

Takeaways from in-person events during COVID-19

2020, the year of the asterisk*. As co-owner of HAL Sports (Healthy Active Living) and as a member of the Board of Directors for Running USA, managing mass endurance sporting events during the pandemic has been very problematic and challenging to say the least.

Over the last several months we have been part of several task forces locally and nationally working with municipalities and permitting agencies on guidelines on bringing runs and walks back safely. In Colorado for example, thanks to the Colfax Marathon leadership of Creigh Kelley and Andrea Dowdy, who lead a joint venture task force (which we contributed to) with several in our business/sport, volunteered to develop guidelines for running and walking events. These guidelines have been accepted and agreed to by numerous agencies, including the Denver Department of Health and Environment and the Colorado Department of Health and Environment (more than 3-month long process).

Now the time has arrived to have our first in-person events and hope all the work on paper goes as planned. To date, HAL Sports has helped to produce a handful of events, most recently the first event in Denver city limits, the Cookie Chase.

Reviewing the events we have done, things have gone exceptionally well. Here are takeaways that hopefully will be useful if you plan to execute an in-person event during the pandemic.

1. **Every Municipality is Different:** Despite whatever a city or state is going to allow, every municipality is different in their requirements (so if you have an event that required permits from a few different places, be prepared for a lot of up front work to get all agencies to agree and be on the same page with your plans). It can vary drastically. For example, we have some permitting agencies/venues that are literally a couple of miles from each other. In one we can have up to 700 participants spread out, and the other (despite allowing us a long timeline) is limiting to just 125 people (including staff and volunteers) for the entire day. My advice is to be patient and certainly try to work with your municipalities in development or approval of guidelines, but don't fight them on it. You likely won't win and you could damage your ability to have an event with them in the future.
2. **Don't neglect getting your permitting locality's Department of Health to review and approve your plans:** I cannot stress this one enough. Don't rely on the various permitting agencies to know if you should or should not get approval from the area's Department of Health (unless they have it in writing or can verify that the Department of Health already has approved their requirements). Have your plans, including how you will adhere to social distancing and the governmental mandates, and submit them to your Department of Health for approval.
3. **Be safer than you need to be:** Regardless of what your permitting requirements are, I highly recommend you be safer than what the requirements call for (within reason of course). For example, perhaps for your portos they only require you have hand sanitizer in them. Well let's be honest, under pre-pandemic times, no one likes using portos. So maybe consider a hand washing station, or a table near the portos with additional hand sanitizer pumps, or even schedule intermittent cleanings of the portos. Come up with a plan that keeps exposure to a minimum in common areas such as packet pickups, start corrals, finish areas, etc. Participant comfort level and perception is very important and honestly, we don't want the bad PR that

would come from not being as safe as possible, especially if someone were to contract COVID at one of our events.



4. **Minimize Event Day Interaction:** For the time being, we removed all main interaction points as best we could. We highly advised participants to come and get their packet at an advance packet pickup to reduce lines on event day
5. **Plan for Longer Timelines:** For a typical 5K, plan on needing to extend the timelines at the venue, your setup could take two to three hours longer than pre-COVID days, depending on needs, staff, and volunteers. The extended time to start participants isn't actually as bad as it might sound, for an event of around 700, the socially distanced start only adds about two additional hours from when your first participants start to when the last finish.
6. **Social Contract:** The newest buzz word for the year, the social contract. When your participant registers or when they pick up their packet, have them agree to (either electronically or with good ole paper forms) a social contract that outlines the rules and requirements for the event. Examples might include that they agree to wear a mask, stay home if they're sick, acknowledge that they have been exposed to COVID, are in a higher risk group, and one of my favorites: Despite all safety precautions, I realize I may still be exposed to COVID-19 and I assume all risks inherent to participating in the event. This is to protect you and your event.

7. **Staggered starts:** Plan for staggered starts (for us, it's been in groups of approx. twenty-four (24) comprised of three lines and eight rows, with the first three being released and then the next in line walk up to the start and go. This kept about five seconds between athletes going out). This also helps if contact tracing should be required at some point, because you, or your timers, will know what small group may have been exposed.



(I am smiling! Especially because I got to announce 20 starts for the 2020 Cookie Chase)

8. **Assign arrival times:** Assign participants to arrival times/blocks so people are not congregating while waiting. During the Cookie Chase, although we were allowed up to 175 people to be around and socially distanced, we never really more than about fifty at any given time (except on the course, which was likely around 100 or less at any time).



9. **Hire an experienced Event Management company:** Just like the Department of Health being critical, if you are an event, hire an experienced Event Management Company that is very credible and has safety as a priority. None of this “wink, good ole boy” style. Your event needs professionals who have been working non-stop on ways to bring events back safely and have the infrastructure to do so. With that too, you will be relying more on them for all areas of the event instead of relying on volunteers. Volunteers are great, and some are superstars that can be more responsible, but it is much better to have trained paid professionals handling your event. If you are an event company yourself, reach out to others that have already been their first, or first few, safe events and ask questions, gather best practices. We all want events to be safely taking place. I know for Hal Sports, we are happy to provide any help we can because we are all in this together.

10. **Announcer is KEY!** More so now than ever, a good announcer is critical for a safe and successful event. The announcer needs to understand the event as equal to or not better than your race director as they will control every safety aspect of the event. They, of course, need to have a good friendly voice and be fun too, but more importantly they need to be watching all areas to ensure safety measures are being adhered to, timelines are being adhered to, and that they are in a sense directing the day. They are charged with getting participants lined up, directing safe release during the starts, and calling attention to regulations being followed. I have found that good announcers who have also directed events and have detailed knowledge of all areas of event production will serve you best.



11. **Participant Feelings:** With the first couple of events, we really had no idea of what to expect in terms of registration, feelings of safety, attrition, etc. I believe that our athletes are really glad to have events starting back and safely. Those that have shown up have given outstanding praise and appreciation to the level of detail for a safe event. Some felt even more safe in a controlled event in the park vs being in the park regularly for their daily run or walk.

I have to agree with this because in the events we have done so far, I have been in less proximity of people than when I go out daily for my exercise in the parks. However, your athletes that normally come to your events may also feel (as we have heard too) that while they are glad to see them taking place, they are not quite ready to commit until they see they are being done safely for some time. I get this! I am not sure I would want to be the first to go to a movie theater when they open back up until some time has passed and they can show they can

have us in their theaters safely with limited exposure. The more we can show that events can be done safely, the more our participants will feel safe to come back sooner than later.

Overall, I have to say that in the events we have been involved with so far, the participants have abided by the regulations and requirements without any issues. While it has created more work to execute an event, those that have participated appreciate the extra work because they have missed being at our events, and we have missed seeing them too.

