

Lessons from a canceled marathon: Athletic events, heat and the effects of climate change

August 10 2022, by Shaelyn Strachan and Christine Van Winkle



Credit: Markus Spiske from Pexels

The [cancellation of the Manitoba Marathon due to extreme heat](#) may provide a case study for athletic event management in extreme weather.

As researchers in kinesiology and recreation management, we took an interest in how the disruption was handled not only professionally, but also from a personal perspective: one of us (Shaelyn) was participating in the half marathon.

The [race](#) was canceled after it had started, with runners already an hour into the race. The result was ambiguity and confusion. Runners were left scratching their heads both during and after the race: wondering what they were supposed to do during the disruption, and pondering how the course shutdown was handled after the event.

Racing in the heat

Hot road races may become more common. The [climate crisis](#) is [expected to increase severe weather](#), which can have devastating consequences such as loss of life, injury and illness when people are unprepared. Even when lives are not lost, the negative experience of an emergency can have [psychological consequences](#).

[Runners can train for heat, wear appropriate clothing and hydrate, but even these steps are often not sufficient to overcome the effects of heat.](#) Exercising in heat and humidity poses a serious challenge to the body's ability to [regulate body temperature](#) and running in such conditions can significantly decrease performance and lead to health issues such as exhaustion and heat stroke.

Managing the hazards posed by a changing climate will be necessary for all community event organizers going forward.

A runner's perspective

Shaelyn's first-person account is helpful in understanding what happened

on the course during the canceled Manitoba Marathon. Here is her experience:

Like other runners, I had trained in an extremely [cold winter](#) and spring and was not prepared for a hot run in the [record high temperatures that were forecast](#) for this late June race.

Event representatives [urged runners to stay hydrated and to adjust their goal given the anticipated heat](#). I kept an eye on my email for an adjusted start time or cancelation. With no news, I headed to the start line. Once started, it didn't take me long to feel the heat of the day but volunteers did a great job of keeping us hydrated.

However, I could not escape the heat; several miles in, my heart rate was above the ideal range. With eight kilometers left, a volunteer told us the course was closed and that we could keep running if we wanted to, which left me confused. Was the course really closed? Should I trust one volunteer? If the course was closed, what were my options?

The course was not physically closed and the runners around me were still running. Aware of no alternative way of getting back other than on my own two feet, I kept running.

This response is not surprising. When faced with a crisis, the [Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication manual](#) put forward by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control presents four ways people process information:

- simplifying the message,
- holding on to current beliefs,
- looking for additional information and opinions and
- believing the first message.

When I crossed the finish line, there was no indication the course had closed. It wasn't until I listened to the news that I was able to confirm the closure. After recovering, I read Twitter threads from participants. My sense of [confusion and uncertainty was not unique](#). Conflicting information circulated about water station closures and traffic no longer being controlled.

Shutting down the course was understandable to protect the safety of runners. However, participants may have been hesitant to stop considering they had likely trained for months, and may have been using the race to try to meet a goal or qualify for another race.

Lessons for future races

Effective communication reduces injury and loss-of-life during an emergency by providing the public with [information to make good choices](#). A crisis can be the catalyst for organizations to [build trust](#) with their community or it can harm the relationship, depending on the [strategy used](#).

Race organizers should provide runners with essential information regardless of the specific hazard. Runners should have advance knowledge of what to expect in case of race disruption or rerouting prior to setting off on the course. This way, whether there is a weather disruption, act of violence or other potentially [catastrophic event](#), racers will be prepared to react.

Complicating the situation is the organizational structure of many events. Volunteers are essential for delivering many community events. While they bring skills and knowledge, they may not have specific training in emergency management nor be sufficiently prepared to help event participants navigate the challenges posed during a major disruption. Organization preparedness should include ensuring volunteer readiness

to respond during an emergency.

Events like the Manitoba Marathon provide runners with the opportunity to reach a goal that took months of training. This year though, many [runners](#) hobbled away from the event with mixed feelings about whether the event should have gone ahead, and if so, how the situation should have been managed.

As [record high temperatures](#) continue [around the world this summer](#), investment in emergency preparedness is necessary to ensure communities can stay safe while sharing meaningful experiences together.

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