

Being a guide runner means being a partner with someone with a visual impairment. Many legally blind runners don't need guide runners (B3 & B4 categories). Only the more seriously visually impaired athletes will require the use of a guide runner (B1 & B2 categories).

Congenitally blind people who have never had the ability of sight can have more difficulty overcoming bio-mechanical issues with stride mechanics than people who have at one time been sighted. The biomechanical issues can often dominate their ability to run well, or run "normally" if there is such a thing. This can be a significant challenge for the blind athlete, parents, coaches, and the guide runner, all of whom will contribute to the success of a blind runner.

Basic considerations for guide running:

- 1) Announce yourself with a greeting when approaching your unsighted partner.
- 2) Ask them if they want to "take an arm" to guide them to and fro when off the tether. They may prefer to use their cane, with some assistance from you with voice commands and tapping sounds (ie tapping on obstacles). If they do accept manual guidance from you, the best thing to do is to bend your arm 90 deg and brush your forearm against their upper arm. Generally they will then grasp your arm near the elbow. (The key is not to assume they want help and grab them and manhandle them about.)
- 3) **Keep safety issues as a top priority.** That means warning the guided runner about trip hazards such as curbs, pot holes, or other hazards such as pedestrians, bikes, cars etc. Note: wearing headphones when running anywhere off a track is not safe and is discouraged, but this should never be done when guide running unless on a track or safe controlled area, and even then, I would not recommend it, especially for the guide.
- 4) Discuss the run you are taking before starting, including the course, the distance, the desired pace, etc. If the workout is on a track, the course is set, but many workouts will not be on a track, and may involve sidewalks, crossing streets, etc. (Think safety.)
- 5) Make sure that you are letting the unsighted runner set the pace. Encouraging them is fine, and may be good to do during a workout or a race. Letting them know what the distance covered is, or distance remaining, can be helpful. Use of verbal cues during a run together is important. (Once you get to know your partner and have a known course, they will likely become less important, especially if the blind runner is experienced.)

Tether usage

The means of guiding an unsighted runner during a run is with the use of a tether. It could be an 6 to 12" rope knotted at each end or could be an elastic "scrunchy". The tethers I use are a rope with a dowel rod handle on each end. Each runner grabs and holds one of the handles. Both runners should have a firm grasp on the tether during the entire event. **Some finer points:**

- 1) When covering open ground, the tether can be held with either hand of the guided runner, but always with opposite arms for guide vs guided runner. Switching arms on different days can be considered depending on preference. Coordinating stride and arm swing is more important for sprints than distance running, but is a consideration for both.
- 2) When on a track, the guided runner usually holds the tether in their left hand. This allows the guide to maneuver curves by pulling at the guided runner, and not pushing at them where they might bump and get tangled. (A forearm push may be needed now and then.)
- 3) If approaching a curve (on a track) let the runner know. Same too for the finish line.
- 4) If using a knotted rope tether, the rope should not be wrapped around fingers of either runner. The knot should be slipped between two fingers and held in a closed fist.
- 5) In a strict competition, the guided runner must cross the finish line ahead of the guide.

Squaring a blind runner on a track before a race

If you are running in a race with a blind runner who can't see the lines on a track, you need to make sure they start off running as straight as possible. In order to do that, you need to square their body (orient it properly) to the lane. This is especially important for sprints.

Toe the line: You should start by having them toe the start line. You can do this by placing your foot along the line, and having the blind runner slide their feet forward until they touch your foot. Then they can move one leg back into the ready position (ie into a starting crouch).

Square the runner to the lane: At this point, you should have them point to where they think is straight down the lane. You can then correct their point by moving their arm to the proper direction, and make sure that they also square their hips and shoulders properly as you orient their arm. Doing this will orient them so they can start running as straight down the lane as possible.

Other considerations for guide running:

Guide runner as mentor: being a guide runner will often mean that you are a more experienced runner than your unsighted partner. If this is the case and your unsighted partner is receptive to input, feel free to share your experience in a constructive manner. Care should be taken not to preach, and not to let your expectations or passion for the sport interfere with the blind athlete's vision for their running. After all, they are the one that is making the decision to participate in something that is difficult to do without vision, so ultimately they need to plan their own course.

Guide runner as coach: if you are dealing with an inexperienced blind runner, helping to enlighten them to proper running form and the effort level required for successful training can be done with some care not to over do it. If they cannot see others, they also can not see how hard others train, and likely need to be told at some point how they stack up against others.

Guide runner as personal trainer: helping the unsighted runner with some basic stretches after they have completed a workout, or a decent warm-up can also be considered. The 3 main muscle masses that runners need to stretch are: calves, hamstrings and thighs. Remember to discourage bouncing up and down, and to hold a stretch for some reasonable interval, such as a count to 10.

Guide runner as running partner: a good matched pair between a guide and blind runner will allow both people to get value out of the time spent together running. It is important that the guide not hold the blind runner back during training and especially during competition, but it is also important that both benefit from the training together or the partnership likely won't last.

Guide runner as trusted friend: ultimately the partnership between a guide runner and a blind athlete will depend on them developing a relationship that will endure through practices, meets, and other difficulties. The blind runner must know that they can trust and depend on their guide with their training and their safety. If they don't come to feel this way, then the relationship will likely fail, possibly with the blind runner's pursuits for the sport of running also.

If you have any questions about guide running, please feel free contact me by phone or e-mail. Thanks for your support of running and assisting those without the advantages of sight.

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