
Though Runners Are Keeping Their Distance, Virtual Races Help Them Stick Together | DCist



Just a few months ago, local runners had [a calendar full of in-person races](#) to choose from: The Rock n' Roll Marathon Series was planned for March, the Cherry Blossom 10 Miler in April, and a growing list of road and trail races were being planned through the Spring.

Now, the coronavirus pandemic is forcing runners to figure out how to build community virtually—and without a set definition for what a virtual race looks like, athletes in the region are creating their own.

As Heather Jeff, event manager at local chain [Pacers Running](#), puts it, “a virtual run can look like a lot of things to a lot of people.”

If you're like Arlington resident Michael Wardian, a virtual race might look like a 63-hour, 262-mile run around your neighborhood. The [Quarantine Backyard Ultra](#) was a “last-person-standing” event held earlier this month on treadmills and running paths around the world.

“The concept is pretty simple,” Wardian says. “You run 4.166 miles on the hour, every hour, until everyone quits.” Cameras set up with YouTube and Facebook Live help keep runners honest.

Wardian—who is also a three-time winner of the US 50 Kilometer championships, among other accolades—beat more than 2,000 other

runners around the world to win the Backyard Ultra after nearly three days of running.

But the runs in the region aren't only ultramarathons.

[DC Front Runners](#), a local LGBTQ+ running, walking, and social club, is holding [a virtual race circuit](#) where runners choose from a menu of race distances to complete now through August. Participants complete at least six "virtual races" on their own, in which they run the prescribed distance and then submit their times to be ranked and scored.

"They can do the same distances [as traditional in-person races], but they can do them any time any place," says DC Front Runners co-director Norman Reich. Even in a time of social distancing, the goal is "to make people feel more connected and a part of the group."

Others are meant for the community to compete in at the same time, as they would an in-person race. Hummus-centric local chain Little Sesame is teaming up with Wardian to host [an Earth Day 5K](#). The [Maryland Half Marathon](#) is now remote. And Pacers, which usually hosts community races around the region, is set to announce their virtual race series later this month—in the interim, the running store chain has been holding virtual happy hours where runners can tune in, chat, and ask questions to running experts and coaches.

In addition to local races, runners are competing in larger events, like the [Run Free Grand Prix](#) race series, or races held in other states.

"Before the pandemic happened I was always a little bit skeptical of virtual races, but I think for the time being while we are distanced, it's a nice alternative," says D.C. resident and runner Edie Wilson. She recently competed in an event held by [Playmakers](#), a running store in her childhood town in Michigan, where she still has close relatives. Prior to the pandemic, Wilson had planned to see some of her family this spring.

Running a virtual race based out of her hometown wasn't an ideal alternative to an in-person visit, but it helped.

"There was a little bit of a connection," says Wilson. "It didn't have that same hype of [a traditional] race day—but it was a festive thing while we're all out there running alone."

Although no virtual event is exactly alike, key in all of them has been making sure that fellow runners follow Centers for Disease Control guidelines and practice social distancing. For pedestrians, that means staying six feet apart. One new study outlined in [a New York Times report](#) suggests runners might need to stay 15 feet away from others to ensure airborne droplets aren't spread.

Tammy Whyte, running coach and owner of [TW Training and Wellness](#), echoes the [CDC's recommendation](#) to wear a cloth mask in public. Some jurisdictions, [including Maryland](#), have issued orders requiring face masks to be worn in certain places, such as grocery stores and public transit. (D.C.'s order is [a little more complicated](#).)

"If you're going where there will be a lot of people, wearing a mask is a good idea," Whyte says. She is a frequent contributor to [Pacers'](#) virtual events and has been reminding residents that the best and safest option is finding places and times where getting close to someone else isn't even a factor.

"If you have a flexible schedule, look for times of day that it might not be as busy and pick routes you know will be empty," Whyte says. She has been running in the middle of the day on streets with wide sidewalks.

"The most important thing is that you're respecting other people on the street," Whyte says.

Although the main goal of these races is to stay separate, it's also to help runners stick together during this time of social distancing.

"Physically we were apart, but philosophically we're a community," says Wardian. "I've raced on all seven continents and the North Pole. And one of the most exciting things to happen, happened feet from my house—there's something to be said for that."

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