

# Running Safety

Adena Schutzberg

*Written for SRR Newsletter, 2005, updated 2011*

Like it or not, we all know that running can be dangerous. It doesn't matter if we are indoors on the track or out on the city streets or park paths. We are in motion, which means that collisions, falls and worse are all possible. Despite our enthusiasm to get out and run, we need to stop and think about how we'll keep ourselves safe so we can run another day, another month, another year.

## **For Starters: You!**

Let's make this very simple. There are two ways to enhance your safety. One is to make yourself as safe as possible as you head into potential challenges and dangers. The other is to make the rest of world aware of you. Let's start with you.

*Clothing/gear.* Do you have the appropriate clothing for the run you are attempting? Is it snowing like crazy as you start the 22-mile from Hopkinton? Will you be able to stay dry and warm? Perhaps you should choose other clothing? Or carry a T-pass, credit card or a cell phone. Got a hat, sunscreen, or sunglasses? How about water (or a plan to get some when needed)? Keeping yourself comfortable physically is a big part of allowing your brain to sense trouble. If being cold or having a blister distracts your brain, it may not alert you to the danger ahead.

*Peepers.* Our eyesight is perhaps the best tool we have to avoid danger. So, protect those eyes with sunglasses. I just began running with glasses in the last year. First, I only used them at night – then I realized I couldn't see the potholes and buckled sidewalks without them. Now I'm an expert at wearing a baseball cap in the rain and defogging using nature's anti-fog solution (spit – just like scuba divers use!). Do be aware that when it's cold, the hats and neck gaiters and other face saving devices may impair vision. Just as you carefully brush and scrape the car before venturing out in or after a snowstorm, consider how well you can see in your winter attire and adjust accordingly.

*ID.* I've asked this on a few long runs when we get bored: "How many folks actually have ID and contact info with or you in case you get hit by a bus?" During a recent long run, my group was 1 for 4. Not too good. Do you carry an ID that will help anyone who might find you get you the help you need? If not, put that at the top of your "to do" list. The bottom line is this: whatever way you choose to carry this information, it should be so simple, so painless, so light that you will never have reason to leave it at home.

When I ran a race where about half the raffle prizes were free Road-ID coupons (and

I didn't win one) I got on the website and bought one. It's a Velcro band with a metal plate engraved with my name, medical issue of importance, town and the phone numbers of two people to call if I get into trouble. I like to wear it on my ankle and really don't notice it. I keep it with my watch and GPS so I don't forget to put it on. (Bonus: I also wear it while riding my bike, just in case it and I get separated.)

*Tunes.* Running with music is very enjoyable. The jury is mixed on the wisdom of wearing headphones anywhere outside of a treadmill. The goal, should you choose to use your favorite music device on the sidewalk, road or trail, is to be sure it doesn't distract from your knowledge of the surroundings - traffic, people, dogs or the unexpected. I recently ran a race where a dog "came out of nowhere" and gave a runner with headphones quite a scare. One more note on hearing: snow absorbs sound, so running in the winter with headphones with snow on the ground is perhaps the worst set of conditions for hearing oncoming cars, dogs, etc.

*Directions.* Many people have regular routes they follow week in and week out. But on occasion you may head off in a new direction or run in another city, state or country. Will you know how to get back? I confess to getting lost on a run in Somerville though I've lived here nearly 9 years. Look at a map, note landmarks or worst case simply run straight down one street and turn around and run back. I felt safe doing that last one in Bucharest a few years ago.

Be aware of the "the bad part of town" situation. Since I often travel alone for work, I make it a point when I check in to a hotel to ask about safe places to run. A few weeks ago in DC, I was told in no uncertain terms by the clerk: "Stay on Connecticut Avenue." In Little Rock Arkansas some years ago the reply was very direct: "You can run around the mall next door. Stay very close to the building. Security drives around it."

*Buddy.* There's one more item that will help keep you safe: a friend. Enough said.

## **Everyone Else**

Everything noting above is all about you - keeping you warm and dry, keeping you from getting lost, getting you the right medical attention should it be needed. Now we move on the other part of the equation: everyone and everything else out in the world. We as runners have essentially no control of those things (like the Lowell Street Bridge) and people (pedestrians, drivers, cyclists) and animals (dogs, horses, the odd raccoon...). Still, we can do things to enhance their ability not to cause us harm.

*Vocalize.* Here's a really simple one - if people don't see you coming down the sidewalk (and you can tell because they are not getting out of the way) give them a yell ("Excuse me!" followed quickly by "Thank you!"). If you are running hard and that's not possible, I clap. It seems to work pretty well. Or, bring your dog who may

well “jingle” with tags or vocalize for you.

*Reflect.* Here’s a no-brainer: reflective clothing/lighting. Perhaps the vests the club offers at Casey’s are not exactly the fashion statement you want to make in the bar, but outside, they provide exactly the statement needed. They are the visual equivalent of yelling: “Here I am!!!” Still, do bear in mind the vests only light up (reflect) if light hits them, so unless the car is heading towards you, you don’t light up. That’s a good reason to run against traffic, at all times. And, note that the thin reflective strips on jackets do help, but they are just thin strips.

*Shine.* If there are no lights around to reflect off of a vest or clothing, you need to provide your own light. Sometimes you may need light by which to see safely (halogen head lamps, for example) and other times you simply need lights that say: “Here I am” (inexpensive blinkies, front and back, are great for this purpose). Joe O’Leary once reminded us that as we warm up outside for indoor track: “You should be lit up like Christmas.” Chose items that are light, easy to get on and off, and comfortable, otherwise you will not wear them!

## **Indoors**

When I started track this year I thought: “Great, now I don’t have to worry about cars and bicycles, I can just run!” While that’s almost true, there are some “rules of the road” that are required to keep everyone safe. As former coach Steve Burton reminded us each week, “run in the first lane and pass in the second.” For un-timed recoveries, one should run in the outside lanes.

It sounds easy and yet, it’s not! Some runners try to run inside the first lane to let others by. That encourages two people to run in the first lane (and typically “spill over” in the second), which makes passing more difficult. While as drivers we all instinctively look in the rear view mirror before pulling into the next lane, sometimes runners forget and get “rear ended” by folks passing. (For people my size that’s like a VW Beetle getting whacked by a Mack truck, one typically going very fast!)

So, tips for indoor safety:

*Run in the first lane.* If you right a bit toward the inside and a friend a bit behind you and a bit toward the outside, you can have two people run “together” and stay in the first lane. Of course, that’s not for everyone. So, as my trainer puts it, “if you don’t like it, don’t do it” and simply run smack bang in the center of the first lane.

*Look in the rear view mirror before pulling into the second lane.* That is, look over your shoulder to be sure a train or Mack truck is not approaching. You do not want to step out in front of it!

When it is clear, pull FULLY into the second lane, pass with a step and a half of clearance ahead of the next runner and quickly get back into the first lane. If you don't move fully into the second lane you can seriously, though unintentionally elbow someone traveling in the first lane. If you are a foot taller than me, which many people are, that means an elbow in the eye!

*If you are done with a fast interval, move to the outside lane.* There's nothing worse than crashing into a runner who instantly drops to a crawl or dead stop in the first lane.

### **Bottom Line**

Running safety is not rocket science. Still, it seems we spend far more time planning our training and picking out our new running shoes than committing to being safe. Take the few minutes to think about safety on the track, order an ID bracelet or put on the reflective vest and blinkies. You are worth it.