



FIND THE PERFECT TEAM PARTNER

BY RENE UNSER

There's nothing quite as motivating as signing up for a multiday foot race across the European Alps. The second you make the decision to take on a race like the GORE-TEX® Transalpine-Run your way of thinking starts to change. Excitement closely aligns with commitment and it's natural to want to start training and planning to ensure your goal goes as well as possible. Before you can commit to a race like this, however, you need to find a partner.

The GORE-TEX® Transalpine-Run held its inaugural race in 2005 and continues to uphold the partner racing concept. Not only does partner racing make a 7 day traverse across the alps more challenging for the race organization, it is a tricky (but exceptionally rewarding) component for participants, as well. For the record, it's also one of the reasons I love this race and have been a dedicated participant for the past 7 years.

Behind the Scenes

We referred to Stage 2 of the 2014 by the three C's: crap. cry and carry on. To this day, my friend Carrie and I talk about this moment (and many others) where we worked together to pull through a challenging or really dark, moment of this race.

Some of hidden truths behind racing with a partner aren't always pretty. Often, out of respect for one another, those "ugly" moments are rarely shared. It's like a sacred bond, the holy grail or a pinky swear. Running through the Alps for 7 days with upwards of 320k and 15,000m will no doubt, at some point, almost break you. Unlike solo racing... your bonk, moment of despair, complete hysteria, or bad mood isn't just about you, it's shared. And it plays a role on the day, the overall experience and ultimately the outcome. Hopefully, you've teamed up with someone who has seen your dark side, your vulnerability, and your trails habits... and also accepts and understands them.

It's often hard to know what to do for your partner or what they need in these challenging moments. Hopefully, you will have discussed it and or had a chance to practice it before race day. But even then, it can be difficult for both partners when faced in the moment. Learning to focus on the solution rather than the problem(s) helps turn moments of weakness into strength.

We experienced moments that found us in a church in Switzerland. Dreaming of a gin and tonic as we ran through the trees in Italy. Tried to stay warm by playing the alphabet game to things that are hot when we climbed a mountain in Austria during a freezing cold snow storm. We found ways that kept us advancing and that worked for both of us. For example, in 2014 & 2015, we landmarked for miles to break up the hiking on the climbs. It helped us from falling into a pattern where we would just hike and lose valuable time. It was team work at its finest.

A strong partnership has more to it than split times, who's a stronger climber or a gazelle on the flats. It's more about who can pull it together under extreme conditions, find laughter through pain, and ultimately recognize that races come and go, however friendships last forever.

I have learned a lot racing with three different partners and I have created a short list of considerations to help teams find a suitable partner and be more successful in their journey.

1. **RACE GOAL:** No matter what you hope to accomplish from the race, you need to ensure you find a partner with the same goals. For example, a common and very suitable goal for most participants is to "just finish." Talk about expectations around training, outcome and goals. You can run with someone who is slower or faster than you if you both agree that your strategy is to "finish" and just have fun. However, if your goal is to compete and maximize your potential, you need to be honest and find a partner who is better matched fitness-wise.

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- PACING:** Pacing is crucial. It's not uncommon for one partner to run the other into the ground and suddenly you have one teammate either dropping out of the race or the overall pace of the team has slowed considerably. I see it every year, where one teammate is running way ahead of the other and the partner behind is pushing way too hard to keep up. In most cases, this causes the partner behind to crack and often, not recover. This is the easiest way to DNF. Remember, it's not a cat and mouse chase among partners. You need to pace to the slowest person each day and find tactics to motivate each other and not wear each other down. You will both be your best and worst over a stage race and rarely both feel your best at the same time. Establishing a pacing plan and communicating guilt free, if you need your partner to slow down for example, is a key component of successfully completing the race. In my experience, it is unlikely that both teammates will feel the same during the entire race and I suggest participants think about the stages ahead in moments like this. It doesn't matter how fast you go during one stage if you can't finish.
- COMMUNICATION:** Team racing has brought so many highlights to my life. It is such a good feeling to have someone there to support you, when you need it, and even better (in my opinion) to give back to someone when they need it. It takes time to discover what your partner may need or how they may react under inevitable fatigue, so discussing this throughout your training or even off the trails beforehand is really important. If there are things you're having difficulty talking about before the race, don't think you'll suddenly be able to once the race starts. If something is bothering you or on your mind, be sure to lay your cards on the table before you show up to the starting gate. The stress of a stage race will slowly break down your focus, energy and coping mechanisms. Bringing up big issues in the middle of the race will be harder to recover from, so start communicating and be honest with each other early on.
- BONDING:** Bonding before the race is an important aspect of gaining trust and confidence. This can be difficult if your partner lives in another community or country. However, you can still make time to skype. Sharing training ideas, successful workouts and encouragement can go a long ways and let's face it... when the race is over, you will hopefully finish with a closer and long-lasting friendship as well.
- DNF DISCUSSION:** While nobody wants to think about the dreaded DNF, it is always a possibility with any race. I think the teams that can have this hard discussion ahead of time have a better chance of finishing the race and protecting their friendship afterwards. It's my opinion that if this occurs, no matter if you're the partner still out racing or injured/sick and not racing, that your actions and commitment to one another don't change just because you're not out there together. Each partner will be going through different emotions and your commitment as a partner doesn't stop if your partner drops out or visa-versa. Knowing how you want to feel when you look back at your experiences like this will not only help make the process more positive, you'll walk away still feeling like you did your best and contributed to your team no matter what the outcome. I have been on both ends of this spectrum throughout my 7 years of this race and I can proudly say that whether I was the one still racing/finishing or out due to illness, my partner values & support remained strong. There is no "I" in "TEAM" and this dedication to your partner starts the day you take on a commitment like his together.

Rene Unser is a 7 time GORE-TEX® Transalpine-Run participant and has finished hand in hand with her partners, finished solo, DNF'd, has won stages and finished 3rd overall in the team women's category. Throughout all these experiences, she has learned so much about herself, partner racing and stage racing and is working with PLAN B to share monthly stories and insights that will help others make the most out of their 2018 journey across the Alps. Rene also writes training plans for novice and experienced runners, which have helped teams successfully finish this event every year.

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