

# Your First **Amateur Radio** Event

Public service is a major component of the Amateur Radio avocation, and a great way to get involved in your community.

## **John Unrath, K6JHU**

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.

### **Before the Event**

Preparation is everything, and begins well before the event. The Amateur Radio organizers should be sending 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 and time, and the location (also if it's indoors or outdoors). More specifically, you'll need to know where you will 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 that you are expected to use. Most events utilize 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.

Be sure to 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.

Visiting the location before the event is also a must for a communications check, as well as to map out parking location, walking distance, and facilities. Being on site will also help to confirm access to the prime and backup repeaters, and it will help solidify decisions on what equipment to bring, such as a handheld transceiver versus a magnetic-mount antenna. If you are assigned to be mobile, bringing APRS can be useful in automatically tracking your position.

Once you have decided what to bring, check that the radio is working, the battery is fully charged, and the prime and backup frequencies are programmed. This should be done at home, well before the event, so you don't have to do it under pressure in the field.

If the event is outdoors, keep an eye on the weather starting a couple of days before the event. It takes major weather to cancel an event. I have supported marathons with pelting rain and the wind blowing at 35 knots.

To make the morning of the event easier, I recommend putting everything you'll need in one location, including 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 car in advance as well, with any placard or parking pass the event organizers gave you. Additionally, you'll want to 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 doing communications at your assigned location by yourself.

### **Early the Day of the Event**

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

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

### **Communications Protocols**

Net Control may not recognize you by your call sign, and will likely be listen-



You may be assigned as a course marker, positioned with your radio at a specific check-point or landmark. [Steve Ford, WB8IMY, photo]



## 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 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 location.

### 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 the person and Net Control.

### Sweeper

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



Amateur Radio operators and American Red Cross volunteers work together at Net Control during the 2016 Cascadia Rising emergency exercise.

ing 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.

### During the Event

All communications with respect to the participants should be via their bib number and color, or other identifier. An emergency, usually medical, during the event can give rise to some tough calls. Unless there is emergency medical assistance right there, the best policy is to call 911 on your cell phone. Then attend to triage. Having Net Control or someone else make the call to 911 loses any location information transmitted from the cell phone. At the first chance, contact Net Control and inform them of the situation and the status. They can dispatch additional resources if necessary. If you are away from your assigned location, let Net Control know how to find you.

Do not use the names of people affected by a medical emergency. Do not go into detail unless asked. Keep Net Control updated as the situation unwinds. Be as calm and professional as possible.

### After the Event

Do not leave 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. Being a first-timer, you will probably see something that can be done differently to improve the event for next year. Be constructive, positive, and enthusiastic in your comments.

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](mailto:unrath@prodigy.net).

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