

The Fine Art of Crewing

(Or how to get your runner to the finish line and not completely hate him)

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You plan, you organize, you haul bags, equipment, drinks, mixes, coolers, shoes, etc. The whole trunk of your rental car is empty and still somehow there is something missing. It is the one thing left behind that your runner not only wants, but demands as you meet him at the aid station. How did he know you would leave this one crucial item on the front passenger seat? Did he spend the last 16 or so miles itemizing everything and then decide to test your crewing abilities on this seemingly insignificant item that he has never wanted or needed in any other ultra before. Crewing in itself is a sport. We know what we all are waiting for – our runner - and the chance to get him/her in and out of the aid station with all of the necessities until we see him again.

During my time crewing, a system has evolved that helps me help my runner. It takes me back to my days of learning Spanish or mastering the 50 states and capitals – it is the 4x6 index cards, lined and colored. I buy 4x6 colored, lined index cards. I prefer the color; yes, even the crew has her own idiosyncrasies.

There is a standard set of index cards. I would like to say these cards have remained the same since their inception, but that would be lying. They have changed as I have learned things along the way. These cards note what equipment is in the blue bag versus the green bag, things I do at each aid station regardless of what the runner says, what is inside each pocket on the running pack, what gets moved from pack to pack, when it gets moved, etc. Also noted are the common things that I need to remember to do each time I see my runner. This includes having a wet washcloth in a baggie for my runner to wipe over his face when he arrives at the aid station. As the day goes along and the temperature increases, I add an ice cube or two so that the wet washcloth is not only wet, but cold. Keep a few spares, because as I give this washcloth to my runner and I get busy preparing water bottles or such, my runner has been known to put the washcloth down on the ground, so now it is a muddy, wet washcloth – something he does not want to be near at the next aid station.

From the ultra-race's website listing of aid stations, crew stations, cut-off times, and sunrise and sunset times, my runner creates a spreadsheet with this information, his 24 hour and 30 hour expected times, as well as his plan to change socks/shoes, add the headlight, check for a sunhat, change shirts, etc. After I have the spreadsheet, I begin the task of making index cards for that ultra, related to the course profile and each crew aid station. The course profile is shrunk to fit on the 4x6 index card. On this, I use a red marker to note crew aid stations. This enables me to tell my runner what the course will look like until I see him again. For example, I can tell him that he will climb about 800 feet for 6 miles, and then have a slight downhill for a few miles, and so forth. Of course, I am not sure he hears this, but it sounds good to my fellow crewers who overhear this conversation.

Each crew aid station is on one index card. The card delineates miles between upcoming aid stations that are manned/unmanned, miles to each of those aid stations, what we will do at the next crew aid station (such as change shoes, add headlamp, etc.). If he has run the ultra before, I give times from previous years of when I expect to see him and how close he is to previous year's times – this, of course, is open to my editorializing. My runner may not recognize that the numbers have

been fudged, but I do this to get him moving. Thankfully, I have not had to put the cut-off times on these cards, but as age increases for my runner, these cut-off times probably will make the index card out of necessity.

The index cards are laminated, using photo-size laminating pouches found at office supply stores. I punch a hole through the cards and place them on a ring, creating a flip chart of index cards that holds my runner's plan, and my reality. With this ring of cards, I can flip through them to see where we have been, and where we are going. I continually look at what is coming up. These cards keep me focused on what the plan is, and what not to forget once my runner arrives.

After my runner sets off again, I go to the original spreadsheet to note what my runner did not consume (how much electrolyte pills remain, how much Perpetum or Endurox remain, etc.). I also note the flavor of the Comp2 or Heed or GU2 given, so not only can I alternate, but if a "problem" arises, we can go back to what he had to "drink" from the time I last saw him.

Other tricks I have learned, mostly the hard way, are added as I continue to crew. When we do a shirt, sock, shoe change, I place the removed materials on the back window ledge in the car, over the unoccupied seats, any place I can lay the equipment out and hopefully get some exposure to sun. This not only helps get the clothes dry so when we leave for home, the clothes are a little less rank, but also if there is unforeseen weather, clothes that were used can to be used again.

Another trick is to bring a towel for the runner. I usually borrow several from the hotel. The towels can act as a curtain to provide my runner with some level of modesty. Also, I place a towel on the folding travel chair we bring along for him. This was a trick I learned the hard way. During my first crewing attempt and by the second time I saw my runner, the chair was soggy from my runner sitting for his few minutes at the aid station. Since I planned to sit most of the remaining 24 hours in the chair, I decided a towel needed to be put there before he put himself in that chair. This enabled me to have a drier afternoon and evening waiting for him.

When my runner occupies the chair, I find myself sitting on the cooler. This "stool" helps me provide support, as I change my runner's shoes and socks. I also place garbage bags on the ground so when we change shoes and socks, my runner has a dry, clean place to put his feet and I have a trash bag to collect used bottles, alcohol wipes, etc. once he leaves. When a sock/shoe change occurs, we place my runner's feet in a folding wash basin normally used for camping. Splashing water over the feet seems to create this warm fuzzy feeling that he can go on with fresh feet. The bowl can be found at any camping/hiking store and again, it dries very nicely on the back window ledge.

My system continues to be refined, mostly with *should ofs*, *would ofs*, and *could ofs*. This, of course, is after the fact, but it helps for the next ultra event, since there will always be another event to run and to crew.