

Chapter Nine

Organizing a Team for the Corporate National Championships

Prepared by Kaye Donnelly, lifelong runner who was a key organizer of SRI International's running club and serves on the board of the Bay Area Corporate Athletic Association, with contributions from Lou Putnam, prime mover behind AT&T's perennially powerful running team and President of the United States Corporate Athletic Association.

Let's assume at this point that you have established a running team at your company and have compet-

ed in some local track meets and road races. The experience has been positive and has whetted your team's appetite for more competition. So, where next?

The USCAA National Championships—A Challenge Worth Tackling?

Each summer, usually in mid- to late July, The USCAA National Championships attract corporate track teams from around the nation. Both large and small companies join in a weekend of friendly but intense competition. Teams participate in separate divisions based on company size. Actual events change a bit from year to year, but you can depend on a menu of track and field events and road races that will challenge your open, master, and senior runners, both men and women. All events are team events, shifting the focus from individual performance to combined performance. The location of the meet moves each year as different regions step forward to sponsor the event. The site is usually at a first-class university track stadium. Most teams that attend find the experience so positive that they begin planning right away to return the next year. Many have made it the culminating event of their running year.

So, what is in it for your team to attend the next USCAA National Championships? From the perspective of teams who have made the trip, the benefits include:

- the special bonding among team members that grows out of taking on the challenge together
- a chance to test yourselves against committed corporate runners from around the country
- a fun trip and probably some medals to help remember

it (medals are normally awarded to members of the top five teams in each event.)

Recruiting

Let's assume that you have decided to enter your team in the National Championships. One of the first things you will want to do is to assess your available runners against the events.

Check the event descriptions carefully. Even if you have a strong team, you may be missing some critical runners in certain age categories. See the chart in Chapter 3 for a quick overview. You should start recruiting early, no later than January; the fall is better. Get as many runners together as you can find, no matter how fast or slow they may be. Post notices on bulletin boards, use electronic mail, voice mail, talk it up to everyone you know—there may be several closet runners in your company. Invite the runners you talk to go for a run or have lunch (sacrifice?). If your company has other team sports such as softball, soccer, or tennis, look for runners within these sports. One company found their best female sprinters on the soccer team. These women had run track in high school and, in some cases, were burned out on running. It took some persistent persuasion, but they finally came out and loved it! Use all of your resources; no matter how slow runners may seem or say they are, they have a whole season to get in shape. There can be a place on the team for everyone who wants to run. If you have a very small team, you may want to consider forming a joint team with another company in your area. Most corporate meets allow small companies to do this.

Don't stop recruiting when you have "enough" runners; you will need to allow for injuries, vacations, and attrition. At this point you may want to form a running club and charge a nominal fee for dues (\$5-\$10). (These

funds can be used for team activities, such as reductions in road race entry fees, etc.) The fee is not necessary, however. At a minimum, put together a mailing list with names, company locations, extensions, and make sure that everyone gets a copy. Consistent communication is one of the keys to keeping interest high. It's a long time from fall to July!

Training

Organized track workouts once or twice a week give your runners a focus—from, say March, all the way through the Meet. Because the Championships are a team effort, these workouts get your team working together. Everyone at that location gets to know one another and it allows you to make realistic assessments of conditioning and capabilities. Twice-a-week team workouts have proved to be good momentum builder in the 2 to 3 months leading up to the meet. You can schedule these workouts at noon or after work at a local high school, junior college, or college track. It is important to continually encourage runners to do the workouts and conditioning to prevent injuries as the training intensity increases. Sending out notices that describe the workout planned can help get your runners focused.

Try to be creative with the workouts. You might want to do some hill sprints, drills, team relays, and time trials to break up the track workouts. Two or three time trials in distances from 220 meters to 5K are important to see where you are and will help you to begin to strategize for the races. Another way to benchmark your runners is to hold a dual meet with another company. All Comers' meets are often held weekly during the track season in major metropolitan areas. These attract some elite runners and provide excellent competition to simulate race conditions.

Another area to consider is the road racer category. Typically, there should be different workouts for short- and long-distance runners. Road racers generally do not like sprinting; therefore, try to have a longer distance workout for them, and get them together to do a few benchmark road races during the season.

As you progress with your recruiting and training, you will be assessing where your strengths and weaknesses are, which runners will have to run two or more events, and whether you even have enough runners to complete a full team. Most small teams have their strongest runners running the maximum number of events. The danger here lies in wearing them out and possibly diminishing the quality of their races. You may have to be prepared to substitute at the last minute. Alternatively, if you find you are spread too thin, you may want to consider running fewer events, with the possibility of

medaling in that event but not in the overall team standings. This is a good time to look at your goals: win, place, or participation.

Now you are ready to put your team together. This is where a good team captain is invaluable in helping each runner set his or her race goals. Here the self-fulfilling prophecy comes into play. Using time-trial results and other runner-specific variables, you can set challenge goals for each race. These expectations take a realistic goal and push it to a stretch level—it's that mental and physical push that happens only in a race! It works!

Funding

As soon as the decision to go to Nationals has been made, you should look at the issue of funding. If you think there is a possibility that your company will fund all or a portion of the costs, submit a formal proposal and budget to the appropriate executive. Typically, by March, figures should be available for entry fees, transportation, and hotels; you can prepare your budget using this information, with additional allowances for any miscellaneous team activities and expenses. If your company can pay only a portion of your expenses, say only the entry fee, then you will have to consider other fund-raising activities such as raffles, T-shirt sales, etc., along with individual contributions to cover the balance. If team participation in covering costs is necessary, notify team members as early as possible for personal planning and allowance for those who may not be able to afford to contribute. (Fund-raising activities are covered in more detail in Chapter 11.)

Uniforms

Ordering uniforms can take from 6 to 8 weeks or more, depending on the size of the order, availability of sizes and colors, and your customization requirements. It also takes time to call all of your runners to get their sizes. Once you have done that and have identified a company to do the uniforms, be sure to order extras for new team members. Cost is another consideration. On the basis of what you anticipate your funding to be, you may want to consider having each team member pay a portion or all of the uniform costs.

In Summary

Early recruiting, conditioning, investigating funding options, and ordering uniforms are the keys to successfully putting together a team for the National Championships.

How to Put It All Together

The team effort can start at the very beginning by getting team members to take responsibility for specific

tasks such as recruiting, workout coordination, funding, and uniforms. The closer you get to the Nationals, the more volunteers you will need to help. If you have formed a running club, this would be a good forum for establishing committees for Regional and National activities. If you do not have a formal running organization, you may want to hold regular team meetings to disseminate information and begin to set up committees and arrange for volunteers for the upcoming activities. It is always nice to have at least two people per task, allowing for travel, etc. The following chart covers the essential tasks for which you may need volunteers and/or committees (additional information is provided in Chapter 12).

Organizing for the National Championships

Recruiting—Keep in mind that you may have to do some last-minute recruiting.

Communication—Should be consistent and regular through team meetings, team workouts, and correspondence.

Funding—Company and/or alternatives: fund-raising/individual contributions.

Team roster—Volunteer needed to maintain and disseminate information in timely manner.

Training—Volunteer needed to arrange regular, weekly, and varied (time trials/hill sprints/relays) workouts.

Uniforms—Volunteer should obtain sizes, order, distribute, and store extras.

Entry Fees—Team captain should oversee payment.

Transportation—Volunteer needed to make arrangements, get information from team members, make reservations, arrange for payment, distribute tickets to team members.

Accommodations—Volunteer needed to make arrangements: determine number of rooms needed, make reservations, get information (bringing guest, etc.) from team members, make room assignments, arrange for payment, and send written notice with specifics to team members.

Local Transportation—Arrange for rental vehicle(s), if needed, in the Meet city, making sure everyone has transportation to and from the hotel and track, and make sure everyone has transportation back to the airport after the Meet.

Race Assignments—Team captain, or volunteer: send written notice with schedule of events and meet participation rules to each team member.

Team Dinner—Volunteer to make arrangements for team meeting/dinner in Meet city: find out number of

team members plus guests and confirm with restaurant 1 week prior to Meet.

Team Supplies—Volunteers needed to arrange for miscellaneous supplies: fruit/snacks/refreshments/ice/first aid kit with anti-inflammatory medicine and plastic bags for icing down injuries/extra safety pins, spikes, and uniforms. Arrange for a tarp to provide sunshade at the meet.

Video—Volunteer needed to make sure camera is available with enough batteries; volunteers needed to operate the camera during the Meet.

Pickup Meet Information at Host Hotel—Team captain, or volunteer.

Road Race Numbers/Course—Team captain to make sure road racers have numbers and course map night before race.

Track Numbers—Team captain to distribute team numbers to all track and field participants.

National Post-Meet Party—Team captain to make sure everyone knows location of post-meet party.

Team Post-Meet Party—Volunteers to arrange for post-meet party back home and thank-you gifts acknowledging exceptional effort.

Now that you have done it, take a little rest—you deserve it—then start planning for next year. The next one will be easier!?

