

# Your First Amateur Radio Event

Amateur radio volunteers are often needed to help with big events, like marathons, bike races, parades, etc. There are many ways to prepare that will help ease your concerns over participating in your first event.

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A ham's-eye view of the racecourse at the Boston Marathon. [Bill Tarkulich, K1WMT, photo]



Sometimes hams are called upon to assist with tasks that aren't related to communicating, such as helping to set up a hydration station. [Bryan Cunningham, KB1EGY, photo]

## Before the Event

Preparation is everything, and begins well before the event. The amateur radio organizers should send you a breakdown of all the information you'll need. Basic knowledge and a general description of the event will be very useful, including the date, time, and location (also whether the event is indoors or outdoors). More specifically, you'll need to know where you'll be stationed, what times you'll be working (keep in mind the ending time is usually variable), and what your assignment requirements will be. This will inform you as to what kind of equipment you'll be using, so look for the radio specifications, frequencies, offset, and CTCSS tone that you are expected to use. Most events use 2 meters or 440 MHz repeaters. Simplex may be used for a small local event, like a parade, but generally repeaters are used for better coverage. If you are assigned to be mobile, bringing APRS gear can be useful in automatically tracking your position.

Print a copy of the details, but try to be flexible, as there may be last-minute changes. If there is an opportunity to meet with all the communicators before the event, make sure to attend. It may be the only chance you get to see, collaborate with, and coordinate with other communicators. To further prep for the event, you should:

- **Visit the location** to map out parking, walking distance, and restroom facilities. Being on site will also help you to confirm access to the prime and backup repeaters, and it will help solidify your decisions on what equipment to bring.
- **Prep your radio** once you've decided what to bring. Check that the radio is working, the battery is fully charged, and the prime and backup frequencies are programmed. Do this at home, well before the event, so you don't have to do it under pressure in the field.
- **Keep an eye on the weather** starting a couple of days before the event. It takes major weather to cancel an outdoor event. I have supported marathons in pelting rain, with the wind blowing at 35 knots.
- **Pack ahead of time** to make the morning of the event easier. Put everything you'll need in one location, and make sure to include a backup radio, an extra battery pack, and a backup antenna. Lunch, snacks, beverages, a folding chair, pens, a clipboard, and paper are also necessities. Prepare your vehicle in advance as well, with any placard or parking pass the event organizers gave you. Bring your cell phone in case of emergencies that require you to call 911. You'll want to be as self-sufficient as possible, as it is very likely you will be performing tasks at your assigned location by yourself.

### Early On the Day of the Event

Be at your assigned location earlier than the organization has requested. Assuming the event is outdoors (95% of them are), be prepared to leave early in the morning, navigate road closures, park your vehicle, and set up equipment in the dark. If it's likely to be cold, you'll want to dress in layers to keep you warm for a typical 8-hour shift.

If you're parking right next to a parade or racecourse, be sure to remain on the side that will allow for an easy exit, so you can avoid crossing the course after your shift or when changing assigned locations. Once you're there and set up, you'll have to check in.

### During the Event

Net Control may not recognize you by your call sign, and will likely be listening on more than one receiver, so tactical call signs and frequencies are encouraged as designators. For example, you can say, "Net Control, this is Start/Finish on 33" to express your assigned location and the last two digits of your calling frequency. Still, you'll need to comply with FCC requirements for ID of your station, so you can tack on your call sign at the end of the transmission.

Most importantly, keep transmissions brief and be proactive. Instead of Net Control having to prompt you for information, give them your message as efficiently as possible.

An emergency, usually medical, during an event can give rise to some tough calls. Unless there is emergency medical assistance right there, call 911 on your cell phone, then attend to triage. Having Net Control or someone else make the 911 call loses any location information transmitted from your cell phone. At the first chance you have, contact Net Control and inform them of the situation and the status. If you're away from your assigned location, let Net Control know how to find you. Keep Net Control updated as the situation unwinds. Privacy is important, so communications with respect to race participants should be via their bib number and color, or other identifier. Do not use the names of people affected by a medical emergency. Be as calm and professional as possible.

### After the Event

Remain at your assignment until dismissed by Net Control, as they may need to shift your assignment during the event. Request permission to be dismissed. The same is true if you must leave your station during the event for any reason.

Review the event, and submit an after-action report via email. Keep your comments constructive, positive, and enthusiastic.

## Assignments

### Net Control

Net Control oversees the directing of all communications. The net may be a directed net, in which all communications are to or from Net Control only, or it could be an open net, in which communications can take place directly between all stations.

### Start Line/Finish Line

In some events, the start and finish lines will be the same, and sometimes they will be different. Check the event instructions, and scout the location beforehand to know what your role will be.

### Aid/Motivation/Rest Stop

This assignment can go by many names, but these stations are spaced at regular intervals throughout the course, marking the on-course support locations.

### Course Marker

There is usually a mile marker, kilometer marker, or turnaround signifying your station, and you will likely be the only one there.

### SAG (Support and Gear)

A support and gear (SAG) vehicle is used to transport a participant who cannot complete the event. There may be more than one SAG vehicle, dispatched by Net Control, each with a driver and a radio amateur.

### EMT/Mechanic

If this is your assignment, you will be paired with an EMT, paramedic, or mechanic to patrol the course. As communicator, you may have to provide navigation as well, so bring a map or GPS.

### Shadow

For the duration of the event, a shadow is assigned to one person, such as the director, timer, medical personnel, etc. You are the link between that person and Net Control.

### Sweeper

The sweeper follows the last person on the course, notifying Net Control when the last participant passes significant points.

*John Unrath, K6JHU, became an Amateur Extra in 2007. John was active in RACES in southern California before retiring and moving to New Mexico. John estimates that he has participated in over 75 Amateur Radio events. He can be reached at unrath@prodigy.net.*