Get it wrong and you're manually correcting data and hunting for signatures at packet pickup.

### **The Most Important Rule: Online Registration Only**

Your life will be easier if you only accept online registration.

Paper registration forms require manual data entry, create opportunities for errors, have no automatic waiver capture, and are essentially impossible to integrate with timing systems. They survive as a nostalgic artifact in some races. I'd encourage you to let that artifact stay in the past.

If a runner can't or won't register online, they have a very small number of exceptions they can ask you to accommodate. But as your default policy — online only — this saves enormous administrative time and reduces errors significantly.

### Choosing a Platform

The running event registration market has several solid platforms. The right choice depends on your event type, timing setup, and priorities. Here's what to evaluate:

**Fee structure.** What does the platform charge runners, and what does it charge you? Most platforms charge a percentage of the registration fee (typically 3–8%) plus a flat per-transaction fee. Some allow the race director to absorb the fees so runners don't see them; most pass them to the runner by default. Understand exactly what the runner sees at checkout.

**Timing integration.** This is more important than most new directors realize. If your timing company uses a specific platform, registering there means runner data flows directly into the timing system without manual import/export. That also means you can leave online registration open until the race starts — runners can register that morning, and the timing system knows about them instantly. I cannot overstate how much money this is worth. Every race experiences a surge of registrations in the final days and hours before the event. If your platform requires you to close registration three days before the race to give the timing company time to process the data, you are losing real registrations at your peak demand moment.

**Payment speed.** How quickly do you receive funds? Some platforms hold payment until after the event; others provide rolling weekly deposits. For cash flow purposes, platforms that pay out regularly are strongly preferable.

Customer service reputation. Check reviews for both the race director experience and the runner experience. A platform that provides a frustrating registration experience to runners will reflect on your event, not on the platform.

Audience reach. Some platforms maintain active runner databases and promote events to their users. If your event is targeting a niche audience (trail runners, triathletes, a specific region), platforms that serve that niche may provide meaningful discovery traffic.

Ease of setup. Every platform claims to be easy. Read actual reviews from actual race directors. The first-year setup learning curve is real regardless of platform. Switching platforms in year two means repeating that learning curve from scratch, so choose carefully.

Registration platforms to evaluate:

**RunSignup:** Currently the dominant platform for U.S. running events; strong timing integration, good analytics, free email tools, and a race discovery calendar that puts your event in front of active runners.

**Race Roster:** Strong in Canada, growing in the U.S., competitive fee structure, and solid triathlon community integration.

**ItsYourRace.com:** The platform I used with International Running Company throughout our timing operation. Worth a closer look than most race directors give it.

ItsYourRace brings online registration, live results, a mobile event app, and live athlete photo delivery together in one platform — which is genuinely unusual. Most platforms handle registration; ItsYourRace also handles results posting and race-day photography delivery to runners, all from the same interface.

**Pricing:** 6% of the registration fee plus \$1.75 per transaction, with a minimum charge of \$3.50. Results hosting runs \$0.35 per participant; live photos and tracking add \$0.75 per participant. All credit card

processing is included in those fees — no separate processing charge on top.

What it does well: The timing integration is genuine. ItsYourRace was built with timing companies in mind, so the data flow from registration to results is clean. If you're working with a timing company that uses the ItsYourRace platform, you get tight integration that reduces manual data handling significantly. The mobile app lets runners track each other and check results in real time from their phones.

Compared to RunSignup: RunSignup has a larger market footprint and more robust marketing/email tools. ItsYourRace has a better integrated results and photo delivery experience. For timing-centric operations — events where results speed and accuracy are paramount — ItsYourRace is what we used and is worth serious consideration.

Best for: Race directors working with a timing company already on the ItsYourRace platform, or events where results delivery and photo distribution to runners are a priority experience feature.

## **Setting Up the Registration Correctly**

Once you've chosen a platform, the setup decisions matter.

What to collect from every registrant: - Full name - Date of birth (for age group results) - Gender - Email address - Phone number - Emergency contact name and phone number - Shirt size (if giving shirts) — list every size in both men's and women's cuts separately - How did you hear about this race (for marketing attribution) - Any relevant health disclosures if your event type warrants it - Waiver acceptance (must be required, not optional)

Optional additions: - Team or club affiliation (for club competition categories) - T-shirt or style preference if offering options - Dietary restrictions if you're serving food

What not to collect: Anything you don't actually plan to use. Every additional question increases friction and reduces your conversion rate.

Waiver presentation: The waiver text should be displayed in full, and the runner must actively check a box or click a button to accept it. "I skipped over it" is not a legal defense against a waiver claim, but your system needs to document that the waiver was presented and accepted at a specific date and time.

## **Pricing Tiers**

There are two common approaches to tiered pricing:

Date-based tiers: Price increases on specific dates (e.g., early bird price until March 1, regular price until race week, race-day price).

Count-based tiers: Price increases when a certain number of registrations are reached (e.g., first 100 at early bird, next 200 at regular, final 100 at late price).

Count-based tiers create a different kind of urgency. When a runner sees "only 40 spots left at this price," the motivation to register now is concrete — that opportunity is measurably closing. Date-based urgency is more abstract ("the price goes up in three weeks") and doesn't create the same psychological response.

I've seen both work well. What doesn't work: a pricing strategy that prices your event above what the market will bear for a first-year event with no track record. Don't set your entry fee based on what you want to charge. Set it based on what the budget requires (Chapter 2) and validate it against what comparable events are charging.

## **The Early Registrant Asset**

Early registrants are undervalued by most race directors.

Here's the thing about someone who registers six months before your race: they've already committed time and money. They have a stake in the event. And people with a stake in something become advocates for it.

The runner who registers in September for your April race is the person who tells their running club about it in October. They're the one who posts about their training on social media and mentions your event in the caption. They're the one who brings two friends to register in January.

Capture this energy: - Send a welcome email when they register that thanks them and gives them a specific way to share (a referral link, a shareable graphic, a discount code for a friend) - Tag them on social media (with their permission) when you highlight registered runners - Make early registrants feel like insiders — give them behind-the-scenes updates, early access to volunteer signup, priority packet pickup

The early registrant segment is small, but disproportionately valuable as a marketing force.

## **When to Open Registration**

The timing of your registration launch matters.

Day of the week: Wednesday or Thursday is ideal. This lets you build anticipation through social media posts Monday and Tuesday, have a “big” opening day with your audience at their computers mid-week, and capture any weekend impulse registrations. Avoid Friday or weekend launches — your audience is less connected to screens, and you lose the build-up advantage.

Lead time before the race: Six months is a solid standard for most events. This gives motivated planners time to sign up early (and becomes your first marketing wave), creates a long window for late registrants, and gives you time to adjust marketing if early registration is slow.

Readiness before launch: Your website, social media, and email list should all be established and active before registration opens. If someone registers, goes to your website, and finds a bare-bones page with no photos, no course map, and no FAQ, some percentage of them will wonder whether they made a mistake. Have the full digital presence built before you open the doors.

## **Race-Day Registration**

Should you accept registrations on race day?

For most events: yes. Race-day registrations are often your highest-converting opportunity. Runners who drove to the venue, parked, and are seeing the energy of the event will spontaneously decide to sign up. Many already wanted to register and just procrastinated.

The logistics: Have a dedicated registration table with a laptop or tablet, a printer for emergency bibs (or a supply of pre-numbered overflow bibs), a printed backup shirt/size list, and someone who knows the registration system. Test the setup the day before.

Timing integration: If your registration platform integrates with your timing system and stays open through the morning, race-day registrants flow automatically into the timing database. If it doesn't, you need a documented process for manually adding them.

Price: Race-day registration should be priced higher than online registration — typically 20–30% more. This incentivizes advance registration while still capturing the spontaneous entrant.

## **Technology Beyond Registration**

Registration is the most important technology decision you'll make, but it's not the only one.

**Task management:** Our accompanying app is a great place to start. It keeps your planning team coordinated on tasks, deadlines, and assignments. For small events, a shared spreadsheet works. For anything with three or more people involved in planning, a dedicated project management tool like this saves hours of email confusion.

**Communication for race day:** Two-way radios are essential for any event with a course longer than a mile or a team split across multiple positions. Handheld radios (typical FRS/GMRS models) are inexpensive to buy or rent and dramatically improve your ability to respond to problems in real time. I'll talk more about this in the race day chapter, but buy or rent them before race week. Cell phones can work for small events, but you need to use a group text chat so everyone is on the same page (and make sure they are listening for, and reading, messages.)

**Live results:** Runners and their families expect live results. RunSignup's RaceJoy, Athlinks, ItsYourRace, and other platforms support live tracking and real-time result posting. If you're working with a timing company, ask specifically how results will be published and how quickly after finish they'll be accessible. The standard expectation for chip-timed events is results available within minutes of finishing.

**Documentation:** Every vendor contract, permit, insurance certificate, and significant email correspondence belongs in an organized cloud storage folder. Google Drive works fine. Create a folder structure before you need it: /Event Name/Permits, /Vendors, /Registration, /Insurance, /Marketing, /Post-Race. The folder you create in month

one will be the folder you're grateful for at 11 PM on race eve when you need to confirm a vendor's arrival time.

## **The Fatal Registration Mistake**

I want to come back to one point because it's worth its own paragraph: do not close your online registration early.

This is a mistake that costs real money. Registration spikes in the final days before an event — that's when casual runners make up their minds, when people who've been watching decide to commit, when last-minute travelers book flights and races simultaneously. If you close registration on Wednesday for a Saturday race, you lose every one of those people.

The traditional reason for early closure was to give the timing company time to download and process the participant database. Modern timing integration eliminates this need entirely. If your timing company requires you to close registration days before the race, have a frank conversation about why and whether there's a technical solution. In most cases, there is.

Your registration should stay open until the start gun fires (or very close to it, with race-day processing at the venue for late arrivals). Every registration dollar is real revenue. Leaving it on the table by closing early is a choice you don't have to make.

# Chapter 6: Course Design & Marking — Your Promise to Every Runner

A race course is a promise.

When a runner registers, they're trusting that the distance is accurate, the route is safe, and the marking is clear enough that they can follow it without getting lost. Breaking any one of those promises on race day is the kind of thing that ends up in reviews that follow your event for years.

Once a 'helpful' volunteer decided to move the 5K turn-around sign out of the road, causing all the 5K runners to run 10K (or just give up). I fixed it by double every single decision point going forward. But the damage from that one bad experience was real — in the reviews, in the social media posts, and in the handful of runners who didn't come back.

This chapter is about designing a course that's worth running and then marking it so well that getting lost is nearly impossible.

## Course Design Principles

### Safety First

No course is worth running if it puts runners or volunteers in danger. This sounds obvious until you start making trade-offs between the beautiful route and the practical one.

My standard: I want either a fully closed course or a course with minimal, low-speed traffic on roads with wide shoulders. The moment you put runners and vehicles on the same roadway at normal traffic speeds, your volunteer needs go up, your permit complexity goes up, your insurance requirements go up, and your accident risk goes up.

For the Race Across Nebraska, runners were on highway shoulders for portions of the course. We implemented strict requirements: high-visibility clothing and lighting based on time of day, required reflective gear, and specific rules about running with traffic vs. against it. It worked, but it required significantly more planning and created more operational complexity than a closed or low-traffic course would have.

The cleanest races I've directed were on closed or near-closed courses. City parks, jogging and biking paths, beaches, closed trail systems — these allow runners to run freely, reduce your police and traffic control needs, and make the experience noticeably better.

### Clarity

A good course is one that a first-time runner can follow without getting lost, even if they've never been to the location and even if their GPS watch beeps at them in a wrong direction.

Before you finalize any course, ask yourself: Where would a runner who wasn't paying attention go wrong? Every answer to that question is a location that needs special attention — a volunteer, extra markings, or a physical barrier.

Decision points — anywhere the course could branch, where the runner has to choose a direction — are your highest-risk locations. You need visual confirmation at every one of them. Not a single arrow. Multiple arrows, a sign, a volunteer with a flag or bell, and — for trail events — flagging on the route so that following the marks is more intuitive than reading the trail.

## Practicality

A beautiful course that's impossible to staff or mark is a beautiful headache. Consider:

How many volunteers do you need to safely position at this course?

How many decision points does it have?

How accessible are the aid station locations to vehicles for setup and resupply?

For out-and-backs: do passing runners create safety issues at narrow points?

For loops: is the start/finish setup location practical for parking and logistics?

Point-to-point courses are generally the most interesting to run — new scenery at every mile — but they add transportation logistics (shuttles for runners and volunteers), more complex permit requirements (multiple jurisdictions), and no simple way for a runner to drop out near the finish if needed. Loop courses are more logistically flexible. Out-and-back courses are simple to permit, easy to staff, and offer a clear turnaround point — but can feel repetitive on longer distances.

## **Road Closures: Know What You're Getting Into**

The difficulty of your permit process scales directly with your level of road interaction:

Course Type	Complexity	Cost Range	Notes
Fully off-road (park, trail, beach)	Low	\$0–\$2,000	Land manager permit, typically straightforward
Lightly used residential streets (cone-based, no closure)	Low-Medium	\$500–\$5,000	May require traffic control plan; police presence helpful
Arterial road closure (city streets)	Medium	\$3,000–\$20,000	Traffic control plan required; off-duty police typical
State highway involvement	High	\$10,000–\$50,000+	State-certified traffic engineer required in many states
Multi-jurisdictional complex routing	Very High	\$20,000–\$100,000+	Each jurisdiction has separate requirements

Before you design a course that touches state roads, contact your state DOT and find out what an event permit requires. In Florida, we needed a certified traffic management plan for any course that used state roads or required detours onto them. For a six-mile course, that plan cost \$18,000 in engineering fees alone, before a single officer was deployed.

If the numbers don't work, redesign the course to avoid the most expensive jurisdictions. A course that costs \$25,000 less because it stays on city streets rather than touching state highways is a better business decision in most cases — especially in year one.

## **Measuring Your Course**

Distance accuracy matters to runners. A 5K that comes in at 3.05 miles on GPS is going to generate reviews. A marathon that's long by a quarter mile generates very angry runners who can't understand why their GPS time doesn't match their expected pace.

**USATF Certification:** For any road race where distance accuracy affects competitive results — and especially for marathons, half marathons, and any event runners will use for time-based goals — USATF course certification is worth the investment. The certification uses a calibrated Jones Counter measurement bike to measure the course precisely. Fees vary by USATF sanctioning body and measurer, but budget \$200–\$500 for a simple course and more for complex routes. The certification is valid for 10 years.

For the Destin Marathon, certification caught a 0.2-mile error in our course before we ever sent runners out on it. That kind of error — uncorrected — would have been a mess.

**Trail and ultra events:** Most trail ultras do not certify their courses, and runners generally understand that trail distances are approximate. However, be honest about this. If your 50K is measuring 52K on GPS, tell runners in advance. Don't advertise precision you're not providing.

**The GPS problem:** Even certified road courses measure slightly differently on individual GPS watches due to satellite positioning and signal bounce. If a runner's GPS shows 26.35 miles at your marathon finish, that's not necessarily wrong — GPS watches often read slightly long on out-and-backs and are affected by buildings, trees, and movement speed. Do not argue with runners about this. Explain the certification, provide the course measurement documentation, and let the factual record speak for itself.

## **Marking: The Over-Marking Principle**

Here is the single most important thing I can tell you about course marking:

If you think you've over-marked, you probably just marked it correctly.

There is almost no such thing as too much marking. I have never received a complaint that said "there were too many arrows on the course." I have received exactly the kind of complaint you'd expect when marking is sparse: "I got lost," "I missed a turn," "I ran extra distance because there was no sign."

The marking standard I aim for:

On roads: - Directional arrows at every turn - Confirmation arrows (pointing straight) 50–100 meters after every turn, confirming the runner is on the right path - An arrow at every street intersection along the route, even if the runner continues straight - Volunteer or physical barrier at any location where a wrong choice is easy

On trails: - Flagging (brightly colored survey tape) tied at eye level and knee level at regular intervals — typically every 100–200 meters on clear trail, more frequently at turns or splits - Ground arrows (flour, spray paint, chalk) at every decision point - "Wrong way" markers at false-turn entry points — wherever a runner might wander off course, put a mark that says NO or WRONG WAY - Glow sticks or reflective flagging for any pre-dawn or post-sunset sections

Volunteer positioning: - Every significant decision point should have a volunteer with a flag, bell, or noisemaker to direct and encourage runners - Volunteers at aid stations should be trained to redirect any runner who comes in looking uncertain - Brief your volunteers: if a runner looks confused, they are to engage immediately, not wait for the runner to ask.

## Testing the Course

After you've marked, test it. Ideally, have someone who has never seen the course run or walk it cold, following only the marks. If they get confused anywhere, you need more marking there.

This is the "blind test" — and it catches problems you've been staring at so long you can't see anymore. You've been over this course dozens of times. You know where it goes. A first-timer following signs for the first time does not have your map in their head.

## Course Marking Supplies

Item

Use

Notes

Flour

Ground arrows, road courses

Washable, inexpensive, visible; washes away after event

Sidewalk chalk

Ground arrows, pavement

Short-lived in wet weather; backup to flour

Spray paint (temporary)

Ground arrows, pavement, grass

More durable; check venue rules

Survey flags (small)

Trail flagging, turn indicators

Wire stake version; buy in bulk

Surveyor's tape

Trail flagging tied to vegetation

Bright orange or pink; very visible

18-inch directional arrow signs

Road courses, key turns

Mounted on stakes; highly visible; reusable

Cones with directional signs

Road courses, intersections

Traffic cones with arrow toppers

“Wrong Way” signs

Trail false-entries, road

Prevents common wrong turns

Glow sticks

Pre-dawn or overnight courses

Attach to flags or ground stakes

Reflective flagging tape

Overnight/pre-dawn marking

Highly visible in headlamp and vehicle light

Budget: \$200–\$500 for a 5K to 10K; \$500–\$1,500 for a longer trail or road event; more for multi-day or complex courses.

Removal: Budget time and people for post-race marking removal. Most land managers and cities require you to remove all markings within 24 hours. Have a team specifically assigned to this task and confirm your entire course is restored to its pre-race condition. Your permit for next year depends on it.

## **Distances That Don't Have to Be Standard**

Not every race needs to be a 5K, 10K, half marathon, or marathon.

The Ratchet 33 race was 3.3 miles — chosen specifically to honor U.S. Airmen killed in a crash with the call sign Ratchet 33. The non-standard distance had meaning. It was part of the story. Runners didn't just run 3.3 miles; they ran 3.3 miles for a reason, and every tenth of a mile was intentional.

Non-standard distances can also serve practical purposes: fitting a natural loop course that measures 4.2 miles rather than forcing an out-and-back addition to hit exactly 6.2. When you let the terrain and the story dictate the distance rather than shoehorning the course to hit a round number, sometimes you end up with a better race.

The caveat: if you use a non-standard distance, communicate it clearly. Runners who train for a 10K and show up to a 6.5-mile race without warning are going to be annoyed. Put the actual distance prominently on every piece of communications, not just the marketing category (“10K-ish” is not an acceptable distance designation).

## **Special Considerations for Ultras and Multi-Day Events**

For events where runners are on course for many hours or through the night, your marking strategy needs to account for conditions that don't exist at a 9 AM 5K.

Pre-dawn and overnight marking: Glow sticks and reflective materials are essential. Mark every decision point with something visible in headlamp light. Run or walk the course in darkness with a headlamp before the event to confirm the marking reads correctly at night.

Mark refresh: On longer events, early-morning marks may be disturbed or obscured by the time the back-of-pack runners reach

them. Build in a marking refresh plan for key locations on multi-hour events.

GPS track distribution: For trail ultras, distributing a GPX file for runners to load on their watches or phones is increasingly standard. This supplements (not replaces) physical marking. A runner who gets off course can use their watch to self-correct — but only if the file is accurate and up to date with the final course version.

Sweep runners: For ultras, a sweep runner (or sweep team for long events) moves behind the last runner on course. Their job is to confirm every runner has cleared a section, collect bibs from dropouts, and be a mobile emergency resource for the back of the pack. The sweep runner should have a radio, a phone, and basic first aid supplies. At the end of the event, they signal the timing system that the course is clear.

## **The Course Walk**

One or two days before the race, walk the entire course.

Not drive it — walk it, or at minimum, slowly drive every turn with a passenger watching for mark visibility.

Things to check: - Are all marks still in place? (Weather, foot traffic, landscaping crews can disturb them) - Are there any new hazards that didn't exist when you designed the course? (Construction, flooding, overgrown trail) - Is every decision point covered — either by a mark, a volunteer assignment, or both? - Are portable toilet placements and aid station locations accessible for setup? - Are there any sight-line problems at intersections (parked cars, overgrown vegetation blocking the view of approaching vehicles)?

The course walk also gives you a final chance to adjust volunteer assignments before briefing day. If you spot a location that needs more coverage than you planned, you have time to add it.

The course you walked a month ago might not be the course that exists today. Walk it again.

## **Chapter 7: Aid Stations & Logistics — The Infrastructure That Keeps Runners Moving**

An aid station that runs out of water during a race is not just a logistics failure. It's a safety failure. It's a breach of the promise you made when runners entered. And it's the kind of thing that gets talked about in race reviews for years.

This chapter is about building aid stations that are stocked right, staffed right, and positioned right — so that when runners come through, what they need is there waiting for them.

### **Spacing: How Far Apart Should Aid Stations Be?**

The answer depends on your event type, your weather conditions, and your runners' needs.

Road 5K/10K: One aid station at the halfway point is standard. Runners in shorter events are typically well-hydrated at the start and don't need extensive support, but a well-placed water stop in the middle is still expected.

Road half marathon: Approximately every 2 miles. This is the industry standard and runner expectation. In hot weather, consider moving to every 1.5 miles or adding a supplemental station.

Road marathon: Every 2 miles, with electrolyte/gel options available at every other station or on request. For a 26.2-mile course, that's 12–13 aid station setups.

Trail 25K–50K: Every 5–8 miles, adjusted for terrain difficulty. A brutal 6-mile technical section with significant climbing might warrant a station placed closer than the standard interval because slower runners spend more time between stations and consume more fluids in effort.

50-mile and 100-mile ultras: Every 10 miles as a minimum for standard conditions, with closer spacing on technical terrain, in heat, or at high altitude. At ultra distances, aid stations also function as crew access points and drop bag locations, which adds operational complexity.

Multi-day events (like Six Days in the Dome): Food and hydration available continuously when athletes are on course. At an indoor multi-day event, the aid station is essentially a staffed kitchen that operates around the clock. Standardization of what's available and when — and a rotation system for the staff running it — is what keeps this functional over multiple days without exhausting your team.

## **Stocking: What Goes in an Aid Station**

### Non-negotiables

Water. Always. At every station. For every event. If you can only provide one thing, provide water.

Cups. Pre-staged and partially filled on the table. Runners grab and go — they should not have to stop to fill a cup themselves. Stage cups in rows with a gap between rows so one grab doesn't collapse the whole setup.

### Standard additions

Electrolyte drinks. For races over 10K in warm weather, an electrolyte drink (sports drink or electrolyte tablets in water) at aid stations

significantly reduces cramping and hyponatremia risk. Not every runner will take it, but offering it is good practice.

Gels, chews, or blocks. Standard at marathon aid stations. At ultras, runners often live on aid station food for many hours; offer variety.

Bananas. Simple carbohydrate, easy to eat while moving, inexpensive, widely available. A staple at every long-course aid station.

#### Ultra-specific additions

At ultras, your aid station is a small restaurant. The further into the race, the more variety runners need, because their appetites become unpredictable and their ability to tolerate typical race food declines.

Common ultra aid station items: - Broth or soup (especially at night or in cold weather — warm liquid is extraordinarily welcome at mile 40) - Boiled or roasted potatoes with salt - PB&J quarters - Pretzels and chips (salt and simple carbs) - Cookies, candy - Hot or cold coffee/tea at overnight stations - Pickles or pickle juice (popular cramp remedy) - Quesadillas and hot food at larger events

The buffer rule: Stock 20–25% more than your projected consumption. The downside of overstocking is waste. The downside of understocking is a dry station and potentially a medical incident. Waste is the better outcome.

## **Staffing Aid Stations**

Minimum crew per station

5K/10K aid station: 2–3 people for a station serving up to 400 runners

Half marathon aid station: 3–4 people

Marathon aid station: 4–6 people at busiest stations (start/finish area); 3–4 at mid-course stations

Ultra aid station: 3–5 people for a standard station; more for high-traffic crew access points

Roles within the aid station crew

Station captain: The single point of contact for the race director. They confirm supplies on arrival, manage their team throughout the day, report to race command, and handle any issues. The captain should have a radio or charged phone at all times.

Setup crew: Gets tables, canopies, coolers, and supplies positioned before runners arrive.

During-race crew: Fills cups, restocks tables, cheers runners, removes used cups, and monitors supply levels. Rotation among crew members is essential for longer events — an aid station captain who's been standing in the same spot for six hours is less effective than one who's been rotating.

Cleanup crew: Removes all supplies, breaks down tables and canopies, picks up all cups and waste from the immediate area, and confirms the station location is restored to its pre-race condition.

Keeping aid station crews supplied during the event

For multi-station courses, someone needs to be driving a supply vehicle along the course, monitoring stock levels and delivering resupply as needed. This should be a specific assignment — a supply driver who has a radio, a list of what each station has and needs, and enough supply in the vehicle to address a shortfall anywhere on the course.

On a marathon-length event, this is a demanding role. The supply driver may make multiple loops of the course throughout the race duration. Don't assign it as an afterthought — it's one of the most operationally critical roles in a longer event.

Equipment

What every aid station needs

Tables (at least 2 per station — one for cups, one for supplies)

Pop-up canopy or tent (weather protection for supplies and crew; essential in heat or rain)

Coolers (pre-filled with ice and water; bring extras)

Cups, already staged before runners arrive

Trash cans or bags (positioned at cup-grab point and downrange so running-speed tosses have a target)

First aid kit (at every station)

Radio or charged phone

Supply inventory sheet (what's on hand, what's been consumed, what's needed)

Additional equipment for overnight or cold-weather stations

Generator and lighting

Propane stove or camp stove for warm food/soup

Extra blankets or emergency foil blankets

Hot water source for drinks

For multi-day indoor events

When I was directing *Six Days in the Dome* in Anchorage, the “aid station” was a continuous operation that had to be managed in shifts. We built a standardized menu and stocking schedule, assigned shift captains, and created clear handoff protocols between shifts. The same system you'd use for a 24-hour commercial food service operation is the right model for a multi-day event — because that's essentially what you're running.

## **Portable Restrooms**

Restrooms are a logistical afterthought for many first-year directors and a major friction point for runners at every event.

Quantity guidelines: - 1 unit per 150–200 runners as a starting point - Add units wherever runners will congregate or wait (start/finish area, large aid stations) - Separate ADA-accessible unit at start/finish is often required by venue permit - Handwash stations required in most jurisdictions (often a separate rental)

Placement: Position units at the start/finish area (highest traffic; runners waiting before the race and immediately after), at major aid stations on longer courses, and at any staging area where runners or volunteers will spend significant time.

Delivery timing: Confirm delivery at least 24 hours before your start time. Nothing creates pre-race anxiety like watching the clock at 6 AM with no portable toilets in sight and 300 runners arriving in 90 minutes.

Budget: \$175–\$280 per unit for a weekend rental; ADA units and handwash stations add to that. For a first-year 5K, budget \$500–\$800 for restrooms; for a marathon, \$1,500–\$3,000 depending on course length and station placement.

## **Fuel and Remote Logistics**

For trail ultras with aid stations that vehicles can't easily reach, you need a logistics plan for getting supplies in and waste out.

Options: - Backpack supplies in (practical for lightweight items; limits what you can offer) - Pre-position supplies before the race on foot or by ATV - Arrange land manager permission for vehicle access at specific times - Use pack animals (genuinely used at some remote mountain ultras)

For most events, the goal is to site aid stations at locations with vehicle access, even if that access requires a dirt road or a field drive. Build this into your course design — if a beautiful aid station location is only reachable by a 2-mile hike, you're creating a resupply problem that will complicate every year you run that course.

## **Aid Station Checklist**

- **Pre-race (48 hours out):** - All supplies confirmed delivered or in transit - Ice confirmed sourced (grocery stores, ice suppliers) - Equipment inventory: tables, canopies, coolers, cups, trash bags, first aid kits - Crew assignments confirmed for each station - Supply vehicle assigned and driver briefed - Radios assigned to station captains and supply driver
  - **Day of setup (2–3 hours before start):** - Tables and canopies set up - Coolers filled with ice and water - Cups pre-staged in rows on table - Electrolyte drinks / food laid out - Trash cans positioned - Station captain confirmed on radio network - First aid kit present and stocked
  - **During race:** - Supply driver making rounds every 90 minutes - Station captains calling resupply at 50% of initial stock - Crew rotating (no one standing in the same position for more than 2 hours) - Trash pickups happening continuously
  - **Post-race:** - All supplies removed from course - All cups and food waste collected and bagged - Tables and canopies broken down and loaded - Station location restored to pre-race condition - Inventory report filed (what was consumed, what was returned)
- This will help you a lot the next year.

## **Chapter 8: Volunteers — Recruiting, Training, and Keeping Your Best People**

Every race you've ever run was made possible by people who showed up early, stood in the same spot for hours, and cheered for strangers. Volunteers are the face of your event. They're the first people your runners interact with at packet pickup and the last people they see at the finish line. A great volunteer crew makes an average course feel like a great race. A poorly trained or undermotivated crew makes a great course feel like a disorganized mess.

I've had crews that were extraordinary — people who took their roles seriously, trained on their assignments, and showed up race morning like they owned the place. I've also been understaffed at a race where misdirected runners added unplanned distance to their event. Those runners didn't know the marking wasn't clear. They assumed the volunteer at the turn would direct them correctly. The volunteer wasn't positioned right. Ten minutes of confusion and extra miles later, some of those runners were genuinely upset — and they were right to be.

Volunteers are not an afterthought. They are one of your three pillars.

### **Your Three Pillars Revisited**

I introduced this concept in Chapter 1: every race rests on three pillars — Runners, Sponsors, and Staff & Volunteers.

The staff and volunteer pillar is the one race directors most commonly under-invest in, particularly in year one. It's easy to spend hours on course design and branding and then scramble to recruit volunteers in

the final few weeks. The result is a smaller, less-prepared team than the event needs.

Start recruiting volunteers as early as you recruit sponsors — six months out for most events, a year out for large ones.

## **Who Volunteers**

**Running clubs.** This is your best source. Local runners who know the sport, understand the early morning timeline, and are likely to be enthusiastic about supporting a running event. Connect with every local running club in your area. Many clubs volunteer as a group, which has the added benefit of providing a built-in social experience for the volunteers.

**Schools and athletic programs.** High school or college cross-country or track programs are excellent sources. Coaches appreciate service opportunities for their athletes, and young runners often make energetic, engaged volunteers.

**Civic and service organizations.** Rotary clubs, Lions clubs, church youth groups, and similar organizations often look for volunteer opportunities, particularly when there's a charity connection to the event. If your race benefits a cause, organizations aligned with that cause become natural volunteer pools.

**Corporate groups.** Some companies actively encourage team volunteering. If you have a title sponsor or a major sponsor, ask whether they'd like to volunteer as a group at the event. This gives their team a direct experience of the event and strengthens the sponsor relationship.

**Friends and family.** The most reliable group of all, particularly in year one. Your friends and family are the ones who'll show up in a rainstorm. They're the ones who'll stay late to help break down after

the race. Don't take them for granted — express genuine gratitude — but don't be shy about asking for their help.

## **What Volunteers Want**

Understanding why people volunteer helps you recruit and retain them.

**Recognition.** Volunteers want to feel that their contribution was noticed and valued. A public thank-you on social media, a mention at the awards ceremony, a personal email from the race director — these cost nothing and mean a great deal.

**Belonging.** Volunteering at a race feels like being part of something. The best events create a culture where volunteers feel like insiders, not just labor. They're part of the team that makes the race happen.

**Perks.** Most races offer volunteer shirts. Many offer free or discounted entry to future events. Some provide post-race food and drinks, or special access to parts of the event (early bib pickup, crew area access). The value of perks doesn't have to be large — a volunteer who gets a shirt and a hot meal after a cold morning feels genuinely appreciated.

**Fun.** Volunteering at a well-run race is genuinely enjoyable. The energy of race day, the connection with runners, the satisfaction of being part of something larger — these are real motivators. When your race has good energy, volunteers feel it and they come back.

At the Destin Beach Ultra Runs, I offered volunteers entries to future ultra events. Some of those volunteers became runners who later came back and ran the race themselves. Loyalty, once earned, compounds.

## **The Volunteer Coordinator**

For any event with more than 20 volunteers, you need a volunteer coordinator — someone other than you.

The volunteer coordinator's job: - Recruits and confirms volunteers for all roles - Assigns specific positions to specific people - Manages the volunteer sign-up list (a shared spreadsheet works; a volunteer management tool like CERVIS or VolunteerHub works better at scale) - Conducts or co-leads the pre-race training session - Manages race-day volunteer communication - Coordinates post-race thank-you process

This is a significant commitment. Find someone who is organized, communicative, and genuinely excited about the event. This person becomes one of your core team members, and a good volunteer coordinator is worth their weight in the race's success.

## **Role Design**

Every volunteer needs a specific assignment with clear expectations. "General volunteer" is not a role — it's a recipe for people standing around unsure what to do.

Standard volunteer roles

Packet Pickup (pre-race, 2–4 people): - Sort and stage bibs, shirts, and packets before pickup opens - Check in runners, verify registration, hand out correct materials - Manage the flow of the pickup line to prevent bottlenecks - Handle race-day registration overflow if applicable

Start Line (2–4 people): - Set up corrals or wave markers - Direct runners to correct starting positions - Manage the crowd during the final countdown - Assist with timing equipment setup if needed

Course Marshals (1 per major decision point, or every mile on road courses): - Direct runners at turns and key intersections - Actively cheer and encourage runners - Watch for distressed runners and radio for assistance if needed - Remain at post until the last runner has passed (plus sweep runner confirmation)

Aid Station Crew (3–5 per station, more at busy stations): - Set up tables, coolers, and supplies before runners arrive - Hand water and nutrition to runners - Encourage and cheer (this matters more than most people expect) - Clean up cups and waste continuously during the race - Break down station after last runner passes

Finish Line (5–10 people): - Hand out finisher medals - Direct runners through the finish chute - Provide water and post-race food - Assist with any medical needs in cooperation with EMS - Cheer every finisher, especially the back-of-pack runners

Medical Support (varies — see Chapter 9): - Staffed by trained personnel; not general volunteers - However, a general volunteer can serve as a spotter who alerts medical staff to distressed runners

Cleanup Crew (4–8 people): - Remove course marking after the last runner - Break down all equipment - Restore venue to pre-race condition - Often the same people as other roles, working in the final phase

## **Training Your Volunteers**

The biggest mistake race directors make with volunteers is assuming they'll figure it out on race day.

Run a training session. Not a long one — an hour to two hours depending on event size — but a real one. Walk the course or review a course map. Demonstrate the radio protocol. Walk through the emergency action plan. Assign everyone to their specific position and confirm they understand their responsibilities.

What to cover in the training session:

Overview: What the race is, where the course goes, how long it lasts

Role assignments: Every person gets their specific position and knows their station captain or supervisor

Radio protocol: How to call in to race command, what information to report, how to request help

Emergency protocol: What to do if a runner is injured or distressed (call race command on the radio; do not move a seriously injured runner; keep calm and provide reassurance)

Course marking review: Show every marshal where they stand and what the runners should do at their position

Cheering: Yes, this is coached. Volunteers who actively cheer make a measurable difference in runner experience. Teach them to call runners by name (if bibs have names), to ring bells, to make noise. It matters.

After the training, send a written recap by email: their role, their position, their arrival time, the radio channel, and the key contact number for race day.

## **Overstaffing Deliberately**

Plan for 10% of your confirmed volunteers to not show up.

This is not cynicism — it's operational reality. Life happens. Cars break down. Kids get sick. Alarm clocks are silenced in the 4 AM darkness. If you're staffed exactly to the minimum, one volunteer no-show creates a gap in your coverage.

My approach: I recruit to 110–115% of my needed count and confirm assignments a week before the race. Anyone who hasn't confirmed by

the Monday before the race gets a follow-up contact. The ones I still can't confirm after that follow-up are replaced if possible.

If you end up with extra volunteers at the start line, that's a good problem. The excess can fill in as floaters who cover gaps, handle unexpected needs, or provide additional cheering energy at the finish line.

## **Race Day Volunteer Management**

On race day, the volunteer coordinator is the primary communicator with the volunteer team. You, as race director, should not be chasing down individual volunteers — you have a race to manage.

Radio channels: Assign specific channels for different operational groups (course marshals, aid stations, timing/finish area, EMS/medical). A race director without a radio is flying blind.

Check-in: Have every volunteer check in with the volunteer coordinator or their station captain when they arrive. A confirmation list gets checked off. If someone doesn't check in by 30 minutes before their post needs to be staffed, the coordinator starts working the "fill the gap" plan immediately.

The pre-race briefing: A brief (10-minute maximum) all-hands gathering at the start/finish area about 45–60 minutes before the race start. Confirm assignments, remind everyone of the radio channel and emergency protocol, answer questions, and send people to their positions. Keep it short — people need to be at their posts.

Communication throughout the race: The volunteer coordinator does check-ins with each station captain at regular intervals (every 60–90 minutes for a longer event). Any supply issue, medical concern, or coverage gap gets radioed in and addressed.

## **Retaining Your Best Volunteers**

Year-over-year volunteer retention is enormously valuable. A volunteer who's done the job before requires less training, is more confident in their role, and often brings more energy because they already know the race.

After the race: - Send a personal thank-you email (not a mass blast — an email that acknowledges their specific contribution) - Post a photo gallery that includes volunteer photos, not just runner finish photos - Send a survey asking for their feedback on the volunteer experience - Give them early access to next year's volunteer signup - At the post-race gathering or awards ceremony, specifically thank the volunteer team by name if feasible

The volunteer who feels valued becomes a long-term team member. The volunteer who felt like an anonymous body-to-fill-a-slot doesn't come back.

Build a culture where volunteering at your race is something people genuinely want to do, and your recruiting challenge becomes much smaller every year.

## **Chapter 9: Safety, Medical & Emergency Planning — The Non-Negotiable Chapter**

When a runner crosses your start line, they are in your care.

That's not a legal statement, though there are legal dimensions to it. It's a moral one. The runner who registered for your race made a decision based on your promise of a well-managed event. They trained for months. They drove to your venue. They put on your bib and trusted that you had thought through what could go wrong and planned for it.

Safety planning is not an item on a checklist that you address once and file away. It is the foundation beneath every other operational decision. Your permit rests on it. Your insurance requires it. Your moral obligation demands it.

This chapter covers the minimum planning every race director should have in place, and how to scale that planning for events of different sizes and conditions.

### **Your Legal and Moral Obligation**

You are responsible for creating a reasonably safe environment for participants, volunteers, and spectators. You are not responsible for every possible outcome — running is inherently risky, and a properly executed waiver communicates that risk to participants — but you are responsible for:

Providing appropriate medical coverage for the event

Identifying and mitigating foreseeable hazards

Having emergency protocols documented and communicated to your team

Having communication systems that allow you to respond to incidents on course

Not being grossly negligent in your safety planning

A waiver is not a shield against gross negligence. If you knowingly sent runners onto a course during dangerous lightning without activating your emergency protocol, a waiver will not protect you. If you failed to provide any medical coverage at an event where participants were having known health difficulties, a waiver will not protect you.

Plan seriously. Document the planning. Execute it on race day.

## **Medical Coverage: Scaling to Your Event**

The appropriate level of medical coverage depends on your event size, distance, course remoteness, and weather conditions.

Level 1: Basic (small events, short distances, favorable conditions)

Minimum: Designated first aid station at finish line with a first aid kit and an AED

Preferred: At least one EMT or medic on site

Appropriate for: 5K to 10K events with fewer than 200 participants in moderate conditions

Level 2: Standard (mid-size events or longer distances)

1 EMT or paramedic per 200–500 runners (adjust based on event risk profile)

AED at finish line; additional AEDs at medical tents on longer courses

Medical tent at start/finish with basic treatment capability

Designated runner assessment area away from finish line flow

Appropriate for: half marathons, trail races, events in warm weather

Level 3: Enhanced (large events, marathons, ultras, extreme conditions)

On-site ALS (Advanced Life Support) ambulance or EMS team

Medical tent with IV capability and trained medical director

Medical personnel distributed along the course (not just at finish line)

Staging protocol for runner transfer to hospital

Appropriate for: marathons, 50Ks and longer ultras, events in high heat or at altitude

Medical cost ranges (for budgeting)

Basic first aid coverage: \$300–\$800

EMT standby, single shift: \$500–\$1,500

ALS ambulance with crew, single day: \$1,500–\$4,000

Full medical tent with medical director: \$2,500–\$6,000+

Contract your medical coverage in writing. Every agreement with an EMS provider should specify the level of coverage, the staffing, their arrival time, their communication channel, and their location on the course. “We have an ambulance standing by” is not a medical plan.

## **Heat Management**

Heat is the most common environmental threat at running events and the one most likely to affect a large portion of your field.

The heat risk scale

Heat Index	Risk Level	Action
Below 80°F	Low	Standard coverage
80–90°F	Moderate	Extra water at stations; additional ice available
90–100°F	High	Consider adding stations; activate cooling measures
Above 100°F	Extreme	Consider race delay, shortened course, or cancellation

## Cold and Wet Weather

Cold weather running events carry different risks, particularly for slower runners who are on the course longer and generate less body heat through movement.

Hypothermia risk: When air temperature plus wind speed creates an effective chill, and particularly when runners are wet, hypothermia is possible even at temperatures that don't feel extreme. At ultras where runners may be moving for many hours through changing conditions, this risk is real.

Provide shelter and warm beverages at aid stations in cold conditions

Have emergency foil blankets available at every station

Know the signs of hypothermia: shivering, slurred speech, clumsiness, confusion

If weather deteriorates during the event, be prepared to announce course modifications or pull the most vulnerable runners

Course cutoffs in cold weather: A runner who is going to be on course after dark in dropping temperatures needs to be identified and either accelerated (encouraged to pick up pace), provided with additional support, or pulled from the course. Build course cutoffs into your plan for any event where post-dark cold weather is a realistic scenario.

## **Emergency Protocols**

Every race needs a documented emergency action plan (EAP) that covers the most likely scenarios. This plan should be: - Written down, not just understood by the race director - Distributed to every staff and volunteer team leader before race day - Practiced in your volunteer training session (even briefly)

## **Lost Runner Protocol**

Definition: A runner who was on course and cannot be accounted for within a reasonable time after the expected course cutoff.

Response steps:

1. Confirm the runner is not at the finish line, packet pickup, or in the medical area
2. Check whether the runner's timing chip registered at intermediate splits
3. Contact the runner's emergency contact
4. Deploy course marshals or a sweep runner to check the most likely location
5. If runner cannot be located within a defined time window, contact local search and rescue

For trail and ultra events with remote sections, the lost runner protocol needs to be more detailed. Have GPS coordinates of every aid station and decision point. Know which sections have cell coverage and which don't. HAM radio operators can provide communication support in dead zones.

Prevention: Every runner at a trail ultra should be accounted for at every aid station. Use a bib check-in system at each station. If a bib

number doesn't appear at the next station within a time window proportional to the distance and terrain, investigate.

## **Medical Emergency Protocol**

On-course medical emergency:

1. First person on scene provides basic first aid and calls race command on radio
2. Race command dispatches EMS to the runner's location (every marshal should know GPS coordinates or named landmarks for their position)
3. EMS assesses and treats on site or requests transport
4. Race director notified immediately for any serious incident
5. Incident documentation begins immediately

At finish line medical:

1. Runner flagged by finish line crew for distress
2. Routed to medical tent immediately, not to medal or food area
3. Medical staff assesses and treats
4. EMS transport if required

Cardiac event: For a cardiac arrest on course, your response time to defibrillation is the primary determinant of survival. Every race should have AEDs distributed such that defibrillation is possible within 3–5 minutes of any location on the course. This means multiple AEDs on long courses, not just one at the finish line.

## **Severe Weather Protocol**

Pre-event watch: Monitor weather forecasts throughout race week and the morning of the event. Multiple weather apps are your friends; don't rely on a single forecast.

**Lightning:** Lightning is the most immediately dangerous weather condition for an outdoor event. Many race directors use the “30-30 rule” as a baseline: if there’s less than 30 seconds between lightning flash and thunder, conditions are dangerous; wait 30 minutes after the last strike before resuming.

**Decision tree:** - If lightning is in the forecast: have a documented delay protocol - If lightning strikes within the warning distance during the event: suspend the race, move runners to shelter, wait the minimum safe interval - If cancellation is necessary mid-race: have a communications plan (PA announcement, text blast to registered participants, social media update)

No sponsor, no entry fee, and no schedule is worth a runner being struck by lightning while you were hoping the storm would pass.

## **Communication Systems**

You cannot manage a safety incident without communication.

**Radios:** Two-way radios are mandatory for any course longer than a mile. Assign radios to: race director, volunteer coordinator, medical lead, each aid station captain, and each course marshal position. Establish a primary channel for race operations and a secondary channel for medical emergencies.

FRS/GMRS radios are inexpensive (available at sporting goods stores for \$30–\$60 each) and work well for most road race distances. For long trail courses or events in terrain with many obstacles, consider more powerful radios or radio rental.

**Cell coverage mapping:** For trail and ultra events, map your course against cell coverage zones. Mark every section where cell coverage is poor or absent. In those sections, station a volunteer with a radio (not just a cell phone) and ensure they know their GPS coordinates.

**HAM radio operators:** For remote ultra events, HAM radio operators provide reliable communication in the most remote sections of a course. Many running events recruit HAM operators specifically for this purpose. Contact your local HAM radio club — many members specifically enjoy participating in running events.

**Medical communication:** Your EMS team needs to be on the same radio channel as race command or have a direct phone number that connects instantly to race command. A medical call that has to go through three people before it reaches the decision-maker wastes critical time.

## **Course Cutoffs**

Course cutoffs serve two functions: they protect slower runners from finishing in dangerous conditions (darkness, heat, cold) and they allow you to manage the operational lifecycle of your event (when to close aid stations, when to reopen roads).

**For road events:** Cutoffs are often required by permit. A city road that closes at 9 AM and has 47 runners still on it at 9:30 AM is a permit violation. Build cutoffs that are achievable for your target field but firm enough to meet permit conditions.

**For ultras:** Cutoffs should be designed around safety, not administrative convenience. A 50-mile runner who's pulled at mile 35 because they fell outside a cutoff still needs safe transportation back to the finish. Plan the sweeping, the bib collection, and the transportation protocol as carefully as the cutoff times themselves.

**Enforcement:** Designate specific people responsible for enforcing cutoffs. The race director should not be the person chasing down slow runners at mile 35 — that's a role for a designated course marshal or sweep runner with a specific protocol.

## **The Safety Mindset**

The safest races I've directed weren't the ones with the biggest medical budgets. They were the ones where safety thinking was embedded in every operational decision.

Course design: is this intersection genuinely safe to run at full speed?

Aid station placement: is this station close enough to every runner on course?

Volunteer training: does every volunteer know what to do if a runner looks distressed?

Communication: does every person on my team have a way to reach race command within 30 seconds?

Emergency plan: is it documented, distributed, and practiced?

Run through every scenario you can imagine — lost runner, medical emergency, severe weather, supply failure, timing failure — and have a documented response for each. The scenario you don't plan for will probably never happen. But the five seconds of clarity that comes from having a plan when something does go wrong is worth every hour you spent preparing it.

The deployment marathon in 2007 taught me this in the simplest possible way. The plan was simple. The communication was clear. The execution was reliable. Those three things are the foundation of safety at any scale.

# Chapter 10: Marketing & Promotion — Filling the Start Line

A race that no one knows about is not a race. It's an expensive private event.

Marketing is the part of race directing that most organizers underestimate in the planning phase and scramble to catch up on when registrations are slower than expected. By the time you're three months out with half the field you need, it's very hard to make up that ground.

The most effective marketing for a running event is not paid advertising. It's word of mouth from satisfied runners, visible presence in the places where runners already gather, and consistent communication that keeps your event front of mind throughout the long runway between registration opening and race day.

This chapter covers what's actually working in 2025 and 2026. The landscape has shifted significantly. The platforms have changed. AI tools have entered the picture. And several tactics that were standard five years ago have either declined or died entirely.

## **The Awareness vs. Conversion Problem**

Most marketing advice conflates awareness and conversion, but they're different problems.

Awareness means people know your race exists. Conversion means they actually register.

A first-year event has a primary awareness problem — nobody knows it's happening. A returning event that's had a good prior year has a conversion problem — people know it exists, but they haven't committed.

Your marketing strategy should be different for each:

Building awareness (year one): - Get the race listed everywhere runners look (race calendars, local running club sites, UltraSignup, RunSignup's calendar) - Go where runners already are (running club night runs, local races, running stores) - Leverage your networks (ask every person who knows about the race to share it once)

Driving conversion (any year): - Create urgency (registration price increases, limited spots, countdown to early bird deadline) - Reduce friction (a clean, fast registration page with no hidden complexity) - Provide social proof (runner testimonials, prior year photos, charity impact numbers) - Maintain presence (consistent communication that keeps the race top of mind)

Know which problem you're solving before you spend money.

## **Social Media: What's Actually Working in 2025**

The social media landscape has reorganized since 2020. Here's the honest state of play:

Meta (Facebook + Instagram)

Facebook is still your most effective platform for runners over 35. Business page, active posting, and paid ads all remain relevant. The organic reach has declined — you're not reaching all your followers with every post — but it's still where most of your field lives. Don't abandon it.

Instagram is essential for visual content. Short Reels (under 60 seconds) get dramatically more reach than static photos. A 30-second

drone flyover of your course will outperform a race registration graphic by a factor of 5 to 10. If your event has any visual appeal at all — and most do — build a library of short-form video content.

What works on Meta right now: - Short video (Reels on Instagram, video posts on Facebook) showing the actual experience: course terrain, crowd energy, finish line moments - Runner spotlights that tag real participants — they reshare to their networks and extend your organic reach for free - Behind-the-scenes content that shows the work happening (course marking, aid station setup, medal arrival day) - Targeted paid ads using Meta's interest-based targeting: running, Strava, Nike Run Club, trail running, specific race brands

Meta paid ads: Still the most cost-effective paid digital channel for most events. You can target by ZIP code radius, by running interests, by similar audience to your existing registrant list (lookalike audiences). A \$300–\$500 well-targeted campaign is a reasonable investment once you're past year one and have some registration data to work from.

## **Instagram Specifically**

Post Reels. Not stories, not carousels — Reels get pushed to non-followers. This is your organic reach tool. A 20-second clip of someone crossing your finish line with good music behind it will reach people who've never heard of your race. That's the point.

Hashtag strategy: use location + running + event-type hashtags consistently. #[YourCity]Running, #TrailRunning, #UltraMarathon, #HalfMarathon — pick the 5 to 8 that fit your event and use them on every post.

## **TikTok**

TikTok has become a real discovery platform for running events. It skews younger, but the running community on TikTok is active and

growing. Short-form videos of race footage, course previews, and training content reach new audiences that aren't on Facebook.

The TikTok algorithm is less dependent on follower counts than other platforms — a single video from a zero-follower account can reach 50,000 people if the content hooks viewers in the first 2 seconds. That's a fundamentally different dynamic than Facebook or Instagram.

What works on TikTok: - Quick race footage with high energy - “Come to [race name] with me” style personal vlogs - Training tips specific to your race's demands - Time-lapses of course setup or aid station prep

Don't try to be something you're not on TikTok. A 55-year-old race director doing trendy dances is not the play. Direct, authentic content about your race and the experience it delivers is.

## YouTube

YouTube is a long-form platform but it also supports Shorts (vertical, under 60 seconds). More importantly, YouTube is the second-largest search engine in the world. A well-titled video — “Destin Beach Ultra 50K 2024 Race Video” — will be found by runners searching for exactly that race for years.

Invest in a race recap video. Even a basic 3–5 minute highlight reel from race day, properly titled and described, becomes permanent marketing content. Runners watch these before registering. Families watch them before their runner recommends the event. A single video produced once in year two will drive registrations for years.

## **What's NOT Working Anymore**

Print advertising. Running club newsletters, local newspaper ads, magazine placements — the response rates have declined to near zero for most events. The money is better spent on social media ads where you can actually measure results.

Flyers on telephone poles. I'll be honest: I don't know if these ever worked well. They definitely don't now.

Broad blast emails to purchased lists. Buying an email list of runners in your area and blasting them with race announcements gets spam-filtered and generates hostility, not registrations. Build your own list from people who've opted in.

Twitter/X. Unless you're specifically targeting competitive runners who want real-time results and running news, X has declined significantly as a race marketing channel. Most running community engagement has migrated to Instagram, Facebook groups, and Strava.

## **AI-Assisted Content Creation**

This is the section that wasn't in any race directing book five years ago.

AI tools — ChatGPT, Claude, Canva AI, and others — have changed the content creation workload for small race operations. A race director who used to spend two hours writing a registration announcement email can now draft it in 10 minutes and spend the remaining time improving the result.

What AI is genuinely useful for: - Email drafts: Give ChatGPT your race name, date, key details, and tone, and ask for a registration announcement email. You'll get a solid first draft that you edit for accuracy and voice. - Social media captions: Instead of staring at a course photo trying to write copy, describe the photo to an AI tool and

ask for five caption options. Pick the one closest to right and refine it. - FAQ page copy: Feed the AI your event details and a list of common questions, and ask it to write the FAQ page. Save yourself an hour of writing. - Sponsorship outreach emails: AI can draft the first contact email to a potential sponsor. You customize the specific business details and local context; the structure and persuasion are already there. - Press releases: A standard race press release structure is easily generated by AI with your specific inputs.

What to watch for: AI doesn't know what's true about your race. It will confidently write things that are plausible but wrong if you're not specific in your prompt. Review every AI output for factual accuracy before it goes out. You're editing, not rubber-stamping.

See the AI Addendum at the end of this book for specific prompts you can use immediately.

## **Strava and Running App Integration**

Strava is where serious runners live. If your race has a course on Strava, create a Strava segment on at least your final approach to the finish line or a key landmark section. Runners who complete the segment automatically see it in their Strava feed — free, passive marketing every time someone trains on your course.

Tactics: - Create Strava segments on your course and name them with your race name (e.g., “Destin Beach Ultra”) - Post your race on the Strava Events feature - Engage with your event's hashtag on Strava if you use one - Encourage post-race activity uploads with your race's hashtag

This is free and it compounds over time. The runner who trains on your course segment in February and sees your race name every time they check their Strava results is thinking about your race whether they realize it or not.

## **Ambassador and Influencer Programs**

You don't need a celebrity ambassador for this to work. You need 10 to 20 credible runners in your target community who will authentically share your race with their networks.

Structure a simple ambassador program: - Recruit committed runners who have already run your event (or who you know in the running community) - Give them a discount code to share with their network (tracking which codes convert tells you who your top ambassadors are) - Give them a complimentary or discounted entry in exchange for a commitment to post about the race a minimum number of times - Provide them with assets: a course preview photo or short video they can share, a unique referral link

The key word is authentic. An ambassador who genuinely loves your race and talks about it naturally is worth 10 sponsored posts from someone who just got a free bib. Find the runners who are already doing this voluntarily and formalize the relationship.

## **Short-Form Video: Your Single Highest-ROI Content**

If you had to pick one marketing investment in 2025 and beyond, it's short-form video content.

Here's the content that actually moves the needle for running events:

Content Type	Platform	Why It Works
30-sec course flyover (drone)	Instagram Reels, TikTok	Visually compelling, stops the scroll, shareable
Finish line celebration clips	Instagram, Facebook, TikTok	Emotional, runners tag themselves, organic shares
Aid station timelapse	Instagram Reels	Shows production value, builds anticipation
"Race week prep" vlog	TikTok, YouTube Shorts	Personal, builds connection to the director
Prior year race recap (3–5 min)	YouTube, Facebook	Research tool; watched before registration decisions
Runner interviews post-finish	Instagram, Facebook	Social proof; authentic testimonials

You don't need a film crew. A modern smartphone on a simple stabilizer gimbal produces content that is more than adequate for social media. The content quality that matters on social media in 2025 is authenticity, not production value. A shaky, poorly lit clip of a race director talking about their course does better than a polished promotional video that feels like a TV commercial.

## SEO for Race Websites

Most race websites are built by race directors who know races, not by people who know SEO. That's fine — but a few basic improvements can put your site at the top of search results for the specific terms runners type when looking for a race like yours.

The basics that matter:

Page title: Your site's <title> tag should include the race name, year, city, and distance. "Destin Beach Ultra Runs 2026 — 50K and 25K Trail Race, Destin Florida" is far better than "Home — Destin Beach Ultra."

Location keywords in content: Use your city, county, and state naturally in your race descriptions. This is what appears in local search results.

FAQ pages are SEO gold: When someone searches “what to eat before a trail race in the Florida Panhandle,” a detailed FAQ on your site can capture that searcher. Write useful content.

Backlinks: Get listed on RunSignup’s calendar, UltraSignup, MarathonGuide, your state running association, and local news articles about the race. Each link to your site improves your search visibility.

Speed: Google deprioritizes slow sites. Compress your images. Don’t load 8 MB photos on your homepage.

You don’t need an SEO agency. You need to write clear, specific content about your race that uses the words your potential runners are searching for.

## **Race Calendars: Don’t Skip This**

One of the most basic and most commonly overlooked marketing activities: listing your race on every relevant race calendar.

RunSignup’s race discovery calendar

MarathonGuide.com

UltraSignup (for trail and ultra events)

Your state running association’s calendar

Local running club event calendars

The events page of every relevant Facebook group in your area

This costs nothing but time, and it’s where runners go when they’re actively looking for a race. I forgot to list a 10K on a key calendar once and didn’t figure out why early registration was slow until a

runner emailed me asking why they couldn't find the race. Don't make this mistake.

## **The Offline Tactics That Still Work**

The in-person tactics that put your race in front of runners who are already running remain among the most effective.

Running club night runs. Most cities and towns have at least one running club with a weekly group run. Show up at the run. Bring some swag from your sponsors. Ask to say a few words at the start or finish. Leave postcards or flyers. The people on that run are exactly your target audience.

Local races. Ask the race director of a similar but non-competing event if you can distribute postcards at their race. Most will agree if you're not a direct competitor.

Running stores. Visit in person. Introduce yourself to the owner or manager. Bring a stack of postcards. Running stores want to be community hubs; helping a local race is consistent with that.

## **Press Releases and Human Interest Stories**

Running events aren't inherently newsworthy to a local journalist. Another 5K? Not a story.

But a high school student who lost 80 pounds training for your race? That's a story. A local veteran completing their first marathon for a SEAL family charity? That's a story.

Find the humans inside your event and pitch those stories. A brief email to a local reporter with a personal angle will get more traction than a generic race announcement. The press release is the follow-up; the personal story is the hook.

## The 12-Week Marketing Countdown

Weeks Out	Key Actions
12 weeks	Confirm all race calendar listings; launch targeted social ads
10 weeks	Begin Reels/short video content campaign; email: training tips
8 weeks	Mid-point price increase; email: charity spotlight with specific story
6 weeks	Countdown content; ambassador check-in; email: logistics preview
4 weeks	Press release; running stores and clubs; race week details
3 weeks	Email: final registration call-out; social: "X days, X spots left"
2 weeks	Race week logistics email; final volunteer push if needed
Race week	Daily social posts building energy; email: weather + final logistics
Race day	Live social updates; share results link before start gun fires
Post-race	Results announcement; photo gallery; survey link; thank-you post

### When Registration Is Slower Than Expected

Every race director has a period of slow registration. It's part of the cycle.

Do: - Double-check all race calendar listings (the most common culprit) - Increase short-form video posting frequency - Send an email to your list with a specific call to action and a deadline - Ask registered runners to recruit one friend (referral code if budget allows) - Run a targeted Meta ad

Don't: - Panic and lower your price dramatically (signals desperation; devalues the event) - Go quiet on social media (exactly backwards) - Make major event changes based on short-term registration data

The late-registrant surge is real. Almost every race experiences a significant spike in the final three weeks. Trust your preparation, keep communicating, and resist the urge to make rash decisions based on the middle lull.

Consistency is the key. A race that posts once in October and then goes dark until February has given potential runners no reason to stay engaged. Show them you're working, you're organized, and you're excited about what's coming. That energy is contagious — and it registers.

## Chapter 11: Sponsors — Finding Partners, Not ATMs

A sponsor is not a donor. This is the most important thing I can tell you about sponsorship, and the distinction that most new race directors miss.

A donor gives money because they believe in your cause and want nothing material in return. A sponsor gives money because they see a business return on that investment — brand exposure, audience access, community goodwill, or product sampling opportunities with your runners. When you approach a sponsor as though you're asking for charity, you'll get rejected most of the time. When you approach them as a business partner and explain what value they receive, you'll get accepted much more often.

The second most important thing: sponsors multiply what you can offer runners. A race with strong sponsors can afford better swag, better aid station food, better post-race entertainment, and better experiences across the board. The sponsor relationship is not separate from the runner experience — it directly funds it.

### Why Sponsors Say Yes

Before you ask anyone for a sponsorship, understand why they'd say yes.

Audience access. Your race gives sponsors direct access to a specific audience — runners in your region, military community members, outdoor enthusiasts, parents, whichever demographic your event

attracts. If a sponsor sells products or services to that demographic, your race is a cost-effective channel.

**Brand alignment.** A craft brewery sponsoring a trail race aligns with a specific lifestyle identity. A physical therapy clinic sponsoring a marathon puts their brand in front of people who are actively running, potentially getting injured, and looking for recovery help. A sports nutrition brand wants to be at the tables where runners refuel. Good sponsors know their brand and are looking for events that match it.

**Community goodwill.** For local businesses, sponsoring a local event is a visible way to invest in the community. This is especially powerful when the event benefits a charity that the community cares about. Being associated with a cause that people admire reflects positively on the sponsor.

**Economic return.** For businesses in your event's primary market, your runners may represent meaningful economic activity. Our post-race data for the Destin Marathon showed \$637,804 in local economic impact from 1,534 registrations — an average of over \$400 per runner. I used that data in sponsor pitches. When a local hotel, restaurant group, or tourism-related business hears that number, their calculation changes.

## **Building Your Sponsorship Package**

A sponsorship package is a document that clearly describes what a sponsor receives at each investment level. It should be professional, visually clean, and focused on the value delivered — not on how much you need the money.

**Tiered structure:** Most running events use a three-to-four tier structure. Here's a framework:

Tier	Investment Range	What They Get
Bronze / Community	\$500–\$1,500	Logo on website, social media mention, logo on event signage
Silver / Partner	\$1,500–\$5,000	Above + banner at start/finish, social posts, logo on bib
Gold / Presenting	\$5,000–\$15,000	Above + logo on shirts, expo booth or branded activation, post-race sponsor report
Title Sponsor	\$15,000+	Naming rights (e.g., "The [Sponsor] Destin Marathon"), logo front and center on all materials, exclusive category

Adjust the tiers and benefits for your event size. A 150-person trail race has different currency than a 1,500-person road marathon. But the principle is the same: clearly define what each tier delivers and price it proportionally to the value.

Category exclusivity: Consider offering sponsors exclusivity within their product category (e.g., only one sports drink sponsor, only one running shoe brand, only one medical clinic). This makes the sponsorship more valuable and removes a competitive concern.

## The Pitch

The sponsorship pitch is a conversation, not a presentation. Know your event's value before you walk in.

What to bring: - Your sponsorship package - Event demographics (how many runners, where they're from, age/gender breakdown if available) - Economic impact data if available - Prior year photos that show the event looking well-organized and well-attended - A specific proposed tier and why it fits their business

Lead with value, not need. “We’d love to have [Company] as our presenting sponsor because your products are used by exactly the audience we’re bringing together” lands differently than “We’re looking for sponsors to help cover our costs.” One is a business conversation; the other is a charity appeal.

**Timing:** Pitch sponsors six months before the race, not six weeks. Sponsors have marketing budgets that are often planned months in advance. If you approach a company in March for an April race, their marketing budget is probably already committed. Approach them in October for an April race, and you catch them while budgets are being set.

Use your charity connection as a closing tool. If your race benefits a credible charity, mention it after you’ve established the business case. Sponsors like being associated with causes their customers care about. It’s an additional positive reason to say yes — but it shouldn’t be your lead argument.

## **Delivering What You Promised**

The only thing worse than a poorly run race is a poorly fulfilled sponsorship agreement.

If you promised a logo on the finisher medals and it’s not there, that sponsor is not renewing. If you promised a post-race email blast with their offer and you forgot to send it, that sponsor is not renewing. If you promised a banner placement and then put it in a location with no foot traffic, that sponsor will tell you it wasn’t worth it.

Every sponsor deliverable should be documented in the contract with specific terms: what format the logo needs to be received in, when the deadline is, exactly where the banner will be placed, when the post-race report will be sent.

After the race, send a comprehensive sponsor report that includes: - Total registration count and demographics - Photos showing every sponsor activation point (logo placement, banner, expo booth) - Social media reach data (impressions, engagement on sponsored posts) - Charity fundraising total - Economic impact data if available

This report makes renewal easy. The sponsor's marketing manager can show it to their leadership and demonstrate that the investment was worthwhile. Make it easy for them to say yes again next year.

## **Local Economic Impact as a Sales Tool**

For larger events or destination races, the economic impact of your event is one of the most powerful sponsorship arguments you have.

For the Destin Marathon, we calculated economic impact by requiring all participants to fill out a brief survey at bib pickup. We asked: How many nights are you staying in the area? How many people are in your group? What are your daily spending estimates?

The math:  $1,316 \text{ room nights} \times \$126.51/\text{night} + 5,412 \text{ visitor days} \times \$56/\text{day} + \$76,000 \text{ in race organization spending} + \text{additional spending by local runners} = \$637,804 \text{ in documented local economic impact from a single race.}$

That number is compelling to local hotels, restaurants, tourism boards, and any business that benefits from visitor spending. It turns your sponsorship pitch from “support our race” into “here's how much revenue our event brings to businesses like yours.”

If you're running a destination race or one that draws significant out-of-market attendance, build this data collection into your packet pickup process. One short survey per bib is easy to execute and produces information that pays dividends in sponsor conversations for years.

## **Title Sponsorship and Naming Rights**

A title sponsor is a significant relationship. They're buying a level of brand integration that makes them synonymous with the event in many runners' minds.

For the Kill Cliff Destin Marathon, Kill Cliff Founder Todd Ehrlich — a former Navy SEAL — was personally aligned with our charity (the Navy SEAL Foundation) and our runner demographic. The partnership worked because the brand fit was genuine. Kill Cliff was already in the recovery drink space, already aligned with the military community, and already a product our runners knew. The naming wasn't just a logo placement — it made sense.

Title sponsor negotiations require more time than lower-tier sponsors. The terms of what “title sponsor” means — what naming rights apply to, what happens if the race is cancelled, what the exclusivity conditions are — need to be in a formal contract.

What to include in a title sponsor contract: - Duration (single year vs. multi-year) - Specific naming rights (what gets the sponsor's name) - Brand usage rights (can the sponsor use the race's name and logo in their own marketing?) - Deliverables and deadlines - Cancellation provisions (what happens to the money if the race is cancelled?) - Renewal terms

## **When Sponsorships Don't Pan Out**

In the early months of planning the Destin Marathon, I was projecting sponsorship income that hadn't materialized yet. It's a trap I've fallen into and that I now specifically warn against.

Sponsorship income should be the last line item you fill in on your budget — not the first. If you're relying on projected sponsorships to

make your budget work, and those sponsorships don't come through at the level you hoped, your entire financial plan is wrong.

The approach I recommend: build a budget that breaks even on registration alone. Any sponsorship income is upside — it funds better swag, a better post-race experience, a larger charity donation. But it's not the load-bearing wall of your financial plan.

When you treat sponsorships as enhancement rather than survival, your sponsor conversations become less desperate, your negotiating position is stronger, and you're not panicking in month two when the brewery hasn't signed the contract yet.

## **Sponsor Relationship Through the Year**

A sponsorship is not a one-time transaction. It's a relationship.

The sponsors who renew year after year are the ones who feel like partners in the event, not just paying customers. That means:

Mentioning them in your race communications throughout the planning process, not just on race day

Posting about their products or services in your social channels in the months before the race

Giving them a heads-up on any significant event news before you announce it publicly

Thanking them specifically and publicly after the race, with photos

The sponsor who feels like they're on the inside of your event — who gets periodic updates, who feels like their investment is working for them throughout the year — is the sponsor who writes the check for year two without you having to ask twice.

Overdeliver. Always. It's the most reliable retention strategy in sponsorship.



## **Chapter 12: Fundraising & Charity Integration — Turning Your Race Into a Movement**

A race that raises money for a cause is a fundamentally different kind of event.

Not just operationally — though it is more complex to execute — but experientially. When runners know their registration fee and their personal fundraising efforts are going to fund a college education for a fallen warrior's child, or feed a family in their community, or fund cancer research for a disease that's touched their family — they run differently. They train differently. They tell different people about the race. They feel something when they cross the finish line that has nothing to do with their pace.

One year Destin Beach Ultra Runs raised more than \$70,000 for the Special Operations Warrior Foundation with 203 runners. A year earlier, 150 runners raised \$60,000 for the same charity. These numbers are extraordinary for events of that size — the national average per-runner fundraising at charity events is a fraction of that — and they didn't happen by accident. They happened because we built a fundraising culture into the event deliberately, year by year, and treated it as seriously as we treated course marking or timing accuracy.

This chapter is the playbook for that.

## Choosing the Right Charity

The charity you choose becomes co-equal with your race in the minds of your most committed participants. Choose it with the same care you chose your course.

Three criteria that must all be met:

- **High Charity Navigator rating.** Charity Navigator is an independent charity evaluator that assesses financial health, accountability, and transparency. Most runners are aware of charity overhead as an issue — a charity that spends 40 cents of every donated dollar on administrative costs is a much harder sell than one that spends 5 cents. Look for charities with an 80+ rating on Charity Navigator. The charities I've worked with — the Special Operations Warrior Foundation (SOWF) and the Navy SEAL Foundation — both hold 4-star (highest) ratings on Charity Navigator. The SOWF has earned 4 stars for more than 16 consecutive years as of this writing, which is an extraordinary track record. That rating makes every ask easier, because the donor can verify it themselves directly at [charitynavigator.org](http://charitynavigator.org).
- **Alignment with your audience.** The more emotionally connected your runners are to the charity's mission, the more they will fundraise. A race in an area with a large military population attached to a military family charity works. A race with a demographic that skews female attached to a women's health cause works. A race for families with a children's organization works. The connection should feel natural, not grafted on.
- **Personal passion from the race director.** You're going to spend a year talking about this charity to runners, sponsors, and the press. If you're not genuinely passionate about the mission, it will show. And passion is contagious — your runners will feel your enthusiasm and it will fuel theirs.

## **Setting Up Fundraising in Your Registration Platform**

Most modern registration platforms have integrated fundraising tools. Use them.

The goal is to make setting up a personal fundraising page as frictionless as possible, ideally within the registration flow itself. The closer you can get to automatic page creation at registration, the higher your activation rate will be.

Key setup decisions:

Enable both fundraising AND donations. These are different things. A fundraising page is for runners who want to solicit contributions from friends and family. A direct donation option is for non-runners who hear about the event and want to contribute without registering. Both represent real money. Both need to be enabled.

Set a default fundraising goal. I use \$100/runner as the starting target. It's achievable by almost everyone — a few emails or social posts to people who know you will cover it — and getting runners over the psychological hurdle of setting up a page is the hardest step. A low initial goal helps. You can always set a higher aspirational goal for the overall event.

Create award levels that motivate. Award levels are fundraising benchmarks tied to recognition or tangible rewards. Here's an example structure:

Level	Goal	Reward
Supporter	\$100	Name in race program
Champion	\$500	Special recognition at briefing + race shirt
Warrior	\$1,000	Custom item + sponsor discount + recognition at awards
Top Fundraiser	Most raised	Custom Bib #1 + same treatment as race winners

The lower levels need to be genuinely easy to reach. That first achievement — getting your fundraising page acknowledged publicly — breaks the inertia and makes higher goals feel possible. Too many levels or too-high thresholds overwhelm runners and produce lower overall engagement.

### The 10/90 Rule

In every race that fundraises, roughly 10% of your runners will raise 90% of your donations.

These top fundraisers are extraordinary. They email their networks persistently. They post updates. They call their donors personally. They are competitive about fundraising in a way that mirrors how they are about running.

Your job is to identify these people early, celebrate them publicly, and fan the flames of their competitive instincts.

How to do it:

Post the fundraising leaderboard on social media regularly. Not occasionally — regularly. Every week or two in the final months before the race, show the top five or ten fundraisers with their totals. This creates visibility, social proof, and competitive drive among the runners who are already engaged.

Make the top fundraiser moment at the event special. At the Destin Beach Ultras, the top fundraiser received custom Bib #1 — awarded at the pre-race briefing, in front of all the other runners, with a formal announcement. They received the same award as the race winners at the awards ceremony. The point was explicit: winning this race isn't only about how fast you run. That public recognition motivated fundraisers year after year. Runners who didn't fundraise in year one frequently came back in year two with a fundraising page — because they'd watched that moment and wanted it for themselves.

Reach out to your top performers personally. A direct message or email from the race director to someone who just raised \$800 says: we see you, and what you're doing matters.

## **The Storytelling Engine**

Fundraising runs on stories.

Statistics are context. Stories are motivation. The runner who opens an email and reads about a specific family — a child whose parent died in service, now in college because of donations to the SOWF — is a different runner than the one who read a general description of the charity's mission. The story creates a face. The face creates an emotional connection. The connection motivates action.

How to generate and distribute stories:

Ask your charity partner for permission to share specific beneficiary stories, always being careful to respect privacy.

Reach out to runners who have personal connections to the cause and ask if they'd like to share their story.

Post a new story on social media every few weeks in the pre-race period.

Feature one story prominently in each email to your mailing list.

Share the story at the pre-race briefing. The person standing at the microphone in front of 200 runners, telling them about a specific family whose children are in college because of this race's fundraising efforts — that is one of the most powerful moments in any charity race.

Here's an example of a story that drove real action. In January 2017, Navy SEAL Ryan Owens was killed during a special operations raid in Yemen. His three children became part of the SOWF's college funding commitment — a commitment the Foundation had made to him before he left on that mission. I sent an email to our registered runners that week, sharing Ryan's story, explaining the SOWF's commitment, and asking runners to set up or contribute to their fundraising pages.

The email was specific. It named a person. It explained the connection between our race and what had happened. It asked for a concrete action. The response was measurable.

That email was not a marketing message. It was a human story about a human cost, and the request that came with it was proportional to the weight of that story. Runners who read it understood what their fundraising pages were actually for.

### Bringing Beneficiaries to the Race

This is the most powerful thing I have ever done in fundraising, and I recommend it to every race director whose charity works with individual families.

Invite the families who have directly benefited from your charity's work to attend the race.

Brief your runners before the race, through your emails and your briefing, about who these families are and what they've been through. By race morning, most of your runners know the stories.

Then, as runners finish, have these families in the finish area to personally thank them.

The runners are already emotional — they've just completed a hard effort, their adrenaline is still high, their walls are down. They're expecting a medal and maybe a banana. They are not expecting to be personally thanked by a widow whose child is in college because of their fundraising page.

I've watched runners stop dead at the finish line, unable to speak. I've watched people who finished break down completely when a family member shook their hand and said thank you.

Those runners will fundraise forever. They have felt the direct connection between their effort and a life changed. No marketing email produces that.

## **Per-Mile Pledges**

One of the most effective fundraising structures for running events is the per-mile pledge: donors commit a specific dollar amount for every mile the runner completes.

For a 50-mile ultra, a \$2/mile pledge yields \$100. For a marathon, \$1/mile yields \$26.20. Both are achievable asks for most runners' networks, and the connection between the runner's effort and the donation amount is explicit and meaningful.

To implement per-mile pledges: most fundraising platforms support this structure, or you can manage it manually through a spreadsheet. At minimum, market the concept to your runners and let them handle the mechanics themselves.

The Destin Beach Ultra events used per-mile pledges as one of several fundraising tools. Combined with our other approach — leaderboard visibility, bib #1 recognition, beneficiary presence at the race — the

per-mile structure added meaningful additional fundraising from runners who were already engaged.

## **Tracking and Celebrating Milestones**

Fundraising momentum feeds on public recognition of progress.

Post milestones on social media: when you cross \$10,000, when you cross \$25,000, when you reach halfway to your goal. These posts serve two purposes: they inform donors that their money is making a real impact, and they signal to uncommitted fundraisers that the movement has momentum worth joining.

At the pre-race briefing, announce the current total and celebrate it. In the final stretch before the race, if you can see your way to a round number, make a push: “We’re \$2,400 from \$70,000 — let’s get there before race day.” Runners will respond.

The goal is to make the fundraising feel like a community effort, not a transaction. When runners feel like they’re part of something that’s building toward a meaningful number, they work harder to get there. And when the total is announced at the awards ceremony, the cheering is as loud as it was for the race winners.

That’s what a fundraising culture looks like when it’s built intentionally. It’s not an add-on to your race. It is part of your race.

# Chapter 13: Race Day Operations — The Choreography

Race day is the performance. Everything before it was rehearsal.

By the time race morning arrives, the preparation is done. The permits are filed, the course is marked, the aid stations are stocked, and the volunteers have been briefed. Your job on race day is to manage execution — to be the calm center of a complex, moving operation while a few hundred to a few thousand people depend on everything going right.

I've had race days that felt almost effortless. And I've had race days that revealed every gap in my preparation. Here's what I've learned about keeping race day in the first category.

## The 48-Hour Countdown

What happens in the 48 hours before the race determines a significant portion of what happens on race day itself.

### 48 Hours Before

Packet pickup setup: If you're doing two-day packet pickup (recommended for events over 200 runners), get the pickup location set up and staffed. Bibs should be sorted by last name or bib number before the pickup opens. Shirts should be sorted by size and gender. Every volunteer at packet pickup should know the protocol: check ID, find registration in the system, hand over the correct bib and shirt, confirm waiver was accepted (don't hand a bib to someone without a waiver), answer basic questions.

Final course marking sweep: Walk or drive the course. Confirm every mark is in place. Add any you find missing. Check every decision point.

Vendor confirmations: Call or text every vendor to confirm their arrival time and location: portable toilets, timing company, EMS, tent company, music/DJ if applicable. Get confirmation in writing (a text will do).

Weather check: Look at every weather app you have access to. Start building your weather contingency plan if anything significant is in the forecast. Brief key staff on the weather outlook and the protocol if conditions deteriorate.

Equipment inventory: Confirm all your race-day equipment is on hand: radios (charged), megaphone, PA system, timing equipment, first aid kits, backup bibs for late registrants, blank bib numbers for emergencies, printed timing backup if your live system fails.

## **Race Eve (Night Before)**

Get sleep. This sounds obvious until you realize you're lying awake at midnight running through every possible problem. Keep a notepad by your bed. Write down anything that's nagging at you so your brain can let it go. Then sleep.

The director who shows up at 4 AM on two hours of sleep makes worse decisions than the one who showed up with seven. Your team needs you sharp. The race needs you present, not frazzled.

## **Packet Pickup**

Packet pickup is many runners' first in-person experience of your race. It sets the tone.

Before pickup opens: - Tables organized with bibs sorted by name or number - Shirts sorted by gender and size, clearly labeled - Separate table for race-day registrations - Volunteers stationed and briefed - Any additional items (course maps, safety pins, sponsor bags) staged for distribution

During pickup: - Flow management: if you have more than 100 runners, stage the line. Sorting bibs alphabetically and having separate check-in lines for A–M and N–Z cuts wait times significantly. - Friendly, energetic volunteers: the person handing a bib to a first-time half marathoner who's nervous about tomorrow is making an impression. Brief your packet pickup volunteers to smile, to congratulate people, to make everyone feel welcome. - Handle race-day registration separately: have a dedicated station for same-day sign-ups so they don't slow down the bib pickup flow for pre-registered runners.

What to hand out at packet pickup: - Race bib (with safety pins, or pre-pinned) - Shirt (correct size — double-check) - Course map if paper is being distributed - Parking information - Sponsor bag or coupon items

At a brewery packet pickup for one of our events, we drew enough runners through the venue that the brewery sold a notable amount of beer in the hours before pickup closed. That's a sponsor win. Think about locations that serve multiple purposes.

## **Setting Up the Start/Finish Area**

Start at least 90 minutes before the start time. Two hours for larger events.

Start line setup: - Start line banner or inflatable arch - Wave or corral markers (signs on stakes, cones, ropes) - PA system or megaphone tested and operational - Timing mats or arch in position and confirmed

with timing company - Clock visible from start area - Any pre-race entertainment or music active

Finish line setup: - Finish line banner - Timing mat or arch in position - Finisher chute roped off with clear flow: finish → medal → water → food - Medal and water staging adequate for the field size - Medical tent visible and positioned just beyond the chute - Photo spot (many runners want a finish line photo — create a spot for it)

## **Wave Starts**

For events over 500 runners on a road course, wave starts improve the experience for everyone.

Why wave starts work: They reduce congestion at the start line, prevent faster runners from being slowed by slower runners in the first mile, and spread runners along the course so aid stations are serving a flow rather than a flood.

How to organize waves: - Seed based on expected finish time (faster runners in early waves) - Allow self-seeding within a range (ask runners to estimate their pace at registration and use those estimates to build waves) - Separate waves by 5–10 minutes for road events; 3–5 minutes for trail events where course width is less of an issue - Announce wave groupings clearly at packet pickup and in your pre-race briefing

The wave start moment: Runners in wave one are at the line with excitement at maximum. Use it. A brief, energetic pre-race address — 90 seconds, not a five-minute speech — to acknowledge why you're all here, what the race is for, thank the volunteers, and then send them off. Every subsequent wave gets the same energy.

For the Destin Marathon, wave starts were essential because our course crossed a bridge that created a bottleneck if too many runners hit it simultaneously. The wave structure solved the logistics problem

and also created a better experience for runners who weren't fighting for position in the first 200 meters.

## **Starting On Time**

Start on time. This is non-negotiable.

Runners have set alarms for 4 or 5 AM. They've eaten at the right time, used the portable toilets on your schedule, and warmed up. They're ready. When the start time comes and goes because the race director isn't organized, that frustration is real and legitimate.

Build a buffer into your setup timeline so that you're ready five minutes early. Brief your start line crew that the countdown begins at a specific minute and that there are no extensions for administrative reasons. Weather delays are different — those are safety calls. But administrative delays (late deliveries, equipment setup, the race director forgot something) are not acceptable reasons to keep runners standing at the line in the cold.

### **Managing the Race in Progress**

Once the gun fires, your job shifts from setup to monitoring.

**Communication:** Stay on the radio. Every station captain should check in at a defined interval. The aid station supply driver is circulating. Your volunteer coordinator is managing the team. You're the center of that communication network — not in the middle of course, not chatting at the finish line, but present and reachable.

**Course monitoring:** Have a trusted course monitor driving the route or covering key sections during the race. They're watching for: runners who look distressed, marks that have been disturbed, traffic or hazard issues, any equipment needs at aid stations.

Timing updates: Check in with your timing team at regular intervals. Are all timing points registering? Are results posting correctly online? Is the live timing working for families following at home?

Problems in progress:

Lost runner: Activate the protocol from Chapter 9. Don't wait to see if they show up in the next 20 minutes.

Medical incident: Your EMS is the primary responder. Your job is to ensure communication is clear (race command to EMS to finish line to you), to manage any course adjustments if the incident is in a critical location, and to document everything for the post-race incident report.

Aid station supply problem: The supply driver should have this covered before you know it's an issue. If a station radios for emergency resupply, the supply driver is already moving.

Weather deterioration: Have a pre-made decision tree. At what point do you halt the race? At what point do you shelter in place? How do you communicate a course change mid-race? These decisions need to be made before race morning — not during a crisis.

## The Back of the Pack

Every race director learns, eventually, how important the last finisher is.

Your fastest runners are already done when your slowest runners are approaching the final miles. Your aid stations are starting to pack up. Your volunteers are tired. The crowd at the finish line has thinned. And somewhere on course, a runner is pushing through the hardest miles they've run in months, maybe ever.

What the back of the pack needs from you: - Aid stations that are still stocked and still staffed - Volunteers who are still cheering — not packing up, not looking at their phones - A finish line that still feels like a finish line

Crossing with the last runner: One of the best traditions in running events is the race director (or a designated representative) meeting the last finisher on course and crossing the finish line with them. It communicates everything: you are not an inconvenience, you belong here, we waited for you because you matter.

In the Destin Beach Ultras, someone ran out to the final finisher every year. That person — who often started worried about the cutoff time, who pushed through when it would have been easier to quit — deserved a finish line experience that was as celebratory as the one we gave the first finisher.

Give it to them.

## **Finish Line Management**

The finish line is the most operationally complex point in any race. Many things converge here simultaneously.

Medal distribution: Assigned to specific volunteers who are trained to hand a medal to every single finisher. Not left on a table for self-service. A medal placed around a runner's neck by a smiling volunteer is a different experience than picking one up from a pile.

Finisher chute: A roped or barricaded corridor that takes runners from the timing mat to the medal area to the post-race food and water. The flow should be intuitive and one-directional. Runners who've just finished are not in the mental state to navigate a crowd — guide them.

Timing: Results should be visible and updating in near-real-time. If you have a live results platform, confirm it's working and share the link on social media before the first finisher crosses. Runners want to see their time immediately. Families following from home are waiting.

Post-race food and drink: Bananas, bagels, oranges, beer, or whatever you're providing — it should be available and restocked through the

entire finisher flow, not depleted before the back-of-pack runners cross.

Photography: If you have a race photographer, their primary position is at the finish line. Every finisher should have a photo. Share them on social media the same day if possible — it generates enormous engagement and positive feelings toward the event.

## **The End of Race Day**

The race is over when the last runner crosses, the course is clean, and your team is standing down.

What that requires: - Sweep runner confirms last runner is across and course is clear - All timing equipment retrieved - Course marking removed (this starts as soon as sections of the course are clear of runners and should be complete within a few hours of the last finisher) - All aid stations broken down and venues cleaned - Vendors confirmed for equipment pickup schedules - Incident log reviewed with key staff

Then: give your team a genuine, specific thank-you. Not a generic “good job everyone” — find specific people, look them in the eye, and tell them what they did that made a difference today. They were up before dawn. They stood in one spot for hours and cheered for strangers. They did it because they believe in your event.

Make sure they feel that.

## **Chapter 14: Timing & Results — The Data That Matters**

Runners care about their time. A lot.

I don't mean this dismissively — it's a deeply human thing. A runner who trained for six months for a half marathon and finished in 1:47:33 is going to remember that number. It validates the training, marks the progress, gives them something specific to chase in their next race. That number matters.

As a race director, your job is to ensure that number is accurate, delivered quickly, and easily accessible. Failing at any of those three things generates a specific, vocal kind of frustration from runners that is entirely justified.

Running a timing company for several years gave me a perspective on this that most race directors don't get. When you're the timer for dozens of different events, you see the same problems show up at the same types of races, year after year. You see which decisions protect results accuracy and which ones create chaos. This chapter is what I learned from that vantage point.

### **Chip Timing vs. Gun Timing**

Gun timing means everyone's time is measured from when the starting gun fires, regardless of when they individually crossed the start line. It's simple, inexpensive, and entirely acceptable for small events (under 100 runners) or events where competitive accuracy is not important (fun runs, charity 5Ks with large fields).

Chip timing means every runner's individual time is measured from when they cross the start timing mat to when they cross the finish timing mat. The chip (a small RFID tag embedded in the race bib or an ankle strap) triggers the timing mat when they cross it. For any event where runners are serious about their times or where age group results need to be accurate, chip timing is the minimum expectation.

If you're running an event where runners might qualify for Boston or where the results will be submitted to USATF, chip timing is required.

When gun timing is acceptable: - Fun runs with no competitive results  
- Charity events with large untimed fields - Very small events where the start is simultaneous for all participants

When chip timing is required: - Any event where runners expect official results - Any event with age group results and awards - Any marathon or half marathon - Any event where runners may use the time for future race registration (e.g., Boston qualifying)

## **How RFID Chip Timing Works**

RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) chip timing uses a timing mat or overhead antenna — a device that emits a radio frequency field. When a chip embedded in a bib or ankle strap crosses the field, the mat or antenna records the chip's unique ID and the exact time.

The system works like this:

1. At registration, each participant is assigned a bib number
2. At bib pickup, each bib has a chip affixed (or bibs are pre-chipped at printing)
3. Timing mats or antennas are placed at the start line, at intermediate split points (optional), and at the finish line
4. As runners cross each mat or under the arch, their chip ID and time are recorded

5. Software matches chip IDs to bib numbers, bib numbers to names and demographics, and produces results

What can go wrong: - A chip doesn't read at the start (common cause: forgotten bibs, bib folded, bib pinned in a way that blocks the chip) - A chip doesn't read at the finish (runner finished but no result appears) - A chip reads multiple times (runner runs over the mat area repeatedly) - A chip reads at the wrong location (timing mat at mile 13 of a marathon picks up chip from a runner who doubled back)

Every timing company has protocols for handling these scenarios. Before race day, ask your timing company: what's your process when a chip doesn't read? What's the backup and your backup to that backup? How will you handle chip protests after results are posted?

## **The Integration Imperative**

The most important technology decision you make in race operations — more important than which timing system you use — is whether your registration platform integrates with your timing system.

Here's why this matters so much:

When registration and timing are fully integrated, runner data flows seamlessly from registration into the timing system. Changes to registrations (same-day sign-ups, distance transfers, name corrections) appear in the timing system automatically. You can keep registration open until the race starts.

When registration and timing are NOT integrated, you have to export your registration data, clean it, format it for the timing software, and import it manually. This process takes time — usually several hours. Which means you close registration days before the race to give the timing company time to process the file.

Every registration dollar you lose by closing early because of an integration failure is real money that you didn't have to leave on the table.

Ask before you commit to a platform or timing company: How do your systems communicate? Is runner data updated in real-time? If I accept a race-day registration at 6 AM, will the timing system have their information before the 7 AM start?

## **Working With a Timing Company**

For most events, working with an established timing company is the right choice. They own the equipment, they've managed the failure modes, they have backup systems, and they know how to troubleshoot under pressure.

What to ask when hiring a timing company: - What timing system do you use? (Chip type, processor brand) - How many events have you timed of this size and distance? - What's your backup plan if a timing point fails? - Do you provide live results? What platform do you use? - How quickly will official results be posted after the last finisher? - Do you integrate with [your registration platform]? - What information do you need from us, and when? - What's your protocol if a runner disputes their result?

What to provide to your timing company: - Complete participant list (up to that point) at least 48 hours before the event (earlier if possible) - Course map showing the location of every timing point - Estimated start times by wave - Contact information for race-day communication

If you're using a timing company that's also providing registration services — which is how International Running Company operated — the integration is seamless because both systems live in the same platform. This is worth prioritizing when making your vendor selections.

## **Doing Timing Yourself**

For small events (under 50 runners) or events with modest budgets, some race directors manage their own timing. This is feasible but requires planning.

Options for DIY timing: - Stopwatch + manual clipboard (gun timing only; acceptable for small fun runs) - Barcode scanning at finish line with smartphone apps (Race Monitor, Webscorer) - App-based timing platforms with basic chip timing support

If you go this route, practice with the system before race day. Timing failures at a small event are recoverable; they're embarrassing but not catastrophic. Still, runners who paid an entry fee expect to get the time they ran.

## **Live Results: The Expectation Has Shifted**

Ten years ago, waiting until the day after the race for results to be posted was acceptable. Now it is not.

Runners post their finish selfies on Instagram within 10 minutes of crossing the line. They want to include their official time in that post. Their families following on a live tracking platform want to see the finish time appear. This is the current expectation at chip-timed events.

What "live results" means in practice: - Results appear on a web platform (RunSignup, ItsYourRace, Athlinks, Race Monitor, RaceJoy, etc.) within seconds to minutes of each runner finishing - The platform is accessible on mobile devices - Families can follow runner progress between split points if intermediate timing mats are present

Share the results link on social media before the race starts. Announce it again when the race begins. Make it easy for people to find. The

more your results are viewed in real time, the more positive social media engagement your event generates.

## **Results Accuracy and Protests**

Your results will sometimes be wrong. A chip won't read. A bib will get switched. Someone will finish and their name won't appear. An age group award will seem to have gone to the wrong person.

How to handle protests: - Have a designated person (often the timing company representative) who handles results questions post-race - Create a process: runner fills out a protest form with their bib number, claimed time, and the basis of the protest - Review the data: did the chip read? Does the time on the timing match what was expected? - For major discrepancies (runner didn't finish but results show them finished), check video or photos if available; for chip failures, the manual backup times and finish order records can resolve most issues

Be responsive. A runner who submits a protest and gets no response for a week is a runner who posts a negative review. A runner who submits a protest and gets a personal response within 48 hours — even if the answer isn't what they hoped — usually appreciates the professionalism.

## **Course Certification and Results Submission**

For events that use USATF-certified courses, results can be submitted to USATF's database and recognized as official for qualification purposes.

If you're running a marathon, certifying your course enables runners to use their times for: - Boston Marathon qualification - New York Marathon guaranteed entry - Any other major marathon with qualifying time standards

Course certification is covered in Chapter 6, but the connection to results is this: a certified course, accurate chip timing, and results submitted through proper channels are the three components of results that carry weight in the broader running community. Runners who run qualifying times at your event and want to use them need all three.

If your event is not positioned as a qualifying race, this is less important. But if you're running a marathon with competitive runners in the field, the expectation of certified and accurate results is real.

## **Post-Race Results Communication**

After the race, results communication is part of your marketing.

Timeline: - Live results: available during the race (if chip timing with live platform) - Preliminary results: within 1–2 hours of last finisher - Official results: same day, after any known protest reviews - Age group results and awards: at the awards ceremony (typically 30–60 minutes post-race for most events)

How to share: - Post the results link on social media immediately when results are live - Email the link to all registered participants post-race - Congratulate specific top performers on social media (overall male and female winners, age group records, notable achievements)

What runners want from results: - Their own time and pace - Their overall placement - Their age group placement - Split times if intermediate timing was available

The faster and more clearly you deliver this, the more your runners will share it — and the more organic marketing you'll get in the days following the race.

## **Timing Technology and Vendors Worth Knowing**

The timing industry has several established players producing equipment used at events ranging from local 5Ks to world championship races. Here's context on two of the most common approaches.

### **Overhead Timing System**

Innovative Timing Systems, the company we used for our timing business, is one of the better-known timing equipment manufacturers and system integrators in the U.S. running event space. Their flagship system — the Jaguar — is a Gen 2.0 RFID system operating at ultra-high frequencies. More than 500 timing operators use the Jaguar system to time running, cycling, triathlon, paddleboard, and motorcycle events.

ITS is also notable for producing overhead antenna systems designed to read chips without floor mats — which brings us to a distinction that more race directors should understand.

### **Mat-Based vs. Overhead RFID Timing: What You Need to Know**

Most race directors understand that chip timing involves a mat on the ground that reads the chip in the runner's bib as they cross it. That's the traditional setup and it works well. But overhead RFID timing is an alternative approach that's gaining ground at larger events, and it's worth understanding the difference before you choose a timing vendor.

## **How Mat-Based Timing Works**

A timing mat is a flat antenna pad placed on the race surface — the road, the trail, the track. It generates a radio frequency field across the mat surface. When a chip in a runner's bib (or ankle strap) crosses the mat, the field reads the chip and records the ID and timestamp.

Why it works well: - Proven, reliable technology with decades of deployment - Works in almost any weather condition - Straightforward setup and calibration - Compatible with essentially all RFID bib chips.

The limitations: - The mat must be flat on the surface — uneven terrain (cobblestones, gravel, trail roots) or wet weather can reduce read reliability - Runners stacked tight in large finisher surges can sometimes cause missed reads if chips pass too close together or a runner carries their chip too far off the mat plane - Mats can be a trip hazard if not properly secured and marked - Mats require a direct power connection or battery pack and physical placement on the race surface – Mats throw up a 'ball' of energy and are not precise enough to tell who won a close finish.

## **How Overhead RFID Timing Works**

Overhead timing uses antenna arrays mounted above the race course — on a gantry, arch, or other structure over the finish line or timing point — rather than mats on the ground. Runners pass under the antennas, which see the chips coming and read the chips from above.

Why overhead RFID matters: - No mat on the ground means no trip hazard at the finish line - Better suited for very large, dense finish surges — overhead arrays can read multiple chips simultaneously more reliably than a mat when runners are shoulder-to-shoulder - Works well on uneven terrain where a flat mat is difficult to deploy properly - Cleaner spectator and finish line experience (no visible mat for runners to navigate) – Highly accurate and more redundant.

The trade-offs: - Requires a structure above the course (finish arch, gantry, or purpose-built mount) — not all venues make this easy - More complex setup than mat deployment.

## **One More Thing About Timing**

When I was running International Running Company, I saw a pattern at almost every event we timed: the races with the best runner experiences had timing directors who communicated clearly with the race director before, during, and after the event.

The worst results situations I saw were caused by:

1. Race director didn't provide a final participant list until race morning
2. Registration and timing weren't integrated, requiring manual import
3. Nobody had tested the timing mats/antenna before the morning of the race and they didn't bring a backup
4. Communication between RD and timing team broke down on race day

The best results situations I saw were caused by:

1. Regular communication between RD and timing company starting months before the race
2. Test run of the full system a day or two before the event
3. Clear radio channel for timing/RD communication on race day
4. Timing company's backup plan was explicitly discussed and documented

The pattern is simple: treat your timing company like a critical operational partner, not a vendor you interact with only on race day. They hold the data that matters most to your runners. Keep them informed, keep the lines of communication open, and you'll rarely have a timing story to tell — which is exactly what you want.



## Chapter 15: Post-Race — Gratitude, Cleanup, Debrief, and Next Year

The last runner crosses the finish line. The clock stops. Your crew starts breaking down the finish area. The runners head to their cars or to the post-race party, and you finally exhale.

But your job isn't done.

How you behave in the week after the race determines whether there's a next race — and whether it's better than this one. The runners, sponsors, and volunteers you take care of today are the ones who come back. The feedback you collect this week is the intelligence that improves next year's event. The planning conversation you have with your team before everyone disperses is worth three times the same conversation held six weeks later.

The post-race period is not an afterthought. It is where traditions are built.

### **Results: Speed Matters**

The first thing most runners check after a race is their official time. They want it fast.

For chip-timed events with live results systems, official results should be visible within minutes of the last finisher crossing. Preliminary results (before any protest reviews) should be posted to your race website and social media within one to two hours. Final, official results — after the awards ceremony and any corrections — should be

posted the same day for small events and within 24 hours for large ones.

A race that posts results three days after the event generates complaints regardless of how well the race itself ran. Runners have already moved on mentally. They've already told their friends and family what time they finished. When the official results are different from what they thought they ran, confusion follows.

For small events, a race director personally emailing results to every participant the same day creates an exceptional impression. Most races don't do this. The ones that do are remembered.

## **The Thank-You Protocol**

Gratitude is not just professional courtesy. It's the foundation of every long-term relationship in race directing.

**Volunteers:** Every volunteer should receive a personal thank-you email within 48 hours. Not a mass email that goes to a list — a personal one that acknowledges their specific role. “Thanks for staffing the mile 8 aid station for six hours in the heat — the runners who came through there were grateful for the energy you brought” is remembered. “Thanks for your help this weekend!” is forgotten immediately.

Post a volunteer photo gallery on social media. Tag volunteers when possible. Publicly thank the volunteer crew at the awards ceremony. These are small gestures with large returns.

**Sponsors:** Sponsors deserve a formal post-race report within one to two weeks. The report should include: - Final participation numbers - Demographic highlights - Photos of every sponsor deliverable (banner placement, logo on shirt, social media posts) - Social media reach data - Charity fundraising total - Any coverage in press or media

Send it with a personal note from the race director. This report is what your sponsor shows their leadership team to justify the renewal. Make it easy for them to say yes.

Runners: A post-race email within 48 hours — official results link, a highlight photo from the race, a genuine thank-you for their participation, and a link to a post-race survey — is the standard. Include a note about next year if you're already planning it.

## **The Post-Race Survey**

The survey is your most valuable tool for improving next year's event. It costs nothing to create (Google Forms is free), and runners who just finished your race are in the best possible mental state to give you honest, specific feedback.

Timing: Send the survey within 48 hours. Feedback quality degrades rapidly over time. The runner who finished five hours ago has specific, vivid memories. The same runner six weeks later gives you generalities.

Length: Five questions maximum. Beyond five, completion rates drop significantly.

Questions that generate actionable data:

“How would you rate the course marking?” (1–5 scale) — Directly actionable if low.

“How would you rate the aid stations?” (1–5 scale) — Specifically about the service you provided, not just the course.

“How would you rate the overall organization?” (1–5 scale) — Broad signal about operational quality.

“What was the best part of the event?” — Free text; this tells you what to protect.

“What would you most like to see improved or added?” — Free text; this tells you what to work on.

Optional: “Would you run this event again next year?” (Yes/No/Maybe) — Your leading indicator of year-two attendance.

Using the data: Read every response, not just the aggregate scores. The specific criticism from a runner who rated you a 2 out of 5 on aid stations and wrote three paragraphs about it is more valuable than 50 responses that all said “great race!” Review the feedback with your core team within a week of the survey closing.

## **Awards Ceremony**

For events with competitive results and age group awards, the ceremony deserves a specific plan.

Timing: Hold it as soon as possible after a sufficient percentage of your field has finished — typically 30–60 minutes after the course cutoff time. Waiting until the last finisher crosses is not required for the ceremony, but the last finisher should be acknowledged before the ceremony ends.

Flow: Overall male and female winners first, then masters (40+, if separate), then age groups from youngest to oldest. Keep it moving. Long gaps between categories lose the audience. Have award recipients staged and ready.

Make it meaningful: Read each winner’s name clearly. Congratulate them specifically. If you know something about their race — a first-time finisher, a PR, a runner who overcome adversity — say it. These moments are why runners come back.

Charity announcement: The fundraising total should be announced with as much fanfare as the overall winners. The audience that raised

that money deserves to hear the number called out like an achievement — because it is.

**Top fundraiser:** As discussed in Chapter 12, recognize the top fundraiser at the ceremony. Give them the same treatment as the overall race winner. The message this sends is durable: being part of this community means more than just running fast.

## **Course Cleanup**

Your permit depends on restoring the venue to its pre-race condition.

What “complete cleanup” means: - Every piece of course marking removed (tape, flags, stakes, chalk, spray paint if not water-soluble) - All cups and food waste collected from aid station areas - All equipment (tables, canopies, generators, timing mats) removed from the course and venue - Any temporary signage taken down - Portable toilet units confirmed for pickup within the agreed window - Any incidental trash collected from the start/finish area

Assign specific people to cleanup duty before race day and confirm the plan at your final volunteer briefing. The people assigned to cleanup should have their assignments in writing and know which sections of course they’re responsible for.

For most events, cleanup should be complete within two to four hours of the last finisher. For longer events with more extensive course marking, allow more time and confirm the timeline with your venue permit contact.

## **The Post-Race Debrief**

Within a week of the race — not six weeks later — gather your core team for a debrief.

The questions that should drive this conversation:

What worked well? Specific things that went smoothly, made runners happy, ran better than expected. These need to be documented so you replicate them intentionally, not by accident.

What broke? Anything that failed, was missing, was insufficient, or created friction. No blame assignment, just honest accounting.

What did runners tell you? Share themes from the survey responses.

What would you change for next year? Concrete, actionable items — not vague aspirations.

Document everything. Keep a post-race report file for the event. Every year that document grows, and what you're building is an institutional knowledge base that makes each year's event better than the last.

### Analyzing the Numbers

After the race, pull the data and learn from it.

Registration analysis: - What percentage of registrants actually showed up? (No-show rates vary by event type and weather; knowing your rate helps with staffing predictions) - What was the registration pace week-by-week? (Identifies your peak registration windows for future marketing) - Where did registrants come from geographically? - What was your split between distances (if multi-distance)?

Financial reconciliation: - Final revenue vs. budget - Actual costs vs. estimated costs for each line item - Any line items significantly over or under budget (both warrant understanding) - Net result: margin or shortfall

Operational notes: - Aid station consumption vs. stocked amounts (the basis for next year's stocking estimates) - Volunteer no-show rate and whether staffing was adequate - Timing or results issues - Medical incidents (anonymized; for operational learning, not legal review)

This analysis is what separates events that improve every year from events that repeat the same problems. A first-year race director who does this analysis is already operating like a seasoned one.

## **Starting Planning for Next Year**

The best time to make next year's planning notes is this week, while everything is vivid.

Write down: - The three things you most want to improve - Any vendor you'd like to replace - Any vendor you want to lock in early (because they book up) - Any permit renewals with early deadlines - Any changes to course, distance, or format you're considering - Any new sponsors you identified

Put a calendar reminder for six months before next year's event date: Permits — start the process.

Put a calendar reminder for three months before: Sponsor outreach — pitch season.

These reminders, set today while the race is fresh in your mind, will pay dividends in twelve months.

## **The Memory That Matters**

The work you did behind the scenes is what runners remember, even if they don't consciously know they're remembering it.

They don't know that you spent four hours last Tuesday re-marking the course because a landscaping crew disturbed half the flags. They don't know that the timing company's main system glitched at 7 AM and you and the timing director spent 45 minutes getting the backup online before anyone in the field noticed. They don't know that the

portable toilet delivery was two hours late and your morning started in a controlled panic.

They know that the race went smoothly. They know the marks were clear, the aid stations were stocked, the finish line had energy, and the results appeared on their phone before their heart rate came down.

That's the standard. That's what you're working toward, year after year.

And when you nail it — when the whole thing runs the way you planned it, when the last runner crosses to a cheering finish line and the fundraising total gets announced and your volunteers leave smiling — you'll know it was worth it.

Write down that feeling too. You'll need to remember it when the permit office doesn't call back.

## **Chapter 16: The Business of Race Directing — Making It Sustainable**

Most race directors don't call themselves business owners. They call themselves race directors, or event organizers, or just people who love running and wanted to give something back to the community.

But if you're taking money from runners, paying vendors, managing employees or contractors, dealing with permits and insurance, and trying to make all of this repeat year after year without losing your shirt — you're running a business. And the businesses that last are the ones that treat themselves like businesses.

This chapter is about sustainability: financial sustainability, operational sustainability, and personal sustainability. Because all three matter, and losing any one of them ends the race.

### **Race Directing Is Not a Path to Riches**

Let me be direct about this upfront: the overwhelming majority of race directors — particularly of small to mid-size events — do not get rich. Many don't pay themselves a salary for years. Most of the “profit” from a race goes back into improving the next year's event, the charity it supports, or the overhead of maintaining the organization.

Running events generate meaningful community value, and the people who organize them are often motivated by something other than financial return.

But here's the problem with not acknowledging the business reality: race directors who treat their events as passion projects with no financial discipline eventually face one of three outcomes. They burn out. They lose money until they can't continue. Or they cut corners because the budget ran dry — and the runners notice.

You can be passionate AND be disciplined about the finances. In fact, you have to be.

## **Paying Yourself**

You deserve to be compensated for your work. This is not a controversial statement, but in practice, many race directors — particularly those running charitable events — resist it.

Here's the math: organizing a race of 300 runners takes hundreds of hours. If you're an electrician, an attorney, a teacher, or a pilot, you charge for your time. Why would directing a race be different?

The Sheriff's Office that denied my Destin Marathon permit also required that I move the event under our 501(c)(3) non-profit, which meant I could not be paid for my work that year. I complied. But I want to be explicit about what that actually meant: I donated hundreds of hours of planning to an event that generated \$189,000 in activity. That is not a sustainable model.

When you're setting up your event — particularly if it's under a non-profit structure — address the question of director compensation explicitly and early. Non-profits can pay reasonable compensation to staff and contractors, including the executive director. "It's a charity" doesn't mean the people running it work for free indefinitely.

Practical approaches to director compensation: - Establish a budget line item for race director services at a reasonable market rate - Contract yourself or your LLC to the non-profit for a specific scope of

work - Document the hours worked (useful for establishing fair compensation and for your records)

A race that can't afford to compensate its director is a race that will eventually lose its director.

## **Year-Over-Year Financial Improvement**

First-year events are expensive. You're buying equipment you'll use for years, building a brand from scratch, and learning the market. Year two should be noticeably more efficient.

Fixed costs that typically decrease after year one: - Equipment purchases (instead of purchases, you have maintenance costs) - Course certification (valid for 10 years; no recertification needed unless the course changes) - Website design (maintenance cost only after the first build) - Logo and branding design (done once; minor updates only) - Traffic management plan (in many jurisdictions, the plan filed for year one is updated, not replaced, for year two) - Initial marketing push to build awareness

What to track year over year:

Build a simple spreadsheet that compares your budget to actual costs, line by line, for every year of your event. Within three years, you'll have a reliable picture of where your estimates are consistently off, which vendors' quotes are trustworthy, and which line items you can reduce.

Example of year-over-year refinement: - Year 1: 20% over budget on aid station supplies (underestimated consumption in heat) - Year 2: Budget increased 20% on that line; actual came in at budget - Year 3: Have historical consumption data; budget within 5%

The race that knows its own financial patterns is far easier to manage than one that starts fresh every year.

## **Building a Team That Doesn't Depend Entirely on You**

A race that can only happen if you personally do everything is not a sustainable race. It's a hostage situation — your event is held captive by your personal availability.

The goal is to build a team where: - You have a clear second-in-command who can make decisions in your absence - Every major operational area has a designated leader who owns it - Processes are documented well enough that a new person can learn a role without starting from scratch

This doesn't mean you delegate everything. Race directing requires a single decision-maker. But it means that if you're sick on race morning, your event can still run. If you need to step back from a future year, someone else can step forward.

How to build toward this: - Document your processes as you develop them (checklists, timelines, vendor contacts, permit notes) - Bring potential successors into more responsibility each year - Cross-train your core team members on each other's roles - Keep the post-race debrief institutional — it's not just feedback, it's knowledge transfer

## **Burnout: The Invisible Threat**

Race directing consumes time and emotional energy in ways that are difficult to explain to people who haven't done it.

The months of planning, the 3 AM permit worries, the social media monitoring, the race-week logistics that expand to fill every waking hour — it compounds. The runners who email complaints that would have seemed easy to brush off in year one start to sting in year four. The vendor who cancels the week before the race, which you handled

gracefully the first time, triggers a disproportionate response in year five.

Burnout doesn't announce itself. It accumulates.

Warning signs: - You're dreading tasks that used to be energizing - The race is consuming time that should go to family, health, or other priorities - You're cutting corners on planning because you're exhausted - The runners' enjoyment feels abstract rather than motivating - You resent the event

Responses: - Take an honest inventory of what's sustainable - Delegate more aggressively - Consider adding a co-director - Reduce the event's scope to match your available capacity - Take a year off if needed — a hiatus is better than a deteriorating event

### When to Add Distances or Events

The most common growth move for a successful race is adding a new distance to the existing event.

A 5K that's run well for three years and developed a loyal following has earned the right to add a 10K. A marathon that's drawn a consistent field might add a half marathon for runners who want to participate but aren't ready for the full distance. The Destin Beach Ultras started as a single 50-mile event and grew to a multi-distance weekend.

Before adding a distance, ask: - Can my current operational model support the additional runners? (Timing splits, staggered starts, additional aid station needs) - Can I staff the expanded event without overextending my volunteer base? - Does my permit cover the new distance? - Does my budget improve or deteriorate with the additional complexity?

Don't add complexity for complexity's sake. Add it because your runners want it and you can execute it well.

## When to End a Race

This is the chapter most race-directing books don't write, because it's not the inspiring story. But it's a real part of the business.

In 2024, we ran the final edition of the Destin Beach Ultra Runs.

The decision wasn't made lightly. This was a race I'd been building for fourteen years. It had raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for charities I believed in. It had developed a community of runners who returned year after year. Ending it felt like closing a chapter of my life, not just a business decision.

But it was the right call.

Standards matter. If you can't run the race the way it deserves to be run — with the preparation, the energy, the quality that the runners and the cause have come to expect — then running a diminished version does a disservice to everyone who's been part of it. Running a race out of obligation rather than genuine commitment produces exactly the kind of event that gives race directors a bad name: the event where the director is just going through the motions, where the runners can feel the lack of engagement, where the charity impact shrinks because nobody's fighting for it anymore.

The races that end well are the ones that end before they have to. Before the quality drops. Before the runners feel the decline. Before the race director is running on empty and it shows.

If you find yourself in that position — if the race has given what it could give, if the mission has been accomplished, if the energy isn't there to do it the right way — the most respectful thing you can do for your runners, your charity, and your own legacy is to run a final edition that honors everything the race was, and close the door with dignity...or hand it off to a more motivated race director.

## **Non-Profit vs. For-Profit: A Practical Guide**

Many race directors operate under a non-profit structure, often because the race was started as a fundraising vehicle for a charity. Some run under a for-profit LLC. Some do both — the race itself is a for-profit business that donates a portion of proceeds to charity. Each has real implications.

Non-profit (501(c)(3)): - Advantage: Charitable contributions are tax-deductible for donors; tax-exempt status for the organization; credibility in fundraising - Obligation: Annual IRS reporting (Form 990); board governance requirements; restrictions on how net proceeds can be used; compensation for insiders is subject to scrutiny - Watch for: “Mission drift” — the operational demands of running a race can gradually crowd out the charitable mission if you’re not deliberate about protecting it

For-profit LLC: - Advantage: Simpler structure; no restrictions on how proceeds are used; you can pay yourself straightforwardly - Obligation: Standard business taxation; no tax deduction for donors - Watch for: Donors and runners may perceive a for-profit charity race less favorably than a non-profit one — be transparent about your model

Hybrid: Many effective events work as for-profit entities that donate a defined amount to a charity. The race covers its costs (including paying the race director), and a specific dollar amount or percentage goes to the charity. This model keeps the financials clear, protects the charity from operational risk, and allows the director to be compensated.

Whatever structure you choose: keep clean books, keep separate accounts for your race versus your personal finances, and work with an accountant who understands small events or non-profit organizations. The IRS complications of a messy first year are significantly more expensive to fix than an accountant’s preventive advice.

## **Succession: Can the Race Outlive You?**

This is one place I failed, big time. The best races develop identities that exist independent of the race director. The Boston Marathon is not about who the current race director is. The Western States 100 has an identity that transcends any individual.

You're probably not running a race at that scale. But the principle applies at any size.

If your race has real community value — if it's been raising money for a cause people care about, building a running culture in your area, giving runners experiences they couldn't get anywhere else — then its potential lifespan is longer than your tenure as director.

Start building toward succession early: - Document your processes - Develop other leaders on your team - Be open about the race's history and the decisions behind key traditions - Consider structuring the race under an organization (board, club, charity) rather than entirely under your personal direction

A race that outlives its founder is a legacy. A race that ends because its founder burned out is a missed opportunity.

The races that matter most are the ones built to last.

## **Chapter 17: Conclusion — Your Legacy Starts at the Starting Line**

You've made it through the whole playbook.

Concept. Budget. Permits. Branding. Registration. Course design. Aid stations. Volunteers. Safety. Marketing. Sponsors. Fundraising. Race day operations. Timing. Post-race. The business of all of it.

You now know more about what goes into organizing a race than most of the people who have ever stood at a start line. You know the parts that are tedious and the parts that are genuinely hard. You know that the traffic management plan is expensive and that the permit can be denied even after you do everything right. You know that the aid station at mile 10 can run dry if you're not watching it, and that a misdirected runner at mile 8 is your fault regardless of whose volunteer wasn't paying attention.

But you also know something the people who quit before race day never know: what it feels like to watch 300 people — or 1,500 people — cross a finish line you built.

### **The Moments That Are Why You're Doing This**

I've thought a lot about the moments that make race directing worth the hard parts. Not the polished highlight-reel version. The real ones.

A woman who had never run more than a mile in her life before training for a race you organized, crossing the finish line with her hands over her mouth, completely undone by what she just did.

A veteran who came to your race because the charity you support was the one that helped his family when he was overseas, and who pulls you aside after the race to shake your hand and say thank you.

The final edition of a race you've run for fourteen years, on a beach you love, with runners who've been coming back for a decade, on a morning that feels exactly right — and you get to run out to the last finisher and cross together.

A fundraising total announced at the awards ceremony that's bigger than anything you projected, and watching 200 runners look at each other like they can't quite believe what they did.

These are the moments. They don't happen if you don't do the work. They happen because you did the permits and the budget and the course marking and the volunteer training and the 4 AM checklist. They are the direct result of all of that.

The work you do behind the scenes is what runners remember long after the finish line tape is rolled up and the medals are hung on walls.

## **What You Owe the Sport**

Running events are how the sport of running stays alive as a community.

Not the elite side — the elite side takes care of itself. But the 300-person trail race in the mountains that introduces 50 new runners to trail running every year, the charity 5K that raises money for a pediatric hospital and brings a neighborhood out every fall, the local marathon that makes people feel like Boston is possible — these events are the connective tissue of the running world.

Every race that's run badly, every registration that disappears with someone's money, every event that cancels because the director didn't do the budget work — these erode the trust that runners extend when

they sign up for a first-year event from someone they've never heard of.

Every race that's run well compounds that trust. It sends runners out into the world telling their friends about an event worth doing. It builds a community that returns year after year. It raises money for causes that need it. It creates reasons to get out of bed at 5 AM and push yourself harder than you thought you could.

That's what you're building. You're building a reason. For hundreds of people, at minimum — maybe eventually for thousands — to train, to show up, to push through something hard, and to finish with something they didn't have at the start line.

Do it right. Do it honestly. Do it in a way that makes your runners glad they trusted you with their Saturday morning.

## **Where to Go From Here**

Get help. The race directing community is genuinely supportive. Race Directors HQ has resources and a community of directors who are willing to share what they know. Facebook groups for race directors are active and useful. Find other race directors in your area or event type and introduce yourself.

Find a mentor. If you can shadow an experienced race director at their event before you direct your own, do it. Seeing the operation from the inside is worth more than any book.

Use the checklists. The Master Race Planning Checklist in Appendix A is meant to be a working document, not a thing you read once. Print it, write on it, update it after every race.

Build your documentation from day one. Every permit, every contract, every vendor email, every post-race survey response — saved and

organized. By year three, your documentation is an asset worth more than you probably realize.

Be honest about what you don't know. The most dangerous race directors are the ones who are so confident they skip the research. I've been directing events for nearly two decades and I still encounter situations where I have to ask someone more experienced than me. That's not weakness. It's operational intelligence.

Give something back. When you've done a few successful races, give your time to help a new director. Answer their questions. Let them shadow your race. The sport needs more people doing this well, and the only way to get more people doing it well is for the experienced ones to share what they know.

## **One Last Thing**

I started this book with a marathon on a U.S. military base in January 2007. Simple plan. Clear communication. Executed with what we had.

Almost twenty years of races later, that's still the framework. Simple plans. Clear communication. Execute with what you have.

The races that end up being remembered are not the ones with the biggest budgets or the most elaborate finish line setups. They're the ones where runners felt cared for. Where the start line was charged with energy and the finish line still had it two hours later. Where the aid station crew cheered everyone through by name. Where the race director was present — not panicked, not invisible, but present and engaged and clearly glad everyone was there.

You're building something worth doing. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

The start line is waiting. The runners are counting on you.

Go make it happen.

Zane Holscher has directed running events since 2007, including the Destin Beach Ultra Runs (2010–2024), the Destin Marathon and Half Marathon, Six Days in the Dome, and dozens of others through International Running Company (2015–2022). He served as the Assistant Team Leader for the U.S. National 24-Hour Running Team at the 2017, 2019, and 2021 IAU World Championships. He is the founder and president of Destin 50 Beach Ultra LLC DBA Guts To Try Foundation. He lives in Destin, Florida.

# Appendix A: Master Race Planning Checklist

Use this as your working document throughout the planning process. Check items off as they're completed; revisit them when circumstances change. This is not a one-time exercise — it's a living document for the entire planning cycle.

## **12–18 Months Before Race Day**

### Concept and Feasibility

Define your race's purpose in one sentence

Choose event type and distance (start smaller than you want to)

Identify venue candidates

Check race calendar for competing events on your target date

Confirm date works for weather, local conflicts, and permit availability

Complete gut-check: permits possible? Staff available? Float achievable? Plan B exists?

### Budget

Build full budget with fixed costs and per-runner costs

Work backwards: donations → sponsorships → entry fees

Calculate break-even registration count

Identify who covers fixed costs before registrations arrive

Choose business structure (LLC or existing entity; NOT personal bank account)

Open dedicated business checking account

## **Initial Permits**

Identify every authority with jurisdiction over any part of your course

Contact each authority: what do they require? What is the timeline?

Determine if state roads are involved (triggers certified traffic management plan requirement)

Begin permit application process

DO NOT open registration until permits are approved (or approved in principle for multi-month processes)

## **9–12 Months Before Race Day**

Legal and Insurance

File LLC or confirm organizational structure

Obtain general liability insurance

Collect additional insured requirements from all permit authorities

Set up waiver in your registration platform (electronic; required, not optional)

Draft/review any vendor contracts for services over \$500

Branding

Choose race name (no distance in name; short, memorable, domain available)

Register domain (.com required; .org if non-profit)

Commission logo (professional; vector files; max 4 colors)

Build website (mobile-first; registration link in nav; course info; FAQ)

Create social media business pages (Facebook, Instagram minimum)

Set up email list (Mailchimp or similar)

Set up Basecamp or project management tool for planning team

Registration

Research and choose registration platform

Set up event on platform (confirm timing integration)

Create price tier structure

Confirm all required fields: name, DOB, gender, shirt size, emergency contact, waiver

Test registration flow on phone before launching

Schedule registration opening (Wednesday or Thursday; 6 months before race date)

## **6–9 Months Before Race Day**

Course

Finalize course; confirm all permits for all segments

Determine whether USATF certification is appropriate; if so, initiate process

Identify all aid station locations (vehicle access for each)

Identify start/finish area (parking, facilities, staging space)

Document all traffic control points and staffing needs

Confirm Plan B course exists

Sponsorship

Build sponsorship package (tiers with specific deliverables)

Identify top 10–20 sponsor prospects

Begin outreach (6 months minimum before race; sooner for major sponsors)

Document all sponsor deliverables in signed contracts

Vendors and Services

Lock in timing company (confirm registration integration)

Reserve portable restrooms

Reserve tents, tables, chairs if needed

Get EMS/medical coverage quotes; reserve service

Confirm police/traffic control if road sections involved

Reserve DJ/sound system if applicable

Fundraising (If Applicable)

Confirm charity partner

Set up fundraising pages in registration platform

Create award level tiers

Draft initial fundraising email and launch to list

Confirm whether beneficiary attendance at race is possible

## **3–6 Months Before Race Day**

Swag

Order finisher medals or buckles (allow 12+ weeks; order 10% buffer)

Order shirts (performance shirts 10–12 weeks out; order 10% buffer)

Order bibs and safety pins

Confirm all sponsor logos on swag items before production

### Volunteers

Confirm volunteer coordinator

Post volunteer opportunities; recruit to 110% of needed count

Create role descriptions for every volunteer position

Build volunteer schedule and assignment matrix

Plan training session (one to two weeks before race)

### Marketing

Confirm race is listed on all relevant race calendars

Launch social media content calendar

Begin email cadence (every two weeks)

Run first paid social media ads if budget allows

Visit local running clubs and stores; distribute postcards

Draft and send press release if applicable

## **4–6 Weeks Before Race Day**

### **Operational Confirmations**

Confirm all permits (in writing)

Confirm all vendors (written confirmation of arrival time and location)

Confirm EMS coverage (level, staffing, location)

Confirm timing company setup details

Finalize aid station stocking plan (quantities at 125% of projected)

## **Course Preparation**

Course walk/drive to confirm no changes since last review

Order course marking supplies

Finalize volunteer positions for every decision point

## **Race Week**

Monday–Tuesday

Final participant count to timing company (as close to Monday as possible)

Final volunteer assignments confirmed by email; confirm they have role, position, arrival time

Weather monitoring begins; build contingency plan based on forecast

All race day supplies confirmed on-hand or en route

Wednesday–Thursday

Packet pickup location set up (if multi-day pickup)

Bibs sorted by name or number; shirts sorted by size/gender

Mark the course: arrows, flags, stakes, cones at all decision points

Post volunteer roles and assignments to all volunteers

Friday (Day Before)

Second course marking sweep: confirm all marks in place

Test all radio equipment (charge all batteries)

Test PA/sound system

Confirm timing mat placement with timing company

Confirm all vendor arrivals for race morning

Check weather: activate contingency plan if needed

Get sleep

## **Race Day**

### **3+ Hours Before Start**

Start/finish area setup: banners, timing mats, wave markers, PA system

Aid stations stocked (tables, coolers, cups pre-staged, supplies at 125%)

All volunteers at positions

EMS/medical on site and confirmed on radio channel

All vendors confirmed on site or ETA confirmed

### **60 Minutes Before Start**

All-hands volunteer briefing: roles, radio channel, emergency protocol

Live timing and results platform confirmed active

Share results link on social media

Race-day registration table open and staffed

At the Start

Start on time — no exceptions for administrative delays

Brief pre-race address (90 seconds; acknowledge charity, volunteers, what's ahead)

Wave releases on schedule

During the Race

Supply driver circulating at 90-minute intervals

Station captains calling resupply at 50% of starting stock

Course monitor driving/walking route at regular intervals

Race director on radio and available for decisions

Timing check-ins at regular intervals

Finish

Finisher chute clear and staffed

Medals distributed by volunteers (not self-service)

Medical tent visible and staffed

Post-race food and water available and restocked

Live results confirmed posting

Post-Race

## **Same Day**

Preliminary results posted to social media and race website

Awards ceremony completed

Charity fundraising total announced

Course marking removal begins (complete within required timeframe per permit)

All equipment broken down

Venues confirmed restored to pre-race condition

Within 48 Hours

Official results confirmed and final results page live

Post-race survey emailed to all participants (5 questions; Google Forms)

Personal thank-you emails to volunteers

Personal thank-you emails to sponsors

Within 2 Weeks

Post-race sponsor report sent to all sponsors

Volunteer photo gallery posted

Post-race survey analysis completed

Team debrief held; notes documented

## **Before Next Planning Cycle**

Financial reconciliation complete

Note three most important improvements for next year

Calendar reminders set for permit process start date

Permit renewal or re-application initiated if timeline requires it

# Appendix B: Recommended Resources

## Industry Organizations

Road Runners Club of America (RRCA) - [rrca.org](http://rrca.org) - Race Director Certification Program - Insurance programs for member events - Educational resources on permitting, safety, and legal

USA Track & Field (USATF) - [usatf.org](http://usatf.org) - Course certification program (for accurate distance verification) - Sanctioned event requirements

American Trail Running Association (ATRA) - [trailrunner.com/atra](http://trailrunner.com/atra) - Event Standards Program for trail running events - Aid station preparedness checklists - Trail race best practices

Running USA - [runningusa.org](http://runningusa.org) - Annual industry reports (participation trends, demographics) - Industry news and event director resources

## Registration and Technology Platforms

RunSignup - [runsignup.com](http://runsignup.com) - Market-leading registration platform; strong timing integration - Free email marketing tools - RaceTrends annual industry report (data on participation, pricing, trends) - New Race Director 101 resources

Race Roster - [raceroster.com](http://raceroster.com) - Strong in triathlon and Canadian market - Growing U.S. presence

ItsYourRace.com - itsyourrace.com - Integrated registration, live results, mobile app, and live athlete photo delivery in one platform - Strong timing integration; particularly well-suited for timing-company-centric operations - What I used with International Running Company

Athlinks - athlinks.com - Race results aggregator; good for live results distribution

### Information and Education

Race Directors HQ - racedirectorshq.com - Free articles on registration, marketing, email strategy, and operations - Paid membership with additional resources - Referenced frequently in this book as a reliable source

Road Race Management (RRM) - rrm.com - “Organizing Running Events” by Phil Stewart (500+ page reference book; RRCA textbook) - Newsletter and resources for established race directors

Race Directors Hub (Facebook Group) - Active community of race directors worldwide - Good for specific questions; high-quality peer responses

## **Charitable Giving Research**

Charity Navigator - charitynavigator.org - Independent charity ratings (financial health, accountability, transparency) - Search before committing to a charity partnership - Look for ratings 80+ for races; 90+ is exceptional

GuideStar (now Candid) - candid.org - Access to non-profit financial data (IRS Form 990s) - Verify overhead ratios and program effectiveness

## **Course Certification**

USATF Course Certification - [certifiedroadraces.com](http://certifiedroadraces.com) - Find a measurer in your area - Access the database of already-certified courses - Application and fee schedule

### **Crowdfunding (If Applicable)**

Indiegogo - [indiegogo.com](http://indiegogo.com) - All-or-nothing and flexible campaign structures - Platform used for the world's first crowdfunded marathon in history (Kill Cliff Destin Marathon, 2015 — verified by Runner's World, June 2015; Indiegogo campaign headline; [al.com](http://al.com) coverage)

GoFundMe - [gofundme.com](http://gofundme.com) - Less appropriate for race crowdfunding (no all-or-nothing option) but useful for individual fundraising pages within a charity race context

CrowdRise (now GoFundMe Charity) - Can support per-runner fundraising pages linked to a parent event

## **Notes on Using These Resources**

The running event industry moves. Platforms change, resources evolve, and new tools emerge. Before acting on any specific recommendation in this appendix, verify that the organization, platform, or resource is still active and current.

The permanent resources — the principles of permits, budgeting, course design, volunteer management, and fundraising — don't change. The specific vendors and platforms that serve those principles do. Keep current by staying connected to the race director community, reading the RunSignup RaceTrends report annually, and attending industry events when your schedule allows.

# **Addendum: How AI Can Help You Run a Better Race**

This addendum was not part of my original playbook — because most of what's here didn't exist in usable form until very recently. AI tools have moved from novelty to genuinely useful in a short time, and race directors who ignore them are doing more work than they have to. This isn't a technology endorsement. It's a practical briefing on what these tools can and can't do for your event.

## **What We're Talking About**

When I say “AI,” I mean the category of tools that use large language models to understand and generate text — ChatGPT (OpenAI), Claude (Anthropic), Gemini (Google) — plus AI-powered design and image tools like Midjourney, DALL-E, and Canva AI.

These are not the AI of science fiction. They're not running your race or making judgment calls. They're sophisticated writing and reasoning assistants that can significantly reduce the time you spend on certain tasks if you use them correctly.

## **AI for Race Marketing**

This is the clearest, most immediate application.

Race marketing involves a lot of writing: registration announcement emails, social media captions, sponsor outreach letters, press releases, FAQ pages, fundraising appeals, race week logistics emails. All of this writing requires time and mental energy that race directors often don't have.

AI drafts this content quickly and well. You still need to: - Provide accurate specifics (date, location, price, distance, charity, key features) - Review for factual accuracy — AI will confidently write plausible things that may be wrong - Adjust the tone to match your voice - Verify any claims (don't let AI invent course details or charity statistics)

What AI does well in marketing: - Generates first drafts that are 70–80% of the way to publish-ready - Writes multiple versions of a headline or subject line for A/B testing - Adapts the same core content for different platforms (shorter for Instagram, more formal for email) - Helps structure an argument you know but can't quite articulate (sponsor pitch, press release angle)

AI image tools: Midjourney, DALL-E (built into ChatGPT Plus), and Adobe Firefly can generate concept art, social media imagery, and promotional graphics. These won't replace a professional photographer on race day, but they can fill the gap in early marketing when you don't have race photos yet. A Midjourney-generated image of runners on a beach at sunrise makes a compelling placeholder graphic while you're building your event's photo library.

Canva AI: Canva's built-in AI tools let you generate social media graphics, adjust layouts, and create text-in-image content without design skills. For a race director who isn't a graphic designer (which is most of us), this is a practical upgrade over blank-canvas design tools.

## **Prompts You Can Use Right Now**

Here are specific prompts to copy, paste, and adapt. These work in ChatGPT, Claude, or any comparable tool.

Registration announcement email: > “Write a race registration announcement email for [Race Name], a [distance] running event on [date] in [city/location]. The race benefits [charity]. Registration opens

[date] at [price]. The early bird price of [price] ends [date]. Tone should be direct and enthusiastic, not corporate. Maximum 250 words.”

Social media caption (Instagram): > “Write five Instagram caption options for a photo of [describe the photo]. The race is [Race Name], [distance], in [location] on [date]. Include a call to action to register. One version should include relevant hashtags.”

Sponsor outreach email: > “Write an initial sponsorship outreach email to [Type of Business, e.g., ‘a local running shoe store’] for [Race Name], a [distance] race on [date] in [city]. The race draws [# runners] participants who are [demographic description]. The charity benefiting is [charity name]. Keep it to 150 words, lead with value to the sponsor, and ask for a 15-minute call.”

FAQ entry: > “Write a FAQ entry answering the question ‘What should I eat and drink before the race?’ for a [distance] running event in [weather/climate description] conditions. Keep it practical, 150 words maximum.”

Fundraising appeal email: > “Write a fundraising appeal email to runners registered for [Race Name], a charity race benefiting [charity name]. The charity [brief description of what they do]. Frame the email around why fundraising matters for this specific cause. Ask runners to set up or contribute to their personal fundraising page. Include a sense of urgency without being manipulative. 200 words maximum.”

### AI for Course Planning and Logistics

This is a more limited application today, but it’s useful in specific ways.

Route analysis: If you describe your intended course route to an AI (or paste in a Google Maps description), it can help you think through potential problem areas — high-traffic intersections, permit

jurisdiction questions, aid station access points — by asking clarifying questions and generating a checklist of things to research.

Permit research: AI can help you draft permit inquiry letters to city, county, or state agencies, and can help you understand the general requirements for events in specific jurisdictions. It can't access current permit requirements (those change and must be verified directly), but it can produce a solid first draft of an inquiry letter that's more professional than most people would write from scratch.

Volunteer scheduling: Paste your event timeline and volunteer roles into an AI tool and ask it to generate a staffing schedule. It won't know your specific site, but it can help you structure a schedule if you provide the inputs.

Logistics planning: AI is surprisingly useful for thinking through scenarios. "I have a 50K that starts at 6 AM with 200 runners, aid stations at miles 8, 16, and 24, and a cutoff of 14 hours. What's a reasonable aid station resupply schedule and how much food should I stock at each station?" is a prompt that will produce a useful starting framework you then verify against your specific conditions.

## **AI Chatbots for Runner Communication**

One of the most promising emerging uses of AI for race directors is automated runner FAQ response.

The concept: train a chatbot on your race's FAQ content, course details, logistics, and rules. Deploy it on your website or as an email auto-responder. Runners who ask common questions (Where do I park? What's the cutoff time? Can I transfer my registration?) get immediate, accurate answers without you personally responding to every inquiry.

Tools available in 2025: - Chatbase, Intercom, and Tidio all allow you to build custom chatbots trained on your own content - ChatGPT's

GPTs (custom versions of ChatGPT) let you upload your race documents and create a bot that answers questions based on them - Zapier AI can connect your email inbox to AI auto-responders for specific trigger queries

What this is good for: The 80% of questions that have standard answers — packet pickup times, shirt sizes, parking, aid station locations. It handles these consistently at any hour.

What it can't replace: The 20% of questions that require judgment, exceptions, or empathy. “My injury means I can't run the 50K I registered for — can I drop to the 25K?” is not a chatbot question. That's a conversation with a human who can make a call.

Start with a comprehensive FAQ page. That alone reduces email volume significantly. A chatbot built on top of it is the next step.

### AI for Photo Management and Distribution

Race photography generates hundreds or thousands of images that need to be organized, selected, edited, and distributed to runners.

AI tools are changing this workflow:

Photo tagging by bib number: If you are not using a timing platform like Jaguar that does it automatically, services like Race Roster, Brightroom, and several dedicated race photo platforms use facial recognition or bib recognition AI to automatically tag runners' photos by bib number. Runners receive a link to their personal photos within hours of finishing — no manual sorting required. The technology isn't perfect (bib coverage, unusual angles, and lighting conditions cause errors), but it's dramatically faster than manual tagging.

Selection culling: AI photo editing tools like Lightroom's AI selection tools can identify and flag blurry, poorly exposed, or closed-eye photos automatically, reducing the cull time for your photographer.

Basic editing: AI-powered batch processing can apply consistent exposure, color grading, and cropping to large photo sets.

Delivery to runners: Automated delivery via email or text (triggered when a runner's photos are tagged) is standard on modern race photo platforms. Runners get their finish line photo within hours, not days.

If you're using a professional race photographer: ask them specifically about their AI workflow. Photographers who've adopted AI-assisted tagging and culling deliver faster and charge less per image than those still working manually.

## **AI for Timing Data Analysis**

After the race, your timing data tells a story that can improve next year's event. AI can help you read it faster.

What timing data analysis can reveal: - Aid station demand patterns (which stations ran low at what point in the race) - Dropout rates by distance and time of day (identifies where your course or conditions are hardest) - Pace distribution across your field (informs cutoff time decisions for next year) - Net vs. gun time variances by wave (evaluates your wave start strategy)

Paste your timing results CSV into an AI tool and ask specific questions: "Based on these chip times, what percentage of my 50K runners finished in the last two hours before cutoff? How does that compare to the distribution in the first half of finishers?" You'll get analysis that would take you an hour to generate manually.

Caveat: AI can make arithmetic errors and misread data formats. Verify any numbers it produces against your raw data before using them in planning decisions.

## **What AI Cannot Do**

Be clear-eyed about the limits. AI cannot:

Make race day judgment calls. “The temperature is rising and we have 40 runners still on course. Do we activate the heat protocol?” is not a chatbot question. That decision requires situational awareness, medical expertise, experience, and accountability that no AI system has.

Replace human presence. A race is a human experience. The runners crossing your finish line don’t want to be thanked by an automated system. The volunteer who’s been out at mile 8 for six hours in the heat needs a real thank-you from a real person. The race director who thinks AI can handle the relationship parts of the job has misunderstood both AI and what makes a race memorable.

Verify information it doesn’t have. AI systems have training data cutoff dates and no access to your real-time vendor quotes, permit requirements, or local regulations. Never use AI-generated information about specific regulatory requirements without verifying directly with the authority.

Guarantee accuracy. AI can and does produce confident, plausible errors. The more specific and verifiable the claim (a price, a name, a regulation, a statistic), the more carefully you should verify AI-generated content.

Replace experienced race directors. There’s no substitute for having directed an event that went sideways and knowing — from experience, not from a language model — how to handle it.

## The Right Mental Model

Think of AI as a very capable junior assistant who can draft almost anything you need, research at scale, and organize information quickly — but who you should always check before the work goes out the door. You're still the race director. You're responsible for everything that happens under your name.

Used correctly, AI tools can return hours every week to race directors who are drowning in the administrative and communications workload. Use those hours for the things AI can't do: building relationships with sponsors, walking your course, recruiting great volunteers, and being present for your runners.

That's a trade worth making.

## Quick Reference: AI Tools for Race Directors

Task	Recommended Tool(s)
Email drafts, social captions, press releases	ChatGPT, Claude
Social media graphics and design	Canva AI, Adobe Firefly
Course concept images (early marketing)	Midjourney, DALL-E (in ChatGPT Plus)
Runner FAQ chatbot	Chatbase, ChatGPT custom GPT
Photo tagging + delivery	Brightroom, Race Roster Photos, FinisherPix
Logistics planning prompts	Claude, ChatGPT

The tools will improve. The principles of using them — provide accurate inputs, verify the outputs, keep humans in the judgment seat — will not.

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# The Race Director's Playbook

*20 Years of Hard Lessons, Practical Systems, and the Things That Actually Work*

Every race starts the same way—with an idea that feels possible and a thousand decisions that stand between that idea and a start line. This book is the guide that closes that gap. Drawing on two decades of directing events from 50-person beach ultras to 1,500-runner marathons, Zane Holscher distills the hard-won systems, real budgets, permit strategies, and race-day operations that separate races runners love from events that quietly disappear. Whether you're directing your first 5K or scaling up a multi-year event, this playbook gives you the roadmap—including the detours.

## Zane Holscher

*Founder, Destin Beach Ultra Runs (2010–2024)*

*Race Director, Kill Cliff Destin Marathon*

*Assistant Team Leader, U.S. National 24-Hour Running Team*

*IAU World Championships 2017, 2019, 2021*

*Founder & President, Guts To Try Foundation*

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