

Bob Fleshner passes the baton

By Tierney Plumb | 01-12-09

Bob Fleshner, a lawyer-turned-entrepreneur-turned-health-care exec, has sprinted from one gig to the next. His personal training business — and a passion for running — led to a position as race director for April's 200-mile American Odyssey Relay from Gettysburg to D.C.

You are a self-described “recovering lawyer.” What was that experience like? I ended up for nine years as an in-house counsel for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey — definitely one of the best legal jobs in America. There were a million things going on, from real estate to liability issues. I learned that one, I had a great legal job and two, I really didn't like being a lawyer. We had a license to do Walt Disney World on Ice shows. I have memories of sitting in a trailer in Holland writing up a contract while everyone went to see the premiere. I'm sitting there with a yellow legal pad with all these notes and writing it all out, long hand. It was pathetic.

Then you dipped your hands in health care consulting and a tiny dental dot-com startup — then what? In 2001 I left and became CEO for United Healthcare of the mid-Atlantic. That was a completely different endeavor. Employee 000111588 reporting for service. That was tough for me to get used to. I was used to running my own ship and making decisions and being nimble.

So what sparked the switch to running? I've been a lifelong runner. It's my one true obsession. I left United in late 2005 to be certified as a personal trainer. I took on 10 or 12 clients, but I thought, what will I do with the rest of my time? I have done three of these relay-type races. They are such a blast. I met two guys putting on races out West, and they said, “We are thinking of doing relay races out East — want a partner?” So I took on this adventure a little over a year ago, and the first race will be in April 2009.

What are the expenses of putting on a race? If you are the one willing to put in the blood, sweat and tears like I am, the out-of-pocket expenses aren't that great. If you have to hire someone to put together the course, that can become fairly expensive. I put together this whole course myself. I drove out to all these towns and met runners. To me it was a labor of love. My wife thinks I'm nuts; it's 10:30 at night, and I'm banging away at my computer. She says, “What are you doing?” I say, “I'm e-mailing with a runner from Smithsburg!” I would get things back the next day, like, “Our favorite running places in Smithsburg are as follows ... ,” and I found cross-country coaches who helped me out. If you translated that to person work hours and put an hourly rate on it, it would be a fairly significant cost.

Other hard costs? The most direct is everyone who participates gets a T-shirt and a medal. Emergency medical will be several thousand dollars, and porta-potties are \$5,000 or \$6,000. We will hire a company to bring them out to transition areas the night before and pick them up the next day. Permitting is

remarkably inexpensive — in the hundreds or low thousands of dollars. Part of it is because we are not closing any roads for the race.

How do sales come rolling in? You have four or five different revenue streams. By far the best is registration. Runner registration is \$95 a person to register, so it's \$1,140 for a team.

What about sponsorships? If you have an established product and a track record I think sponsorship gets easier. It's a first-year race, so it's a little tougher, and in this economic climate it's even tougher. Pacers, a local running store, has gotten T-shirts for us on a wholesale basis. Sport & Health will give us free membership or gym bags to give away as prizes. Drink More Water is providing us with five-gallon jugs of water to be strategically placed so we don't have to buy bottled water. Another revenue source is merchandise. I surveyed signed up runners and gave them six or eight choices. Fleece jackets was number one, followed by baseball caps and long sleeve T-shirts.

Explain the relay dynamic. The race start time is staggered based on your predicted finishing time. Slowest teams start first at 7 a.m. Fastest teams start later at 2:30 or 3. We have people from 22 states, D.C. and Canada signed up right now. There are two key factors: One is everyone has to be done by 7:30 the next night [in D.C.]. We can't have people on National Park Service property running around at night. I first figure out how many hours it will take a team to run and add a little fluff to that. Then I have a problem on the other end. No one can get to the towpath before it's light at 5:50 a.m. It's mile 135 into the race, so I've got to figure out how long it's going to take them to get there. If I start them early, they will get to mile 135 at 4 a.m., and it's going to be pitch dark. I don't think it's safe or fun to run, in my view. Normally when you run at night you have an opportunity for the van to be in close proximity. You can't put a van out there. Someone can twist their ankle in the middle of the night.

You say you want to keep this race elite. How? The first year we are doing 150 teams max to make sure we do it right and limit mistakes. If you have 300 to 400 teams, there's more opportunity for error. We'd prefer to be the Ruth's Chris, not the McDonald's. The answer to that is we have four or five of these odysseys on the drawing board, and we will maybe end up with eight or 10. One of our competitors is sprouting up everywhere and taking a cookie-cutter approach. We are customizing our races, meeting local people and running where the locals run.

On what par of races would you like to be? There's no reason to believe that we couldn't succeed in all the places we are going within a five-year period. The Hood to Coast Relay [in Oregon] is the granddaddy of them all. It has 1,000 teams, and they sell out every year and have to turn people away every year. Reach the Beach [in New Hampshire] is an extremely well-run, well-organized race. It gets 350 teams and sells out every year. If we build a brand and product as well as the two of them have done in a place like D.C. — which has got way more population than Oregon or New Hampshire — and certainly is as much of a destination point, if not more, there's every reason to believe we can get 350 teams, if not significantly more, if the course can handle it. We will play that over time.

You also added London and Atlanta to the relay series. Our other race destination in London will be a fantastic opportunity. The route uses a lot of the park systems and where Windsor Castle is. Outside of

Atlanta is more of a regional play. We don't think as many people will travel there. San Diego is another one, which will probably be the winter of 2010. They have a wonderful outdoor athletic community.

Where does the D.C. race end? West Potomac. Coming down from Jefferson to the Kennedy Center, pass the FDR memorial and take a hard right on the grass, you're running directly toward the Washington Monument. For out-of-towners, it will be like, "wow."

How did you map out many of the legs? [Near Gettysburg] I saw a woman running with dogs and kept driving around to other places and saw her a second time. I pulled down the window and told her what we were doing. She was so excited and said she was delighted to help. She took us on back roads I wouldn't have found in years. There's a camaraderie in the running community that's second to none.