

Honesty in Road Racing

Occasionally we hear about cheating and dishonesty in road racing. The most common form of individual cheating is to cut the course or jump in the race at some point. The most famous case was in the 1980 Boston Marathon where Rosie Ruiz stood on the winner's stage and accepted the laurel wreath. Probably most of us have known someone or heard about someone who has cheated. For the most part it is not necessary to question a runner's integrity. However, it does happen and we shake our heads and wonder why anyone would do such a thing. Many times there is no money involved...just a trophy or recognition. There are other individual dishonesties such as lying about a person's age or intentionally passing in the chute.

Other types of dishonesty might be in the course where it could possibly be measured short. Race times would certainly be bogus and unacceptable. Most course measurers would never measure a course short intentionally. This is why there are course measurement and certification procedures. We have heard of cases where fun runs have been measured short in order to give runners a good "feeling." This, of course, is deceit and should never happen. In one case a young female star ran an incredible time in her first cross country race. After numerous tries to duplicate this effort she became very frustrated only to learn that her original "record" time was over a bogus course. It was short.

Another way to be dishonest would be to "quick-punch" the electronic timer. This has probably happened, but there is no case on record that comes to mind. It would be easy to do by simply punching the timer a few meters before a runner reaches the finish line. This is why there are at least two backup timers at the finish chutes. Here again only someone dishonest would do this.

We are all in agreement that no one would accept a bogus course or a bogus time. That is no one unless it was one of the few individuals we have heard about who would also cut the course. In which case, these individuals would probably do a lot of other dishonest things.

But what about the awards? If we insist on accurate courses and accurate times, should we not also insist on accurate award distribution? The common practice by over 65% of the races of excluding age group awards from the Open awards is bogus and dishonest. Ashley Houghton, director of the Michael Houghton Memorial Run had this to say about age group exclusion:

"You could not give me an award stating I was first in my age group when there was someone else my age that finished ahead of me. I would no more accept an award for this than a "record" time on a short course."

In some cases where the top ten or twelve Open runners receive awards as many as six runners in one age group were excluded. This means that the seventh finisher in a particular age group was given a first-place trophy? This actually happened in a race. The person who received the first-place age-group award was running her first race to get into a weight-loss program! If this is not deceit, then what is it?

What we hear most often is that race directors are attempting to separate the elite runners from the average runners. Occasionally we hear that race directors just want to give as many awards as possible and send everyone home happy. Or race directors don't want to duplicate awards. Others have said "lighten up" it doesn't make any difference--its all for fun.

In the 1993 Michael Houghton Run the 40-44 female winner was also be best WMA Master and also first in the Open. In other words, she was recognized for three distinct accomplishments in one race. Rather than give this person three separate awards the proper procedure is to give her one award and one only recognizing all three honors. Directors should never, ever give someone else the Masters trophy and someone else the 40-44 age group award. Not only does this prolong the already long and drawn out award ceremony it results in phony and meaningless awards. We have been at ceremonies where runners were called up four separate times to receive four separate awards.

One director, who is an average runner, stated that in her race she would have to assign 126 runners to the Open category for awards and then exclude all these from the age groups. In this manner she would be first in her group because there were 22 others that would normally be there but finished in the Open!

Another problem with age-group award exclusion is its inconsistency with course and state records. Those who are named as age-group winners on race day will not show up as age-group record holders!

Good performances should always be rewarded but awards should be based on performance, honesty, consistency and meaning.

There is no other way to do it. **If you don't have honesty, you have nothing.** You have to tell it exactly the way it happened...insisting on honesty above all else. If not, you may as well randomly hand out awards stating that everyone finished first. Believe it or not the majority of runners in these types of races will accept an award stating he or she won an age group.

The accuracy of the course, accurate timing procedures and awards distribution are three very important items for the race director. These are items under his or her control. One is just as important as the other.