

Running Blind Newbies' Notes for Running & Guide Support

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1) Introduction and basics

Finding guide support on a regular basis to provide support for a healthy lifestyle involving outdoor aerobic fitness can be challenging for someone with a visual impairment, but it can be done. The key is to find the right fit with someone such that there is a good match with the spirit of the guide such that they enjoy the relationship and enjoy providing service to someone, and also that are mutual benefits based on the ability to train together in a manner that allows both runners to get a similar amount of exercise. That basically means that a pairing in which the blind runner and guide have a similar pace and desire to train is best. If the goal for the blind runner is to participate in weekend races and perform to the maximum extent of their ability, then finding a guide that is faster than the blind runner is essential such that the guide is not holding back their training partner.

2) Runners who are just starting out

If you are new to the world of running, congratulations on making a healthy lifestyle choice, and welcome to our world. It can be daunting when starting something new that can be inherently difficult on it's own without knowing how well you will be able to perform based on variables other than your vision (natural stride, endurance, biomechanics, etc), and more complicated yet based on having a visual impairment. But it can be done and thousands do it. The key is to have faith, to try hard, and to persist. If you are starting out with guide support from Running Blind, we certainly hope that the support we helped line up will last long enough to get you over the hump of deciding whether or not you enjoy the sport, and if you are going to be tough enough to endure the physical and mental effort required to participate. We generally try to find at least 2 guides such that you can have more than one source of support. One might be a primary guide and one might be a back-up, or both may effectively be co-guides. How such a situation will work out is largely up to the blind runner and their ability to manage the challenges of working with more than one guide. We have found that having one primary guide is the norm, but having alternatives can be helpful, and can help promote a more stable training schedule for yourself if you are not dependent solely on the availability of one guide. But the more people that are in the mix, the scheduling and natural nuances of the relationships can be tricky, which is most likely why we find that having one primary person you can rely on is the most common situation.

3) How often should I expect to train with my running partner?

That can vary depending on the match that is established, but at Running Blind, we don't expect a guide to make a commitment to training together more than one day per week. Some partnerships will work in more workouts than that if the two people are well suited on pace and location, but in general, a sighted guide will be making accommodations to some degree on training pace, workout distance, and overall time availability, such that expecting more than one workout per week may become a difficult commitment to maintain because the guide will have their own running and training goals, and they will likely want to have the ability to workout independently to maintain their own goals. This is not going to be the case with everyone, but a once a week schedule is our standard. Working out together more often than that should be done knowing the risk of burning out the guide and also of having a greater level of dependency and also the potential loss if the relationship falters for any reason.

4) How many workouts per week should I try to fit in with and without my guide?

That will vary depending on the level of experience and commitment to fitness and the sport of running. For new comers training once per week would be the minimum and 2-3 would be a good goal. Starting out with 1 guided run per week would be fine for the first month or so to get the feel of things and test the water, but some effort should be made soon to add a 2nd workout of some sort. Doing that would mean one run with your guide, and one workout without your guide, possibly a run on a treadmill, or on a stationary cycle, or at an aerobics class or with a jump rope some other form of aerobic training. Eventually getting up to 3 workouts per week would be preferred if possible, such that there are at least 2 running workouts per week, and one other workout that could be cross training of some sort, which could include weights, calisthenics, swimming if possible, or whatever you can fit in. For an experienced sighted runner, daily training is normal, not necessarily 7 days a week, but likely at least 4-5. For a blind runner getting to that level will be more challenging. It will either require multiple guide runners, or access to a gym with treadmills, or both. If the goal is to train for a race, working out 3-5 times per week should be the goal.

5) Who is the right guide and how long will someone be likely to stick with it?

Establishing the right mix of location, schedule availability, overall speed, training intensity, workout frequency and commitment to the relationship can be complicated. Two things we definitely take into consideration is drive time between the partners, and both partners' normal training pace (based on minutes per mile), and we try to match people as well as we can. Finding a perfect fit is fantastic and is the goal, but most likely is not going to be possible – that's reality. After years of working with people and setting up lots of pairings through Running Blind, we have discovered that even the best pairing most likely will have a lifespan of about a year. Certainly some may well last longer than that, but even with the best of intentions and a good match for the things mentioned, people's schedules and priorities often change making it difficult to maintain a training commitment with a partner for a duration longer than that. But with the right attitude and

the right level of commitment to yourself and your lifestyle, and with the support of groups like Running Blind and others (such as local running clubs), there is still a good chance that active running can be a part of the lifestyle of a visually impaired person throughout their life.

6) How do I find my own guide or more guides than Running Blind has provided?

Good question – and like many things in life, there is no right answer and there are many ways to skin a cat. Eventually, establishing a large circle of supportive friends who are also interested in fitness is the best way to gather support. The best way to make friends who are runners is to join / interact with a running club on a regular basis. Runners can be solitary people, but in general, most of them like to hang out together now and then to train with a group (which can definitely help with motivation), have some food or a beer together after a workout, talk about races, and talk about training issues or share training injury stories. Running clubs foster just such groups. There are generally a number of those in most any populated location. They will generally meet at least once a week at some regular location and run as a group – some will do a distance run, or some may do interval training on a track. Breaking the ice with such a group and becoming an accepted regular part of the group is the key. Once that happens, the options for training with a sighted guide will likely become much more numerous, as you will potentially have the ability to get different people lined up for training runs on different days of the week. Another big advantage to working with a group is that as people cycle through the group, you will have the ability to meet new people and to establish a fresh support group of possible guide prospects.

Groups may exist as their own small independent entity such as the Ann Arbor Track Club or they might be through a place of business. (There is an active Ford Runners Club where I work for example – most runners there worked for Ford, but not always all of them.) There are also clubs called Hash House Harriers (or just Hashers) that are often somewhat off-beat and zany but generally quite spirited. Some of these groups are known to focus more on the post race party than the training, so enter there at your own risk! Most running stores will generally promote some group runs on a weekly basis and most of them have some very experienced runners working there that can provide guidance for the serious or not so serious competitor. Such stores may also sponsor some paid training sessions that include an experienced coach. These can be great sessions but people attending those are likely striving to meet their own training goals, and may be somewhat less willing to alter their training schedule to work with someone else. However attending sessions like those with a guide could be a great way to network and meet other people that could eventually work their way into your circle of support. You might also get a membership at a local gym and mix with people there. Most gyms have plenty of cardio machines in addition to weights (some gyms more than others – Planet Fitness has a lot of cardio, whereas Powerhouse Gyms generally have less), so going to a gym to meet other runners is very possible. Even posting a flyer in a gym or a running store asking for guide support could be considered if you are bold enough to do that. (Hope Springstead, Running Blind's communication's director tried that, but she is not what I could consider shy by any means.) There are also other support groups like Running Blind that could be considered for support such as Veterans groups like Team

RWB if you are a veteran, or groups like the USABA or others that provide services to visually impaired people (AFB, NFB, etc) that you are likely familiar with as a member of the visually impaired community. There are also some on-line networking sites that can foster meeting people such as RunningEyes1, various Meetup groups, Facebook, and others. You need to use sites like these at your discretion and with some caution.

7) Participating in races

Running in competitive races is not necessarily important. Some runners do lots of them, and others not so many. They can be fun and invigorating allowing you to mix with a small or large crowd that shares your enthusiasm for fitness and for running or walking. They can also be expensive and taxing to get to and they may have large crowds of participants that can create special challenges for running pairs that may well be using a tether. (Wearing vests that identify you and your guide is strongly encouraged if you participate in races that will have a mass start of over 100 or more people. Running Blind can provide such vests.) Races come in all shapes and sizes and there are generally a lot to choose from in any given area on any given weekend. 5K races are probably the most common, but other distances such as 10Ks and marathons and especially half marathons have become much more popular in the past few decades. Some runners also go gonzo and go for the ultra marathons. Different strokes for different folks. Half marathons are a good distance goal for a blind runner since most guides will be able to hack 13.1 miles, whereas that may not be true for a full marathon at 26.2 miles.

8) What is the right answer?

We can't say – like most things in life there is no right answer and what works well for some people may not work quite so well for others. A good goal would be to work with Running Blind for a year or two while you establish running with a guide as a regular part of your lifestyle and hopefully also at the same time establish a relationship with a group of people who are active runners that will eventually allow access to more sighted runners and perspective guides. Having more support will allow you to maintain a more steady workout schedule. Certainly Running Blind will work with you as long as you need support and want to try to stick with it, but if you are solely dependent on us to find support, there will more likely be times where there will be gaps in your schedule between guides as guide support transitions occur. Again, as mentioned previously, getting motivated to dive in and take charge of the situation as best you can on your own and gathering as much support as you are able to muster is the best way to go at it. Even with our support and the support family, friends, a spouse, you will have to want to participate and keep pushing to keep yourself active. Running Blind can help in many ways, but the fire has to come from within.

Good luck with your efforts. I hope that Running Blind can play some role in supporting you, whether that be to find guide support or to find some motivation, so don't hesitate to contact us with questions or comments or any good stories you can share. I also hope that you reach most (but not all!) of your goals, and that you enjoy the journey.

Hal Wolfe
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