

## Trail Marking – A “How - To”

by Tom Clark

The ideally marked trail for a race is easy to follow, does not place too heavy a burden on the marking crew, or the people who pick the markers up, and doesn't leave a lasting impression on the environs.

Pinflags, which are lengths of straight steel wire with bright flagging at one end, are excellent trail markers. They stick into the ground easily (mostly) and are easy to carry and easy to pick up. They lack directionality, so they are used as waypoints – things that you navigate towards, then past.

Sometimes you need arrows, stapled to lath. Arrows are excellent course markers (they point which way to go and are visible at a distance), but the lath is heavy and unweildly.

You can also draw flour arrows on the ground. These are placed prior to a turn. A bike water bottle full of flour works well – you squeeze the bottle and draw the arrow on the ground. If it rains heavily, the flour goes away, so these are tough to rely on.

In general:

- use a consistent marking technique throughout the course.
- try to mark one side of the course.
- place the marking device where it isn't likely to be clobbered, yet is visible at a distance.
- think about speed: cyclists racing downhill need some warning (100 feet?) about a turn.
- the simpler and less complicated, the better.
- after placing markers, stand back and ask yourself: Does it work?
- try different configurations.
- place the markers the evening before or even the day of the race.

### The Straightaway:

If you haven't had to place a marker for a quarter mile or so, you may place a “confidence flag”, so long as it is obvious that there is not a turn there. This tells the racer “you are on course.” (This is pretty easy, so no diagram.)

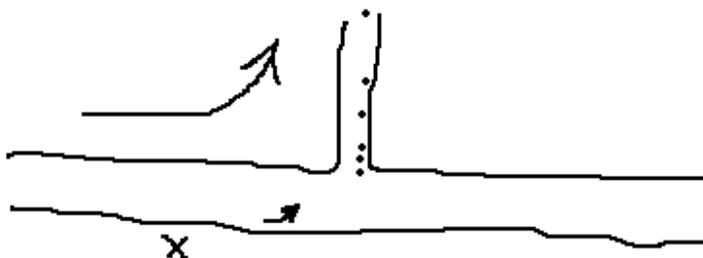
### The Straightaway With Unused Intersections:



*Figure 1: Straightaway, no turns*

When the another trail intersects, but you don't use the intersecting trail, place a single marker about ten feet AFTER the intersection, close enough to be visible, but far enough uptrail so that it isn't mistaken for a turn. Figure 1.

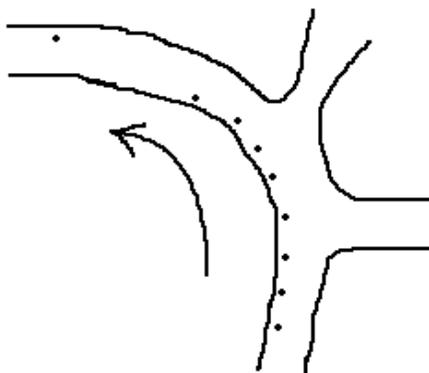
The Basic Intersection:



*Figure 2: Normal intersection*

If undergrowth is sparse and the intersecting trail is visible at a distance, plant a few pinflags in a line at the head of the intersecting trail, with a few more leading up the trail. If dense brush, grasses and trees obscure the turn, plant a **group** of three or four pinflags right at the head of the trail, with a few more leading up the trail, confirming the right path is being followed. Try to arrange this group of pinflags so that they are visible well before the turn. A flour arrow on the ground prior to the turn can help. Really serious situations require a lath stake and arrow at the “X”. Figure 2.

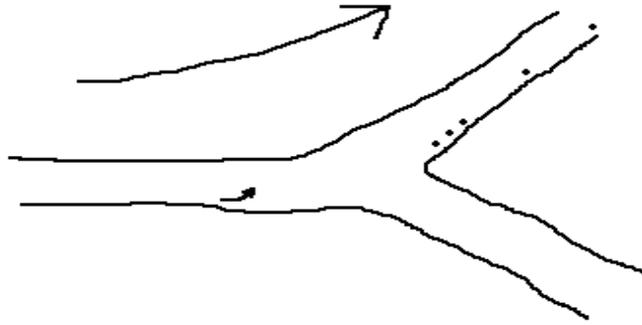
The High Speed Turn:



*Figure 3: High speed turn*

Sometimes the course will need to make a turn where racers will be traveling at high speeds. In this instance, a flock of regularly spaced pinflags (16” to 6’, your call) can be placed in advance of, and throughout the turn. This works particularly well for a sweeping turn. This is an instance where you may need to mark the left side of the course. Abrupt turns may require lath stakes with arrows, and flour arrows on the ground prior to the turn can help.

### The “Y” Intersection:



*Figure 4: The "Y" intersection is easy*

Other than the straight section, this is the easiest thing to mark. Place a few pinflags just inside the turn, and a few more up ahead, still clearly visible, leading the racer up the trail. If conditions are good, you can even add a flour arrow on the ground for good measure. Figure 4.

### The “Out 'n Back”, or sections used multiple times/different directions:

A lot of thought has to go into this, and you need to look at your work critically. Know how the course will be used, and use the above techniques to mark the turns. Generally, you'll also need arrows and possibly other signage to sort things out. Pinflags need to be placed so that they only attract racers coming from the appropriate direction. No diagram, as these are quite varied.

### Things to avoid:

- Resist the temptation to flag both sides of a trail and have racers go through the “gate”. A single flag is fine, and won't be confused with a turn.
- Other marking materials. Part of marking a course well is doing it consistently throughout, with similar materials. Racers will follow the course best if they know what to look for.
- Don't block unused legs of intersections. Your blocking material (sticks, logs, tape) will probably get tossed aside by irritated trail users, and in spite, your markers might get taken down.

### Tips:

- In rocky soil, it can be difficult to insert a pinflag or stake. Locate a clump of weeds close to where you want your marker. Crop the weeds close to the ground, and stick the pinflag through the remaining roots. This works for stakes as well.
- Place markers the evening before (or the day of) the race to minimize the chances of vandalism.
- Think like an exhausted racer. Would you be able to follow your markers?