



FOLLOW THE BALLOONS

An experienced pacer helps you avoid common mistakes like a too-fast start.

Mass Appeal

A good pace group can take the guesswork out of racing and get you to your goal **BY LISA MARSHALL**

THEY ARE EASY TO SPOT: Just look for the balloons and banners emblazoned with promised finish times. Seventeen years after *Runner's World* hosted the first official pace group at the St. George Marathon, in Utah, pace groups are everywhere, helping marathoners and half-marathoners nail specific time goals. "Now if you go to a race and it doesn't have a pace team, it feels like something's missing," says Star Blackford, a 3:17 marathoner from Columbus, Ohio, who has paced more than 80 marathons as a

member of the Clif Bar Pace Team. But are they for you? That depends. "I am a believer in pace groups if the runner picks the right group and the pacer knows what he or she is doing," says Darren De Reuck, a running and triathlon coach based in Boulder, Colorado. "If not, it can be a disaster." Here's how to nail your goals by running with the right pack.

FIND YOUR GROUP

→ Pace groups are typically organized free of charge by race directors, running stores, and/or national retailers. To find

out if your race has them, look on its Web site, e-mail the race director, or look for the pace-team booth at the prerace expo. (If no groups are offered, check whether local running stores are organizing them.) Sign up online or at the expo. You'll get a pace band to wear on your wrist detailing each mile split—you may also get a time goal to wear on your back so your team can identify and cheer you on throughout the race. →

Pace-group etiquette dictates not crowding your pacer or others in the group and moving quickly through all the water stops.

RUN
better



HAPPY TIMES
Nail your goal *and* make a few new friends.

Even if you haven't formally joined one, most pace teams will allow you to show up at the start and tag along.

MEET YOUR LEADER

→ A good pacer can help followers avoid mistakes like going out too fast, bypassing early water stations, and pushing too hard up hills, says Eladio Valdez, a Kansas City-based coach at The Runner's Edge and founder of SmartPace. Some organizers require their pace leaders to have a minimum number of marathon finishes and to lead groups running up to 30 minutes slower than the pacer's PR. Other coordinators are less rigorous. "I have heard of pacers that lead a group too close to their PR and then struggle and don't make the goal time," says Valdez. "There are also showboats that speed through the aid stations and overdo it on the hills." Go to the expo, meet your pacer, and ask about her experience and strategy or go online and review her profile on

the pace team Web site or Facebook page. "If your pacer says something that doesn't sound right, listen to that voice in your head," says Blackford. "You never want to change something you've done in training based on your pace group."

ASK ABOUT STRATEGY

→ Some pace leaders shoot for even splits, running each mile at the same pace with slight modifications for hills. Run-walk leaders insert walk breaks every few miles. Others start out slower than goal pace, speeding up slightly over the course of the race and then dialing it back over the final miles. De Reuck suggests newbie marathoners and those with a slower time goal (five-plus hours) look for a group that incorporates walk breaks. Runners with a tendency to start too fast should join one that eases into the first miles. Just remember, the strategy should mimic what you've done in training.

ENJOY THE RIDE

→ Pace groups can be loud and feel congested. But you can't beat the camaraderie, says Blackford. "Having a group of runners next to you who are trying to qualify for Boston or break a PR is very different than simply running with 17,000 people," she says. "They can pull you through dark patches and give you motivation you can't give yourself." ❧

Group Therapy

Ace pacer Star Blackford's tips for dealing with pack problems

THE SCENARIO	THE SOLUTION
You can't find an appropriate group	If your pace isn't offered, go to runnersworld.com/tools and plug your finish time into the Marathon Pace Band calculator for splits. Or check the expo: Vendors like Clif Bar often provide pace bands for any goal.
The group starts too fast	If you need a more gradual warmup, fall back, then try to slowly catch up. If the pacer is off, go it alone or run with the next, slower group.
The group is running too slow	In a marathon, wait until after mile 18 to pass. In a half, wait until mile five. The first miles should feel easy if you've trained properly.
You need to hit the porta potty or take a walk break	Don't sprint to catch back up; the extra effort will haunt you later. Slowly try to reconnect over two to three miles.

FOLLOW THE LEADER

Advice from the world's best runners



JIMMY GRABOW, 27, of Running Springs, California, placed 10th at the Olympic Marathon Trials—his first marathon—in 2:12:29.

1 Get Ready

"I miss a few water stops on longer runs to understand how my body reacts to less fluid. This gives me confidence that I don't have to hit every stop in a race."

2 Get Strong

"I do push-ups, crunches, and lunges between four strides, followed by 800 meters at 5-K pace. I do four to 10 sets. This works on race pace and strength."

3 Get Smart

"If you're exhausted or the weather is too hot, take an easy or off day. Sometimes the toughest thing to do is take a break."
—BOB COOPER

→ 30% OF RUNNERS SAY THEY HAVE RACED WITH A PACE GROUP IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS, REPORTS A RUNNERSWORLD.COM POLL.