

Adventures on the Washington, DC Marathon Course By Bob Thurston

Washington, DC, 2 April, 2002

1. March 2001

When John Stanley of H2O Entertainment Group asked me a year ago to measure and also to help set up the course for a new marathon in DC, I told him I was confident about the measuring but rather a novice in setting up a course for a large race. But he insisted that he wanted me to do it, so I agreed. I do have experience in checking on a course that someone else has set up (I do this for the Marine Corps Marathon), and I figured that at least this way, I can try to get the setup right from the outset. Well-- all I can say is that this is a humbling experience; getting the setup right is easier said than done!

By the time the race date rolled around, I had already had enough excitement for one course. In March of 2001, we started out on a weekday evening. With John trailing me in his blinker-lighted SUV, and me with every kind of blinking light and reflective clothing I could find, we got just a little past the halfway point where the route joins Rock Creek Parkway. This was maybe about 9:30 at night. (In my 20 years of measuring, I've never encountered a more dangerous road to measure than Rock Creek Parkway—and it isn't getting any better. The "speed limit" is 35 but it's used as a speedway to get around congested streets, and it is winds wildly back and forth as it follows Rock Creek. There isn't really any good time of day or night to measure there—and John Sissala, who measures the Cherry Blossom course year after year on this road, should be at the top of the list to get a generous insurance policy.) Anyway, we were making progress and I was within sight of the end of the worst part when a patrolman pulled us over and said we had to stop. Of course he was right, only someone should have pulled us over about 3 miles before that. We had to go back in the daytime and finish up, but even that was pretty nerve-racking.

After all this, we completed work on the course, and just as I was nearly finished with the map work, word came that we'd have to make major changes to the route. The main reason was that the original route ran by too many churches, but I was glad that the new route kept the Rock Creek Parkway portion to a minimum, using only the part to Virginia Avenue, just past the Watergate Complex. The new route would add some major downtown streets—Massachusetts Ave, Pennsylvania Ave, and North Capitol St, but all of these share one redeeming virtue: they are straight. So I wasn't upset about trading these streets for Rock Creek Parkway and Beach Drive. I finished up all the measurements for the race in July, and I certified the race in September.

Sometime around the first of the year, a major flap broke out when a lot of churches first learned about the race. It turned out that the race date, March 24, was Palm Sunday—a fact that nobody had seemed to notice last year during the planning stages, including city officials and even some ministers who were consulted. By the time it became known, it was already too late to change the date of the race, so the race and the city could only promise that future races would avoid any conflict with Palm Sunday or Easter.

2. March 2002

I came back into the picture about 10 days before the race when John Stanley asked me to meet him at the finish area to confirm the exact finish line. Then with about 5 days to go, we made a tour of the course and talked about the sort of coning that would be needed. I began to realize that we were in over our heads here: cones were needed for blocking traffic, marking the centerline, directing runners through complex intersections, and even for protecting church access to parking. I hoped that someone had drawn up a plan for all of this, but no such luck—it would only exist if I did it. To make it worse, cones were really hard to come by—it looked doubtful that we would get anywhere near the number we needed.

After assessing the situation, the first thing I did was—panic! No way would there be time enough to do this right! First of all, I told them we would need to start at midnight (race start time was 7:00 AM) rather than 3 AM; and also, we would need two trucks rather than just one. Then the basics: a list of where course marshals needed to be placed. A list of how many cones would be needed: I came up with 4200, but that wasn't going to happen, so some more figuring. If we cut the centerline spacing from 30 feet (requested by the police) to 50 feet, we would save about 1200 cones. For the other stuff, we'd just have to be a little bit stingy. But the cone shortage convinced me more than ever that we needed a detailed plan or else we would run out. I spent one entire evening going over the route with course manager John Brown, but we only got halfway by midnight. We had planned to put easy-to-find paint marks where all of the cones should be placed, but we quickly dropped the idea of doing that at night in favor of a more pro-life alternative of drawing little sketches from the safety of the car.

The next day I went over parts of the course on my own; by now I was getting the hang of how to draw these sketches so they would make sense, but my enemy was time. I did some more when I got off work that afternoon, and managed to get to the most complicated portions, such as Logan and Thomas Circles. Finally, as I worked on the coning sketches throughout the day on Saturday, I decided to cut bait and only try to get the first half of the course drawn up completely. That way John Brown would be able to direct the coning up to halfway while I did the rest.

3. Race Morning at Midnight

Finally, there we were at midnight, ready to start from the Lincoln Memorial—but with only one out of two promised trucks on hand. When both were finally there, and we had figured out how to deploy the various volunteers, we set off coning. We talked a lot about getting that 50-foot spacing right because that was crucial in the plan to make the cones “stretch” to cover the entire course. We kept in touch with cell phones, so John could ask me to be sure about tricky areas. And our driver, Pharoah, relayed instructions to the back of the truck using his cell phone/walkie-talkie. It was slow going, and I regretted not requesting at least 3 trucks to do this work. You can only drive so fast when guys are hanging onto the back of the truck setting out cones. And our part of the route had a long stretch that went the wrong way on a one-way street, so we had to drive that distance three times. As the hours wore on, Pharoah would entertain us with his late-night disk jockey / tour-guide patter about the places, and sometimes the people, that we were passing. But progress was slow, and I could see that I'd have to scratch my plan of

touring the whole course once more before the race. About 6:20, John called to tell me they had finished coning the first half. We were somewhere around mile 23, with some complicated sections ahead, and I told him I wouldn't be back before the start. I wanted him to start checking the course but it turned out he had no transportation, having just been dropped off near the start. We were running short of cones on our truck, so we had the other truck meet us at a half-mile to go, and they helped us cone that last portion. Then I got a ride back to the Lincoln Memorial, where I had left my car.

4. Checking the Second Half of the Course

I asked John Brown if he'd like to come along as I checked the rest of the course. It was close to 8 AM and obviously only the second half would be available for checking. John said he'd talked to John Stanley who indicated there wasn't much point in checking it now—only if I was curious. I knew better, and took off on my own. Right away I noticed that the stacks of cones we had left were right where we had put them—not out in the roadway on the little X's I had painted. “Somebody” was supposed to have put them out, either police or course marshals, but it wasn't happening. One officer said she'd tell others by radio that the cones at the intersections were there for putting out, but there were still a number of spots where I had to stop and get people to help me put out the cones for guiding the runners at crucial turns, etc. Eventually the inevitable happened: the runners caught up to me and I was “trapped” for a while by the race. I managed to get through and in front of the runners again. Sometimes there were no cones in sight, neither in the little stacks nor on the road, and I saw where the police had liberally re-deployed them to other spots of their own choosing. But basically the course was right—and where the cones had been re-deployed, at least there were people at the corners who knew where to tell the runners to go.

Everything was all right, that is, up until just past mile 24. Now at this point the runners are on Vermont Ave, running in a south-southwesterly direction, when they reach McPherson Square. They are supposed to turn right (west) on K St, then turn left (south) on 15th St (west) [*unfortunately for purposes of clear communication, there are two parallel “15th Streets”, which flank McPherson Square on 2 sides!*]. This brings them to the SW corner of McPherson Square where they rejoin Vermont Ave; they again run in a SSW direction to H St, where they turn left and head east all the way to 6th St NW. This is the way we had set up the race—and I was confident that it would stay that way because there were course marshals on the scene by the time we reached this point. I talked to them and made sure they understood where the runners were supposed to go. But the police had completely re-routed the race! They had taken all those cones from K, 15th (west), and Vermont, and used them to mark a route straight south (on 15th St east) from the point where Vermont runs into the NE corner of McPherson Square down to H St. In other words, they had cut off two blocks, one of them longer than “normal” because of its trapezoidal shape.

This wouldn't do. I knew two wheelchairs had already gone through, but the runners were somewhere behind me. I started barking orders to the course marshals, who were very helpful. We got cones out to turn the runners right onto K St, then left onto 15th St (west). I hurried to put my car right in the roadway at the “control point” where runners were allowed to cut over to the corner to make a left turn onto H Street. The lead runner, Andrey Kuznetsov, was approaching McPherson Square, and course marshals got

him turned onto K St, then left onto 15th. So far, so good. He got to the SW corner of McPherson Square, and I was pointing him down Vermont and telling him to turn left right after the gray Volvo that I had just parked there. But in the meantime, the press vehicle had continued straight south, on the wrong course laid out by the police. Just at this point, someone in the press car (a representative from the Potomac Valley Association of USATF, it turns out) yelled at him to come back, he was off course. (I did my yelling too but they won out. I guess if someone leads you 24 miles of the way you begin to trust them, at least when compared to some character you've never seen before!) Kuznetsov went back to the "police route" after running around McPherson Square; he had added back one of the two blocks that the police bypassed, but he still bypassed the longer trapezoidal block.

Meanwhile, the police sergeant who had ordered the change in route confronted me about my guerrilla action of moving the course back. I told him I had measured the race and this (the route as I had corrected it) was the correct course. No, he said. His map said they go straight down 15th St to H. I told him I was sorry he got an incorrect map, but that this was the right course. "You sure are sorry," he replied with his voice rising, "Because you're sending those runners onto unprotected streets and they could get hurt!" I told him I hoped he'd help us out and protect the runners on the course. I left it at that; by this time we had all the runners going on the correct course, and I had no need to stand and argue any more with the sergeant. I doubted whether he'd have much sympathy for the fury of all those runners who ran hard only to get an asterisk put by their times because the course was short.

5. After the Race

I never found out what happened with the second and third place runners, but I think they followed the police route. I talked to the second place finisher, Retta Feyissa, an Ethiopian who lives here, but I don't think he knows what streets he went on. He was shivering wildly after the race and I stopped asking him questions so his friends could try to get him warmed up. The third place finisher apparently went off course somewhere near mile 23; I never found out where he went astray or how we managed not to catch him. Whatever distance he may have cut at McPherson Square was probably more than balanced by the several blocks he went off course earlier. I did speak to runner number four; as far as I can tell, he was the first runner to go entirely on the correct course. And every runner after that was on the right course.

Using the scale of the city map, I reckoned that the police route cut about 200 meters, or 700 feet, from the course. Kuznetsov, who went around McPherson Square but missed the trapezoidal block, ran about 60 meters or 200 feet short. He finished in a time of 2:23:40, so the 60 meters probably shaved about 12 seconds from his time. If the second and third finishers did in fact follow the police route, their 200-meter shortfall would be worth about 40 seconds. (I have not yet checked these differences by bike, but will do so soon.)

I spoke with reporters after the race, and I thought I had made clear what had happened. In one case, it seems I could have double-checked a little more. I opened the morning paper to read: "Though Kuznetsov wandered dangerously into backed-up city traffic and seemed very confused by his predicament, he was quickly ushered back onto the course by the alert shouting of [a local official], who sanctioned the course for USA

Track and Field.” Of course it had been that shouting that led the runner back off the correct course—but the official had no way of knowing that; she was probably a victim of the same incorrect map that confused the police.

I’m not sure what to do about those “slick” maps that race directors like to produce. They are very pretty, but are usually a bit short on accuracy. When I saw this one for the first time, about five days before the race, I noticed errors on it and said so. They checked, but all the copies had already been printed. Little did I realize that the police would be referring to that map to know where the course went—I was under the impression that this whole race had been worked out in minute detail with the police. I have also been told that the police have very detailed maps of every block traversed by the marathon, and that their maps coincided exactly with my own certification map. So why this particular sergeant was using the other map for reference is a mystery. But it does point up the need to proofread every map that is produced for a race.

All in all, the Washington, DC Marathon was a big success, and John Stanley deserves kudos not only for tackling something believed impossible by most folks in the running community, but for doing a fine job as well. There was a great story with two 40-plus winners: Kuznetsov is 44 and Victoria Mills of Atlanta, who won the women’s race in 2:54:30 to the cheers of her husband and 3 young kids, is 40. Of course there were church people who stayed angry because of Palm Sunday, but others found that things weren’t as bad as they had feared. And the 5,000 or more runners seemed happy with the race and the route; many were pleasantly surprised at how nice the city is.

6. Questions

All of this leaves me with lots of questions. One set of questions consists of variations on the central question, “How do you pull off a big operation like this?”:

- What sort of plans do you draw up?
- How do you make sure everyone understands what they’re supposed to do?
- If you have cones that can’t be placed in the roadway until just before the runners come through, how do you plan for them to be placed correctly?
- What sort of backup plans do you need, to correct any mistakes or gaps before it’s too late?

I know that there are folks who have good answers to these questions. In case any of them are reading this, they shouldn’t worry—I don’t plan to get into the race management business. I just want to understand what is the right way to do it!

Then there is another whole bag of questions, that I consider a serious challenge to all of us who measure courses:

- How much do we know about how these courses we measure are actually conducted?
- How many of those critical cones are in place the way we specify, and how often are critical locations manned by informed, assertive course marshals who make sure that runners observe the intended restrictions?
- Do the races use the maps we make for them, or do they hand out other maps—and do those other maps then “take over” the courses?

Well, you get the drift. We all may have different answers to those questions, but here are my guesses:

- We know less than we think.
- Races are done “wrong” more often than we ever learn.

- Even when a race director understands all the details, there is a good chance that the marshals or sentries out on the course have a different understanding.

Despite everything this was a lot of fun, and I would do this again, for this race, if only because I want to get it right just once! But the next time a race director asks me to set up a race course, I hope to be prepared with a better answer—one that starts and ends with “No, thanks”, and includes the names of several other people who might be able to do it!

November 8, 2002

Rick Nealis
Dave Fadden
Marine Corps Marathon
Quantico, Virginia

Gentlemen,

Congratulations on an excellent race! From my point of view things went very well, although I got nervous a couple times, which got me to asking some questions I'd like to come back to in a moment.

Start and Finish: These were, as expected, in the correct spots.

Mile Points: The only mile standard that was in the wrong place was Mile 1!! I was thinking this would be a rough day when I saw that, but maybe it was good luck because I saw no others out of place. I got a couple guys to move Mile One to the right spot, no problem.

Mile Standards: I think these are really good, and if they were expensive, they were probably worth it. I guess how they serve over a number of years will be a true test but I'm betting they will do just fine.

Pentagon Security Lane: OK, they had obviously moved the barriers so the runners could enter that security lane, but when I rode my bike around to the other side I saw that only one out of 3 jersey barriers had been moved! I asked some guys whether the other ones were going to be moved, and they didn't even know the runners were going through there but introduced me to the officer in charge who assured me that he would get all the barriers moved. I was envisioning a mass of runners suddenly coming to a standstill in order to get through the barricade, but I am assuming that it turned out OK.

Pentagon South Parking: It was clear that things would be OK for the first swing through South Parking, Mile 4 and everything, but I didn't see any signs of a clear path for the second swing through around Mile 24. Except: once again the runners were going to be routed on the right side of Eads extended on their way past Mile 24. It's really measured so they go on the left side. But I did not try to change this, as it's a fairly small difference in distance run, far outweighed by such circumstances as the construction moving the runners to the left as they go around the bend from 15th St to Joyce. But no markings or signs of a route from South Parking down onto 110. The scary part was the first umpteen people I asked didn't seem to have a clue where the runners would be going at that point in the race. I got one road guide to put out some cones that would help direct runners onto the correct lanes of Route 110. But the connector road was itself in very bad shape, strewn with a bit of construction trash, a

bit too much sand and rubble. It should have been cleaned up and marked more clearly.

Turnarounds: The turnaround on Boundary Channel seemed fine, and coned well enough to keep runners out of any hazardous spots. The Rock Creek Park turnaround that is 100 YARDS north of the island (I'm glad that mistake of mine was caught!), was correctly set up. But my dotted line circle, on Independence Ave a bit west of Ohio, was not done. I explained what we needed to the road guides and they quickly helped set it up with materials at hand (including the famous cones that the Park Policeman is so protective of).

South Parking Again: At one point I learned that I was only 3 miles ahead of the first wheelchair, so I tried to move quickly, and get back to South Parking to see if things looked any more definite than before. I was a little surprised that there were still people going through on their way to 5 miles, and also that even at this late time there didn't seem to be any obvious signs of where they were going to send the runners. I had 2 fears: one, that they would send them straight the way we used to go, which would have been a dead end, or that they would mistakenly send them up and over the bridge to the wrong side of Route 110. I asked and got referred to someone that I thought was in charge of the whole area, but it turned out this was somebody just in charge of the band that was playing! So I ended up telling a lot of soldiers who were in the area what would be happening. I think they tolerated me the way people are sort of polite to crazy guys in town who wander down the street talking to nobody in particular. But when I saw that the lead vehicles all went through the correct way, I relaxed a little.

The Question: I hadn't really thought about this so much before, but it isn't enough that certain people, maybe those who are in charge, know the right answers and the right things to do. There has to be a way so that someone trying to ensure that the course is done right (like me) can *quickly ascertain* that it will be done right. It doesn't make a lot of sense for me to have to interview a couple dozen folks just to discover whether they're going to be sending the runners on the right path. I think this is an area that deserves more exploration and discussion. The question is-- what is the best way to achieve a better and more widespread understanding about a race course? Some thoughts on the matter:

All or almost all the people working on or near a race site should have a basic knowledge of where they are on the course, and where specifically the course goes in that area. Unlike a military situation where certain information can't be widely shared, this information shouldn't be secret and should be widely understood.

One way to get this information out would be for everyone to have a copy of the official course map-- or it may be that another sort of document, more detailed for specific areas, would need to serve as the basic information tool.

Course maps could also be posted at critical points, so that large numbers of race workers/volunteers could check on any questions about location or route.

I would like to hear your thoughts about this issue, and I am trying to give it some more thought because I think it's an issue which affects just about all road races that I've been a part of.

Again, congratulations on the race. It is truly a pleasure to work with you guys on a project that means so much to so many people.

Best Regards,
Bob Thurston