



Jenny Maier acts as crew chief for runner Chris DeNucci, Dusty Corners Aid Station, Western States 100-Mile Endurance Run, California.

Avoid the Crew Snafu

Assembling the right crew can mean the difference between success and a DNF

For her first 100-mile race, 2015's Rio Del Lago, Alison Boudreau of San Jose, California, recruited four friends with ultrarunning experience as her crew. But on race day, she says, "They were being festive and socializing. Time got away from them."

At a critical meeting point, Boudreau's crew parked too far away from the aid-station area, became distracted and failed to find her and provide the clothing and headlamp she needed. She waited for about 25 minutes, borrowed a jacket, tights and light from someone else, and got back on course, feeling distressed.

Boudreau met her crew and pacer at the next meeting point, but they were not ready and caused more delay. When the event's sweepers caught up to her toward the end of the race, she dropped out.

In ultras, runners often rely on a crew of helpers to provide gear, clothing, special food or drink and moral support. By placing so much reliance on their crew, however, runners can be vulnerable.

"Crewing is stressful. It's like landing a plane—so much has to go right and efficiently in a couple of minutes," says ultrarunner Chris DeNucci of Menlo Park, California, winner of the 2016 American River 50 and a top finisher in several other ultras.

So, if you're preparing for an upcoming ultra, first ask yourself, can you get the support and stuff you need by using aid stations and drop bags? If so, then it might be best to eschew the crew.

But if you prefer a team approach, then follow these six steps to minimize the chances of a crew snafu.

1 Choose your crew carefully.

The ideal crew member takes the job seriously, is completely focused on you, the runner, and won't be rattled by your moodiness. He or she doesn't mind driving long distances and waiting many hours, and has experience participating in that race.

Often, friends volunteer to be a part of the race-day scene, or family members want to be able to see their loved one along the course. But inexperienced friends and family may be ill prepared for the real work and patience crewing demands.

A strong team is small and efficient; two or three well-synchronized crew members should be plenty.

2 Appoint a crew chief.

"It's a huge benefit to have one crew leader who can see the big picture, knows you and can predict what you might want, given the specific challenges of the day," says DeNucci.

For him, that person is his significant other, Jenny Maier, also an ultrarunner. He provides her with all the essential race-day info, and all the possible things he may need along the way—and then he puts her in charge of organizing supplies, which involves splitting up items into Ziploc bags and labeling them for each aid station.

"I would be happy to do this, but when the crew leader does it, then they own it, and it's organized just how they want it," DeNucci says. "Having one person who's a problem solver, leading the charge, keeps the complexity to a minimum."

Also, ask your crew chief to play "bad cop," if necessary by reminding well-intentioned spectators—who often want to swarm a runner at aid stations—to keep their distance and not distract with unnecessary conversation.

3 Provide expected arrival times, directions and checklists.

Simply driving to aid stations and finding parking nearby can be challenging in backcountry races. Make sure you provide pithy notes of maps and directions (especially in

remote areas lacking cell coverage), along with a timetable of your anticipated window of arrival at each station. Ask your crew to arrive and set up at least 20 minutes before your best-case scenario.

Also, develop checklists of everything you need the crew to provide. Work with your crew chief to assign crew members

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specific tasks, which may include "empty trash from pockets," "apply sunscreen and anti-chafing lube" or "prepare drink mix for bottles." Finally, print out these notes and put them in plastic protectors to bring along with supplies.

4 Hold a pre-race meeting.

Don't count on crew members to read all the info you email them. It's best to hold an in-person meeting, approximately a week before the event, to review the race-day action plan.

Also, make sure each crew member understands and follows the event's rules. Common crew rule violations include giving a runner aid outside of a designated aid-station area, or bringing a dog when no dogs are allowed.

Finally, let your crew know what you do or do not want them to communicate to you when you see them. You may instruct them, for example, to tell you where you are in the race relative to others—or you may not want to hear this information. You can also suggest encouraging things they can say to help you rebound from a low point.

At this meeting, be sure to thank your crew in advance, offer to reimburse their expenses and make a date for a post-race celebration.

5 If you need something essential, rely on a drop bag.

Drop bags can be a pain to find and unpack at aid stations, but you're pretty much guaranteed it will be waiting for you. The same cannot be said of your crew.

your stuff on your own.

"I kept thinking, 'If only I had a drop bag,'" with the clothes and headlamp needed, Boudreau says of her failed 100-mile attempt.

6 Mentally prepare for crewing mishaps.

Never forget that you, the runner, ultimately retain responsibility for taking care of yourself. Approach your crew meeting points with a clear idea of what you need, and be prepared to get it from the aid station, or to make do without it, if your crew isn't ready.

Devon Yanko's 2016 Western States 100-Mile Endurance Run hit a rough patch when she entered the mile-24 aid station and couldn't find a crew member. The situation immediately turned stressful for Yanko, who would eventually place third in the race.

"I wasn't thinking, 'I need two flasks with this many calories.' I was just thinking, 'He's not here,'" Yanko recalls. "I lost focus on what I needed to do, and left [the aid station] with too little." Before the next aid station, a frustrated Yanko ran out of calories and fluids.

For her next 100-miler, Yanko says she probably will recruit a crew but will also prepare to be more self-reliant. Instead of depending on her helpers she says, "I'm viewing my crew almost as a nice luxury."

SARAH LAWENDER SMITH is a contributing editor at Trail Runner. This article was inspired in part by her family jogging her headlamp at mile 62 of the 2016 Western States Endurance Run.