

The Measurement of parkruns

Report to Association of UK Course Measurers (AUKCM) for the Course Measurement Working Party 30 November 2013 by Colin Tether

Summary

This report outlines the situation with parkruns, how they are measured and how course measurers have been involved. It summarises those courses that have been measured and some views from course measurers. It presents the result of a meeting with Tom Williams from parkrun

Why this report?

In March 2011 I ran my first parkrun. I have now run four different courses, all very different in character. My local course is at Arrow Valley in Redditch. This is two laps around a lake and almost entirely on good quality tarmac.

My Club, Evesham Vale Running Club, started to take part in local parkruns, at Arrow Valley, Worcester and Cheltenham. Claims were made for the fastest 5K so naturally I wondered how parkruns were accurately measured.

My offer to measure the Arrow Valley parkrun was accepted and I found the existing course to be short by some 47 metres. The course was then altered to my measurement.

I then decided, with support from Kym Wheeler, Phil Holland and Tom Williams of parkrun to carry out a questionnaire survey of all course measurers in the United Kingdom.

parkruns - What are they? How many?

parkruns started in 2004. At the moment there are 208 parkruns every Saturday in England and Wales, with a further 15 in Northern Ireland and 11 in Scotland, a total of 234 for the United Kingdom. To illustrate how parkruns are increasing, ten new parkruns have started in the last six weeks

They take place at 9:00am or 9:30am every Saturday morning throughout the year. According to the parkrun website, an average of 140 runners attends each event. parkruns are open to anyone of whatever age. 3,514 running events were shown in Runners World for 2012. This compares with around 10,000 parkrun events for a year.

There are also a few junior parkruns of 2km but these are not covered in this report. parkruns are now being established outside the United Kingdom and these are not covered in this report.

parkrun courses description – An analysis

parkruns are run on all sorts of courses with varying configurations, number of laps and surfaces. For each parkrun a description of the course is shown on the website page. For example Portrush in Northern Ireland is run entirely on a sandy beach, others entirely on tarmac. I carried out an analysis by reading the descriptions of the courses which showed the following results:

Course Type	No. of courses	% of courses
Multi-terrain	111	49
Grit surfaces included (over 10%) – Possibly measureable	38	17
Tarmac	77	34

parkrun timing and results service

parkruns are not races but are timed fairly accurately with a “Gun” start using a barcode system.

parkruns have an excellent process for publishing results which are normally shown by the Saturday afternoon. Runners can compare their times, and the PBs for each course and each runner are shown. With such a good results service, runners like to look at their times and compare PBs.

parkrun does show the overall UK record holder for both male and female which does imply that the courses should be accurate.

parkrun course measurement

Each event website makes the point that the parkruns are measured accurately:

"The course is 5000m (5K) long. This has been accurately measured by us with a professional measuring wheel."

Tom Williams from parkrun has provided some details, based on his own experience:

- The wheel used is normally of the type supplied by Screwfix.
- Users have no training
- Unsure whether all users keep to the shortest possible route
- No overall correction factor is used, but most probably reference will be made to a landmark just beyond the 5,000 metre mark.
- Detailed plans are not normally made beyond those shown on Google Maps for each event's website

Tom Williams has also commented:

"I appreciate that reading the above makes us sound awfully slapdash but the key here is the original parkrun ethos which was that it didn't really matter how accurate the course was as long as it was the same distance every week. This was because it was more about individual club runners being able to test/improve their fitness over a weekly threshold/tempo run. The original Bushy course was something like 40 metres short for many years before Hugh Jones (legend has it) re-measured it and brought it up to 5k. I don't think that we ever envisaged delivering in excess of one million 5k runs performances per year and hundreds of thousands of people regularly trying to improve their 5k times. Our recent request to change from 5k (NAD, MT & Road) on the Power of 10 was partly designed to emphasise the fact that we're a little more casual about course accuracy and if people want that level of detail they should enter a paid race. We also need to be mindful of the fact that many of our event teams have zero experience of any kind of running prior to setting up a parkrun. Having said that, many of our volunteer teams are highly experienced in the delivery of athletic events and regular parkrunners will know that our courses and times are generally accurate."

Power of 10

Phil Cook has noted "There has been a change since you brought this up at last years (the 2012) AGM, all parkruns now appear on Power of 10 as a generic "parkrun" regardless of whether they have been measured or not, so they no longer count for 5 Km PB's or Rankings."

Survey of course measurers

In mid September 2013, emails were sent to all the course measurers listed in England and Wales shown on the course measurement website who had an email address. Attached was a questionnaire which I asked to be completed for any parkrun that had been measured.

The response was very good and many measurers also added their views on the matter.

Course Measurers with email	81
Course Measurers without email	6
Response with details of parkrun(s) measured	26
Response saying no parkruns measured	41
No response	14

I also emailed separately John Glover, Northern Ireland and Alan Young, Scotland. John Glover responded but I have not heard from Alan Young.

parkrun	Measurer	Surface	Accuracy	Comments
England and Wales				
Alexander Palace	Hugh Jones	Mostly tarmac	OK	Measured previously by counting revolutions of a bicycle wheel. No certificate
Arrow Valley	Colin Tether	Tarmac with short gravel section	47m short	Awarded certificate
Barking	Mark Jefford	Tarmac	New course	Race Run Director had previously measured with a wheel, course was short. Awarded certificate.
Bournemouth	Bill Hicks	Tarmac with 1km grass, earth	N/A	Off road. No certificate
Bushy Park	Hugh Jones	Grass and track	30 – 40m short	Off road. No certificate.
Canon Hill	Doug Hyde	Tarmac	11m short	Good surface. Awarded certificate
Cardiff	Phil Cook	Tarmac	Within limit	Measured from the start. Awarded certificate
Colwick Park	Derek Poole	Compacted gravel, some road	N/A	Awarded multi-terrain certificate
Astbury Mere, Congleton	Simon Walker	Tarmac & gravel	2 metres short	No certificate yet.
Corby	Kym Wheeler	Mostly grass, some tarmac	Slightly short (two lamp posts)	Dangerous downhill section in wet conditions. Awarded Multi terrain certificate.
East Hull	Steve Green	Tarmac	N/A	Excellent course for PBs. Awarded certificate
Finsbury	Mark Jefford	Mostly tarmac	Approx 10m short	Start position can vary depending who sets event out. No certificate
Gorleston Cliffs	Richard Thornhill	Tarmac	New course	Awarded certificate
Highbury Fields	Mark Jefford	Tarmac	Approx 10m short	Awarded certificate
Hove	Hugh Jones	Tarmac	30-40m short	No certificate
Leeds	Ken Kaiser	Mostly tarmac	New course	Course used previously by 5k course measured by Ken. Awarded certificate
Lister Park	Dene Townend	Tarmac	New course	Awarded certificate
Milton Keynes	Steve Crane	Asphalt	Did not match	Awarded certificate
Newport	Paul Day	Mixed woodland, gravel, grass and woodchip paths	About 10m short	Difficult to measure becomes boggy when wet. No certificate

Northampton Racecourse	Alan Mills	Paths and grass	200m short	Runners complained course was short. Alan was asked to measure. No certificate
Norwich, Eaton Park	Richard Thornhill	Almost all tarmac	New course, adapted from existing course	Awarded certificate
Oak Hill (London)	Mark Jefford	Tarmac	New course	Awarded certificate
Parc Bryn Bach, Tredegar	Paul Day	Tarmac	About 5 metres short	No certificate
Peterborough	Tim Cook	Tarmac	New course, adapted from existing courses	Awarded certificate
Princes	Brian Grice	Park paths, some rough	N/A	Awarded certificate
Roundhay Leeds	Ken Kaiser	Tarmac	N/A	No certificate
South Manchester	Malcolm Fowler	Tarmac with 10% gravel	New event	Awarded certificate
Southampton	Colin Goater	Tarmac	New event	Awarded certificate
Southwick Country	Darren Wrintmoor	Rough tracks	New event	No certificate. Measured with wheel but to same rigour as with Jones Counter
Valentines (London)	Mark Jefford	Tarmac	About 10m short	Adapted and finalized existing 5K course No certificate
Weymouth	Bill Hicks	Tarmac and gravel, off road	New event	No certificate
Whitstable	Rob Bright	Concrete and tarmac, a little grass	Cannot recall	Awarded certificate. Ron reset the start and finish.
Woodbank	Malcolm Fowler	Almost all hard surfaces	New event	Awarded certificate
Wycombe Rye	Mike Hickman	Grass, dirt	New event	Measured with calibrated wheel.
Northern Ireland				
Ballymena	John Glover	Tarmac	New event	Not known
Craigavon	John Glover	Tarmac	New event	Not known
Falls	John Glover	Tarmac	A little long	Not known
Mid Ulster	John Glover	Tarmac	New event	Not known
Queens	John Glover	Hard gravel	New event	Not known
Victoria	John Glover	Tarmac	New event	Not known
Wallace	John Glover	Tarmac	New event	Not known
Waterworks	John Glover	Tarmac	New event	Not known

Views expressed by course measurers.

Course Measurers Support for parkruns. Almost all measurers expressed their support for parkruns. Many of those who had measured parkruns had done so for free.

Individual Courses. A few measurers suggested that it does not matter if the course is a bit long or short. Most courses are quite different in nature. Most runners taking part in parkruns are local and so are interested in just comparing their time at that particular event.

Offer to measure courses. Many of the parkrun courses measured had been done by measurers who had made an offer to measure or were involved in the setting up of the parkrun. At least five measurers had made an offer to measure a local course which had been turned down.

Accuracy of Surveyor's wheels. A number of measurers said that surveyor's wheel were not suitable for measuring more than short lengths. This was because:

- They are not accurately made, that is the wheel is probably not of the correct circumference.
- They cannot easily be used – that is they wobble from side to side and/or jump over rough surfaces.

Setting out courses. At least three measurers suggested that courses were set out differently from week to week. Starts and finish positions may slightly vary; sometimes corners are taped off, sometimes not. In some cases there was little to refer to which made it difficult to set out the course. At some parkruns, a local event in the park will mean a change to the route and there is no evidence of the new route being measured.

Rigor in Measuring. It was suggested that parkrun organisers may not employ the same rigor to measure a course as course measurers do.

Club Standards. A few measurers suggested that parkruns are used for club standards and therefore it is very important that if they are stated to be 5K then they should be so.

Meeting with Tom Williams on 20/11/2013

Phil Holland and I met Tom Williams on 20/11/2013 and we exchanged information on Course Measurement and parkruns. The following was informally agreed

- Wording in "The Course" on parkrun event website. The description would be amended to a wording like: "*The course is approximately 5000m (5K) long and has been measured by us with a measuring wheel.*"
- New events. (hard surfaces) At new events, parkrun will try to get these measured by AUKCM accurately before they start for the first time.
- Existing Events. (hard surfaces) parkrun to contact organisers to see if they would like AUKCM to measure their courses.
- Course Description on parkrun event website. Consideration given to stating for those courses on hard surfaces that the course has been accurately measured. However also statement that the parkrun will not always be on the exact course so distance of run can differ on some occasions.

Tom also offered to put a Course Measurement page on the parkrun website to help explain what we do and possibly this may help us to recruit new course measurers.

Colin Tether
22/11/2013