



ROAD RACE MANAGEMENT

COURSE CLOCKS – ARE THEY NEEDED ANYMORE?

By Dave McGillivray

Years ago, before the huge field sizes and multiple wave starts, I always thought seeing course clocks along the race route was both informative and motivational. Now, I am just not so sure anymore.

The fact of the matter is that once the gun fires and the clocks are set to that gun, the times displayed by those clocks are accurate only for those runners in the race that were right up front on the starting line itself but not anyone else in the race. Given that most races now time and score using *net time*, that is, from the time each runner crosses the starting line to the time they cross the finish line, all the clock times along the course (and even at the finish line although the finish line clock is here to stay) are actually not an accurate representation of 99% of the runners in the race.

Interestingly, for races with either wheelchairs or early starts for athletes with disabilities or even elite women starts, most of the time the course clocks are not set for these divisions and it doesn't seem to be an issue with them – at least I have never heard any complaints about not having times displayed on the course clocks for those divisions.

So, why have them anymore? I asked a few race director friends in the business this very question. Here is what some of them said:

- “We don’t use course clocks anymore and I don’t remember any runner ever complaining about it.”
- “We still use them and I think it would be perceived as a step back if we eliminated them.”
- “I very much like the optics of using them, but I think they are largely unnecessary.”
- “Agree that they aren’t accurate for most of our runners, but I still feel they are necessary.”
- “We don’t own any clocks and don’t provide them at any of our races.”

- “We stopped using them this year. I chalked it up as an unnecessary expense and we cut them from the route completely.”

Then I posed the same questions on Facebook and here are some comments I received *from runners*:

- “Despite needing basic math skills, the course clocks can be handy when your watch battery dies before Mile 1. That would be Boston last year.”
- “Great question. I think people who use them (and even people with their own GPS watches like to compare with them for some reason) find them motivational.”
- “At small races with no waves and short distances, I think we should keep the clocks.”
- “The course clock is symbolic and thus essential to the true nature of the event. It is a necessary part of the experience; to look up and see the clock, it's seconds rolling ahead as you get closer to it, connect the mind once again to the grand objective, its meaning, and the need to push ahead.”
- “As a runner, clocks are rather useless to me. I'm now at the back of the pack and rely on my GPS rather than the course clock. However, as a 36-year race director of a 1500 runner 10k, I'm not going to take the clocks away. I'm thinking it would be perceived as a negative by some of the runners and I don't want that.”
- “At Chicago this weekend I started an hour after the first wave start. Therefore, I never even looked at the race clocks. I would not miss them at any race.”
- “Keep them! Watches fail and I find it easier to see it on a bigger clock than looking down at my watch!!!”
- “As others have stated, MATH is one way I deal with the mental aspect of a marathon. Like seeing the numbers. The more of them I see, the more I am calculating and not thinking about how my legs are holding up.”
- “Like yesterday at BAA Half, there was a time my GPS was sort of acting up or maybe just me thinking it was tricking me. I used the clock time to estimate how I was doing by minus about 5 mins from it which actually helped me to determine how much to push. I think it is a good thing to have.”
- “I like them as a carrot when coming into the chute. Don't need them other than at the finish.”
- “I don't pay attention to the course clocks anymore, I use my Garmin for time, pace, HR, etc. It is nice to have a FINISH LINE clock for photos. I'm sure as a RD it would save your staff valuable time at the race start if course clocks were no longer necessary.”

We recently polled a few other *race director* veterans:

DOUG ALRED – GATE RIVER RUN

We do put clocks at every mile mark for the Gate River Run 15K and also for the 5K (5K uses a different course). For the 15K we start the mile mark clocks when wave one starts (1/4 of the field), which includes the elite men at the front. We start the elite women (usually about 25 to 40 athletes) 5-minutes ahead of the wave one. We pay \$5,000 (Equalizer Bonus) to the first person over the finish line. At the 15K finish we have two different clocks, one showing the elite women time and the other with the time of wave one. After all the elite women finish, we change their clock to wave one time (we use wave one time as gun time). We start our 5K in one wave so the gun time for all participants is the same.

RYAN MORRIS – TIMING PRODUCTIONS

Yes, clocks are still being used. I am sure some events differ but the bigger events that I am involved with all use clocks on course. Every mile would not be common I would say - most are every 5k plus points like 13.1 in the marathon distance. I agree that they are irrelevant for most but remain for leaders and for looks and legacy reasons.

Houston has clocks. We have clocks in Boston, Marine Corps Marathon, Falmouth, to name some others we work on.

MICHELLE JUEHRING – BIX7

Bix puts one out at the half-way point of our 7-mile race. It used to sit on an old Wendy's truck, but they're no longer a sponsor. Now it's on top of scaffolding - great place for a sponsor banner. We also have timers at every mile, reading their stopwatches as people run by.

JIM STASAITIS - BOILERMAKER

The Boilermaker had clocks and timers at each mile and the 5K and 10K mark until COVID hit. Since then we have done away with them. Our mile markers are clearly visible and with everyone wearing a watch these days, they can check their "chip time" at every mile.

So, as you can see, the opinions are definitely mixed. Some runners want them along the course, others don't think they are necessary. Some race directors have done away with them, others feel it would be perceived negatively by runners if they did away with them. Although there is a cost to them and there are resources required to set them up and take them down, those issues don't seem to be a factor for most.

As technology improves, maybe the day will come when course clocks can display the net times of all participants as they run past them (although with the density of runners I'm not sure how this could actually happen). Others have suggested that if there were four wave starts for example, the race should place four clocks at each location

representing the time from the start of each wave. This not only gets costly, but it isn't that simple to find one source for this many clocks, especially for a marathon.



Finish line clocks at the TCS New York City Marathon display different times for different categories.
//Photo: Phil Stewart//

As for the finish line clock, no one is suggesting that clock be eliminated. Some, however, have suggested that there be multiple clocks suspended representing all the different wave starts. The issue I see here is that if you had four clocks suspended over a 30-40 foot finish line width, they would all be so tight that it would almost cause more confusion with runners jockeying for position underneath the clock representing their wave. Others are hoping the day comes when a clock will display a person's name, net time and place – now that is a classic “wouldn't it be nice” concept.

Thus, to sum things up a bit regarding the wisdom and value of course clocks, below are a few reasons to keep course clocks and a few reasons to eliminate them:

REASONS MENTIONED TO KEEP COURSE CLOCKS

- Most runners still expect to see them.
- Many runners have no problem doing the calculations based on when they crossed the starting line.

- The clocks help to clearly identify the mile markers along the course.
- Many runners have stated that seeing and then passing clocks along the course are a form of immediate gratification.
- In most smaller races, course clocks still remain very relevant and effective.
- If a runner's watch or GPS fails, at least they have something to go on if there are course clocks.
- Spectators can get a sense of when a runner they are following might be coming by that checkpoint when viewing a course clock.

REASONS MENTIONED TO ELIMINATE COURSE CLOCKS

- As stated above, the times displayed on course clocks in large scale races are not accurate for most of the field.
- There is a cost to renting all the clocks and manpower required to placing them.
- Some runners have stated that when they see the clocks with the times displayed, they get even more confused and lose their sense of pace.
- A fair amount of runners have stated that they don't even look at the clocks anymore.

So, if you were a race director of a large race, what would you do? Or, as a runner, what do you prefer? Certainly, no right or wrong responses on this one.

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