

An unexpected calling

Ian Ladbrooke suggests you may have to be mad to become a race director

About a year ago I received a call from the race director of a half marathon in Scotland, John Martindale, asking whether I had seen the advert for race director of the 2004 Syntegra Edinburgh Marathon.

I had previously put together elite fields for races around the world in places like Beirut, Dubai, Mumbai and Pyongyang. The idea of being a race director for a marathon in my home country, with such a venue as Edinburgh, had immediate appeal.

I was surprised by the call. When the race was started up I had severe doubts as to whether it would succeed. That it did was testimony to the determination of the chief executive Geoff Sims and the race director Mike Buckland.

That inaugural race in 2003 had started and finished at Meadowbank Stadium. Nearly 3000 people had safely got around a tough route and it was full steam ahead for 2004. I went to a lunchtime meeting with John and Geoff not quite knowing what to expect: a general chat about elite runners, or an interview. Three hours later I had become more and more interested by all I heard.

Things moved along fast and I was offered the job, if I was prepared to do it fulltime. I was living in Coventry with a young family, and a good group of athletes that I coach. Yet I was tempted into moving 500km to an area where I know few people.

We had been thinking of moving that way for some time. Now that the perfect opportunity had arisen, it still seemed a big step. The decision was helped by the availability of cheap flights from Birmingham and the ease with which business can now be done electronically.

By December 2003 I was commuting weekly to Edinburgh. I lived out of a suitcase, first in a Bed & Breakfast place and then in a small flat 50m from the beach at North Berwick. It sounds great, but even for someone used to being away from the family on a regular basis, it became very tough. It meant total immersion in the event.

We wanted to put on a show that Edinburgh and Scotland could be proud of. We wanted to show that London is not the only place in Britain that can host an international marathon. Time would tell.

To increase numbers we added a four-person relay to the marathon. This gave more options to our many charity supporters

and opened up the event to many people who would never take up the challenge of running a full marathon. That was the theory, and it proved correct, but it also added daunting logistics to an already complicated job.

The relay announcement immediately raised the level of interest and excitement and we ended up with nearly 800 teams and over 4200 marathon entries. The total entry was nearly 7500 people, more than double that of 2003.

As race director of a number of smaller races I thought that I had a fair grasp of the task ahead. I was wrong. For a start we needed over 600 volunteers, and I had little idea where I would find them.

Vote counting for the European Election was to happen at Meadowbank Stadium (who says politics don't interfere with sport?) so a new start and finish area had to be found.

Holyrood Park had been a good venue for the European Cross-Country Championships in December, and seemed as if it would be great for the marathon. It was. Meadowbank had changing rooms, car parking, refreshment facilities, first aid rooms and PA systems already in place.

Holyrood just has a lot of space. We recruited Gavin Lightwood, the site manager for the European Cross, and between him, Geoff and I we came up with a site plan for the start and finish that was acceptable to the owners, Historic Scotland.

Event management can be a sleepless task. I had organised other races, long distance cycle rides and charity golf days. I thought that I was well prepared, and I should have been. My patience, however, was to be tested to the extreme. Most of the time I try to be a fairly relaxed fellow, but I hit new stress levels.

Like when I was awoken by our electrical contractors eight hours before race start with the threat that if I didn't find more security they would take all of their equipment off site. Who could I wake up at that time? No one. It was another DIY job. Off I went armed with phone and woolly hat to babysit the grandstand and PA system.

After a 10-minute shower and change break at 05.00 I was back on site to make sure the day went to plan. Adrenalin flows well in these situations. Nightmare scenarios continued to flow as we



discovered problems with sponsors' logos on the start and finish gantry,

missing barriers in supposedly secure areas and a lot of volunteers not being allowed through road blocks by over-zealous council workers. Half an hour before the start a 200m queue had formed for the baggage tent. A swift revision to the arrangements cleared this quickly.

Then the motor cycle for the new Chief Executive of Scottish Athletics to follow the race went missing. It appeared at the last minute, threading through the crowd. Then - hey presto, the Army canon went off bang on 09.00 to start the race.

On the back of a bike, wired for sound, we were off. I thought it was too late for anything else to go wrong, but I was mistaken. Drivers of the relay buses announced they had to take a statutory break, energy drinks ran out and then, as we approached the finish, I heard that the finish line announcing could not be heard and that the finish tape, carefully placed somewhere safe, had gone missing. In these situations you trust to fate, which means relying heavily on the common sense and the ability of key race staff to think on their

feet. They did not let us down.

Smiling faces outnumbered glum ones 20 to 1, sponsors, local media, visitors and the runners themselves were singing praises. Apart from a few dehydrated runners and the usual number of blisters there were no serious casualties. Most runners were promising to come back the following year. From an organiser's perspective we are still trawling through our debrief notes - and we will do better next year.

I sincerely hope that this article doesn't stop prospective Race Directors from attempting the job. I used to think that the RD has it easy in the last few days and just schmoozes with sponsors on race day. I couldn't have been more wrong, but I will not be giving up. After careful reflection, and fuelled by a few beers on race night, the rewards make it worth it. The looks on runners' faces as they crossed the finish line and the hundreds of grateful emails of thanks make it a job in a million. I look forward to making Edinburgh a major international marathon in the coming years.