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SRQ Copy (2-page partner profile)
First Watch Sarasota Half Marathon & Relay

Community Outreach: First Watch Sarasota Half Marathon & Relay's reach spans beyond the runners

The phenomenal growth of endurance and running events worldwide has only been more pronounced by their ability to attract people from all walks of life and fitness levels. One of the largest sectors is in walkers, opening up the "field" to many who might otherwise shun the idea of walking, much less running 6, 10, 13 or 26+ miles. Spanning beyond the skinny runner-types that marked the courses in the 70s and early 80s, today, you will find people of all shapes, sizes, disabilities and ages taking on and embracing the challenges of an endurance event.

Thanks to the vision and persistence of founder Lisette Riveron, the Sarasota Half Marathon & Marathon became a reality for the region five years ago. Riveron helped forever change the way Sarasota and Her Islands now embrace events of this nature.

U.S. Road Sports & Entertainment Group

Two years ago, Riveron decided to focus on other endeavors and sold the rights to U.S. Road Sports & Entertainment Group (USRS), a leading health and wellness company that produces more than 25 world-class endurance events nationwide, including the ING Miami Marathon and Half Marathon®, Chicago Half-Marathon, Publix Georgia Marathon, 13.1 Marathon® Series and the Publix Escape to Miami Triathlon.

Committed to growing participant endurance sporting events, particularly in Florida where the weather bodes well during the winter and spring, USRS has earned its reputation for offering participant sports experiences that showcase host communities and tie directly into the promotion and exposure of each city's culture and identifying features. Having USRS take over the Sarasota Half Marathon came at a critical time for the city, when economic downturns started keeping visitors away, while sporting events such as the half marathon and other endurance and participant sports provided an economic engine by attracting individuals and teams from across the state and outside the region.

"We weren't sure how a national, for profit event organizer would impact our local racing community with their involvement in the First Watch Sarasota Half Marathon. However, we've been more than pleased with the effort U.S. Road Sports has put forth to tie in the local running and business community as well as supporting many local charities," said Molly Jackson, co-owner of New Balance Sarasota and University Park. "We've seen an even greater outreach in their second year and expect the race and exposure both locally and regionally to grow in future years," Jackson added.

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Although the Sarasota Marathon course has been put on hold (with the hope economic conditions will allow it to someday return) USRS was not alone in this decision, as other cities and event organizers, including the Gasparilla Distance Classic, found that the cost to participant ratio of holding a marathon in conjunction with a half marathon was too great.

Destination benefits

While some may mourn the Marathon course loss, the good news is sporting events, including endurance races such as triathlon and half marathons, continue to grow and show excellent returns for promoting destinations and local businesses, supporting charities and adding economic stimulus. The First Watch Sarasota Half Marathon attracted more than 2,000 participants in 2009 and 2010, 50 percent of whom came from outside Sarasota, including 25 percent from out of state. This helped generate more than half million dollars of additional revenue to Sarasota County in one weekend. The number of participants puts the First Watch Sarasota Half Marathon in the top five largest destination events for the County (outside of Spring Training). This number is expected to grow to 3,000 participants in 2011 and increase over the years, particularly with this year's addition of the 2-Person Relay Team option where two runners or walkers cover the 13.1 miles in 5.5 and 7.6 mile legs.

Local business exposure

What makes endurance and running events even more meaningful is their ability to tie-in local businesses and running clubs and stores, as well as charity and corporate teams that attract people committed to supporting an important cause while also providing a healthy and motivational outlet for training. Locally based businesses such as First Watch Restaurants and specialty running stores including Fit2Run, Fleet Feet, New Balance Sarasota and University Park, and On a Shoestring, are all actively involved and/or sponsors for the race, including offering training programs for runners and walkers.

"Being the title sponsor of the First Watch Sarasota Half Marathon makes total sense for us. Although we now have more than 80 restaurants in 11 states, we've called SRQ home since 1986. The race aligns perfectly with our focus on active, healthy lifestyles and is one of the regions premiere annual events," said Chris Tomasso, Chief Marketing Officer for First Watch Restaurants.

Participating Charities Program

Recognizing there are many existing charity training programs already in place and wanting to encourage participation from as many of these as possible, USRS embarked on a Participating Charities Program, whereby local, regional and national groups and organizations can add their cause to the participant list with the goal of helping to utilize the existing event to assist the charity with fundraising efforts.

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While still in infancy for the First Watch Sarasota Half Marathon, USRS has helped raise millions of dollars for charities across the country through its other 25+ endurance events. Locally, National Charity Director David Scott in partnership with Race Director Javier Sanchez have been working to build awareness among local affiliate charities and non-profits, which to-date include the Suncoast Chapters for Team in Training (Leukemia & Lymphoma), ShamRockers USA (teen fitness and running programs), Team World Vision (Building a better world for children) and Warriors in Wheelchairs (disabled veterans). In addition, USRS also makes an annual donation to Community Haven, a local non-profit that provides services for disabled children and their families.

"The teen runners of ShamRockersUSA have been involved with the First Watch Sarasota Half Marathon for the past 5 years as runners and as volunteers; we're thrilled with the support and exposure US Road Sports has provided our organization and team of young athletes," said Diane Lyons, Founder and Coach for ShamRockers USA, a growing teen fitness and running program. "It has really helped me grow this important program and attract other kids who want to train for races," she added.

Growing commitment to the race and community

Sanchez confirms USRS' interest in growing both the event and the charities program. "We believe Sarasota and Her Islands present a tremendous opportunity to attract runners and visitors who want to participate in a leading event in a spectacular destination. We purposely moved the start and finish area for 2011 to Van Wezel so we can better accommodate participants and help grow the race to one of the leading half marathons and relay races in the country," he added.

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