



## Running USA Case Study: Starting from Scratch

*Tes Sobomehin Marshall led the Atlanta-based Unity Collective to the start line for a half-marathon and 5K called The Race, celebrating community and diversity, in 2018. Here's what she learned from the experience.*

ATLANTA – When Tes Sobomehin Marshall envisioned the start line of the inaugural [The Race](#) half marathon she spearheaded in Atlanta last year, she pictured the sun rising over a momentous new event in long distance running.

That sunrise did happen, but it was at first metaphoric. Lined up to start The Race half that Saturday in mid-October was the largest group of African American runners to ever run collectively in an organized long-distance running event. Runners who identified as African American made up 86 percent of the field. But it wasn't until they headed out into the neighborhoods of westside Atlanta, an area of the city that rarely if ever is exposed to endurance sports, that the sun came up over the historic experience.

“There were many conversations about running and race that weekend, but I can't tell you how many times people said to me: 'It was just so beautiful seeing people who look like me to my left and to my right.' I heard that numerous times,” said Marshall. “I also thought I'd be crying at the start line, but when you're the race director, there's always too much to do to be in tears.”



An African American race director and runner who came up in the sport with the support of organizations like **Black Girls Run** and the [National Black Marathoners Association](#), Marshall and a group of collaborators in Atlanta had for some time talked about creating an event that would speak to African American runners nationally. In late 2017, she decided it was time to stop chatting about it and act. That

founding group became the Unity Collective, which worked together under Marshall's direction to produce The Race.

"I'm the kind of person who doesn't want to talk about stuff too much – let's stop talking and do it," explained Marshall. "So we came up with the idea to put this event together as a Kickstarter campaign."

The establishment of the Unity Collective and its goal was formally described as: "A collaboration of running community leaders, vendors, and supporters united to host a road race that supports black owned businesses, runs through historically black neighborhoods, makes a positive impact with charity and service, and garners massive national support from the African-American running community."

Using Kickstarter to create a financial foundation and crowd-sourced buzz about a running event is not unheard of, but it's also not easy. As a result, Marshall doesn't recommend it to new events or event organizers. But The Race's Kickstarter campaign was successful: in less than two months, the Unity Collective raised more than \$70,000 for startup costs and registered more than 700 people to run in the half marathon. This was all with the traditional Kickstarter caveat that if the funding goal was not met, the event would not happen. Using the platform entailed a great deal of additional legwork and communications to ensure the backers registered, in addition to traditional registration management.

"The thing I always want to make clear is that money wasn't a fundraiser, but it was basically people saying, here's my financial commitment to a register. If this race happens, I am signed up," Marshall explained. The event still sought out and earned numerous corporate sponsorships as well.

One positive benefit to using Kickstarter was that early backers took a sense of ownership over The Race. Their names were on t-shirts and a banner at the event to honor their support, and throughout race weekend, there was a sense of pride in the air of being part of a successful new venture.

Steering clear of a Kickstarter startup was just one of the many lessons that Marshall learned during The Race's inaugural year. She shared many other smart suggestions for start up running events with us recently, and they are summarized here:

### Lessons learned from starting a brand new event

1. For smaller event production companies and race organizers, **gaining a base of support before you fully commit to a new event is a valuable tool**. While Marshall would not recommend that events use Kickstarter as a way to achieve that support, the campaign helped her know that The Race's inaugural year would be a success. Other potential ways to create a similar support base would include pre-registration and foundation level sponsorships from supporting partners.
2. If you're targeting a niche audience, **grassroots social media is a powerful tool to reach your prospective runners**. The Race exhausted outreach to every possible African American-focused running group, event, business or organization its planning committee could connect with online to spread the word about the inaugural event and the Kickstarter campaign. And the majority of those efforts were unpaid promotion, received simply by reaching out, finding a point of connection, and asking them to help spread the word.

3. There's no harm **in being transparent about what it actually costs to put on a first class event.** The Unity Collective provided its budget for event costs on its event website for participants to view. This is an uncommon practice, but a valuable way to help educate runners about what their entry fees are actually used for. One common misperception about running events, for example, is that police officers volunteer their time to monitor event courses. That is never the case – police officers are always compensated for their time. Runners will hopefully be less likely to gripe about the cost of events when they see what their money is paying for.
4. **If you build it, they will come.** Marshall is quick to point out that the intent of The Race wasn't fix a perceived wrong, but to engage a less visible part of the running community. "I know that for the folks who worked with me on this event, The Race was not about feeling like we weren't included in running events or weren't represented. It was more about celebrating the accomplishments and the strides that we have made in the running community," she explained.
5. **Make use of your Running USA network to ensure your event is a success.** Marshall created the industry relationships she needed to make sure her event went seamlessly at the Running USA 2018 conference held in Austin, Texas. Partner providers included Leslie Jordan, Hasty Awards, the ACTIVE Network and Race Result. "The connections I made at that conference were really invaluable," she noted.
6. **Engaging your runners immediately AFTER the event is a valuable way to connect runners with the community.** One truly unique thing that The Race successfully tried was to ask its runners to stick around the Atlanta area the day after the half-marathon to volunteer in the community. Organizers identified 12 volunteer projects, most located in or near the west Atlanta neighborhoods that the runners had traversed on the course the day before. \$5 of every race entry fee was also put towards a charity donation program.

About 25 percent of the field showed up to work on neighborhood beautification, cleanup, and helping local non-profits like a historic Atlanta orphanage. While it was a chore to educate and inform the runners about the volunteer activity – and get them to show up – Marshall said it was absolutely worthwhile and plans to do it again this year. "I think that this being a new concept, made it more difficult. But now we have the concept proven and we hope to expand it with more volunteers and more projects this year."

Marshall is excited to apply the lessons she learned last year to **The Race 2019**, a half marathon and 5K presented by the Unity Collective, set for Saturday, October 5 in East Point, Georgia. Runners nationwide are encouraged to attend. [Learn more about the event and sign up here.](#)

## Thanks for reading

Want more industry insight and resources on producing endurance events? Visit [RunningUSA.org](https://RunningUSA.org) If you have race production tips you'd like to share, we'd love to hear them. Please [email us](#) here.

