

It Takes Two

Being a blind marathon guide is an exercise in connection and trust.

by **Rosie Ball**



Sunday mornings in Yoyogi Park are crowded with people enjoying walking and jogging. In the blind marathon practices it is an important role of the guide to convey to their partner that other people are approaching.

As we arrive in Harajuku in the early morning of Sunday, 2nd of June, the sun is already hot and the atmosphere in Yoyogi Park is buzzing. It seems like the whole city has come out to enjoy the park, with families strolling, young people socializing, and hundreds of joggers sweating it out on the pavement of one of Tokyo's most beautiful green spaces. Among them is a particularly large and lively group of runners wearing fluorescent vests, talking and mingling. At first glance you would think they were just one of the many running teams coursing through the park,



A small rope called a companion rope, or bond that connects visually impaired runners and their guides. The length and material are determined by the official rules.

but in fact this is a marathon training event organized by the Japan Blind Marathon Association (JBMA). Composed of visually impaired runners, running guides, and helpers, the differences between this group and the others are small but significant. You cannot help noticing there is a slightly greater sense of excitement tingling in the air here.

Some people may be surprised to know that blind marathon running is widely practiced all around the world. Locally, it is thanks to organizations like JBMA that visually impaired runners have been given greater opportunities to participate in this cultural pastime for 35 years. The goal has always been the same: to empower people, foster community, and normalize visual impairment. While participation from the visually impaired community is obviously fundamental to the organization, you could say it is the volunteers that lay at the heart of JBMA's work.

Anyone can become a volunteer or guide, just attend a Yoyogi Park practice session on the first Sunday of every month with your running shoes and an open mind. Attracting a surprisingly diverse crowd of various ages and nationalities, today's volunteer turnout is very impressive. Generally, a practice session is made up of

30 percent runners and 70 percent volunteer staff there to provide assistance, encouragement, and general care for the runners. Since a large portion of volunteers who come to monthly practices are usually new, before running starts, JBMA provides in-depth training for the unacquainted. This involves learning about the varying degrees of visual impairment, and how to alter your technique for each category in order to be a more effective guide.

The first thing the guides learn when they begin training is that the most crucial aspect of blind marathon running is not actually running at all. Their job is to be the eyes of the unit, guiding their partner with a comprehensive account of the ever-changing conditions around them. Partners are linked together at the wrist with a small rope called a companion rope, or bond, and must run in perfect synchronization to be most successful. JBMA outlines three principles for guides: ensure your partner's safety, match your partner's running style, and always put your partner's needs before your own.

During the training, new guides also practice running with vision-obscuring glasses, ranging in severity. The idea is simple: by running a mile in their visually impaired

partner's shoes, guides have a better understanding of the information their counterparts need. One middle-aged volunteer guide says he surprisingly enjoyed the experience of wearing the glasses. Having spent years running regular marathons, they allowed him to experience different sensations while running. "I felt like I could run faster than I could when I do it alone," he said. We ask him how long it takes to feel a sense of trust with his partner. "About 500 meters or one kilometer," he says, as his partner chimes in: "I know immediately."

Two young female partners return from their first run. Was it challenging? "Becoming synchronized with my partner was very tough," they say, "but when it did happen, it was such a nice feeling."

Fresh volunteers undoubtedly face a demanding and fascinating array of new challenges when they decide to start blind marathon training. But therein lies the joy of being a partner. More than just physical exercise, it is an exercise in problem-solving, building connections and trust, and a chance to improve another person's quality of life. In a blind marathon it is not about the finish line, it is about how you get there.