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SET UP EVENTS: SETTING THE STANDARD



SETUP

Though they are based in the South, the folks at Set Up Events can aptly use the term “snowball” to describe the growth of their 14-year-old organization.

“The nation’s largest triathlon production company” – as they proudly state on their website – has produced 350 races and timed countless others throughout North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia since 1994. “We put on one race our first year. In 1995 we put on three races, six in 1996, 10 in 1997, and it just continued to grow,” says Set Up founder Bill Scott. The growth hasn’t slowed. In 2008, Set Up will produce and direct 75 triathlons and provide timing services for an additional 50-plus running and multisport events.

A passion for the sport and for the athletes they serve has been a key component of this growth for Scott and his staff.

We had a chance to sit down with Scott and his No. 1 Event Director Jeremy Davis to learn more about their company, the growth of multisport in their area, and why

they enjoy making race day special for the athletes who compete in their events.

USAT: Tell us how you got into multisport.

Jeremy Davis: I had biked across South Carolina in two days, was easily running my 5ks in the low 17s so I figured, “how hard could triathlon be”? Swimming must be easy. I was wrong, but fell in love with the sport trying to get faster. Thus, I started the first ever Triathlon Club at Clemson University. This was a welcome break from my Civil Engineering studies and gave me my first taste of organization in the field of triathlon.

Bill Scott: I got into cycling in the early 1980s because of my job. I was manager of the Olympic Planning Committee for the Southland Corporation (7-Eleven) from 1980 to 1984. It was a dream job and I just happened to be in the right place at the right time. In that role, I was in charge of the 7-Eleven Cycling Team from its inception in 1981 to 1984. The team manager hooked me up with one of the team bikes, so I had to start riding. Next thing I knew, I saw Julie Moss crawl across the finish line in Kona in 1982 and did my first tri in 1983.

USAT: What is the history of Set Up Events?

BS: I had produced a few triathlons while living in Dallas in the late 1980s and early 90s. In

1992, I moved to North Carolina and decided to put on a triathlon in Wilmington in 1994. The tri scene was relatively weak here at that point. There were a few races, but I thought that the area could use some more, so I formed Set Up, Inc. in 1994. It was a hobby at first but soon became my full time business.

USAT: How has Set Up grown over the years?

BS: By 2000, it was clear that I needed help. Jeremy was our first full-time staffer and quickly demonstrated a strong desire to get involved in a greater capacity, and showed a real talent for event management. Jeremy became our first production team leader... We now have five complete production teams, each one equipped for full triathlon event production including ChampionChip timing systems. The question I always get is “Did you ever think that it would get this big?” Easy answer: No way. I’m constantly surprised.

USAT: What were some of the challenges you initially faced in getting up and running?

BS: Gaining credibility. Starting from scratch is tough. It takes time to create and develop a brand. Set Up was a money-losing business for five years.

USAT: Jeremy, why did you decide to make a career out of event production?

JD: For me getting involved in race management was a way to create my own life for myself and my family. It is hard work, but it is work I am passionate about. I am happy every day doing this, and I knew engineering could not provide that same happiness to me. It also meant I had to be in an office 40-50 hours a week. Now, I get to be in an office 60-70 hours a week, but at least that office is in my home, right next to my wife and son.

USAT: What are the challenges you face today?

JD: Today's challenges include a hectic schedule that eats into personal time. It is difficult for me, as it is for any small business owner, to know when the "job" ends and life begins. There is such a blending of work and life that it takes a long time to know when to turn off the job side of me and focus on the life/family side... Other challenges include trying to find new venues as populations continue to grow, convincing local jurisdictions why triathlon makes sense for their community, etc.

BS: Jeremy covered this one very well. From a more "corporate" perspective, the challenge is managing and controlling our growth, which we've been pretty careful about. Seventy-

five events sounds like a whole bunch, but it's happened steadily over a 14-year period. Luckily, I'm blessed with great people.

USAT: What is it about your company that makes you different from other race management companies?

JD: Bill will have his thoughts on this as he is the one who started the company, but to me Set Up Events is different in two major ways.

1) We are the largest event production company in the U.S. based on number of events and athletes served each year. With more than 70 triathlon events on our 2008 calendar we have a unique formula for event production. We "own" only one-third of the events we produce and are actually hired by non-profit and for-profit groups to produce their events for them. Thus, we work hand in hand with dozens of local organizers to put on events across the Eastern Seaboard... Working with local organizers allows us to produce events anywhere in the country with less hands-on work.

2) We try our best to keep our costs low for the athlete... Thus, athletes can race all year without a huge investment. We are able to do this while providing a very professional racing experience because we handle all aspects of event production in-house. We

own our own timing and production equipment so we do not rely on outside sources to rent this equipment.

BS: Can't add much (this is why I keep Jeremy around).

USAT: How do you make the whole race experience special for the athletes?

JD: Our events are set up as events, not just races. Our sponsors are part of our team and work hard to create a great feel at our events. Athletes are the most important aspect of our events. Without the athletes, we don't have a business. Thus, we work hard to keep their desires in mind. Whether it's technical shirts rather than cotton, or a great post-event spread, we try to give the athletes an experience to remember. Also, one of our series (The South Carolina Triathlon Series), manages an age group racing team each year. In 2008 we sponsor eight athletes in South Carolina and deck them out with a great package: free entries, gift certificates, team gear, nutritional products, special deals on gear with our partners, etc. We do all this to remind the athletes they are important to us.

BS: It's also very important and big up on our list of priorities that we constantly reinvest in our business. We can't sit back and grow

lackadaisical. There's a lot of competition out there and plenty of other race production companies who do fine jobs. Each year, we buy new "toys" which are always designed to make our events better for the participants.

USAT: What are the goals you have for your company?

JD: My goal is to see Set Up Events become a national brand recognized by all athletes in the sport. I hope to see Set Up events in areas outside the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic. Whether this is via new events owned by Set Up Events or events owned by local groups hiring Set Up Events to produce their event. We have the business model to make this happen on a national scale and I look forward to growing our company in this way. Of course, our number one goal is to create a great racing experience each week at the events we currently produce.

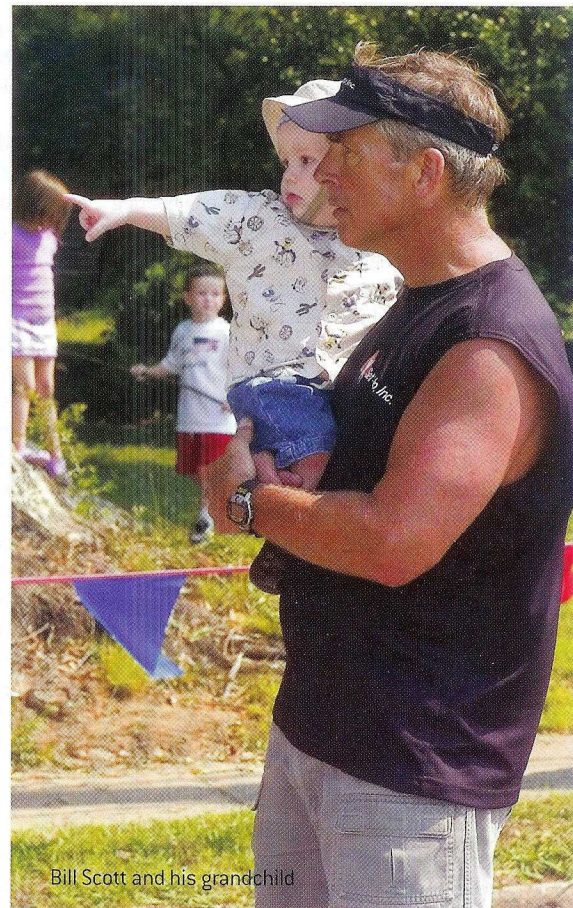
BS: My immediate goal is to try and keep Jeremy and our full time Marketing & Communications Director [Tom Crichton] in check. I'm kidding of course, but those two have been working with NASA and have found an outstanding venue on the Moon. Jeremy has water samples coming back from the Sea of Tranquility.

is always thinking, always growing, always coming up with new ideas on how to make events better.

USAT: What advice do you have for new race directors?

JD: My number one piece of advice is to find a mentor who knows the business. Work with him/her at their events and learn what they do and why they do it. If this means working for free one year to assist in the planning of a local event, do it. There is no greater knowledge in this business than learning from those who already do it... If someone is already doing something, and doing it well, find out what they are doing. You can produce your own events with your own personality, but the nuts and bolts don't differ from venue to venue.

For more about Set Up Events, visit their website at www.setupevents.com.



Bill Scott and his grandchild