

Theme 8

Adapting the competition environment to support individual development in sport

Parkrun: Self-comparison and age grading

Parkrun offers free, weekly, timed 5km runs in public spaces that are open to individuals of all running abilities (including those that choose to walk the 5km). The initiative has an online results system that provides a weekly update of individuals' achievements.

Research to understand the motivations for engaging in Parkrun found that there was an overwhelming focus on self-comparison for achievement; only a small proportion of runners cited that the friendly rivalry with others of a similar pace was a key motivating factor³⁴. However, for those that are interested in comparisons with others, Parkrun enables individuals to compare their time with those of the same sex and age. It generates an age grading, which take an individual's time and use the world record time, along with their sex and age to produce a score (a percentage). This allows runners to compare their personal performance against other people's performances even though they may be of a different age and sex to one another.

In addition, rather than being purely focused on achievements in terms of time to complete the run, Parkrun also records and celebrates the number of runs that individuals have completed, celebrating and rewarding them when they complete 10 (for under 17's only), 50, 100, 250 and 500 runs.

What were the benefits?

The feelings of achievement generated through Parkrun are consistent with wider evidence of being a key motivator to undertaking exercise. The value of the individualised record of attendance and performance at Parkrun was also notable. Allowing individuals to set their own goals (e.g. improving times, reaching milestone numbers of runs, or running the whole distance) provided ongoing motivation to continue attending Parkrun (and to undertake independent exercise). This aligns with evidence that highlights that mastery goals are generally associated with positive outcomes such as effort and persistence. Parkrun facilitates this and in turn, increases individuals' confidence for exercise and encourages people to sustain their engagement.

In addition, by encouraging runners of different speeds to participate together, slower participants reported feeling inspired by the speed of front-runners. Conversely, faster runners described how they admired and respected the efforts of those for whom running did not come easily.