

Marathon founder not ready to hand off baton



This marks the 20th year of the Lake Tahoe Marathon.
Photo/Provided

By Susan Wood

It may take as much dedication, stamina and love for the sport to run marathon operations as it does to compete in one.

When athlete extraordinaire Julie Moss finished the marathon of the Ironman in Hawaii in 1982 by crawling, six-time champion Mark Allen was so moved, he married her. It was one of the most unforgettable moments in sports.

And those endorphins can be just as important in the joint venture of a business deal, the hallmark of American society.

Locally, just ask Lake Tahoe Marathon founder and race director Les Wright – or even runner, adventure-sport guru Sean Sweeney. Sweeney, 48, and his business partner Jason Collin wanted to last year follow in the footsteps of Wright, now 73, and manage the high altitude marathon known for its stunning views and multitude of auxiliary running events. (It starts Oct. 8.)

But after an enduring more than a year of negotiations and

rewrites beginning in March 2014, the deal fell apart.

Wright declined to comment on what happened. Sweeney, however, provided a bit of the high-road account.

Sweeney expressed interest in stepping in to take it over years ago. Wright, according to Sweeney, seemed interested enough to put together a contract involving an exit strategy and 15 concessions including one in which Wright would remain the race director and get paid.

"We spent a lot of time and a lot of energy, and we had an influx of new ideas," said Sweeney, who also works in the Sierra-at-Tahoe marketing department.

Sweeney believes having 26 events "diluted" the weekend's main event for the marathon purist.

"He has a lot going on," Sweeney said. "We wanted to learn from him. But it was going on 14 months, and (he and his wife Cara) were going on vacation. We told him: 'Vacation or not, if you don't sign, we're not interested.'"

Wright declined to sign, and the offer was pulled off the table.

"I'm probably never going to retire," Wright admitted to *Lake Tahoe News*. This year is the 20th anniversary of the marathon.

Wright started the Lake Tahoe Marathon upon retiring from Lake Tahoe Unified School District as a physical education teacher at age 53.

"I did all those things I wanted to do when I retired – golf, fished, scuba and running. Then, I said: 'I'm bored. I'm going to start a marathon,'" he recalled saying to himself in 1995.

Where to place the route was the big question.

He always noticed the captivating stretch along Lake Tahoe's

West Shore from Tahoe City to South Lake Tahoe.

“The beauty of that road gives me chills,” Wright said.

He put out fliers for the September event, and “it just took off from there,” he reflected back on the early beginnings. The first year brought out 250 runners. The next year, 1,300 people signed up. The high mark was 2,800 entries set a few years ago.

Collectively, the event rakes in about \$20,000 in proceeds that are earmarked to groups such as Tahoe Arts Project, Valhalla and Tahoe-area schools. Volunteers work the 18 aid stations on the 26-mile route starting at a not-for-the-faint-of-heart 6,227 feet with a 2,000-foot elevation gain. It now ends at Lakeside Beach after two decades of ending at Pope Beach.

Along the way for the Thursday through Sunday extravaganza, Wright has added events – to the point the collage may seem overwhelming to the average participant. There’s the Tahoe Triple (three marathons in three days), Trifecta (three half marathons and a full marathon involving the East Shore.) Tack on a 10K, a swim-run duathlon, standup paddleboarding and kayak races as well as two pumpkin fun runs. In addition, a four-person marathon relay has been added to entice those not wanting to tackle a 26-miler or even half the distance.

“A lot of people will like to do that,” he said.

Overall, about 2,000 people have signed up this year for the multitude of events.



Race director Les Wright
fires the start gun.
Photo/Provided

“No matter when I do it, there’s a conflict,” Wright said, illustrating the focus of events at Lake Tahoe in recent years. The events have been in September and October.

And under the guise of “there’s a reason for everything,” Sweeney and Collin have excelled in their own right by launching Epic Tahoe Adventures, a company that specializes in events to cultivate athletic prowess.

One successful event is the Rock Tahoe Half Marathon scheduled on June 18. With 2016 being its second year, the event has already signed up 500 participants and may take up to 3,000. The first year brought out 2,000 runners. Its slogan “run-rock-recover” goes well with Tahoe’s work-hard, play-hard mantra.

Add in a little techno benefit such as participant access to a recorded clip of themselves on the course, and the half marathon set on the East Shore has an appeal all its own. For starters, the website received more than 800,000 hits – 30,000 in the first two hours, according to Sweeney.

And more is in store from Sweeney’s athletic company.

This could be all good news to a runner like Brenda Knox, a Tahoe Mountain Miler.

“The race is well done. When I finished (this) year’s, I signed up immediately after,” said Knox, who has also competed in the Lake Tahoe Marathon. She’s “not a fan” of shuttles, so seeks out ways to avoid them. This year’s Rock Tahoe Half Marathon fit the bill.

And according to Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority Executive Director Carol Chaplin, there’s room around the lake for both events.

“In some ways, the two events are not comparable,” she said.

Chaplin pointed out how Rock Tahoe is a half and Lake Tahoe Marathon is a half, as well as a full version, along with other events.

Also, one is scheduled in June, while the other is slated in October.

Better yet, both events go hand in hand with Tahoe tourism stakeholders’ quest to make “outdoor recreation pretty much the focus,” Chaplin said.

“Whether there’s growth potential, we can’t answer that now. But I do think this area can support these two events. They don’t compete. We support more than one music event – as long as it’s not on the same weekend,” she said.