

Fiona in Focus

Event organization is by no means easy. Whether the event is a wedding, a family reunion, a race or an Oktoberfest celebration, there are many details to arrange of which most participants are unaware. And sometimes, despite the best organization and planning, a wrench is thrown in the works at the last minute, leaving organizers scrambling for a solution.

I still cringe whenever I remember the Oktoberfest fund raiser I organized for a group of Germans in Montreal several years ago. I arrived at the venue to be informed that a couple of bartenders had not shown up for work that evening, which meant our group would have to wait longer than usual for their beverages. Needless to say our guests, who were thirsty and ready to party, did not appreciate having to wait 30 minutes for a beer, and it is a miracle I lived to tell the tale!

Organizing an outdoor event, particularly one which attracts thousands of participants, is a huge undertaking and I applaud those who are brave enough to assume the responsibility. When freezing weather and ice forced organizers to implement a Plan B at Cowtown this year, the majority of runners had no idea what was going on behind the scenes. Cowtown logistics coordinator and Executive Director, Heidi Schwartz, was kind enough to share a little of what is typically involved in putting together a race of this size and to offer a glimpse of what organizers had to deal with this year.

Every year, three full time staff and two part-timers work on the Cowtown races and in the two months leading up to and the month directly after the event, this number increases to 10. Organizers work closely with the police and fire departments, transportation and special events departments, the health department and the park department to ensure everything runs smoothly.

Around 4,300 volunteers donate their time every year to support the event, including 18 who serve on the Board of Directors and 90 who are Lead Chairman Volunteers. Because of the weather, this year's event was organized with only 600 volunteers.

Staff generally starts planning the following year's race in mid-March, but this year's staff probably will not be ready to begin planning next year's event until the middle or end of May as they are still processing all the virtual run paperwork.

This was the first time in 37 years that any Cowtown events have been canceled although runners have had to contend with a variety of crazy weather throughout the years.

The reaction of runners to the event cancellation was interesting and it was clear that feelings were mixed regarding the decisions that were made. However, while organizers did receive some negative comments and e-mails, feedback was largely positive and the Cowtown staff appreciated all the kind words and messages of support that they received. Of course they were so busy working that they did not have time to read these messages until after the event!

Schwartz did not sleep much race weekend. She calculated she probably only slept four hours on Thursday night, two hours on Friday night and then did not sleep again until 1 a.m. on Monday morning. The entire time from Saturday night to Sunday morning, she could hear workers and volunteers chipping away at the ice on the sidewalks to ensure the area around the Will Rogers Center would be safe for runners.

On race day, yet another wrench was thrown in the works in the form of a train that passed through the course near the start of the race, causing some runners to have to wait six minutes until it had passed. It appears that despite the fact Cowtown staff had communicated the updated race schedule to the train dispatcher he had not understood that one of the races would still be taking place. Schwartz mentioned that any runner whose race was interrupted as a result of the train should contact organizers at info@cowtownmarathon.org to have their time adjusted accordingly.

Many runners appreciated the 'virtual' option offered by organizers to earn their medals. While it was obviously not the same as running the actual race, it was a form of consolation for many who had paid their entry fee and logged countless hours training for the event. Schwartz said that offering the option of a virtual race was costly and time-consuming but explained that the goal was to keep runners happy and hopefully have them return next year. Organizers were also visiting all the schools that had registered for the Cook Children's 5k and putting together races for them so the children could earn their medals.

There is no question that Cowtown is an exceptional event organized by exceptional individuals. We would like to thank everyone involved for their hard work and dedication and look forward to seeing you next year!

