

Nowhere To Run

Marathons have been canceled across the country, and organizers face a long road back

FOR YEARS JERRY MARCUS has been waking early — 3 a.m. early — on the first Sunday of November to make and eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. But this year was different. When 3 a.m. struck, Marcus just stayed in bed. It wasn't an appetizing thought.

Why? Because a tradition, at least for one year, has been put on hold.

Marcus, 70, lives in Manhattan and has run 23 New York City marathons since his first one, in 1987. "Signed up the day before," he says, "and paid ten bucks."

Each of his race days starts with that pre-dawn PB&J. This year he — along with 50,000 other people who paid upward of \$255 to run the largest marathon in the world — won't be rushing to run 26.2 miles. The TCS New York City Marathon has been canceled because of COVID-19, just like most races in the country, from small-town 5K charity

runs to historic mega-marathons in America's urban centers.

For Marcus, the canceled marathon means no pre-race carbo loading Italian meal with fellow members of his Pizza Runner Group. No fighting for a seat on the Staten Island Ferry that transports runners to the start come race day. No loud roars greeting him as he makes his way into Manhattan from Queens via the 59th Street Bridge.

"I'm missing it now," Marcus, a retired technology executive, said a couple of weeks before the scheduled marathon date. "I'm not training as I used to and I am not training with my friends. That whole social environment, independent of the race, is gone. The anticipation. The nervousness. I'm going to miss all that."

This fall, the nation's roadways are missing thousands of runners like Jerry Marcus. Since

BY CHARLES
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March, when most of the world went into quarantine due to COVID-19, the racing industry has been running on empty. Everything from the Boston Marathon in April (30,000 runners), to the Peachtree Road Race in Atlanta (60,000 runners) on Independence Day to the fall marathon season has been one giant DNS (Did Not Start). Besides New York, marathons in Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia have all been KO'd by COVID.

"It has been a horrible year for any and all live events," says Jean Knaack, executive director of the Road Runners Club of America, which represents 1,500 running clubs and organizers. Or, as Tom Grilk, the CEO of the Boston Athletic Association, organizer of the most prestigious race in the sport, the Boston Marathon, puts it, the business of racing was brought to "a grinding halt" by COVID.

The stoppage has done more than snuff the traditions relished by runners like Jerry Marcus. Marathons pump millions into local economies, with runners (and their families) spending money on food, travel, accommodations and merchandise during a weekend of festivities. The TCS New York City Marathon reportedly generates \$415 million for the city. Boston measures its impact at \$200 million. And Chicago, which was due to have its 43rd running on Oct. 11, derives over \$400 million. But it's not just big cities profiting from the sport. The Monterey, Calif., area draws 75,000 runners, relatives and friends by hosting two race weekends each year. In 2020, both events were canceled, and so too the economic benefit.

The trickle-down effect from the missing events is widespread. Often, charities secure slots in the coveted races, then make them available to runners willing to fundraise for the charity's cause. Last year, charity runners doing the Bank of America Chicago Marathon raised more than \$25 million for 100 charities. With the race canceled, those organizations now face thousands of dollars in lost revenue.

And then there's the hit on runners' wallets. A New York City marathoner could spend upward of \$500 to gain entry into the race: \$255 for the actual event and another \$250 or so to take part in nine smaller races that guarantee entry into the big one.

This year, New York Road Runners, the marathon organizer, offered either a full refund or a deferral to a future marathon, a strategy employed by organizers in Chicago and Philadelphia, among others.

Usually, though, races don't offer refunds when they're canceled. Eddi Walker, a runner from Butte, Mont.,

says she spent about \$400 on race fees this year but received only \$175 in refunds. She directs races in Butte, so she understands the no-refund policy. Races have expenses — from permits

to booking exhibit space for pre-race expos to purchasing T-shirts — that can't be recouped. Still, the lost entry fees are "kind of problem. I am not working full time," Walker says. "I substitute teach, and as a teacher they closed school down for a long time — and now it's too scary to [teach]."

Race directors say they feel the runners' pain. Their bottom lines hurt, too. New York Road Runners' 2019 tax forms show revenue





After first being postponed from April 20 to Sept. 14, the Boston Marathon was not run in person this year for the first time since its debut in 1897.

of more than \$113 million, of which an estimated \$12 million came from marathon entries. With the cancellation, NYRR will be refunding runners who are not deferring to a future marathon. It is also negotiating with sponsors who signed up to be part of a race that isn't happening. In some cases it may have to return sponsorship dollars. "It is significant," Jim Heim, senior vice president of events and race director, says of the financial hit. "[The marathon] is the biggest financial driver that we have."

New York knows the trials a cancellation can cause. In 2012, Hurricane Sandy wiped out the race just days before its scheduled running. That year, NYRR lost \$19 million, although it recouped \$15 million via its insurer. By canceling this year's race four months in advance, NYRR officials say they avoided some major costs they usually incur. Still, they're not yet clear how much insurance will cover other losses.

Timing did not favor the Boston Marathon. COVID-19 was peaking in many East Coast cities when the BAA canceled its mid-April race. By then, race officials had incurred costs for shirts, medals and other event-related expenses. "There are costs to cancellation, costs that cannot be canceled," says Grilk. "A race organizer in many cases is stuck with those costs." Grilk says the BAA also had sponsorship deals to consider. While not disclosing exact figures, Grilk says the BAA "did return money" to John Hancock, its longtime title sponsor, after a "data-driven analysis" that looked at what value John Hancock had gained prior to the cancellation. Like NYRR, the BAA did have insurance that covered cancellation caused by such events as a pandemic, according to Grilk.

The lost revenue, in some cases, has cost jobs. The 229-person New York Road Runners has laid off 26 employees (11%) and furloughed 65 others. Chicago, with its 45,000 entrants generating upwards of \$6 million in revenue, also laid off employees,



Jerry Marcus (second from right) and his Pizza Runners buddies ran a virtual marathon last month.

A PROBLEM FROM START TO FINISH

Nearly a year's worth of major marathons have been called off

| Event | Last Held | Most recent finishers |
|----------------------------------|---------------|-----------------------|
| TCS New York City Marathon | November 2019 | 53,627 |
| Bank of America Chicago Marathon | October 2019 | 45,932 |
| Boston Marathon | April 2019 | 26,771 |
| Honolulu Marathon | December 2019 | 18,805 |
| Marine Corps Marathon | October 2019 | 18,355 |
| Walt Disney World Marathon* | January 2020 | 14,116 |
| Philadelphia Marathon | November 2019 | 10,065 |
| Chevron Houston Marathon* | January 2020 | 6,899 |
| Medtronic Twin Cities Marathon | October 2019 | 6,747 |
| San Francisco Marathon | November 2019 | 5,226 |

* Have already canceled races for 2021

according to race director Carey Pinkowski. While not disclosing the number of affected employees, Pinkowski says, "You have to make adjustments on what you are doing; pull back on a lot of things. Our goal is to keep our core team together, but it's the economics. We're fortunate that we have some reserves to draw on and as we move into 2021."

Doug Thurston, race director of the Big Sur International Marathon in California, says his organization has reserves too — they're just not what they were before COVID. Canceling major events in April and November cost the organization close to \$3.4 million in revenue — and eventually jobs. In August, Thurston laid off five of seven full-time staffers. He also announced the cancellation of all 2021 races, becoming one of the first race directors to raise the white flag on the coming year.

"It is completely a survival game. Completely," says Thurston, who says he took a pay cut at the time of the layoffs. "We know how much money is in the bank. There is not much more going in. We can sell a few shirts now and then, but that barely pays the electric bill. Our balance in the bank is just going to keep going down and down and down each month until we can get a new influx of cash."

And when's that? Race directors say planning for 2021 remains a waiting game. Until a vaccine is approved and widely available, staging large-scale racing events is unlikely. Organizers also need city and state authorities to ease restrictions. Already, December's BMW Dallas Marathon has been rescheduled to April 2021, and January's Houston Marathon has been canceled, with organizers deciding to replace it with a virtual race.

For now, virtual races have become the industry's lifeline, keeping runners connected to their favorite events — if still far away from a race's actual course. Runners who signed up for, say, the virtual Chicago Marathon in October could run the 26.2 miles on a route of their choosing without having to travel to Chicago. They received a complimentary digital race bib number and a finisher certificate. They could also tour the virtual race expo. (They did need to pony up for a race T-shirt.) The BAA, on the other hand, charged \$50 for runners to take part in its first virtual Boston Marathon. The field was limited to those who had

qualified for the April race; 18,000 signed up, with finishers receiving a Boston medal.

New York leads the pack when it comes to virtual racing. This year, it offered different tiers, ranging from a free entry to elite levels of \$150. By mid-October, 26,000 runners had signed up to do the virtual marathon. Runners could download an app that offered Frank Sinatra's rendition of "New York,

New York" when they began their marathon—even if their run started in Des Moines or Spokane. They could also take a photo of themselves when finished, with an "augmented reality" medal appearing on their chests.

TCS developed the AR feature. The company also worked with NYRR on a podcast and YouTube training program in order to get some value out of its title sponsorship, a role it has held since 2014. Michelle Taylor, TCS's head of global sports sponsorships, says such programming showed a shared interest between the event partners "to keep runners engaged in these crazy times ... We want to do everything we can do with the race property to help create the experience and opportunities wherever people are."

Taylor did add that TCS and NYRR will need to resolve "how much of the value we have traditionally gotten is not able to be delivered." That's a near-term conversation. Another conversation looms: TCS's contract with NYRR ends after the 2021 marathon. That's 12 months away, and while Taylor says the company is committed to running and runners, like everyone involved in the sport "we are trying to get a sense of where things are heading."

Jerry Marcus knows the feeling. On Oct. 24, he ran the virtual New York City Marathon. Instead of hitting all five boroughs, Marcus kept his route to the streets of Manhattan. Instead of running with 55,000 other runners, he ran solo, for 5 hours, 40 minutes, and 46 seconds. And instead of being cheered by New Yorkers lining the streets in different neighborhoods, he at times dodged tourists clueless to what he was doing. But he ended his run at a familiar spot: the finish line in Central Park he had crossed 23 other times. Waiting for him, with a Mylar jacket, was his wife, Roberta, and five other members of the Pizza Runner Group. They had run 26.2 miles that day too. A picnic followed, Marcus celebrating his 24th New York City Marathon. Sort of.

"Without the normal lead-up to a race, without running with people competitively, particularly in New York where you go through different communities and get the vibe—all that was missing," said Marcus.

And as it turned out, one other thing was different: He ran 26.3 miles. "That's the problem when you make your own course," he said. "You can't plan it perfectly." ❌

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