

Frog Chopper's Guide to Setting and Running a Hash Trail

Introduction

Ever wondered why some hashes are great and others just so so? A really great hash depends on a lot of things, many of which you don't have much control over, such as the weather, who turns up and someone doing something entertaining and memorable such as falling into the deep shiggy. But the hare can do a lot towards making it a good hash by making a trail appropriate to the occasion; the hounds can do a lot by remembering to call and help backmark so that the pack stays reasonably close together.

This is Frog Chopper's guide to setting and running a hash trail. It's based on the expectations of, and the signs and terminology commonly used by Lemman Genève Hash House Harriers and Swiss Franc(e) Hash House Harriettes. Some parts are personal views that others will not agree with and other bits are statements of the blindingly obvious but you never know, someone might find it useful.

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Planning the Trail

What's the Aim?

Setting a good trail is easy as long as you think about what you're doing and who is likely to turn up. Essentially, for a normal weekday run, you want a trail of about **4 to 5km for the walkers**, about **7.5 to 8km for the runners** with sufficient false trails and checkbacks to make any fast FRBs run 10 to 12km. That means quite a lot of extra false trail if you think there will be a lot of fast runners there, but hardly any at all will be needed if you're confident that everyone who turns up will be running at much the same speed. Generally, too much false trail is better than too little; you can always point people in the right direction if it's taking too long. Subtract a little distance if there are long stretches through woodland with poor trails, or other areas which will seriously slow people down.

Ideally the trail should include as many as possible of the following features:

- runners' trail basically the same as the walkers' trail, but with lots of extra false trails and loops evenly distributed throughout the trail so that people run past the walkers every few minutes and there's a sense that the two groups are actually somehow connected;
- as much of the trail as possible on footpaths rather than roads;
- some pretty and/or interesting places;
- the trail should not be simply straight out and straight back, but twist and turn in unlikely ways so that even those who know the area are uncertain where they will be headed next.

Sadly, the geography of most areas means you can't achieve everything and you'll have to make compromises, but it's worth bearing these points in mind when you're working out where to go.

The starting point must have plenty of parking space nearby and be reasonably placed for wherever you intend people to go for the On On. Ideally, it should also be easily accessible by public transport, though that is of course difficult out in the country.

Planning Tools

The best two tools which I've found for setting runs in the Geneva area are the yellow covered map of the Canton "Le Grand Genève" (available from all good Geneva bookshops) and the run planning website MapMyRun.com. Le Grand Genève is still the easiest way to see what footpaths are available, particularly through wooded areas and to get a good idea at a glance of what's around. MapMyRun.com will then let you work out exactly how far your basic route will be.

Making Sure People Get There

It's essential to send accurate details to the trailmaster in good time, including the starting point, directions by car and an indication of where the nearest bus or train stop is (ideally with times, but the public transport geeks are perfectly capable of working that out for themselves as long as the stop name is correct). Ideally this should be done more than a week in advance so that it can be announced at the hash the week before. **Remember that the instructions have to be clear so that visitors can find it** - don't just assume that everyone knows "because we've been there before so many times".

Equipment

For setting a typical trail, you will usually want about **4 bags of flour**: you'll usually use 2 or 3, but it's a nightmare getting halfway round and realising you've not got enough left. If the trail goes over a lot of open fields or through woods without well-defined paths, you'll need some extra.

The point of the trail is not, as some people say, to confuse the hounds. It's to get everyone round a trail safely and back to the beer stop at round about the same time.

To make blobs, most people put the flour into a strong **carrier bag** (or a pair of supermarket carrier bags one inside the other to stop the flour coming out of the holes), dip in a **tennis ball** and throw it at the ground (or keep it in the hand to knock against rough surfaces which it would bounce off in random directions).

To draw letters and symbols, the cheap option is to get an old **milk bottle**, cut a 5mm hole in the top and fill it with flour.

Some **chalk** can be useful on surfaces which take it well, but only for setting the trail immediately before the hash or backmarking during the hash as it doesn't last as long as flour. **Polenta** and **coloured flour** are sometimes used (with varying degrees of success) when it snows. No matter what the weather, never use anything permanent.

Watch out for other, more sophisticated marking devices in the hands of gadget-freak hares.

Setting the Trail

General Stuff

Unless you're expecting a lot of really fast runners and have a huge number of false trails, it shouldn't take much more than 2 hours to set the trail at a fast walk or slow trot, plus any extra for setting a walkers' trail if you've not been able to do that at the same time. If it takes you much longer than that, there's a fair risk either that you're going to have trouble keeping up when you come to run it later, or that you'll get complaints that it's too long if you don't have some shortcuts up your sleeve.

Importantly, the point of the trail is not, as some people say, to confuse the hounds. It's to get everyone round a trail safely and back to the beer stop at round about the same time, whether they are Olympic marathon runners on a mission or average folk strolling round with a pram. That does mean a battle of wits, trying to make the front runners go significantly further than slower runners, but **it doesn't mean simply letting people get lost**. If the FRBs on the hash swear at you because you are gently strolling along and they're sweating as they run past you for the fifth time, you're probably doing it right. If everyone's milling around muttering that they can't find flour anywhere and not even attempting to run, you're probably doing it wrong.

Where to Put Flour

Assume that the runners are blind, lazy and stupid. Most of the time, they will give up very quickly if they don't find flour and just mill around uselessly. Even if there's no possible place for the trail to have turned off, if they don't find flour within 50m of the last blob they will start to worry and if they don't find flour within 100m there's a very good chance that they will just stop and wander back. Blobs usually need to be much closer together than that and (most of the time) in obvious places: for example, by lamp posts (people's eyes get drawn to them and there's light if the hash is at night), on trees or big tree stumps and placed consistently (if they start on one side of the road, keep them on that side). Exactly how frequent depends on the type of terrain and the number of opportunities to turn off the path, but every 10 paces or so is reasonable in most places in town; you can get away with further apart on long stretches of path with no turnings.

On the other hand, once they really get running, runners sometimes fail to notice that the flour has stopped. There's not an enormous amount that you can do about this, but the ends of false trails and checkbacks need to be clearly marked. It's also worth putting specific false trail markers between points where the outbound trail comes close to a later section of trail, to try to avoid people veering off course and cutting a large section off the trail. If you put checks near other sections of trail, clear Fs in between are essential - in this case you should probably put more than one F down (for example on both sides of the road) to be on the safe side.

If you're going through woods, unless there is an extremely clear path, you will need an enormous amount of flour or people will get lost. Each blob should be clearly visible from the last - that may mean flour on almost every tree you go past in some places. Arrows are very helpful from time to time to confirm the general direction.

Never cross a ploughed field (it's dangerous for the ankles and rude to the farmer, possibly even risking you or the hash getting abused and sued). Even with grassy meadows it's usually easier to mark the trail round the edge. However, if you really must cross a field, the hounds will lose the trail very easily. Put an arrow at the start of the field giving the right general direction and keep the blobs close together. Rocks, patches of bare earth and cowpats are a lot easier to spot flour on than grass.

"Slowing Down" the FRBs

To keep the faster and slower runners together without the faster ones simply getting annoyed, you need to get the faster people to run further than others. The two main ways of doing this are checkpoints and checkbacks, both of which get at least some of the faster runners going the wrong way and then coming back. These need to come reasonably frequently throughout the length of the trail. Try to avoid setting too many checks at the start and then not enough in the second half.

No matter how carefully you think through your checks and checkbacks, you'll usually find that some people get well ahead, so you'll almost certainly need one or two holds. Hopefully, nobody will be waiting more than a minute or two at these. The best places are either somewhere with a good view or with a (drinkable) water fountain. Everyone is already together when they restart so there's no point in setting false trails from a hold - that just leaves most people hanging around for even longer and lets some of the FRBs get ahead again.

Another option now and again is a rambo trail, giving some extra distance which runners can choose whether to cover or not.

Setting the Walkers' Trail

Assume that the walkers are blind, lazy, stupid and too busy chatting to take much notice of flour or maps. Put arrows with a W at each junction in the hope that they will notice, but ideally you should have a walkers' hare to lead them round. If you don't get round to setting a walkers' trail and just give them a map, make sure you also give them a stick of chalk or some flour to mark the trail for any latecoming walkers.

When It Rains

If you set the trail the night before and it rains, bad luck. There's a fair chance you're going to have to set it again immediately before the hash. You can do what you can to put the flour in sheltered spots to minimise the risk, but a lot of the time nature will beat you. If the rain is really hard on the evening of the run, you may have to admit defeat and just lead the hardy few around the trail. If any of your trail has survived, you can point to it to prove that you really did try. A related risk is street cleaners - in urban areas, there's a fair chance that large portions of your trail will be washed off by the council or locals if you set it too early. It's usually best to set trails in the centre of town on the night.

Running the Trail

Hare

Assume that someone will turn up late or get lost. Put arrows right at the start to point people in the right direction.

Make sure that each check and each major turn is obviously back-marked once the front of the pack has found the right trail so that the people behind stand a chance of catching up. Otherwise, you may have to go out looking for them later. If there are two hares, it's good to try to have one fairly near the front (to mark the checks when the right way has been found and to make sure that the FRBs don't do outrageous shortcuts which ruin your carefully planned trail) and one near the back (to point the really slow people in the right direction and look for the ones who have got lost). If some people are taking far too long (everyone should be at the beer stop in under an hour, or much less if it's far from there to the end) it's probably a good idea to offer them shortcuts, as long as you're certain they will find the trail again at the end of them.

If everyone's milling around muttering that they can't find flour anywhere and not even attempting to run, you're probably doing it wrong.

FRBs

Assume that the rest of the hounds are blind, lazy, stupid and deaf. If you're on the right trail, shout "on on" as loud as you can - frequently. You may think that the fact that you shouted "on on" when you first found the trail and have not stopped or turned round would be enough to make clear to people behind you that you think you're on trail. Don't believe it. There's a pretty good chance that if they've gone for 3 seconds without seeing flour for themselves, they will grind to a

halt and shout "are you?" until someone reassures them. Remember that if you can't keep them running, you'll have to wait longer for them at the next hold and that it will be that much longer until you reach the beer.

Middle of the Pack

Remember that there may be people behind you. If you see flour, shout "on on" to encourage them along and give them confidence that they're still going the right way. When you come to a checkpoint, don't just all stop dead until the trail is found - follow the FRBs out along the various routes so that there's always someone within earshot of the next person ahead and you don't have to start checking all over again because nobody heard the FRB shout "on on". Some people's voices don't carry very far, especially round corners or against traffic noise. If the hare isn't with you, mark the check before heading off so that those people behind who don't see you go can find it. You can use twigs or stones to make an arrow or kick the flour of the check in the correct direction.

Tail End

Just because you think you're at the back, it's not necessarily true. If you're on trail, shout "on on" every so often. Not only will this help people who are so far behind you that they are out of sight, but it will remind people ahead that they need to make sure you're going in the right direction and to wait for you at the next hold. Don't wait until you're lost and then shout "are you?" Chances are that by that time the people ahead will be out of earshot and it will be too late.

Glossary



Arrows: You know - arrows. Things that (usually) point people in the right direction. Often combined with letters indicating exactly who ought to be following them: W (walkers), R (runners) or RR (rambo runners). It's important to make sure that the direction is clear: all too often they point somewhere between two different tracks, leading to unpleasant things being said of the hare.



Backmarking: Putting down *arrows* (or other marks) once the correct trail has been found at checkpoints, the start of checkbacks and any other place where the correct trail may not be obvious to people who have fallen behind. In the absence of flour or chalk, stick arrows or kicking through the check in the appropriate direction also work.



Beer stop: The place where the hounds stop for beer. Often preceded by warnings BN (beer near), BVN (beer very near) and the like.



Blobs: The marks that the hounds normally follow. Little circular, well, blobs of flour, frequently laid down by throwing a flour-covered tennis ball at the ground.



Checkback: An extra bit of trail for the FRBs. The blobs carry on past a turning and continue for some distance, at the end of which is a mark CB#. The hounds go back # blobs and look to the sides for a trail - the first few blobs will generally be out of sight, either round a corner or otherwise hidden (behind lampposts is often good) so that they are not visible to people naïvely following the checkback.



Checkpoint: A junction marked by a circle, where the trail might go in any of several directions. Some or all of the wrong directions may have false trails marked. When the hounds find the right one, they (hopefully) shout "on on" to call all the others in the right direction and someone (hopefully) backmarks the check.



False trail: A marked wrong way from a checkpoint. Usually up to three blobs ended by an F. Note that in other hashes, there may be different numbers of blobs before you're "on" and the ends of false trails are often not marked.

FRB: Front Running Bastard. One of those people you occasionally see heading over the brow of the next hill with irritating ease.

Hare: The person who set the trail and normal target of everyone's abuse.



Hold: A place marked by a circle with an H inside where everyone waits, hopefully not very long, until the others have caught up. Sometimes combined with a song.

Hound: Someone following the trail.

On on: (1) What people are supposed to shout when they're on trail. (2) The meal after the run.

Rambo trail: An extra loop, usually marked RR for the fast runners who think that the trail might otherwise be too short.

Walker: A remarkably slow, delicate creature which needs to have a special short path marked for it if it's going to make it to the beer before midnight.

