

Public Service Events and Tactical Call Signs

KA9SDQ - 2 March 2023

KA9SDQ has participated in several Hamilton County marathons, and has been the liaison between CIARA and the organizers for the Sam Costa Half Marathon.

About marathons

- A marathon is 26.2 miles. A large-scale event, such as the Indianapolis 500 Festival Mini Marathon, needs 70 amateur radio volunteers.
- They are an opportunity for developing public service as amateur radio operators, and thereby training for emergency operations.
- They are a lot of fun. I like being outdoors when the weather is starting to turn nice. But this is Indiana. Be prepared for any kind of weather. The Sam Costa had snow in 2019 and 2022. But there have been other times when the weather was nice.
- If you're like me and live in Carmel, you're not going anywhere anyway when they close all the streets, so you might as well volunteer for the marathon.

Other public service events

- These include the Thanksgiving and Christmas food distributions, parades, public safety fairs, and local festivals.

The role of amateur radio in these events

- No two events or marathons are exactly alike and your role will vary slightly from one to the next.
- *"Why amateur radio? Doesn't everyone have cell phones?"* is a question many of us have heard asked. The answer is that we couldn't do everything we need to do with cell phones. However, this doesn't mean there is no role for cell phones.
- The overall purpose of amateur radio in a marathon or other event is to enhance safety. We do this in a number of ways, such as reporting injuries, calling for medical assistance, reporting unsafe conditions (weather, traffic), tracking the first and last runners, providing situational awareness (being the eyes and ears on the event), and reporting needs for supplies or other logistical concerns.

Equipment Needed

- We all tend to be obsessed with radio gear, but make it a priority to take care of your personal needs: dress warmly, bring a rain jacket, water, snacks.
- In most cases, an HT and a spare battery will be sufficient. Mobile radios can also be used; if you are able to do this, let the planners know.
- You will generally be able to operate an HT better with a speaker microphone or headset. You'll be able to hear more clearly, your battery will last longer, and you can hold the radio up higher.
- Do not use VOX (Voice Operated Transmission), and make sure your cords are plugged in solidly. A rubber band may help.

- You may want to replace the rubber duck with a longer whip antenna. Nothing is more frustrating than not being able to get through, and a higher gain antenna may also allow you to operate at a lower power setting.
- Pen (or pencil) and paper for taking notes. You can also take notes with your smart phone, but I'm old fashioned.
- The lead and tail car riders will likely need a radio with GPS and APRS capability.

Operating Procedures

- Never give private information over the air. This would include runner's names, health information, etc. If you need to relay private information, use a cell phone. Identification numbers of runners are often used for lead, tail, and injury notification.
- Operations are through a directed net similar to our Thursday and Sunday evening nets. Everything goes through net control and individual stations do not talk to each other directly unless allowed by net control.
- It's okay to take breaks. Just let net control know when you are going to be off the air and then when you return. We care about the safety of the runners and we also care about the safety of each other.

Tactical Call Sign Usage

- Most events of this type use tactical call signs, which identify the station's location or purpose, regardless of who is operating the station. For example, when someone on the Sunday net says "Net Control, this is N9XYZ with an announcement" they are using a tactical call sign. "Net Control" is a tactical call sign—and at an event of the kind we're discussing, there will likely be more than one net control operator.
- Tactical call signs do not take the pace of your FCC call sign. They are **in addition to** your FCC call sign.
- A typical tactical call signs will be "Water Stop 1". If you are at "Water Stop 1" and want to contact the net control station, you would say, "Net Control, Water Stop 1". If you had emergency traffic, you would say, "Water Stop 1, emergency traffic," or for priority traffic, "Water Stop 1, priority traffic."
- After the message has been sent, you would complete the call by saying, "Water Stop 1, <your call sign>." This fulfills your station identification requirements and indicates to net control that you believe the exchange to be complete.

Helpful hints

- Avoid "open mics". This can result from a plug not being solidly inserted in the socket, or accidentally pressing the PTT button with a clipboard or while in a pocket.
- Be listening all the time.
- When you are using linked repeaters, if you can't get through on VHF, try UHF and vice versa.
- There is an excellent YouTube video from the Marin Amateur Radio Society called "How to be a ham radio operator during public service events and nets"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHxNOMGSwAI>