

July/August 2017 Wingfoot Spotlight: Finding the Fine Line of Cheating

By Theoden Janes

John Stanton didn't run a legitimate qualifying time, didn't raise money for a charity that would have rewarded him with access, didn't have some job working for the event's presenting sponsor that would have given him preferential treatment in the form of an entry.

But several years ago – a couple days after celebrating his 48th birthday – Stanton pinned an official bib to his shirt and ran the Boston Marathon.

Long story short: Stanton was planning to be in Boston that weekend to visit his son; Stanton's friend, Matt Hall, found out earlier in the year that he'd be unable to run; so Hall offered his spot to Stanton, and Stanton took it. "Because I'll never qualify, and I wanted to experience it. For me, it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."



There's no question where a race director stands on this type of activity, and the most principled of runners would certainly frown upon what Stanton and Hall did. But many runners seem to share the view that, as long as they're not cutting courses or unfairly earning cash or valuable prizes, breaking the rules isn't really *that* big of a deal – despite what sites like MarathonInvestigation.com are doing to popularize public disdain for cheaters.

Take Denise Walser. She was sick the day of the half marathon she'd intended to use to qualify for the 2015 New York City Marathon, so her friend Mindy Harrington ran as Walser and got the time she needed. Walser said she's fast enough to run what she needed fairly easily; Harrington, she said, didn't collect the overall award she'd won under Walser's name. "No, I don't consider it cheating," Walser said. "I've run the time before, I had run it recently, just not in the window."

Or Gary Regan. Last year, he wore his friend Blake Berger's bib at an event last year that combined the times of two races held back to back, and ended up winning first overall. Regan did collect the award, which hangs on the medal rack in his house. "I know I broke race rules," Regan said. "By definition it was wrong. But, morally, do I feel like I stole from anybody, or I'm an awful person? No. Maybe I'm awful for not feeling awful, but we weren't cheating for the sake of making the Olympic team, or qualifying for Boston."

Even if there are not big stakes on the line on race day, using someone else's bib is a safety issue for race directors. Each bib is linked to a specific person in the event's registration database, which can easily allow race staff to find information such as the participant's emergency contact should something go wrong. Additionally, online registrations include waivers to make participants aware of the risks associated with the event and protect the organizers from liability issues.

Exposing Bad Behavior

Still, Stanton and Walser and Regan (those aren't their real names, by the way – all of the rule-breakers we talked to for this story agreed to be interviewed only if we concealed their identities) are the types of runners whose offenses MarathonInvestigation.com's Derek Murphy might like to expose.

Murphy created the website in 2015 in the wake of the saga of Mike Rossi, who became a hero for publicly blasting the principal of his kids' school after the administrator scolded him for making them miss classes so they could watch him run the Boston Marathon ... then became a zero when Internet sleuths discovered evidence that he cut the Lehigh Valley Marathon course to earn his Boston spot.

"I'm thinking, 'Well, why are we spending so much time on this guy? Yeah, he's a jerk, but how many more people do this?'" Murphy said. "The idea from the beginning was to bring awareness and try to be a little bit of a deterrent. If people knew that I was looking at them and knew they might be profiled on the site, then they might think twice."



Murphy uses online race results, finish line photos and video, anonymous tips and an algorithm to catch cheaters, and his focus is on runners who have gained access to the Boston Marathon without earning it. But there's been collateral damage along the way – most famously: In February, he helped get the second-place female at the Fort Lauderdale A1A Half Marathon disqualified after noticing suspicious splits but also by enlarging a post-race photo that showed her Garmin had clocked just 11.65 miles.

For her crimes, Jane Seo's face wound up splashed across the pages of news sites from The Washington Post to the U.K.'s Daily Mail, and took one of the harshest beatings on the Internet since ... well, since Mike Rossi.

"I think *runners* were more up in arms over it than I was," said Matt Lorraine, race director for the Fort Lauderdale Half. "It came to a point where I just wanted to wrap it up and move on."

His stance on lesser infractions? "While I'm not happy with it, what it comes down to is, 'What can I do about it?' There's really limited action you can take."

Meanwhile, here in Atlanta, Rich Kenah – who took over as Atlanta Track Club executive director and race director of the AJC Peachtree Road Race three years ago – said he and his staff spend a fair amount of time in the planning process addressing how to handle and minimize cheaters.

This, he said, is in response to the fact that "a good number" of the race's 60,000 participants try to obtain its coveted finisher's T-shirt without actually completing the full 10 kilometers.

To try to reduce that number, three years ago, organizers started disqualifying runners from the official results if their bibs didn't show they'd crossed both the start and finish lines; last year, they added a 5K mat and now will eliminate anyone who doesn't hit all three mats.

"If for some reason we missed a read, we can go back and add you back in," Kenah said. "But we've found that those who cheat don't try to get back into the results."

When there *is* a suspicious runner, they investigate the way Derek Murphy might – by using the mats; previous race results, which could tell them whether a runner is capable of the time he/she put up; and evidence from photography vendor MarathonFoto, which would allow them to cross-reference a runner's position at a given point in the race with that of nearby runners' eventual results.

(That's how Peachtree organizers caught a masters runner who cut a course and wound up finishing well enough to earn prize money a few years ago.)

Kenah also shares another sentiment with Murphy: "One of the tools in our toolbox to fight against cheating is that public shame. It's a little bit of a stretch, I guess, of a comparison, but it's not unlike someone caught using performance-enhancing drugs. Their sentence is made very public, so that people can see the sanction and see the repercussions of cheating."

How Far is Too Far?

The question, on both sides, is where do you draw the line?

Obviously, infractions like Jane Seo's are egregious, and therefore, banning her from future Fort Lauderdale A1A Half Marathons and revocation of her running team membership would probably seem fair to most rational people (especially when you consider her trip, from New York, was partially sponsored by a Fort Lauderdale tourism website). But read through the meanest comments on the LetsRun.com message board about her and consider whether she deserves all *that*.

And, at the other end of the spectrum, you've got runners who jump into portions of non-major races to pace friends without ever using aid stations or crossing the finish lines. Still cheating, technically, but even Lorraine admitted: "It's wasted energy for me to get hot and bothered about that."

Then there are the various offenses in between. Denise Walser, who had a friend help her earn a New York City Marathon spot because she was laid up sick in bed. Gary Regan, who won a race he didn't pay for under a friend's name – and kept the medal. John Stanton, who took his friend's bib and ran Boston knowing he'd probably never be able to qualify on his own.

"I'm really comfortable in my own skin with it," Stanton said. "I know some people aren't, and that's fine. I don't try to convince them that they're wrong. But I think the shaming part of it, the righteousness of that, the judgment and all of that – I don't know. I think that's a little extreme. Essentially, we're talking about a race here."

Added Regan, when asked if he felt any remorse about taking the first-place medal from another runner: "In hindsight, now that you say that, I guess that sucks a little bit for whoever potentially could have (won it). Then again, it's just semantics, really. It's whatever's on paper. Yeah, the bib wasn't in my name. But I still won."

Of course, in the end, on a runner-to-runner level, down in the trenches, there are as many who won't buy those arguments as there are who make them.

"The rules are the rules," said Roxy Pinson, 44, of Flowery Branch, Georgia, who was the first to react to a recent Atlanta Track Club Facebook post about the subject. (Her online comment: "Bandits and cheaters suck.") "What if everybody was to say they don't apply to me? What if everybody was like, 'Well, so what? It's just one person'?"