



Feets of economic strength

By: Jacqueline Birzon

May 9, 2014

Long Island's running community is lacing up for its most competitive – and lucrative – time of the year.

With prime-time seasonal sales on the line and a flurry of competitive relays on the calendar, athletic-minded businesses are looking to lap the competition. Even nonprofits, many of which raise funds through mini-marathons, stand to run up healthy revenues.

But in a relatively small region with a tight-knit running community, in a season packed with local events, an entirely different kind of competition can arise – pitting charities, towns and grassroots groups against each other in the race to attract runners.

Running count

The main event of the local race scene, arguably, is the Long Island Marathon, which was held Sunday at Eisenhower Park in East Meadow and attracted more than 8,500 registrants. That number makes it Long Island's most-crowded footrace, though other annual Island events – including the Great Cow Harbor 10K, the Shelter Island Run and the Marcum Workplace Challenge – aren't far behind.

Marking its 37th year this September, the Great Cow Harbor 10K is very much in its prime, according to race director Rich Boziwick, who cited key marketing points keeping the 10K fresh, including a consistent pool of Olympic athletes who headline the event annually. Boziwick didn't want to reveal how much organizers spend to promote the run for charity, which winds through the heart of Northport Village and attracts about 5,500 participants annually, but cited a “full advertising budget” covering print ads, on-air promos during News 12 broadcasts and corporate sponsorship drives.

Organizers even spruce up the Great Cow Harbor 10K logo every year, Boziwick noted, just to keep things fresh.

“We believe in an annual improvement of the event,” he said. “We can't change the course or the weather, but we can improve on the big things that we offer. It's sort of painstaking, but we come up with a different design every year.”

A bigger, better advertising campaign is squarely on the minds of organizers behind the Shelter Island Run, which may be a victim of Long Island's crowded marathon calendar. The 10K event has recorded dwindling participation in recent years, with runs attracting as few as 1,600 participants; this year, organizers are fighting back with a \$10,000 advertising campaign they hope will increase registrations by 500 runners for the 35th annual run.

With Olympic silver medalist and Boston Marathon winner Meb Keflezighi headlining the June 21 event, organizers are counting on print, radio and online marketing efforts to push past the 2,000 mark.

“We wanted to find a way to try and reinvigorate the race,” said organizer Mary Ellen Andipietro. “We definitely have a quality race and we feel that we can bring it back to the level it once was, even though there are so many races around.”

Cashing in

Whether or not each individual race attracts record-setting registrations, Long Island's footrace culture delivers some considerable business benefits.

Athletic vendors were out in force at the Sports and Fitness Expo this year, a side event accompanying the Long Island Marathon. According to Greater Long Island Running Club VP Mindy Davidson, vendor booths, rented out at \$700 a pop, were maxed out this year, with more than 50 booths – the most ever – at Saturday's Mitchel Athletic Complex expo.

It's a sign that the marathon's marketing efforts worked, Davidson said, noting efforts to attract larger, national brands to Mitchel Complex – providing exposure not only for the marathon, but for regional small businesses.

“The race calendar nationally is packed this time of year, so we tried to market this event earlier in hopes we could get on the calendars for some national companies,” Davidson said. “I think word has spread among local organizations that it's a great way to get the word about their businesses.”

Not all of the participating businesses were thrilled with the expo. Farmingdale-based Runner's Edge geared up for the expo by linking with big-name brands like Saucony and SwiftWick, and by doing so managed to stand out during an event that otherwise had a “flea market” feel, according to Runner's Edge General Manager Dejan Popovic.

“[Nassau] County puts it out as something that they almost don’t want to become too much of a huge, overexposed or competitive event,” Popovic said. “People go by default and what happens is that they expect discounts, and it’s sort of a huge savings kind of environment.”

By infusing national brands into its company message, Runner’s Edge was able to “stay relevant” among a sea of like-minded businesses, the GM added. The strategy was costly – the company laid out for five different booths at Saturday’s expo – but resulted in a 10- to 15-percent profit increase over Runner’s Edge’s participation in the 2013 expo, according to Popovic.

That’s not to say the “huge savings” environment Popovic lamented wasn’t a commercial draw in its own right. Brendan Barrett, co-owner of the Sayville Running Co. (and its offshoot, the Smithtown Running Co., slated to open Saturday), entered the expo for the eighth year on a mission to display clearance items and sell, sell, sell – with the ultimate goal of promoting his two stores.

“It’s helpful from an inventory standpoint, and it’s also helpful to be exposed to runners that could potentially become regular customers,” Barrett said. “[The expo] isn’t really a huge moneymaker for us, but it certainly helps get rid of old stock and the draw is absolutely advertising to customers.”



Profiting nonprofits

The regional competitive-running scene also provides healthy returns for Nassau and Suffolk’s nonprofit communities.

Profits from the Long Island Marathon, for instance, are funneled to the Friends of Nassau County Recreation, a not-for-profit organization that hosts the event in conjunction with the county’s Department of Parks and Recreation. And since accounting firm Marcum LLP turned its annual company picnic into a competitive, fundraising “workplace challenge” nine years ago, more than \$300,000 has been raised for various local charities.

Carolyn Mazzenga, partner in charge of Marcum’s Long Island office, said 2013 was a “banner year” for the 3.5-mile run, which attracted 12,000 participants to Jones Beach. Organizers aim to raise at least \$80,000 each year through registration fees and sponsorships, Mazzenga noted, and they’re “well on track” to hit that target this year.

“We’ve been able to give more each year because of sponsorships, and for the most part I think the event itself is growing because of the charities,” she said. “That’s really promoting a lot of additional sponsorships.”

Since its inception, the Cow Harbor 10K has raised more than \$300,000 for charities, particularly the Special Olympics, which is guaranteed at least \$20,000 in fundraising from each Cow Harbor run.

“We look forward to this every year,” said Special Olympics Long Island Director Kristina Aquilone. “We get substantial funding for our athletes. Program donors like the Great Cow Harbor race community are incredibly helpful.”