

1989 MIDWEST MORRIS ALE IN EXILE

sponsored by

Maroon Bells of Boulder
(The Honorable Ryntha Johnson, Squire)

and

Rocky Mountain Morris and Sword
of Fort Collins
(The Honorable James LaTourrette, Squire)

with

a cast of

171 regitants
7 cooks
1 cat

representing

20 teams
& 13 states

Running an Ale

I want to begin by stating the obvious. Dancers come to the Ale to enjoy good dancing and good company, preferably along with plenty of beer and good on-time food. If you get these right, the Ale will be a success. The hosts job is to provide these with the minimum number of hassles. The reason I state it now is that it is what one most easily forgets in the heat of the many battles, territorial wars, and crises involved in mounting an Ale. In the dark days to come, remember that an Ale is really about letting people have fun.

The top of our organizational tree was composed of one heavy, myself, who yelled and screamed at people to get things done, set deadlines and generally made himself unpopular, and one facilitator, Ryntha, who soothed feelings, calmed people down and acted as a pressure valve. To do so, she stayed mostly out of the line of command. While I would not highly recommend our method, we did put on a good Ale and were still speaking to each other at the end of it, which is not true of all Ales. Though I did, through my position, have the most power over the Ale, all decisions were by majority vote of the Ale Committee.

The Ale committee was composed of whoever happened to show up at the meeting, which varied in size from seven core people to about 18. For the first 8 months, the committee was something of a disaster. We spent more man-hours in committee than we did working on the Ale. Largely, this was a function of wanting to discuss detailed plans without having done any fieldwork first. One case in point was where we were going to tour the second day, whether back into Boulder or up into the mountains. In August, we assigned the Maroon Bells the task of looking (never assign tasks to teams, assign them to individuals if you want them done). In September and October, we assigned it to individuals who never got around to it, and by November it was too snowy to tell. After wrangling all winter over the question, I finally did the drive myself-- something that Ale masters should get used to. In fact, there was no place even remotely big enough to dance.

If at all possible, the way to do it is to assign the preliminary groundwork to someone, bring it back for review and changes, assign someone to finish it, and then give it a final review. We consistently jumped the gun and argued over things that we had no groundwork for. When we had not specified that everything was subject to change by the committee, we had a number of persons get defensive, as they felt their work was being attacked. Stress that they are working on a proposal. Above all, be specific. One of our consistent minor irritants was that someone did not understand what really was required of them, and when it was required. Set deadlines for anything you ask for. They will still be ignored, and you will get it a month late, but it is better than 2 months.

Running an Ale Continued

At a prior meeting, set the agenda for the next meeting. If someone has the time, distribute copies before the meeting. For a single team putting on the Ale, this is more irrelevant. However, as I did not see the Maroon Bells every week, and so could not remind people, we wasted much time when sub-committee heads did not show and forgot to pass on their info.

Get everything in writing, especially money figures. We had a couple of times when someone was asked for a figure, gave it, and then said at the next meeting that there was no way that was right. I drew up statements of agreement for everyone to sign who was handling a substantial amount of money. It took some time, but then I had a figure that I knew everyone had agreed to. Our cook, who was not a team member loved it, because then she knew precisely what she had to spend. Especially for non-team members, I think it worked really well. This is a \$10,000 event now-- if someone goes 10% OVER their assigned budget, it can be a major expense.


Take time out at meetings to thank your workers and tell them what a good job they did. The easiest way to burn out your crew is for them to feel unappreciated. At the Ale, introduce them and thank them. It only takes 5 minutes, and a little applause can go a long way towards soothing hurt feelings.

Recognize the fact that no matter how hard you work or how well you plan, some things are still going to go wrong. The only thing you can do is to wing it and hang loose. The same applies to schedules. Also, remember that you can not please all of the people all of the time. Various people will come up and complain or yell at you. Sometimes, you can work something out. Other times, you just have to tell them, "tough shit.". But generally, if the dancers know you are trying, they will try to cope as well. People are here to have a good time. And try to have some fun yourself.

Other than that, use the Ale book, and make it as widely available as possible. If your team has never done a big Ale, it is a really valuable resource. But also remember that every Ale and every host team(s) is different so some things you have to do your own way.

And I just want to wish all who follow me good luck. Running an Ale is a hell of a job, and halfway through you will be wondering why you are doing it. After it is all over, though, it is a nice feeling to know that you did a good job, and that there are 180 dancers who had just a great time.

Good Luck,


James LaTourrette
Alemaster 1989

T-Shirts

Generally, about 70% of the attendees will order a t-shirt. Another 10% will want to buy it at the Ale. The major complaint we received was that the design and color should have gone out with the registration mailing. Dancers want to know what they are buying. Additionally, we received some complaints from people who wanted 100% cotton, instead of a mix.

What this means is that one needs the design at least 2 months before the mailing to accomodate design changes. One also needs to have checked with the printer that the colors picked out are indeed available. Despite repeated assurances that he could ~~not~~ get any color we wanted, the printer in fact could not get the ones we wanted. Three weeks before the Ale, we ended up switching to a Fort Collins printer who could accomodate us.

If the design is decided by open contest, pick a winner and then put the runner-up on the buttons. It will help alleviate hurt feelings.

Touring

By and large, the dancers seemed to like doing small tours on Saturday and larger ones on Sunday. By switching one of the two busloads at each place, everyone did get to see everyone else, which obviated one of Ann Arbor's Ale problems.

Otherwise, get the schedule set early, post it Friday afternoon, and make sure as many hosts as possible have a list of where everyone will be when. As we had only one person on site who had the information, we got a number of complaints from people who wanted to call friends Friday night and tell them where they would be. We also had complaints about a lack of audience on the second day, but it is true of most Ales. ~~Just~~ Be prepared to change it all around. There will be all sorts of requests to switch around to dance with some team.

Most important, keep the damn bus rides short. Very little makes dancers more irritated than long bus rides and short stays.

Show Dances

In order to accomodate everyone, we had almost 5 hours when the Ale was all together. It meant that everyone who requested 2 shows got them. However, there were a number of people who felt that this was too long. One day, we literally ran out of Mass dances to do between the shows. On the other hand, I know how irritated some teams have been when some teams did two and others only one. It is a dilemma that I have no solution for, except to wish you luck.

Mass Dances

For this Ale, we chose only 7 mass dances, which was too few. Unfortunately, a lot of the people did not know either William and Nancy or Lollipop Man; consequently, especially on small tours, the mass dances were pretty minimal. Also, for the long show dance periods, 7 dances was not enough. My recommendation would be for 7-9 dances most of which would be easy. Furthermore, a number of them should not be physically demanding. Dancers do get tired.

Beer and Wine

We drank the equivalent of 3 and 1/2 kegs (178 people). Additionally, we drank 50 liters of wine. Although we did not drink as much wine as we had provided, a lot of people thought it was a good idea- not everyone is fond of beer. We got some criticism of the the Festival Beer, which was pretty tasteless; sentiment seemed to be that it is worth the extra money to get a better beer.

Food

When doing a count for food, be sure to put in the cooks, helpers and general extras, then add in 6-10 more for the random people showing up. Every night, we fed 4-8 extra people who were friends of someone at the Ale, or friends of a friend, or in a couple cases just people who thought the Ale sounded like fun.

Giving people something to eat on the busses coming back seemed to be appreciated. And as dinner is going to be late, as it always seems to be, be sure to have some munchies out. With snacks, a late dinner is at least tolerable; without them, be prepared to get handed your head. Last, because we were so isolated, we did offer a Friday night dinner, and we certainly got no complaints. However, it is a significant expense. Take your choice.

Registration

One idea of ours that worked was to put the buttons on the T-shirts beforehand, and then bag them together by team. It means one person can do most of registration at the camp. Furthermore, it is one more thing that can be done beforehand, rather than at the camp.

We used Ann Arbor's registration form, which we liked as it let responding teams do most of the work of adding the figures up. However, its downside is that one can not make up an Ale address book from it.

As far as written materials go, plagiarize. This Ale is enough work without spending the time to come up with new forms or doing totally new letters. We modeled most of our written materials after Ann Arbor's. From year to year, Ales do not change a hell of a lot, so pick the letter(s) you like and rewrite them to your needs. And remember, the readership diminishes in inverse proportion to your verbosity. Inside jokes, stories, and lengthy explanations are fun to write, but no one will read them. In fact, irregardless of how short the letters are, no one will read them anyway, or rather only a few will.

Workshops

About 60% of the Ale attended workshops. Our smallest was music, 7 people, the largest was Oddington, 24 dancers. Most of the rest were 12-16. Having sign-up sheets for them worked fairly well, although attendance could swing close to 50%. We almost canceled Tango, and then ended up with 18 people attending, whereas Border went from 15 signed up to 10 attending.

If possible, have the workshop leader arrange for music within his own team, as it will be easier for all concerned. Barring that, make sure you have some musicians standing by.

Introduce the leaders at some point, so if someone has a question he/she knows who to ask. Also, tell participants what they need to bring.

For dancers who do not want to dance, prepare some type of a walking guide. Even if it is not the Rockies, attendees often want to explore a little of the area. Other than that, I'd advise you to stick to the basics, Morris/Sword/Clog/Fooling etc., with a couple extraneous ones thrown in. The responses to our workshop letter all favored the basics. This is, after all, a Morris Ale.

Music

We did not hire a contra band, and people seemed to enjoy playing. We did have one main musician running it. And what he did feel was that we could have used someone to run the sound system. He also highly recommended getting a good sound system. As well as for the contra, we did use the sound system for the mass dance practice, and it was a real help. Alternatively, one could rent a bullhorn, which could then also be used outside. In either case, some artificial aid for the foremen is a help.

Airport Pickup

This was one of our great hassles and I doubt it will be as bad for most future Ales. We had people calling up to the night before to give flight information, which plays havoc with schedules. Furthermore, we had people who would claim that a teammate was coming in, who actually was not. Our coordinator recommended not listening to anyone but the Squire ~~and~~ and the person flying, as he was putting pages out all day for people who were not coming, or had changed their flights. One further way of eliminating the problem is asking for names to match to flight numbers. Part of the problem arose, because people would send flights, but without saying who they were.

Flights came in from a half-hour early to 2 hours late. What this meant was that a few flights did not get met at the gate. Thus, in the future, it might be wise to state in the letter a landmark in the airport as a fallback point.

Airport Continued

One alternative that did work was to have a constantly manned phone at a Morris central. In that way, anyone who is really lost can get hold of someone. Plus, persons at the airport can pass messages back and forth about someone who had changed flights. And when all else fails, you can do what we did and page Mr. Morris Dancer.

Budget

There will be extra income from two sources that is hard to quantify till afterwards. One is busking-- we picked up \$143 from it. The other is late fees, from which we received \$50. They are the type of income that is very hard to build into the budget, but will provide some extra cushion. Just beware they are out there.

Miscellaneous

Telephone Calls: if you give out a telephone number, give out the hours you can be reached. This avoids getting woken up at 7:00 am. Conversely, when someone calls, and wants an answer, get them to leave hours as well. It avoids playing telephone tag all the time.

Scheduling: Stress to the Ale committee that things need to be done ahead of time, so that they can be reviewed. All too many of the minor errors we made came about, because no one but the maker reviewed the decision. If jobs are completed long before the Ale, errors can be picked up. The closer to the Ale, the less time to review.

Back-ups: For important jobs, have some way of providing a back-up. When our registrar got delayed getting to camp, we had no one there. And we had no set-up to cover this. This leads me to my second point which is get copies of everything to everyone. All of the housing and registration materials were with the registrar, so even when we got some hosts to the camp, they had no information. The same thing happened with tour schedules. We had no detailed tour schedules at camp until our tour head arrived about 8 o'clock. At the very least, the Ale masters should have copies of everything. The further one spreads the information the more likely it will be there when someone wants it.

70/30 Rule: 70% of the work will be done by 30% of the workers. The key to making this work is to create small enough defined tasks that people who do not want to do a lot of work are willing to take them on. If you off-load enough of the trivial tasks on to non-core people, your core people will be functional during the Ale.

Miscellaneous

Before the Ale, do not give your treasurer much extra work. Unlike the rest, he/she will have a lot of work to do after the Ale. We also found that having one person collecting all receipts helped.

Make sure Tour guides are specifically informed of where to go. Telling them that they are going to park is not enough. Whoever scouted the places should talk to the tour guides about exactly where to take the tours.

Hire a big enough kitchen staff that your team can stay out of the kitchen. We had a couple people help in serving at meals, and we asked for help bussing tables after meals. We paid a head cook \$200 to do all the shopping and menu preparation. In addition, we paid 6 assistant cooks \$25 for the weekend and free room and board. They were all folk dancers who did it in part to help out and in part to have some fun. We also used all paper plates and did not regret it. Washing dishes is time-consuming and no fun.

Have extra sleeping bags on hand. We had 2 people forget to bring them. Luckily, I was able to scrounge a couple up, or they would have been awful cold.

One other note, 3 partial teams (Berkeley, San Diego, Columbus) got together to dance and seemed to enjoy the Ale more that way. It seems to be worthwhile to try to get partial teams together.