

by Kathryn Kukula



What can be more exhilarating than running a road race? There's the excitement at the start as the horn sounds. Then, a mental and physical struggle ensues as you find your pace and test your endurance. Relief and pride come at the finish, followed by a well-earned bagel and a hug from a friend.

In New York, road races are truly special. For many runners here, pinning on a race number is like having a one-day gym membership—a day-long passport to the world of fitness and personal achievement. For others, a road race is a day out of the gym and off the treadmill—a real-world, on-the-road challenge. Increasingly, participants come to NYRR road races to raise money and awareness for a cause and take advantage of information kiosks and on-site health screenings just beyond the finish line. NYRR races also attract world-class runners who could compete anywhere, but choose this venue.

It's just this mix that makes NYRR events so exciting and motivating. But the wide range of ability levels presents challenges for race organizers, who are in charge of moving the mass along park roadways and city streets, around the cyclists, dog-walkers, joggers, inline skaters, lovers, tourists, and parents pushing strollers. In addition—and this is not inconsequential—every race participant must obey the laws that govern New York City parks and other public places.

Fortunately, these ordinances are basic, and NYRR staff sets up races to help ensure that runners stay on the right side of the law. NYRR has its own rules, of course, and some races are certified by USA Track and Field, which requires another set of guidelines. But unless you're going to set a world record or qualify for the Olympics, the laws are easy to remember: "It's simple: Runners have to stay in the recreation lane, they can't interfere with other park users, and they have to use the toilets," says Peter Ciaccia, NYRR's vice president of event development and production. "We have to disqualify people who are breaking the law."

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Photograph by Ed Haas

These laws are paramount because the New York City's Department of Parks & Recreation and the Central Park Conservancy own the race course. "It's their venue," explains Ciaccia. "We're just borrowing it." On any race day, the park is on loan to NYRR for 12 hours or longer. Staff members begin setting up at about 1:00 a.m.; post-race breakdown and clean up last for hours after the last runner has crossed the finish line.

More Runners, at All Paces

The laws and race procedures are the same whether 1,000 or 6,000 people run the race—and more are running every year. "On average, we're seeing a 7 percent increase in registrations [per year] and a 3 percent increase in finishers," says Ciaccia. That growth, he notes, is a wonderful thing—not just for NYRR, but for all of New York City. "It means more people are exercising and getting fit."

But the expansion has brought challenges. It's not just that more people are running; participants today encompass a far greater range of fitness levels than they did in the past. "The time difference between the fastest runner and the slowest runner—what we call the differential—is larger now," notes Ciaccia. A race used to be a tight cluster of runners that moved through the park with a spread of only a few minutes in their per-mile pace. It's now a long train that includes athletes peeling off 5-minute miles and fitness walkers at 15-minute-per-mile pace. In some events, a loop course is no longer feasible because the fastest runners lap the slowest participants.

Problems begin to surface when runners throughout the differential mix at the start, rather than seeding themselves according to their anticipated per-mile pace. When the horn sounds, the field bunches up, and faster runners are forced outside the designated recreation lane to pass slower athletes. "The footprint of the race takes over the whole park road," says Ciaccia. Other park users—cyclists, inline skaters, walkers—are displaced and even emergency vehicles can have a hard time getting through.

Dealing with this large—and still growing—differential is a top priority.