

Chicago Startup Connects Runners to Race Carpools

Ride sharing service verifies identities by checking race results and offers insurance against drivers who DNS.

ByCindy Kuzma



The Wisconsin Marathon in Kenosha—about halfway between Milwaukee and Chicago—draws its fair share of runners from both large Midwestern cities each May. Every year, race director Jonathan Cain hears the same questions from carless urbanites: “How do I get to Kenosha by train?” and “Does Uber work there?”

Beginning with this year’s event, Cain can recommend a new solution, thanks to a partnership with a runner-owned ride-sharing service. The Chicago-based startup, called Sweeten the Ride!, matches drivers and passengers online so like-minded racers and spectators can carpool.

Shari Matzelle, a former electrical engineer with an MBA from the University of Chicago, has run the Chicago Marathon twice and completed three Ironman 70.3 triathlons (partially to compensate for her sweet tooth, one of the inspirations for the company’s name). She came up with the concept last spring. “Sometimes there will be races I want

to do, but I don't know anyone else going," she says. "I thought, 'What if there was a way I could find someone going to that race to ride with, connect with, even grab a hotel suite together?'"

To sign up for Sweeten the Ride!, runners simply enter their location and a few other details—gender preferences, interest in hanging out at the race or rooming together, and the price they'd pay or would like to receive for the journey (so far, about \$10 and \$20 round-trip, Matzelle says).

The company uses a propriety software system to pair riders and drivers and alerts them of potential matches via email. If both sides confirm, the rider enters a credit card number, Sweeten the Ride! finalizes the transaction (and takes a 10 percent cut), and the carpoolers receive each other's contact information to hammer out the details.

The registration form also asks for a Facebook username and recent races, which the company uses to verify identities. Staff scours Athlinks and race results pages to make sure users have truly participated in these events, Matzelle says. For an added layer of security, drivers or riders can also add on an emergency alert keychain from Guard Llama, another Chicago-based start-up.

Matzelle began testing the concept at races last year, forming partnerships with race directors like Cain and Dave Zimmer, owner of Fleet Feet Sports Chicago, which will offer Sweeten the Ride! services at the six events it owns in the city. "Chicago's beautiful lakefront provides the city some fantastic parks and trails for running, but it doesn't come with much parking," Zimmer says. "When the race route crisscrosses city streets, the surrounding area often has limited parking, and what is available can be cost-prohibitive." Offering ride sharing simplifies the logistics for participants while also minimizing each event's carbon footprint, he notes.

By the Fleet Feet Rudolph Ramble last December, Sweeten the Ride! had matched up several drivers and riders, though none finalized the transaction. Matzelle says that with more partnerships and a database of several hundred runners, she expects the service to pick up steam this spring. Another runner-friendly perk, she points out: If a driver cancels within two days, riders are still guaranteed transportation, via a third-party service or even a team member if necessary. "We know how important it is—if you signed up for a race, you can't take any risks that you're not going to be able to get there," she says.

One runner who has signed up, Brooke Heibel, 22, lives almost two hours outside Chicago. She ended up arranging to stay with a friend the night before the Rudolph Ramble. However, she plans to use Sweeten the Ride! next time not only for convenience, but also for the kind of camaraderie she might not get from a Lyft driver.

“Before a race, that’s all you kind of want to talk about, because you’ve been preparing for so long,” she says. “And I’ve realized the only people who want to talk about running are runners.”