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Director's Cut

Money, deaths, natural disasters and angry athletes—all in a day's work for a major race production company

By Brad Culp

Director's Cut

This past June, Des Moines, Iowa endured some of the worst flooding in its history. The city's government had plenty to worry about: helping residents evacuate, building sandbag walls and stopping looters. The last thing on anyone's mind was triathlon. Due to contaminated water and flooded roads, it seemed inevitable that the Hy-Vee World Cup would be turned into a duathlon, or worse yet, that the whole event would be called off. Race director Bill Burke, of Premier Event Management (PEM), was determined not to let that happen, but there really isn't a plan B for a flood of near-Biblical magnitude.

"We were essentially kicked out of the city — and with good reason," Burke says. "Des Moines had enough to worry about. There was no way we could get enough police or medical personnel to hold the triathlon."

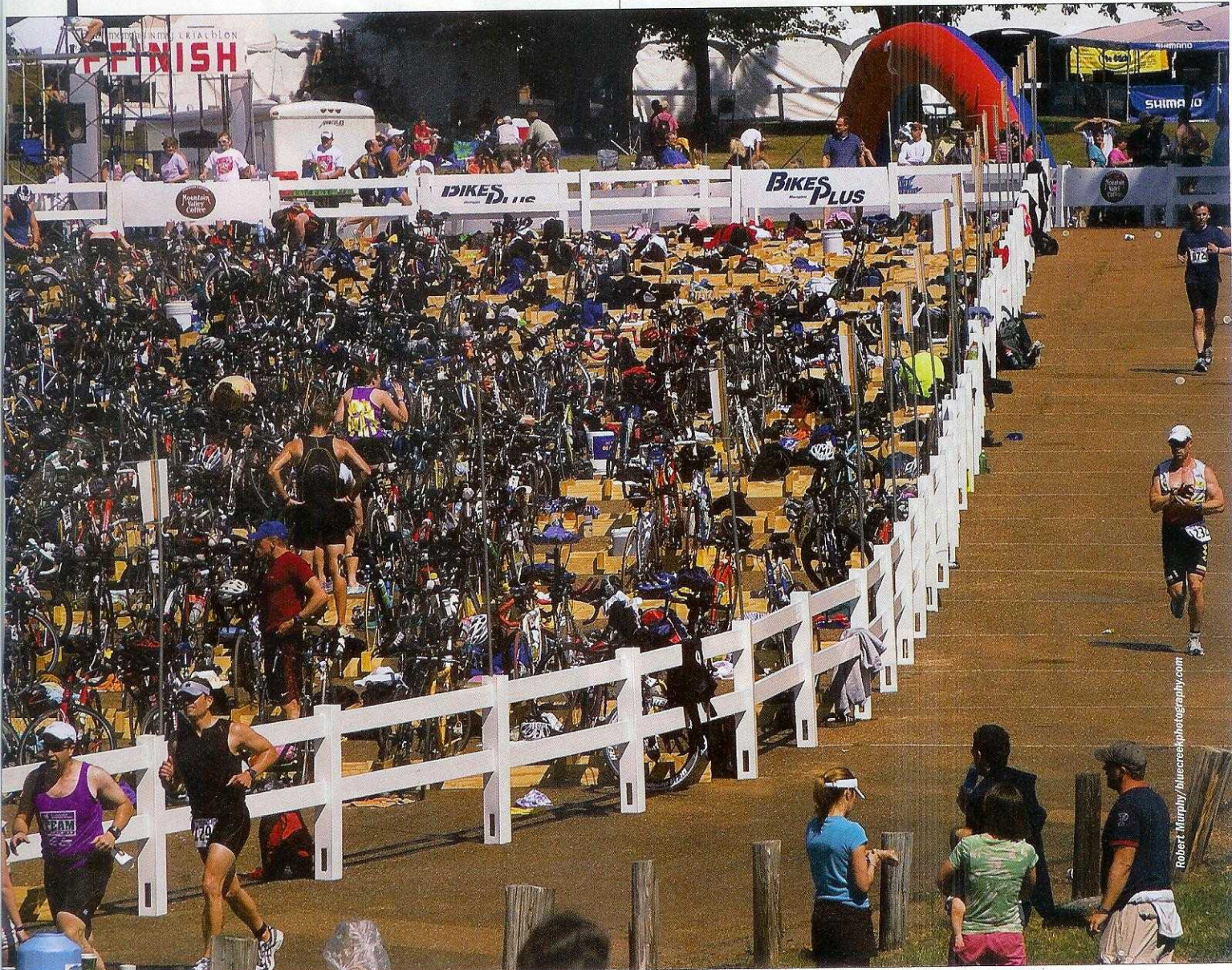
With the final two U.S. Olympic berths and \$700,000 of prize money on the line, Burke knew he had to come up with a plan—fast.

"In 20 years of race directing, nothing has ever tested me like that," Burke says. "With so much on the line, we really had to exhaust every option before calling anything off."

There was only one thing to do—find a new city. With only a handful of days to spare before race day, Burke found a suitable venue in West Des Moines and the event was back on. Hunter Kemper and Sarah Haskins earned their Olympic berths; Rasmus Henning and Emma Snowsill got their paychecks; thousands of happy age groupers got to do their race.

Life isn't always so stressful for Burke, but when you've been directing races for more than two decades, you have your moments. Like most successful race management companies, Burke's outfit got started just before the triathlon boom of the mid-80s, and now manages more than 20 races each year. Burke and the PEM crew are always looking to add new races to the mix, but the focus of the company has always been on quality, not quantity. As its name implies, PEM directs only high-profile events, with superstar athletes, huge prize purses and tons of participants.

PEM is one of only a handful of companies that produces such a large number of races, but 20 events are hardly the most. That distinction belongs to Set Up Events, which produces 75 races each year. If you live along the Eastern Seaboard, it's possible to race one (or more) of their events every weekend between April and October.





Brett Kaminski

When Bill Scott founded Set Up in 1994 neither he nor right-hand man Jeremy Davis foresaw the growth that would follow.

"When I look at the number of races on our schedule I still wonder how we do it," Davis says. "With the right formula and the right work ethic, we find time to get it done."

To deal with their extraordinary race schedule, Set Up has assembled five separate production teams, each of which spearheads over a dozen races. While a few of their events have grown to more than a thousand participants, for the most part, Set Up sticks to producing smaller, local events.

"Gone are the days when triathletes would follow a series around the nation," Davis says. "These days, the closest event is less than an hour away. Why would anyone choose to go farther?"

“Some people just start a race without realizing how expensive it can be to put on... It can take three to five years to build a successful event and turn a profit.”

-Terry Davis

While PEM sticks to so-called “big” races and Set Up focuses on the local scene, Tri-California does a little of both. They produce only five events (all in California), but these include two of the world’s marquee races—the Wildflower Triathlon Festival and Escape from Alcatraz. Terry Davis (no relation to Jeremy Davis) started the company in 1983, while he was working for the County of Monterey. Davis was helping organize a bluegrass festival at Lake San Antonio when some people he was with suggested that it would be a good venue for a triathlon.

"We really didn't know anything about triathlon when we started Wildflower," Terry Davis admits. "Turns out all those people who suggested it were right."

Davis says he's always interested in expanding the company and doing more races, but like Burke, he knows he has to be careful. "Some people just start a race without realizing how expensive it can be to put on," he says. "It can take three to five years to build a successful event and turn a profit."

More money, fewer problems—sort of

In 1983, the inaugural Wildflower Triathlon had the largest prize purse in the world—it was \$1,000. Nowadays, that payout would barely cover the cost of getting to the event. While no one gets into triathlon to become rich, it's becoming a possibility for a select few. With prize purses soaring to record levels each year, race directors know that if they want high-profile athletes to show up at their event, they need to provide monetary incentive. When it comes to shelling out big bucks, nothing matches the Hy-Vee World Cup and the Lifetime Fitness Series.

"Hy-Vee and the Lifetime Series have changed the playing field," Burke says. "I wouldn't be surprised to see a few more events follow suit in the next couple of years."

According to Burke, triathlon is a relatively cheap sport for sponsors to get into. Sprint reportedly paid almost \$100 million to get title sponsorship of NASCAR's premier series. Hy-Vee (a grocery store chain) and its partner companies spent a little more than one percent of that amount to gain title sponsorship over the Des Moines World Cup, which offers a \$700,000 purse. For comparison's sake, the total prize purse for the U.S. Open Golf Championship is approximately \$7 million.

For race directors, it's a simple equation: Big sponsors plus big purses equals big-time athletes—who in turn make those sponsors happy.

Like PEM, Tri-California does all they can to attract the world's best athletes to their races. "For a race to grow into a top-tier event, you need to have pros," Terry Davis says. Tri-California has even developed a "Pro Elite Series," which offers purses at each of their five events, as well as a series championship purse.

Terry Davis believes more sponsorship dollars ultimately help the sport, but he acknowledges that there is some room for concern. "We currently offer a \$50,000 purse at Wildflower," which is really all we can do," he says. "We get the world's best athletes, but if more races start offering a lot more money, it'll be hard to keep the athletes coming."

Attracting top talent to a race may be a surefire way to create a successful event, but it's not a necessity, as Set Up has proven 75 times over. You may find a couple of East Coast-based pros at a few of their events, but it's really all about the amateur athletes.

"Triathlon is a unique sport in that it's all about the age grouper," Jeremy Davis says. "A lot of athletes don't even know who the top pros are."

“As a race director, I see myself as a captain on a ship... People put their safety in my hands and I have to do absolutely everything possible to get them through the race safely.”

-Bill Burke

Worst-case scenario

When you direct a race with thousands of panic-stricken athletes, there's a lot that can go wrong, but nothing compares to losing an athlete during a race—something Burke knows all too well. In over 20 years of directing races, Burke has lost four participants. Two died of heart attacks, one from an internally bleeding ulcer and the last has yet to be determined.

"As a race director, I see myself as a captain on a ship," Burke says. "People put their safety in my hands and I have to do absolutely everything possible to get them through the race safely."

To Burke's credit, he is known for having more medical personnel at his races than just about anyone else. He even brings in a psychologist to help calm athletes' nerves before the swim of the New York City Triathlon. There's only so much a race director can do to protect the athletes. For the most part, when an athlete dies during a race, it's simply a matter of someone who shouldn't be there showing up.

Set Up has been somewhat more fortunate in that they've only lost one athlete in the past 15 years (again, from a heart attack during the swim). Like Burke, Jeremy Davis does everything possible to prevent such incidents, but some things are beyond a race director's control. "It's always a possibility when you have hundreds of people together at once," he says. "People have heart attacks at baseball games all the time. It's no one's fault, it just happens."

Looking ahead

While most industries in this country have seen better days, triathlon continues to steamroll and participant numbers reach all-time highs every year. Many attribute triathlon's resilience against the struggling economy to the athletes treating it as a true lifestyle sport. Swimming, biking and running are more than just recreational activities for the multisport crowd. It seems committed triathletes would much rather save money by skipping a winter ski trip than by canceling their big summer race.

Athletes are still shelling out big bucks to stay involved, but there's always concern that things may slow down. "The costs are getting somewhat prohibitive," Terry Davis says. "The cost of everything is going up and that includes the cost of putting on an event. Unfortunately, that means registration fees will likely continue to go up."

High registration fees mean high expectations from the athletes, who will only keep signing up if they feel the fee is justified. "It all comes back to providing the best experience to the athlete at a price that fits what you provide," Jeremy Davis says. "If you provide a \$75 event and charge \$150, you won't stay in business very long." ▲



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