



Why Join the Club?

Since parkrun was born in Bushy Park back in October 2004, one of our main aims has been to encourage all runners to join their local running clubs. In these articles, (first published in three instalments in September 2008), Crispy talks about why he thinks joining a running club is such a fantastic idea, how to choose a club, and how to get the most from your membership.

Part I – Running with the pack

As a parkrunner, you already know that you can't beat running with other people to give you that extra motivation. Most running clubs run weekly training sessions, and if you pick the right club (more on that in the next article), you will be training with a group of people of the same ability. Talk to many club runners and they will tell you they get more benefit from their club runs, because they try harder than they would if they were training by themselves.

Safety in numbers

Sorry to mention this, but the summer is drawing to an end and the evenings are getting darker, earlier; many runners do not feel so comfortable running by themselves. But there really is no need to if you're a member of a club. For many runners this is the main attraction of a running club and lets them keep running throughout the winter.

Free events

Most running clubs offer a wide range of free or heavily subsidised runs. And they're not all about the elite runners up front. Handicapped races let the fastest compete against the slowest on a level playing field: everybody starts at different times, and if the handicappers have done their job properly, everybody finishes at the same time – of course they never do, and there are endless opportunities for discussion at the pub afterwards. Mob matches are a form of inter-club competition which lets two or more teams (of different sizes) compete against each other; the bigger teams have the advantage, but the smaller teams can win. Finally, most clubs also compete in a wide range of competitions including marathons, fell runs, cross country, track, road races, triathlons, duathlons and orienteering races; in my experience some of the smaller club runs have been the most enjoyable I've done. For the small cost of the annual membership fee, joining a running club is definitely the cheapest way to take part in a wide range of events.

Off the beaten track

If you run by yourself it's really easy to get stuck in a rut, following the same tried and trusted route, run after run. Get down to your local club, go out for a run with one of the more mature members, and you're almost bound to see parts of your locality you didn't even know existed. Many of them will also be able to tell you the history of the area as well.

Get with the plan

Most of the bigger clubs will organise training sessions for a range of different ability levels, from absolute novices up to elite runners. Many clubs have experienced coaches, who lead training



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sessions and if you attend regularly and ask nicely will help you put together a training plan. Most club runners would be happy to admit that without the support and encouragement of their club, they would not have improved as much as they have.

It's not all about running

Most clubs have social side too, and they don't always talk about running.

Part II - How to choose

In the last article Crispy looked at some of the reasons for joining a running club. In this the second article in the series of three he looks at how to go about choosing a club.

What do you want from a club?

There is a bewildering array of clubs out there in a hundred different flavours. So the first step should be to think through what you want from your club. Hopefully, once you've joined, you will want to stay a member for ever more, so it is worth getting this right.

So the first question to ask yourself is: "Am I looking for a social club that runs a bit, a running club that socialises a bit, or a pure running club?" At one end of the spectrum we have hash clubs: too complicated to explain in detail here (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hash_House_Harriers), but basically a social form of running for all ability levels, with plenty of socialising en route. At the other end of the spectrum we have many of the elite level clubs that focus on nothing more than becoming better athletes. In between these two extremes fall the vast majority of clubs.

The next question to ask is: "What sort of running do I want to do?" Running is not just running, and the clubs have evolved to cater for every possible variety. Here is an undoubtedly incomplete list just to give you an idea of the range:

- Track: specialise in track running, but often with opportunities to have a go at other track and field events (jumping, throwing, etc).
- Road Running: prefer to escape the confines of the stadium but like the firm feel of a well laid path or road beneath their feet.
- Cross Country: hills, mud, ditches and obstacles - all may feature on a cross country course and there are plenty of cross country clubs that cater to this.
- Fell Running: big hills, big mud, big ditches, big obstacles -not for the faint hearted (particularly on the descent), but great fun.
- Orienteering: if you fancy a bit of an intellectual challenge as you run, this is the one for you. This is the one if you want to hone your map and compass reading skills.



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- Multi-sport: triathlon has become hugely popular in recent years and some very well organised clubs have sprung up to support it.

And the final question is: "What do I get for my money?" Club subscriptions vary enormously, from just a couple of quid upwards, but generally they reflect the facilities available at that club. So it is important to ask what facilities club members have access to. Some clubs own their own premises, while others share facilities with other clubs or may have no fixed abode. Many clubs have free or heavily subsidised access to gyms or athletics tracks, and many have discount arrangements with local sports shops. Finally it's worth asking to see the fixture list, many clubs organise a series of races throughout the year that are free to their members.

Which club?

Once you've had a thought about the three questions in the previous section the next stage is to work out which clubs you're interested in. Have a chat with the runners at your local parkrun event. They will be able to give you a feel for what each club is like. Most of our volunteer event organisers are members of clubs, and in many cases the organising teams are drawn largely from a single club. While parkrun does not make specific recommendations, many of the organisers will be able to point you in the right direction. The web is also an invaluable resource; have a look at the links section of each event's website at www.parkrun.com (if you are a member of a club that is not listed on the appropriate links page, get in touch with your local organisers who will be able to add it). And finally most running clubs do have websites that can be found with more or less effort through the various search engines.

Try Before you buy

All the decent clubs will let you try out the club for a couple of weeks before they ask you to cough up the subscription fee. Use this trial period to make sure the club ticks all your boxes: How welcoming are they? How social are they? What coaching and support is available? What sort of running do they do? What races do they organise? What facilities can I use? If you're not happy at that club, work out why it's not for you, then give another club a go. Above all do not be disheartened if you don't find your dream club first go, there will almost certainly be a club that's right for you in your neighbourhood, and it is worth making sure you've found it.

Part III – Getting the most from your Membership

Crispy concludes this short series with a brief look at getting the most from your club.

Run, run, run!

Having joined your perfect club, it's now time to make the most from the small investment of your subs fee. It might take a few weeks to work out which training sessions are right for you, but it's worth the effort. Many clubs will have several groups heading off on any given night; have a chat with some of the regulars and work out which group you'll benefit most from joining. Be honest with yourself about your ability level; it's demoralising being left behind if you pick a group that's too fast,



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and you're not going to get the full benefit of the session if you're in a group that's too slow for you. My tip would be to err on the side of caution to start with, then work your way through progressively faster groups until you find the one that's right for you.

As mentioned in previous articles, many clubs have coaches or fellow runners who would be happy to put a training plan together for you. This is a great idea for everybody, but particularly if you have a specific event in mind. Speaking of which, get hold of the fixture list and have a go at the club races, as mentioned previously most clubs organise free races throughout the year and have developed a wide range of formats to suit every conceivable ability level. If you're still feeling apprehensive about taking part in club runs, go and watch a few, or even better, offer to help out (more of that in a minute). You should soon be itching to get your running shoes on at the next event.

Many club runners use the parkrun events as part of their regular training routine, and of course many of the organisers are themselves members of the various running clubs. However, please do not neglect the club runs – it is OK to miss the occasional parkrun event if you have a club run in the afternoon; in fact that would be an ideal week to volunteer at your local event.

Get involved

Beyond the running itself, there are all sorts of jobs that need doing within the club. Part of joining a club is about becoming a part of the community. If you've got spare time, think about getting more involved in the organisation side of things, and ultimately join the committee.

And finally, many clubs are looking to train up new coaches and race officials. With the London Olympics looming, many people are starting to think about volunteering; with the experience you could gain in your club, you will be much better placed to get that dream trackside role (maybe).