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BACK OF PACK FRONT OF MIND

Creating more inclusive
and successful events

She**RACES** 

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Why the back-of-the-pack experience matters

Finish lines change lives. It's not just about completing a race; it's the culmination of hard work in training, a sense of achievement, a shared community experience and so much more. We want everyone to experience the joy of crossing a finish line.

But we also know not everyone gets the race they deserve. Our work focuses on the experiences of women in racing, whether that's running, triathlon, cycling or other sports. Our flagship survey, conducted in 2022, identified the key barriers to women in taking part in races and ways that our experience can be improved. This detailed research led to the creation of our freely available [Race Guidelines](#) – simple but effective guidance that all races can implement to create events that are inclusive and increase the proportion of women on their start lines.

Since then, we've done in-depth research in several different areas and created guidelines for [Triathlons](#) and races featuring [Elite women](#), as well as a report on the importance of [women-only events](#).

Through this work, and across different sports at all levels, we have become aware of the frequent disparity in race experience between those at the front and the back of the field. The person who crosses the finish line last deserves the same positive race experience as the person who crosses it first.

However, we know from conversations with our community that this often isn't the case. Poor back-of-the-pack experiences deter women from entering again (or even entering in the first place), reduce self-esteem and detract from the joy they should have in finishing.

Introduction

We have collated feedback from our community to form an accurate reflection of what the back-of-the-pack race experience is really like. From this, and through in-depth conversations with race directors and event organisers, we have created a series of additional race guidelines that are freely available for any race to download and implement, highlighting best practice for supporting athletes in the final third of the race field.

While SheRACES' mission is to improve the race experience for women, and to advocate for female athletes at all levels, a better back-of-the-pack experience benefits everyone, of any gender, age or ability, and creates the truly inclusive events we want to see.

Thank you to every athlete who has shared their race experiences with us and every event organiser who has supported us. A particular thank you to running author and *Runner's World* columnist Lisa Jackson, who has been actively involved in this research and has given her expert opinion after proudly finishing last in 25 marathons!

Please support us by sharing these guidelines with events – encouraging those who already are supportive to shout about it, and suggesting improvements to races that simply might not be aware of where they fall short. These guidelines are a living document – we are always looking for new ideas to support athletes, so please share yours at hello@sheraces.com

Foreword by Lisa Jackson

There is nothing embarrassing about finishing at the back of the pack. For many athletes, getting to the start line is already a victory; getting to the finish line is the result of weeks or months of training, planning and commitment. Finishing last does not mean caring less. Very often, it means overcoming more.

Athletes at the back of the field are not an inconvenient minority in modern racing, they're a meaningful and growing part of the sport. They include newer runners, older runners, participants returning after illness or injury, disabled athletes, run-walkers, walkers, people fundraising for causes that matter to them and people taking on distances they once thought were impossible.

When races get it right, the effect is enormous. A stocked aid station, a marshal who cheers with enthusiasm rather than condescension, a finish arch still standing, a medal still waiting, a race announcer who treats the final finisher like they belong there: these things tell a participant that their effort counts. When races get it wrong, the message is just as clear.

This is why back-of-the-pack inclusion cannot be an afterthought. It is one of the clearest tests of whether a race really is inclusive. The practical steps in this report are simple. They do not ask organisers to lower standards or remove challenge. They ask races to match their values with their operations and to treat slower participants as the legitimate, valued athletes they most definitely are.



What back-of-the-pack athletes experience

We asked the SheRACES community to provide insight on how races treated back-of-the-pack participants, asking for both positive and negative feedback.

The comments were predominately from women, given the nature of our wider work and core followers, but they represented participants from running (road, trail and ultrarunning), cycling and triathlon. Experiences were broadly similar across all sports, highlighting a wider systemic issue rather than being discipline-specific.

From this, we identified some key themes that particularly impacted back-of-the-pack athletes.

A lower-quality race experience

The most common concern was that later finishers did not receive the same race package as earlier finishers. Slower participants expect the same race experience promised to all entrants. For participants, this is not an insignificant operational issue: it is often experienced as a sign that they were not truly welcome or planned for.

When supplies run out, it is widely perceived as poor planning or a lack of respect.

"I've had aid stations run out of some things or completely packed up. Photographers long gone. Less crowd support. It can be a really lonely experience at the back."

"The photographers waited for the front runners and then moved on to capture them again at the next location, so there was only one official photo of me on the course, right at the start."

Key Findings

Illustrative participant feedback included:

- Aid stations being packed away before all runners had passed.
- Finish-line infrastructure being dismantled before the cut-off had expired.
- Post-event recovery options, such as on-site massages or provided food/drink, no longer available.
- T-shirts being unavailable in the size ordered at registration.
- Lack of pacing groups for slower athletes.

These experiences highlight the importance of planning for the last finisher, not just the first half of the field.

"As a back-of-the-pack runner who has never finished outside the cut-off, I have lost count of the times I have not received a t-shirt or been given a shirt in the wrong size despite stating my preferred size. I've also entered races where they've run out of water or restrict you to an inch in a cup."

"No photos ever taken. Police on your ass. Being pushed onto the sidewalk despite being well within the course time limits. Medals running out. Having people employed by the race talk to you (and others) about how pathetic you are/how you shouldn't even be there if you can't be faster/and how you don't deserve a medal."

"The cut-off was 4hrs 30mins and we finished in 3hrs 40mins, but they had run out of the advertised pasties at the end, and all the food and drinks vendors had packed up. We were very disappointed as it was only 4°C so a hot drink and pasty would have really hit the spot."

"I watched a lady forced to pick up a discarded bottle of water from the gutter because the aid station had run out and was packing up."

Feeling like an inconvenience and a lesser 'athlete'

Many athletes described being made to feel like a burden rather than a participant. They reported being hurried off the course, spoken to with pity or impatience, or made to feel their presence was causing problems for staff and volunteers. When staff and volunteers stayed engaged, cheered warmly, kept aid stations operating and welcomed later finishers with enthusiasm, they transformed entrants' race experience. Many of the positive examples in the feedback centred on volunteers doing exactly that.

Being treated badly has a disproportionate emotional effect. Back-of-the-pack athletes often arrive at the finish line after spending longer on the course, managing more self-doubt, and receiving less crowd support. A dismissive comment or obvious impatience can overshadow the day and mean that athlete is less likely to return to any start line in the future.

"At the start of a 6K trail event, the commentator called it a 'beginners' race' He said it was for those not yet really fit and that it wasn't really a proper race. That felt like a kick in the guts. For me the race was challenging and so many people never even reach this level. Disgusting. Running is hard, and for some people walking is hard. Not everyone is an Olympian. I will never attend that event organiser's races ever again"

Common examples included:

- Being told to hurry up while still inside the official cut-off.
- Marshalls leaving early.
- Being made to feel unwelcome when collecting finish-line items.
- Silence, indifference or visible annoyance from staff as later athletes arrived.
- Race staff expressing annoyance.
- Announcers making patronising comments.

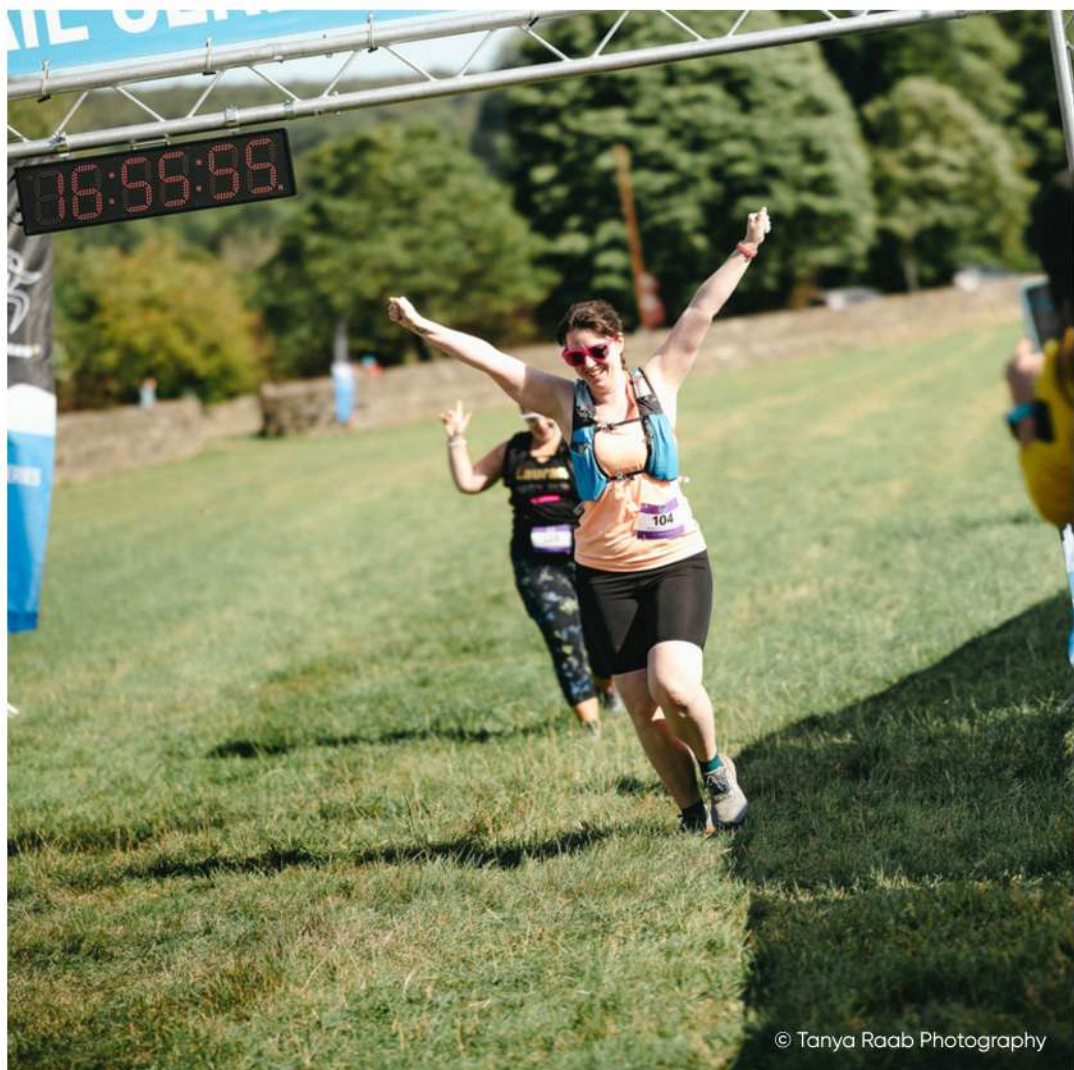
Key Findings

A slower pace does not make an athlete less worthy of dignity.

"It's really hard being at the back of the pack. I've had race directors shout at me for being close to the cut-off. I've had them swear at me and tell me I needed to hurry up because they wanted to go home (not quite as nicely put as that either)."

"As I approached the finish line of a trail half in Wales, the commentator said: 'It will be mainly girls coming in from now on'. 1) I was 49 years old, so not a girl. 2) I checked the results and 50% of the runners who finished after me were male."

"Being asked if I'm okay is like a red rag to a bull for me. Being slow does NOT equate to not being okay!"



Cut-offs: confusion, pressure and unfairness

Most participants understood that some races need cut-offs. The problem was not the existence of a cut-off in itself, but the way it was communicated and enforced. Runners described unclear policies, inconsistent application, being judged against gun time rather than chip time, and being removed abruptly or aggressively from the course. The most intense frustration was often directed at the gap between published promises and race-day reality. Some athletes signed up because events claimed to be inclusive or open to all abilities, only to discover the practical support for slower times was not really there.

The core themes were:

- Cut-offs not clearly advertised in advance and hidden in the small print.
- Cut-offs being inconsistently enforced – some races allow entrants to exceed the official cut-off and still get a time and medal, others don't.
- Intermediate cut-offs not explained.
- Athletes being pressured before they were actually outside the cut-off.
- Medal, timing or finish recognition being removed even when the distance was completed.

Clearer, fairer and more compassionate cut-off handling would transform many of these experiences.

"Just ran my first half marathon and finished just under three hours (2hr 57mins chip time). Was running with a large group of back-of-the-packers at a pace within the race cut-off, and cops were trying to sweep us onto the sidewalk from miles two to ten by aggressively using air horns, etc. The last pacers were well behind us. It was so demoralising. We believe that the cops were sweeping based on gun time, rather than chip time."

Race marketing not matching reality

Another clear theme was the mismatch between inclusive messaging and lived experience. Phrases such as 'all abilities welcome' or 'everyone can take part' create expectations. If a race then has a short cut-off, limited support for slower paces, or operational constraints that mean later finishers can't be adequately supported, that needs to be stated honestly.

Participants were generally more understanding of genuine constraints than of vague promises. Transparency builds trust; overpromising and underdelivering damages it.

"I could talk for days on this on what it means to be truly inclusive and not feel patronised, like you're putting someone out, or that you're not good enough. I look at race data and marketing very carefully before signing up to anything these days."

"I finished last at the [REDACTED] on the first year they staged it. They advertised it as a completely beginner-friendly race. When I finished, they had already run out of food at the finish line, despite there still being numerous marathon and ultramarathon runners still being out on the course."

"Why advertise a half with a three- or four-hour cut-off, but the last pace group is 2hrs 15mins?"

Key Findings

What makes a good back-of-the-pack experience?

Participants were clear about what good practice looks like. The races remembered most fondly were those that delivered the same basics to everyone and made later finishers feel visible and valued. The positive examples shared had several features in common:

- Medals, food and key supplies were still available at the finish.
- The finish line still had atmosphere, announcers and support.
- Cut-offs were clearly stated and fairly handled.
- Walkers and run-walkers were genuinely welcomed.
- Later finishers were celebrated rather than merely processed.

These are not 'optional extras' or 'nice to haves': they're signs that a race has catered for all of its participants, not just its faster ones.

"I had a positive back-of-the-pack experience at the Jedburgh Three Peaks Ultramarathon. They have a trophy for the final finisher and cheer just as loudly for those at the back as they do for those at the front. They're very fair with cut-offs and promise to keep the party going at the finish line till the very last person has crossed. There is always soup and goody bags no matter what time you finish."

"I came third from the back at the Guernsey Marathon and all the marshals were amazing and encouraging. Everything was still there at the end, including the massages and snacks. The prizegiving took place after everyone had finished, so all the speedy finishers were still there to cheer."

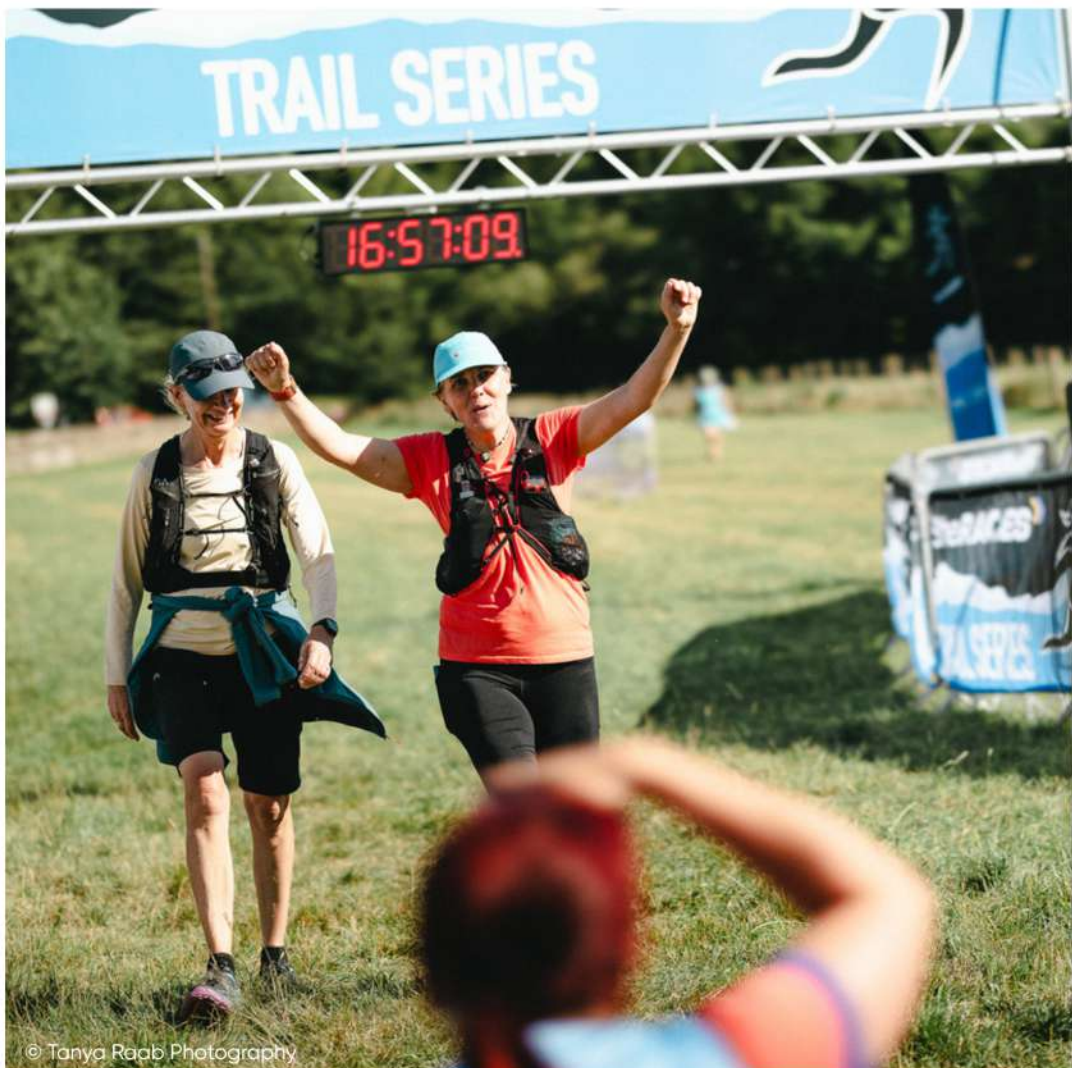
"I did my first ultra last year and somehow managed to get lost. I got back on track but ended up way at the back of the pack. The amazing team at Pegasus Ultra Running sent someone out by car to check on us and we were always in communication with the marshals. They always keep the checkpoints open until everyone is through and have a 'no cut-off time' policy."

Key takeaways

Slower participants are not asking for special treatment, they are asking for equal dignity. Races that plan for the last finisher create safer, more inclusive and more sustainable events.

- Planning for slower finishers reflects race values.
- Poor treatment discourages beginners and marginalises participants.
- Small positive gestures have disproportionate emotional impact.

"I've definitely arrived to empty aid stations and had marshals packing up to go home, but also the reverse, and those are the races I'll go back to."



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Pace Inclusive Event Guidelines

This guidance is informed by hundreds of first-hand comments from endurance-sport participants sharing experiences of how races treat those finishing towards the back of the pack. These are practical, achievable recommendations that improve participant experience, safety and long-term event reputation. Not all guidelines will be relevant or appropriate for all races, but every organiser can use them to assess whether the race experience they're offering truly extends to the back of the field.

GUIDELINE 1: PLAN FOR THE LAST FINISHER

a) Equal event experience

Every registered participant should receive the core event experience promised to all entrants, regardless of where they finish in the field.

- Keep aid stations stocked for the duration of the event.
- Keep the finish line, timing mats, photographers and medal distribution in place until the final finisher or final stated cut-off.
- Order medals, t-shirts and goody bag items in sufficient quantities and distribute them fairly.
- Keep bag storage secure and staffed until all participants have finished or been accounted for.
- Provide finish-line hydration and, where relevant to race distance, appropriate food or recovery support for later finishers too.
- Stress-test the athlete experience specifically from the perspective of the final third of the field.

"My first half marathon consisted of two loops. In the second loop, they were already closing the aid stations and had only water left. On a warm summer night in June. I finished in 2hrs 45mins."

"I was one of the final finishers in the New York City Marathon this year (8hrs 36mins) and volunteers came out specifically to cheer for the back of the pack. Since it was dark, I got given glow sticks by the staff and I crossed the finish line with them. It was so special."

b) Course management

Where a course cannot remain fully closed for all participants, later athletes should still be supported to complete the event safely whenever possible.

- Allow participants to complete an event on pavements or safe alternative routes when roads must reopen.
- Use sweepers to support and assist, not to intimidate or pressurise participants.
- Ensure sweepers operate on foot, or use bicycles or low-emission vehicles where feasible.
- Give sweepers secondary duties, such as signage checks or course clean-up, so they do not create constant pressure on slower participants.

c) Design for the safety and wellbeing of all athletes

Those at the back of the field need additional safeguarding consideration, especially in longer events. There may also be entrants who have picked up injuries during the race who want to continue but who may not have anticipated (or be prepared for) spending additional time on the course.

- Ensure medical and safety cover extends to the last finisher.
- Review lighting, navigation and isolation risk for back-of-the-pack participants.
- Brief sweepers/back marshals that they should support, not pressurise, slower athletes.

GUIDELINE 2: MAKE CUT-OFFS CLEAR & CONSISTENT

Sometimes races need to have cut-offs. This could be due to road closure limitations, lighting conditions, availability of volunteers or other safety issues. Cut-offs could also be an inherent part of the challenge of the event. However, transparency and tone significantly affect how cut-offs are perceived. The key issues are when cut-offs are poorly explained or enforced abruptly.

Most entrants will self-exclude based on the cut-offs if they are clearly communicated. However, if a cut-off is stated, the race experience needs to be consistently maintained up until that time. There also needs to be a compassionate conclusion to the event for those who miss the stated cut-off.

- Communicate cut-offs clearly in pre-race materials – participants should not have to hunt through pages of small print to find them.
- Explain what happens if a participant misses a cut-off.
- Train staff/marshals to enforce cut-offs with respect and empathy.
- Where possible, allow unofficial finishes with recognition by, for example, moving participants safely to the pavement if roads need to be reopened.
- Ensure the cut-off time is from the actual start time of the final participant – the chip time – not the gun time.
- Where possible, give as long a cut-off as possible to allow more people to finish: women have a slower average time at all distances compared with men.
- Consider an 'early start' option for those who need the most time on the course.
- Be careful in your language around cut-offs. Don't call a cut-off 'generous' if it's not actually generous based on potential finish times

"I've had aid stations emptied, people pack up finish lines on me, finish-line cameras turned off and just generally been made to feel awful for being slow. I've cried many times trying to be 'fast enough' to beat the cut-off."

"If a race has a cut-off time, the finish line should be there right up to the very last second. I've finished a half marathon with 15 minutes to spare and the finish line was already dismantled."

"I walked/jogged the [redacted] a couple of years ago – I only signed up because the race promoter told me there was 'no cut-off time and all were welcome'. The reality was that there was a hard three-hour cut-off from gun time and my starting corral was 10 to 15 minutes after the gun. Aid stations were down by the time I reached mile eight and I was basically chased by city trucks and street sweepers."

GUIDELINE 3: SUPPORT & CELEBRATE ALL ATHLETES

Later finishers should be recognised with the same warmth and legitimacy as front-runners. Celebration is not a luxury extra; it is part of what participants have trained for.

- Ensure final finishers are welcomed over the finish line with energy and respect.
- Encourage announcers, volunteers and spectators to remain present for later finishers.
- Keep music, atmosphere and finish-line acknowledgement going throughout the duration of the event.
- Consider positive recognition that goes beyond speed alone, such as perseverance awards or a celebratory moment for the final finisher.
- Build a culture in which finishing last is never treated as shameful.
- Consider having prizes/spot prizes that are not just based on time.



GUIDELINE 4: ALIGN MARKETING WITH RACE-DAY REALITY

Inclusive messaging is undermined when slower participants feel unwelcome at events. Participants are more forgiving of constraints (such as cut-offs) than of mixed messages. If you say your event is inclusive and open to everyone, that needs to translate to a good race-day experience from the front all the way to the back of the field.

- Match marketing claims ('all abilities welcome') with operational planning.
- Be honest about limits if full inclusion is not possible.
- Avoid language that frames slower participants as exceptions.

"[REDACTED] annoys me as they say they 'welcome all', yet there is a six-hour cut off. I understand smaller events might have to set a cut-off due to problems finding volunteers, but a big event like this should be able to get enough support to implement a longer cut-off."

- Brief volunteers on inclusive language and tone, as well as what constitutes unacceptable comments that are sexist, racist, ageist, ableist, patronising or belittling.
- Draw up a code of conduct for all volunteers to follow.
- Have a clear way for participants to report unacceptable behaviour and explain how it will be dealt with.



GUIDELINE 5: DESIGN INCLUSION FROM THE BEGINNING

Inclusive races attract broader participation which results in long-term growth. The best races build inclusion into their design rather than trying to retrofit it late in the planning process.

- Offer pacers across a broad range of realistic finishing times.
- Consider early start waves, staggered starts or formats that allow a broader range of paces.
- Design events with walkers and run-walkers in mind where appropriate.
- Maintain atmosphere and entertainment for the full event window, not just the first part of the race.
- Seek structured feedback from later finishers after the event and use it to improve future editions.

"The Cardiff Half Marathon was amazing – I was at the back of the pack without feeling like it. So many people still around me, crowds still out in force, not made to feel anything but a superstar for being out there and giving it my all! And to top it off, the event village was still buzzing with people at the finish. I loved it and would do it again!"

Race Director Checklist

This short checklist can be used in planning meetings, volunteer briefings and final operation reviews.

Fair time policies

- Are all cut-offs – including intermediate cut-offs – clearly publicised?
- Are cut-offs based on chip time whenever possible?
- Is the process for missed cut-offs explained in advance?
- Is there an early start option, where appropriate?
- Is there a plan for recognising participants who complete the distance after the official cut-off?

Course management

- Is there a safe plan for later finishers if roads reopen?
- Are sweepers briefed to support rather than pressurise?
- Does safety, medical and welfare cover extend to the final participant?
- Has the event reviewed lighting, signage and isolation risk for slower entrants?

Communication

- Do race materials explicitly welcome run-walkers and walkers?
- Are staff and volunteers trained in inclusive language and behaviour?
- Is there a clear reporting channel for poor conduct?
- Does marketing accurately reflect the event's operational limits (for example, if roads have to reopen at a set time)?

Equal event experience

- Will aid stations remain operational until the final participant passes?
- Will medals, t-shirts, hydration and key supplies still be available at the finish?
- Will bag storage, finish-line timing and photography remain in place until the end?
- Who is responsible for keeping finish infrastructure intact until the event has truly finished?

Celebration

- Who will be present to welcome the final finishers?
- Will announcers and music still be in place later in the event?
- How can the final finisher feel celebrated, not hurried?

Inclusive design

- Do pacing support and event timings reflect a realistic range of participants?
- Have walkers and run-walkers been considered during planning?
- Has the event been reviewed from the perspective of a back-of-the-pack athlete?

Accountability

- Do policy, marketing and race-day delivery align?
- Is post-event feedback gathered specifically from later finishers?
- Has action been taken to address any known areas for improvement before the next edition?

Why everyone benefits

A better back-of-the-pack experience benefits everyone. Anyone can have a bad day, pick up an injury, misjudge their pacing, stop to help another participant, or simply find themselves further back than expected. A race that works well for later finishers is more resilient, more humane and more trustworthy for the entire field.

Inclusive design also makes commercial sense. Participants return to races where they feel respected. They recommend those races to friends. They are more likely to try a new distance, to fundraise again, and to build a long-term relationship with an event that made them feel they belonged.

Most of the changes in this report are not expensive. They are about planning stock (such as t-shirts, medals and food/drink provisions) fairly, keeping infrastructure in place until the event has actually ended, training volunteers properly, setting honest expectations and remembering that the final finisher paid the same entry fee and invested just as much emotionally in reaching the line as the runners at the front.



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