

Sense of joy

How visually impaired and hearing-loss runners overcome the obstacles to find freedom and fulfilment on the run

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Hearing dog Nero has expanded owner James Shea's running landscape



Super-competitive Helen is always in the market for a guide who can keep pace with her



For those with visual impairment or hearing loss, running can be liberating and empowering, but it also presents many challenges. Sensory impairments make running life more complicated. There are myriad hazards that sighted or hearing runners simply don't notice. The small increases or decreases in elevation, such as dropped-kerb driveways or damaged pavement, potholes and cambers on country lanes, litter, signage boards, traffic cones, other pedestrians or road users, trees, lamp posts, bins, the unheard noise of traffic or warning shouts of an upcoming hazard – the list goes on and on.

These can all make running more difficult and even prove a barrier to lacing up at all. A Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) study found that those who are visually impaired (VI) have reduced opportunities to take part in things they would like to – things like sports and fitness. And those who need a running guide are especially limited when it comes to when and where they can run – each run has to be organised alongside someone else's life and plans. This can make training for an event difficult. 'People have busy lives and it's kind of them to give an hour or so a week,' says Kelly Ganfield, an Invictus Games sprinter and marathon competitor. 'But training for an event needs consistency and continuity – in terms of enhancing race performance, as well as trusting a guide to keep me safe.'

When it comes to events, while many runners look forward to races and anticipate enjoying the camaraderie, the buzz, the music, the sound of the crowds and being with like-minded people, for

runners with sensory issues, events can be daunting at the best of times and inaccessible at the worst. Races are often chosen simply on the basis of how easy it is to access information prior to the event and during the event itself.

Outside of racing, we all know the value that running brings to our lives – the mental health benefits as well as the physical. 'Your body increases endorphin activity in the nervous system, which is linked to a euphoric state and reduced pain perception,' explains Dr Rebecca Jones, lecturer in sport science and physical activity at Bedfordshire University. 'Running can therefore have a calming effect and allow the runner to feel less stressed and more relaxed.' Those mental health benefits are particularly vital when data shows how common mental health problems are in the VI and hearing-loss communities. One study, published in the *European Journal Of Ophthalmology*, found that in adults with severe visual impairment, 45.2% reported moderate depressive symptoms, compared with 16.6% in the normal-to-near-normal vision group. Another study by the RNIB found that VI people are more than twice as likely to experience difficulties with unhappiness or depression than the UK average. The Joint Commissioning Panel for Mental Health cites mental health problems within the deaf community as ranging from 30% to 60%. So it's especially important that people from these communities have the option of running. As the personal stories on the following pages reveal, running has the power to uplift and enhance lives, but we can do much more to make sure it's accessible to all.

then trained for the Bath Half Marathon. I could just about manage to run by myself, but life was getting trickier. However, I got the running bug and continued to try to train. Unfortunately, I was losing my peripheral vision and couldn't see any obstacles at my feet, making running solo difficult and races even more so. My husband, Paul, started accompanying me, so I could continue running safely.

Currently, my vision is the size of a 50p coin in the centre of my eyes, but everything is very foggy. I can only see a vague outline of shapes and nothing on the floor. I can manage very familiar routes with a cane but always have to be guided for running. It's hard to get guide consistency for many reasons – their own life commitments as well as my own – but also to find people who are faster than me. People assume that because you're a guided runner you can't run at a decent pace, but that isn't the case – it's not my legs that don't work! I try to train five times a week, so you can imagine how difficult that is with guides. People are nervous about being guides, so I ask if they have kids, because if you can navigate a child safely, you can be a guide. Training for personal bests can be difficult, as I can't always get the training done consistently. I'm super-competitive and get very cross if I don't improve race times, but I did achieve the much-longed-for Good For Age Place at Newport Marathon in 2019.

I enjoy events for the camaraderie, the atmosphere and the challenge of a race, but I do have to be choosy about which ones I do. I love off-road races, but the terrain can be a nightmare. Some busy road races are also tricky – I've had people try to barge through the guide tether or just push me out of the way. On the whole, people are considerate – I like a race briefing that reminds people to give space to me and the guide – but to be honest, I do avoid big events as they're just stressful with the extra hazards.

Sometimes it can be frustrating not being able to run on my own, but I don't know what I'd do without it. I always come back buzzing and planning the next event.'

'I don't know what I'd do without it'

Helen Davies, 55

'I'm classed as legally blind and have spent more than half of my life with severely restricted sight. I have retinitis pigmentosa (RP), a hereditary genetic degenerative disorder with which I was diagnosed at 24. Although I had some issues with my sight before this, I had already passed my driving test and couldn't quite believe the doctors who told me I would lose my sight – especially as they couldn't give an indication of how much vision I would lose and when. Because I was young, I almost dismissed the prognosis and did my best to carry on with my life regardless. I moved to Athens for work and even bought a horse, which I competed with, trying not to let my deteriorating sight get the best of me.

By 40, I had moved back to the UK and, initially as a dare in the pub, I entered and

Understanding the experiences

'Sensory impairment' is used to describe some degree of reduced hearing or vision and covers a wide range of experiences. The phrase 'blind or visually impaired' is an accepted way of referring to those who have no or limited vision where it can be classified as a disability. Language is complex and we can't necessarily transfer the term 'visually impaired' to 'hearing impaired' when referencing the latter sensory need. Increasingly, certainly in the UK, there is a move to use the terms 'deaf' or 'hard of hearing'. The deaf health charity SignHealth describes the term 'deaf' as used to identify anyone who has a severe hearing issue and can range from mild to profound deafness. This is considered inclusive, acknowledging anyone diagnosed with hearing loss (mild, moderate, severe or profound) as part of the deaf community).

Signers have their own linguistic and cultural identity and are certainly able to communicate effectively with those who share the language. But when deaf and hearing communities come together, another shared communication strategy is required, and this is where accessibility and inclusivity matter. Depending on the range of hearing loss, and whether it's pre or postlingual, some people rely on lip-reading or sign language, others on implants or a combination of communications. Hearing loss greater than 65dB (hearing threshold in decibels) is classed as severe and, according to the Royal National Institute for Deaf People, the most recent data estimates that over 1.2 million people in the UK experience this.

Being blind also encompasses a number of categorisations – severely sight impaired, or sight impaired (partially sighted). Data from the Royal National Institute of Blind People in 2021 suggests that, of the two million people in the UK registered as having sight loss severe enough to have an impact on their daily lives, around 277,000 have severe sight loss. ▶



James completes his local parkrun every week with his hearing dog, Nero

‘Running is mindfulness for me; it roots me back into myself’

James Shea, 51

I describe myself as hearing impaired, living and operating in a hearing world. I’m postlingual, meaning that I became deaf after speech and language acquisition. A whooping-cough booster damaged my hearing as a child so much that I can’t hear anything without the highest-powered aids. My parents decided to keep me at a state school where, in those days, there

wasn’t extra learning support. I gradually learned through dual coding – using lip-reading, limited sound and subtitles – so I could adapt to this hearing loss, but I don’t sign as I wasn’t taught. I also relied on adoptive strategies – extracting information from every external cue I could. This approach worked for me, as I became head of English at a secondary school before becoming principal lecturer in teacher education at the University of Bedfordshire, with a particular interest in research in education and neuroscience.

This adaptation to the hearing world is a process I use when it comes to running races. I can’t hear a single word in briefings and find that events, at best, cater for people who are deaf and can sign or, at worst, give no thought at all. I’ve been to events where the race briefing is in a field, with the race director using a loudspeaker, and taken all guidance from the cues of other runners, trusting my life and running experience to keep me safe. This isn’t so much of an issue – I’m used to adapting to the occasional thoughtlessness of the hearing world – but I do prefer local races and parkruns with friends who can fill me in on the information I miss. I love my local parkrun – I’ve had my 250 T-shirt for some time – but hesitate at parkrun tourism and events further afield, unless someone has posted a video of the course online. It’s simply an extra mental effort, wondering what information I’m missing.

The whole running community is, to me, a very inclusive one and I prefer running in the company of others. When I started running, I ran solo but did feel vulnerable – although I have hydrophobic hearing aids, enabling me to hear some traffic, it’s not ideal for them to get wet and I feel unsafe. I rely heavily on my local running community and find it so supportive. I love that my club, the Bedford Harriers, adapts with me. At a track session, for instance, instructions for the session will automatically be communicated to me in such a way that I don’t have to ask anyone for directions. At local races with clubmates, if a traffic shout goes up, someone will give me a tap on the arm, alerting me to hazards.

My running landscape is expanding with a hearing dog, Nero, who does the parkrun every week with me, and I now feel I can do more events. I didn’t like to have to tell people about my hearing impairment, but as people approach Nero, the conversation opens up and I feel easier. Running is mindfulness for me; it cleanses me, roots me back into myself, it’s so grounding. All work and life stresses are relieved by the time I get home. It’s my switch-off time.’

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Darren has run at many international marathons, including a 3:28 at Boston

‘Running brings me solace, freedom and independence’

Darren Blanks, 34

I have dual sensory loss – I became visually impaired and had hearing loss at the age of 23. I was experiencing some sight loss and a routine trip to Specsavers, followed by an emergency trip to hospital, saw me having an acoustic neuroma – a tumour on my ear nerve – removed. This resulted in complete hearing loss on my left-hand side. Post-operation, I contracted meningitis twice and blood tests revealed that I had Leber hereditary optic neuropathy (LHON), a genetic form of vision loss.

As a young, fit man, this was devastating news. My vision was reduced to seeing light and dark contrasts, but I’m unable to distinguish between, say, a tree, a lamp post or a person. It’s like looking through frosted bathroom windows all the time.

I know something is there but can’t work out what it is. Most people don’t have faces and I’ve walked into a pool before. But I continued running in my home county of Cumbria and found solace in the familiar countryside, memory mapping the landscape, learning through trial and error the hazards of trees, rocks etc.

Through my work with Blind Veterans, as a public speaker and supporting many events, I realised I could achieve more of my running ambitions if I had some support. With a variety of guides, I’ve completed a number of international marathons, including London, Boston, Brighton and California. My personal best is 3:28, set in Boston in 2018, the year when VI runners were first recognised as a separate category. I feel this categorisation is a positive move and hope that more events will do the same in the future – it will encourage other VI and blind runners to get running.

I don’t shy away from the larger events – as a 6ft 3in, 13st runner, being accidentally knocked doesn’t affect my balance or stride

too much – but I still find the experience disorientating and stressful. Races have been less challenging when I’ve had the opportunity to start a few minutes ahead of the pack, as it’s easier for people to negotiate past me and my guide than it is for me to negotiate around hundreds or thousands of runners. I find smaller events and parkrun easier and lately feel more comfortable showing that I’m VI by wearing a tabard or carrying my cane. At RunFestRun, I decided to put myself out there. I feel that if VI runners don’t put themselves forward, then how can people be more sensitive, and how can accessibility improvements be made? In my experience, once people are aware of my disability, they are very empathetic and keen to understand how they can make running and events easier.

Running has brought me much joy, focus and even love in the form of my partner, Helyn, who I run with. It is also a connection between life before and after sight loss and brings me solace, freedom and independence.’

'Running gives the self-belief that life can continue'

Colin Johnson, 57

I've been a guide runner for six years, inspired after seeing a social media post by a blind runner, Chris, who needed a guide for the Budapest Marathon. I did the England Athletics Guide Runners course, met Chris and started marathon training. I experienced a real buzz from helping him achieve his goal and realised what it meant to be able to run as a sighted person would.

I encouraged others to train up and launched a Facebook group, VI Runners Bristol. We meet every Wednesday in different locations around Bristol – where the terrain is relatively flat and clear of hazards – and go to the pub after to share advice and stories, and enjoy a running community. The group has now swelled to over 450 members. It means that anyone VI is able to pop a note on saying they'd like to run that day and invariably someone is around. Guides are available for many local events so everyone can enjoy them safely and relatively stress-free. The open group is essentially a bunch of mates and some can see better than others.

My aim is to make running as accessible to as many VI people as possible. Many in the group have experienced sight loss later in life and struggled with their mental health as a result. According to the RNIB, only 17% of people experiencing sight loss are offered emotional support. Being able to continue running, or take it up, gives people the confidence and self-belief that life can continue, but in a different way. Running, for most of us, is about switching off and enjoying the moment, but blind or VI people have to be alert. Running in a familiar location or with a guide helps members experience that same sense of freedom.

I organised the first dedicated race for VI runners at the Great Bristol Run 2021 – Visually Impaired (VI) Runners 10K Challenge. We had a specific category for VI runners, just like an age-group category. There were over 40 runners and the goal was encouraging VI people to join the running community.

I now deliver guide-running courses through England Athletics and continue to promote guide running. I'm passionate about removing barriers for VI runners and Chris and I are currently training for Man v Horse. It's an off-road, multi-terrain and hazards event and we joke that Chris will be the first blind man versus a horse!



Colin has been guiding Chris for six years and aims to make running as accessible as possible



How could events be more inclusive?

VI and hearing-loss runners set out a manifesto for more accessible events

Provide an accessibility support tent at events for those who can't access last-minute race briefing information easily. *Andrea Sexton, a runner and racer with a high degree of hearing loss*

Make a video of the race briefing accessible pre-event. Last-minute changes could be communicated by text. *Andrea Sexton*

Only allow bone-conducting headphones. *Andrea Sexton*

Invite a VI runner to run the course and assess whether there are any manageable hazards. *Colin Johnson*

If there are stretches of course where runners have to be on the road, ensure that it's mentioned in the race briefing and have extra marshals who can alert runners that there's traffic. *Helen Davies*

Spread out water stations so that there's plenty of space for VI runners to grab their water. Have someone before the station alerting everyone to the water station coming up. *Darren Blanks*

Ensure a video of the course is available beforehand. *James Shea*

Have a big flag at the start, with the person holding it preferably elevated. *Pupils at Sheldon School, which has a separate department for deaf pupils*

At the start, signage needs to be clear, as deaf and hearing-loss people won't be able to hear final instructions. *Pupils at Sheldon School*

Be aware that megaphones don't help most people with hearing difficulties, as the sound is distorted. Many people who use hearing aids won't have them and may rely on lip-reading instead. *James Shea*

Being forced on to pavements makes it difficult for a guide and VI runner to run safely. If competitors need to be on the pavement, the race briefing should include this information so that runners can be considerate and allow space. *Helen Davies*