

Running & Sprinting with Guides



Introduction to guide running

Being a guide runner can bring rewards for both the guided runner and the guide. For a Paralympic hopeful this might provide a guide with new motivation for training, a chance to experience the buzz of competition and, for some guides, a unique experience of entering a world class arena. For the social, fitness and goal achieving runner the need for guides can offer a whole new dimension to a running group, and a further extension to paced groups and leaders.

Not all visually impaired and registered blind athletes need a guide. The rules for athletics also limit the use of guides to B1 athletes, and a choice for B2. Indeed, some athletes, for example Libby Clegg, will train without a guide most of the time but in races will always use one. Noel Thatcher chose the opposite – training with guides but racing solo. Each athlete's vision and preference is very different, so a coach and athlete must explore what works best.

Running distance track and road events with a guide introduces new technical challenges including a fair amount of physical interventions – shoulder knocking and pulling – and lots of verbal feedback and encouragement. For a perfectly run sprint the emphasis is on executing a synchronised start and pick-up.

Whilst a very good guide can help with race strategy and setting the rhythm, it is not pacing. During a race the leadership should come from the athlete. The advantages against rivals are made with well organised training, plus excellent team-work and understanding.

At the 2012 Paralympics, for the first time guide runners will also receive medals and financial rewards for assisting with podium finishes. Elite guide runners often receive the same physiotherapy and medical insurance to ensure they are kept in track-shape.

Noel Thatcher

Noel Thatcher MBE competed at six Paralympic Games (1984 to 2004), won five gold medals and set a 5k world record at Sydney. Noel was inducted into the England Athletics Hall of Fame in 2009.

“For me, my guides were absolutely pivotal to my winning races. Although it was difficult to find suitably fast guys. I ran 3.50 for 1500 and had 3.34/5 runners to train with, and 2.14 marathon runners!

In training, the guide gets you through the session safely, pre-empts potential hazards and gives feedback. Try running 10 mile tempos around Regents Park in the dark and wet!

For the visually impaired person who would like to run but who lacks the confidence, a guide can make dreams come true.

Guides are worth their weight in Gold Medals!”



Selina Litt

Selina Litt is currently the leading English athlete. She trains at Charnwood AC with Joe McDonnell for the 100m, 200m and Long Jump. She is picture here with former GB Junior sprinter Jenn Taker.

"It's like a three-legged race, only your hands are linked instead. Begin with walking, then jogging and progress to running, lengthening the distance each time. You eventually don't have to think about it"

A guide rope can be made out of anything from a piece of string or a headband with a knot in the middle. You don't want it too stretchy and distance between guide and athlete is personal preference, but the closer the better seems to be the way most athletes do it".



The Basics

A guide ensures that a visually impaired or blind athlete can train and race along a set course. This is usually performed by use of a loose strap or rope held between hands.

- ◆ On the track the guide will run on the right hand side in 200m+ races, going the long way around. The guide will need to stretch their stride around the bend and shorten again on the straight.
- ◆ In the sprints this depends on preference or field of vision.
- ◆ During a marathon up to four guides can be used (changing at 10k, 20k, 30k points).
- ◆ A guide can be male or female, from any age group.

Organisation and rules

- ◆ Ensure that races are held in good light: daylight or well floodlit conditions.
- ◆ Provide light weight, breathable fluorescent vests marked 'Guide' if possible.
- ◆ Guides do not pay an entry fee and will need accreditation.

Basic competition rules

- ◆ At the finish the athlete must cross the line before the guide-runner.
- ◆ Athlete and guide must not run more than 0.5m apart, except for last 10m of the race when the rule doesn't apply, providing no interference is caused.
- ◆ Rules state an 'elbow lead' or 'tether' may be used, but no pushing / pulling etc.
- ◆ Verbal instruction is allowed.
- ◆ Guide-runners must run! No bikes or roller skates permitted.

Road races

- ◆ Check how many guide runners are needed – and ensure that they are transported into their appropriate place on the course.
- ◆ There should be awareness at water stations of what is needed for handing drinks to blind and visually impaired athletes.
- ◆ Assistance is allowed at water stations for athletes in T11-T13

"The guide can't cross the line first, as the athlete will be disqualified. If the guide false starts, so will the athlete. It's the guides responsibility to set up the blocks, place the athletes hands behind the line or if a standing start ensure the athlete is straight, not only their face, but hips and feet too."

Selina Litt

On the track

- ◆ IPC competition rules state blocks must be used by athlete and guide for all events up to 400m.
- ◆ Two guides may be used in races 800m or longer, but only one change is permitted. The Track Referee must be notified in advance and will instruct on procedures.

For full rules please consult IPC Athletics Rules & Regulations on the IPC website:
<http://ipc-athletics.paralympic.org>

Pairings

Getting the right pairing of athletes with a suitable guide is important:

- ◆ Ideally pairs should be of similar height and stride length.
- ◆ The speed/ability of the guide should be relevant to the session or distance.

Advice from Selina Litt

Drills

- ◆ A visually impaired athlete can do most of the drills a sighted athlete can do.
- ◆ The visually impaired athlete needs to become co-ordinated on their own first (such as high knees etc). They can then do these with their guide linked.
- ◆ Many visually impaired people struggle with balance, so drills to improve this is beneficial too, such as standing on one leg.
- ◆ A visually impaired athlete will always want to be close to the ground, even without realising. Jumping drills ensuring the athlete doesn't reach for the ground will help this (e.g. squat jumps or jumping into the sand pit, soft landing).
- ◆ Box jumps are risky, but when an athlete is confident they can be done.

Communication

Simple communication between the guide and athlete will make the pairing more effective

- ◆ Simple, quick instructions, e.g. nose to the left or right, will make the athlete not only move their head, but entire body position too if veering.
- ◆ Bigger arms will lengthen out stride length, don't just say stride out. It's the guide's responsibility to match the athlete's foot strike.

General technique

- ◆ Good technique for a visually Impaired athlete should be the same as for any other athlete, there should not be any obvious differences.

Standing start

- ◆ The guide should line the athlete up with the line, ensure head, hips and feet are straight. To check the athlete can make an arrow with their hands to check direction.
- ◆ The guide should wait for athlete to step first and concentrate on matching that first stride to get the rhythm.

Blocks start

- ◆ Most guides set their blocks slightly further back to the athlete to ensure that the guide doesn't go running off without the athlete. Again the guide should react off the athlete.
- ◆ Blocks should be placed close together so there is little strain on guide rope.
- ◆ Both guide and athlete need to use knuckles instead of fingers for the 'set' position due to the lack of space.
- ◆ The guide should line up the athlete first and then get into their blocks.

“Co-ordination is vital. Not only between you and your guide, but as the athlete you need to be able to run evenly, with equal stride length, not one long, three short etc”

Selina Litt

- ◆ Guides are usually quicker than the athlete (for sessions and elite races).
- ◆ The pair should be able to synchronise arm and leg movements (it is always better for the athlete if the leg and arm action is synchronised (i.e. as in a three legged race) and when sprinting it is almost impossible to run any other way. The guide can use the athlete's free arm as a visual guide to keep in step. This is obviously preferable to looking down at the legs or feet!).
- ◆ It is most important to encourage the athlete to use both arms correctly.
- ◆ Guides should be fit and healthy, and not prone to injury or DNFs.
- ◆ Similar interests and humour definitely help!
- ◆ Guides should be well organised, but flexible.

Running Buddies

There is more to it than just the technical aspects. It is important the pair get on well.

- ◆ Honesty! The athlete or guide simply may not 'get on'. This may not be personal, but simply due to different personalities.
- ◆ A successful pairing depends on confidence, timely feedback etc. However, this could be upset by being unreliable or a more subjective or personal factor such as an annoying running habit or unsuitable stride pattern.

Multiple Guides

Where possible it is best to train up and use several guides to cover for different distances and paces, but also having back-up should the 'race' guide become injured or not available. With a mix of long, short, easy and hard sessions, slower guides can be used for recovery runs and sprinters used for track sessions.

British Blind Sport (BBS) and Classification

To compete domestically athletes need to be registered with BBS and UKA by completing a 'Sight Form': www.britishblindsport.org.uk

For information on IPC Classification: <http://ipc-athletics.paralympic.org/classification>

Rob Matthews

Rob Matthews MBE won eight Paralympic Gold, four Silver and one Bronze medal between 1980 and 2004, and broke 22 World Records from 800m to 10km. With bests of 1:59.90, 4:05.11, 8:55, 15:43.40, 32:42 and 2:47:18 it would be very difficult for one guide to cover all those distances (running in lane 2!), and maintain their own training. During his career Rob used over 115 guides, balancing racing and training between up to three or four guides at one time ... plus a treadmill for additional runs.

Now living in New Zealand Rob is a world class Para-Triathlete and Cyclist.

His story *Running Blind* was published by HarperCollins in 2009.



"During marathons I've always found it easiest and expedient when drinks are handed to the guide who then hands them to me"

Rob Matthews

Distance and road running essentials

The run:

- ◆ Discuss the route, the pace, any niggles or any other issues before the run. Even if it's a pre-arranged session or a regular route, it is always worth clarifying these so there is a clear understanding.
- ◆ You should both be honest if you think run will be too fast, far, hard or risky – particularly if you or they are carrying a potential injury. Remember, there are two of you to get home!
- ◆ Always allow time for the pre-run brief, stretching and warm-up. For drills a guide is often needed.
- ◆ As there are two of you, account for twice the chance that the run may over-run or come into problems.
- ◆ Synchronising the running action between athlete and guide can take a few runs to perfect. This can also be affected by:
 - ◆ fatigue after hard training or a race
 - ◆ using a different guide since your last session together (especially if they're taller or smaller)
 - ◆ the session being set at a different pace.

So don't be surprised if you have to re-adjust or take some practice getting used to running with each other.

- ◆ If you don't synchronise at first. Stop and try again.
- ◆ Remember to relax!

Verbal feedback:

- ◆ Simple, clear advice and feedback is needed – not a story – but once going you can start talking about the things runners normally discuss on a run!
- ◆ Timing is critical. For example, running up a kerb or over a speed-bump needs to be known as soon as the standing foot hits the ground.
- ◆ Pre-alert potential problems such as an oncoming dog or a child riding a bike. You should then run 'tight' (meaning close together with the guide rope pulled more tightly, not with a tight running technique) and cautiously. If appropriate say 'excuse me' to the hazard (you can try telling a dog!), and then it won't be a surprise if you suddenly have to stop or swerve.
- ◆ A person walking towards you may expect you to separate, so letting them know in advance will prevent a rude reaction (wearing a florescent bib with 'Guide Runner' on it may help).
- ◆ In a distance race you can also feedback on competitors, current pace and potential overtaking etc.

"When running the athlete doesn't generally need to speak, but the guide needs to keep the athlete informed, for example, how far to the finish, when to come out of the drive phase, if the athlete veers off in the wrong direction. The athlete needs to speak up if the rhythm doesn't feel right or the amount of info is too much or too little."

Selina Litt

Advice from Rob Matthews MBE

If a potential guide had to go through all the instructions before running for the first time they might find the whole thing even more daunting! Definitely good communication is essential but I've always found the guide really needs to be confident and positive – the more hesitant the more likely accidents and tumbles become.

Training, obstacles ... and cross country

I never like too much warning before, say, a kerb as I would tend to moon walk! Two or, at most three, steps are my preference. Even jumping logs or streams during a cross country race is very doable but it would probably take more than a couple of steps for my guide to tell me to jump high or long. Also where possible hitting a kerb squarely; diagonally works but the athlete should be made aware that it is a 'diagonal kerb down'.

(Knowing the athlete's preferences with regards to how much notice they want of obstacles, and what phrases work best for them, is very beneficial. This can be developed through discussion before and after runs as well as through practice on the runs. A great deal can then be tackled, for example, Rob competed in club cross country races, including the notorious stream at Leamington Comyn during the Warwickshire Championships).

Racing

On the track, only 'bend' and 'straight' are essential and only approximately one step before. I found more warning would have me barging my guide or hitting the kerb. One step before worked best. When suffering towards the end of a race I might find it a comfort if my guide told me that the other athletes are looking rough as well!

Championships

I think getting on well with the guide is really important especially for sharing a room on a training weekend or at an international – after all you're together 24/7. I tried to give my guide space and a rest from me hanging on his arm from time to time by hooking up with a partially sighted athlete or better still one of the girls!

Welfare

- ◆ For training which is supervised by a coach, or as part of a group, a guide can be of any age or either gender. The important thing is that a guide is suitable for the intended session and the needs of the athlete.
- ◆ If required, escort to the toilet should be by someone of the same gender where possible. If this is not possible it should be in pairs to an accessible toilet door. A guide should never need to enter a toilet cubicle with any athlete.
- ◆ When a junior and adult are working together as guide and athlete, training should be supervised by a coach.
- ◆ For a junior athlete the parents should be aware that their child may be guided in training by a male or female, or senior athlete and parental consent should be obtained. Similar consent should be obtained regarding escort to the toilet and any competition/travel arrangements.

Safety

1. Before the first guided run, it is worth meeting or talking on the phone about expectations, concerns and if appropriate, to offer advice.
2. Start slow, and if possible run some strides.
3. Make sure both runners are wearing visible tops.
4. The strap should be strong.
5. Use verbal instructions.
6. Know the route.
7. Know the quick routes home.
8. When running in the dark or the snow, you should know the obstacles really well.
9. If possible, tell somebody where you're going.
10. Let the athlete know if there are any weather or light changes imminent.
11. Obstacles are high and low, and sometimes unexpected.
12. Use verbal caution and warning in advance wherever possible.
13. Run 'tight' (shortened guide rope and closer together) and slow down when needed. Stopping is an option.
14. Don't try to unnecessarily put yourself at risk of injury by running too close to edge of a road, in the line of trees etc. If the path is narrow, slow-down and run 'tight'... or avoid that route.

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