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RRC FOOT NOTES

INDEX

Page 2 Editorial Page
3 Results of the National 10-Mile Postal Championship
4 Run For Your Life!
5 Question Box.; Run For Your Life Continued
6 How To Measure Road Race Courses
7 RRC Officers; Measuring Continued
8 Editorial Continued
9 How To Organize An RRC
10 How To Organize An RRC
11 Sample Membership Questionnaire
12 Sample Membership Questionnaire
13 Sample Constitution
14 Sample Constitution
15 Long Distance Running-The Fountain of Youth?
16 RRC Alibi Sheet

HOW TO MEASURE ROAD RACE COURSES

By Ted Corbitt

Wherever road racing has been engaged in, the problem of getting more accurate measurement of the course has come up. The USA is at this point now with the geographical spread of road running. Many courses are longer than advertised while others are shorter with the latter "complaint" being dominant. Can road race courses be accurately measured? Sterner has pointed out that absolute accuracy in measuring road courses is out of the question. There are errors in all measuring methods. Poor technique exaggerates errors. The goal is to keep the errors so small that a course is at least the full distance.

Careful consideration should be given to the selection of the course to be used. Ideal spots are decreasing due to the squeeze by more and more courses. Ideally, you would have the start, finish, dressing room, prize presentation, etc. in one location because organization is simplified. There are several types of courses in use: a circular course, a point-to-point course(e.g. Boston marathon), a loop or lap course, and out-and-home course, or a figure-of-8 or other pattern course.

A number of methods have been used to measure road courses: steel tape, 66 yard chain, wheels, maps, automobile, pacing by foot, pedometer, bikes, etc. In our survey we got the following replies to the question of how to measure a road course:

J.Barry(N.J.),"The only way to measure courses is as I've done by hand. A 100 ft. tape. It's hard and takes quite long to do. But it can be done."

B.Bright(Ind.) "...Morehead stated that in most cases the car speedometer was used."

B.Campbell (Mass),"The only way I know of measuring a course is to take a wheel and push it over the course and cut all turns."

N. Farrell(Canada),"Measure course forward and backward with about 5 new cars. They should first be checked on a measured course. Go to the police dept. They have a measured mile strip and also a gadget to check speedometer accuracy."

J. Girling (Canada),"Use car or a wheel dragged behind the car."

A.L. Monteverde (Calif.)," Courses should be surveyed by competent engineers."

Dr. C.A. Robbins(Conn.)," I don't think it makes much difference how they are measured. The important thing is the record for the course itself. Distance doesn't mean a thing in relation to time unless it is run on a quarter of a mile track."

S. Takenaka(Tokyo),"The steel tape measure is used...There is no measuring wheel in Japan."

J.Jewell(Gr.Br.RRC),"The recognized method in this country is by surveyors wheel although in actual fact the promotors of road races use a number of methods."

P.W. Cerutty(Australia),"The course should be measured by a 66 yard surveyors chain or similar."

B. Prentice (Australia)," I find the wheel more accurate than steel tape and chalk marks and much quicker, and to my mind is about as close as you can get." Note: Prentice constructed a special wheel which was used to do the preliminary measurement of the '56 Olympic marathon course. He has measured most road courses in his state for the Victoria Marathon Club, an organization similar to the RRC.

H.Jascourt(DC),"We use the measuring wheel on all courses. Problems are wheel alignment and the slow speed you must travel in a car while using the wheel possibly tying up traffic behind you. Remember even 440 tracks produce different times."

Measuring Courses continued...

The automobile odometer and the surveyor's wheel are the most often used measuring instruments for road courses. Neither is a precision instrument. Efficient use of these instruments increases their accuracy to a useable level. However, where exactness is important, some method other than an odometer should be used. In test results soon to be released by the National Bureau of Standards, Wallin reports that odometers are at least 5% off. He reports that steel tapes are the most reliable device although not practicable for measuring long distances.

SUGGESTIONS:

1. For annual runs the sponsor should appoint a committee as keeper of the course. They would watch for road changes so that losses can be corrected instead of drifting as happened at Boston, Yonkers and Van Cortlandt Park.
2. Use the most accurate measuring method available. If a super-fast time is made, re-measure the course.
3. The measuring instrument should always be calibrated or checked carefully against a known, accurate distance. This reference distance should be set up in a convenient place for subsequent use.
4. Call the distance as it is measured. Do not round off the figure. A race need not be exactly 10 miles or some other round number unless a championship is involved.
5. Each area should set up a surveying committee to specialize in the measurement of road courses. This team could measure all road courses in the area, in time.
6. Several RRC Associations may pool their resources to buy a measuring wheel or to have a special wheel constructed to be used in turn by the Associations. (Ed. Why not have the AAU buy it?) The mere possession of a wheel does not automatically mean that courses will be measured accurately, technique is important.

If all road courses are accurately measured, comparison of results would then be more meaningful, even though the toughness of courses vary. Also a standards program could then be initiated. The RRC of England has offered to help us in the matter of standards certificates, etc.

The RRC of England began working on the problem of short courses several years ago. They have completed a survey of measuring procedures, and have conducted field tests. Most of their courses have been checked. The USA RRC has also started a study and has exchanged information with the English RRC. Our report, and recommendations, is expected to be completed in the near future.

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