

# CHAPTER 3

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## **THE FAMILY FITNESS WEEKEND: THE STANDARD FOR LIFESTYLE RECREATION IN FLORIDA**

“SPORTS MARKETING ISN’T JUST WHAT STEVE TEBON DOES FOR A LIVING. IT IS PART OF HIS CULTURE, AND WHO HE IS AS A PERSON. HE WASN’T JUST SELLING A MARKETING PROGRAM TO PUBLIX, HE WAS SHARING HIS LIFE AND HIS VALUE SYSTEM WITH US, HIS TEAM, AND THE PARTICIPANTS. HE’S ONE OF THE MOST GENUINE PEOPLE I’VE EVER WORKED WITH IN THE INDUSTRY, AND THAT SHOWED IN EVERYTHING HE AND ESM DID.”

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## **FINDING AN IDENTITY FOR ESM**

It was the mid-1980s, and Steve and Dennis Tebon had just experienced their first taste of success as sports marketers and event directors. The South Florida-based, three-race triathlon series they had purchased to start Exclusive Sports Marketing (ESM), by all accounts, had been successful. They had secured sponsors, established relationships with host sites, and begun to gain a following among South Florida multisport athletes. By trial and error, they had begun to learn the intricacies of the business and had started to see what methods would help the company grow and, they hoped, become profitable.

After surveying the triathlon landscape, the Tebon brothers quickly realized Florida had the potential to become a prime breeding ground for the multisport lifestyle. Weather, especially in South Florida, was exceptional, allowing athletes to train and race year-round. There was an established core of athletes growing all the time, which meant a significant increase in demand for events. In addition, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw a boon in fitness across the board, similar to the running boon of the 1970s. Most importantly, participation data showed that triathlon was not a sport just for men anymore. More and more women were racing, meaning that families were now becoming part of the equation. Steve Tebon realized this and began a plan of action.

*We realized that because more and more families were traveling to races, the prevailing philosophy of race directors would have to change. It became evident that we needed to provide more in order to satisfy the fitness and competitive needs of dads, moms, and kids.*

The first step in the “fitness weekend” direction was the addition of a kids’ race in conjunction with each triathlon ESM had on the schedule. Initially, they were just short running races, with varying distances for the kids based on their age. Like their racing parents, they received the same “5-star service,” including race T-shirts, awards, and race packets. The move was a hit, among both kids and parents. For the Tebons, it was another revenue stream, and although small, they realized that there was certainly a bright future in involving kids in the overall fitness weekend model.

The question remained—“what next?” By this time, a top resort in major cities across Florida was hosting each event weekend. ESM was crisscrossing the state, taking events from Miami to Jacksonville, Boca Raton to Sarasota, Ft. Lauderdale to Orlando. Event locations were scouted and analyzed so that races took place in areas that could host additional fitness activities.

Input from the athlete was a factor that played a huge role in expanding the fitness weekend concept.

ESM sent out surveys and hosted focus groups to help determine which ancillary events athletes liked that could be implemented into the concept. Two in particular became obvious and were no-brainers to implement and include, based on what the program was already providing: 5K runs and open water swims.

*From an event director perspective, the run and swim were easy to add,” notes Tebon. “Courses for both were already set because of the triathlon. Early on, athletes ran the exact same 5K course that they would during the sprint triathlon. It was good for them because it enabled them to get a feel for the course before the tri. With the swim, we just increased the distance to one mile to provide a little more bang for the athletes’ buck. It was a win-win because it provided additional events for all athletes and additional revenue streams for the company.*

With the family fitness concept taking off and an established schedule of events bolstered by a sport that was gaining more and more popularity in the crowded world of recreation, it was time for ESM to make the next move. “The concept was solid; we had the race weekend format down; and we were beginning to establish an athlete following,” remembers Steve. “Our next goal was to increase revenues, and to do that, we had to start going after sponsors that would help pay the bills and provide

the credibility needed for the fitness weekend to grow and become what we wanted it to be—one of the premier grassroots sports programs in Florida.”

## **THE FAMILY FITNESS WEEKEND**

When it came time to find a name for the program, most of the work had already been done. “The fitness weekend concept was alive and well. When you added the family element to it, which was where we saw the program going, the name just evolved naturally,” said Steve. The Family Fitness Weekend was born.

Although the program would feature a number of sponsors in the early years, they were generally for limited amounts of cash and one-year commitments. That changed in 1992 when Tebon convinced Gatorade to take the Title Sponsorship. Now, the Gatorade Family Fitness Weekend, the triathlon series, and the events around it had immediate credibility. The Gatorade name brought media attention, calls from potential host sites, and a major sports marketing name athletes could relate to and trust.

From there, things really started to take off. With newfound confidence in his skills as a salesperson, Tebon knew he could go after the big boys. The Gatorade deal led to additional cash deals with iconic brands such as Coca-Cola and Toyota. The Family Fitness Weekend was legitimate. Where to take it next remained the big dilemma.

Gatorade Brand Manager Dave Lockwood answered that question in part. A visionary with respect to where he wanted to take the Gatorade brand in Florida, as well as a fellow athlete, Lockwood and Tebon became confidantes. They were both focused on the big picture and seeing their brand and program expand in the desirable Florida market. For ESM, that meant expanding the series and increasing sponsor revenue. For Gatorade, it meant bringing a retail element into the equation.

*Enthusiasm, passion, creativity, flexibility, organization and execution are all attributes of Steve Tebon that lead Gatorade's first entry with Publix and teaming up with the Sprint Triathlon series. Coming up with a plan for the weekend warriors to compete around the state of Florida was ingenious and fit into a working model then for Zephyrhills/Nestlé water with Publix. We received nothing but great feedback from Publix executives about the programs and Steve's implementation. This success led to large six-figure sponsorship deals for multiple years. That's the Power of Sports Marketing.*

“For about six months, we did all kinds of research into the retail industry, trying to decide which retailer would be the best fit for the Family Fitness Weekend,” recalls Tebon. “Along with Gatorade, we considered the pros and cons of grocery

chains, convenience stores, and the big box retailers of the time. In the end, it was decided that our pitch should be made to Publix. The reasons were obvious.”

Publix Supermarkets was—and still is—the largest grocery chain in Florida. At the time, the chain had more than 500 stores in Florida and throughout the Southeast. They had stores in all the markets ESM was presently in and ones into which the company had plans to expand. Publix was family focused and recently had started sponsoring more local sports and fitness events. The chain moved a lot of Gatorade product, of obvious importance to the sponsor and ESM. Everything was aligning in Tebon’s favor. The question was could he get the deal done?

With Gatorade’s Lockwood working on getting ESM a meeting with Publix, the Tebons and the ESM staff went into overdrive to educate themselves further about the chain and put together a first-class, deal-winning presentation. “We were extremely excited and lucky to get a meeting with Publix. Every promoter in Florida wanted to work with them, not only because they were one of the biggest brands in the state, but also because their name on an event brought instant credibility. In addition, having a relationship with the company provided leverage with respect to attracting sponsors. It was the biggest opportunity we had ever had.”

ESM and Gatorade would be working with Dave Cera, a Buyer for Publix. The fact that he controlled the budget ESM hoped to tap into was critical. He had a pulse on the market and Publix's plan. It wasn't going to be a straight marketing decision. The Purchasing Department at Publix would also have a say because Lockwood convinced them that the Family Fitness Weekend was not just a program that would splash the Publix name across the state. He stressed that the concept the Tebons had come up with would also increase sales.

Having heard their pitch, Cera went to bat for the Family Fitness Weekend. He convinced his peers that Publix needed to go in this direction. After numerous presentations and Q & A sessions, Steve Tebon received the call for which he was waiting. The retail giant had given the go-ahead. The Publix Family Fitness Weekend would become a reality.

### **THE DAWN OF AN ERA**

With Publix becoming the Title Sponsor of, and identity for, the Family Fitness Weekend, Tebon's next move would be to secure sponsorship and put together a long-term plan for growth. Gatorade would be the Title Sponsor of the Sprint Triathlon Series for the first year, and existing sponsors would be given more high-profile status. At this time, most of the program's smaller sponsors weren't paying



much money or providing much in-kind support. Tebon was taking a big chance, but he thought that by “giving” sponsors a little more, he would perhaps gain their support and loyalty, which he in turn could use in his favor at the negotiation table. If not, ESM was at least building creative and innovative marketing strategies that would provide other sponsors with a solid return on their investment.

The Publix Family Fitness Weekend was way ahead of its time. In an era in which race directors for the most part stayed focused on marketing and executing one event, the Family Fitness Weekend concept provided a stage for multiple events. As the program moved into the mid-1990s, each weekend hosted up to six different races/events, a prerace expo, and a big postrace party. A typical event week looked like this for the ESM staff:

- Wednesday: Trucks leave office, travel to host site.
- Thursday: Event crew sets up site, has event-related meetings.
- Friday: Event set-up complete. Host pre-race expo/registration, 5K run, in-line skate race.
- Saturday: Sprintkids Triathlon, Open Water Swim, In-Line Hockey Tourney.
- Sunday: Gatorade Sprint Triathlon, Post-Race Awards Ceremony & Party.

Adding events such as the swim, in-line skate, and hockey were significant for a number of reasons. An

event such as the open water swim was added because it fit the weekend profile, was something triathletes wanted, and was easy to implement. In-line skating and hockey came because of ESM's ability to see where the recreation market was heading. In-line racing was at its peak at this time, and it had become a huge fitness craze. Hockey was a natural add-on because of that, and to the surprise of many outside the company, had a strong following in Florida. But the big reason for the addition of these ancillary events? The bottom line, said Tebon.

*At that time, we were in a position to capitalize on our assets. The Publix Family Fitness Weekend was the premier grassroots sports program in the state. We were developing a big athlete following. We were producing for sponsors. More than anything, that allowed us to bring other sponsors aboard at a key time. ESM was growing as a company. We had salaries to pay, overhead to fund, equipment to buy. As CEO, I had to focus on keeping existing sponsors and signing new ones. It was the only way we were going to survive and grow.*

That mindset allowed Tebon and ESM to find Title Sponsors for all the ancillary events and keep on board a stable of other key sponsors. As the leader of the multisport niche in Florida, ESM had to grow and continue to improve for another reason. Al-

though not quite mainstream, the triathlon's popularity was booming, and a number of other promoters throughout the state jumped into the ring hoping to grab their piece of the recreational pie.

Steve Tebon and his company were aggressive. They were focused. They were doing everything they could to stay ahead of the curve and be the leader in recreation in Florida. However, that didn't mean that everything came easy with respect to the sports marketing business. One problem ESM had was that because they were at the forefront, they were expected to be that much better. Certainly, that was a compliment, but at times, it also proved to be a curse.

*Despite the accolades we may have received from our sponsors and partners, the media, and the athletes, things weren't always easy. Because of where we were, people expected us to do more, produce more. We were able to attract the attention of a lot of brands, and because of that, had more opportunities than most companies in Florida. That led to tremendous pressure at times, but luckily, we were able to deal with it. We had a plan. We had a young, energetic staff that was willing to do whatever was called upon to get a job done. It's a cliché that's used far too often, but the simple truth is we just never quit.*

Tebon always comes back to this philosophy when asked how he thinks those new to the sports/

events business need to approach things. “Speaking from a sports marketing motivational perspective, the early days of ESM are testament to why someone who wants to make it in this business can never back off, not even for a second. You’ve got to be aggressive. You’ve got to make the right moves. You’ve got to have a plan that allows you to capitalize on your successes. Were we in the right place at the right time? Certainly. Did we have some luck? No question. But what you have to remember is that, in this business, you make your own luck”

## **THE GROWTH OF A STILL YOUNG BUSINESS**

As the Publix Family Fitness Weekend moved into the mid-1990s, the program was flying high. Running from mid-April to mid-September, the season’s schedule generally consisted of eight- to ten-event weekends, which included a highly anticipated “Destination” event and the all-important Family Fitness Weekend (FFW) Championship Weekend. Sponsorship was secure, with most major partners secured with multiyear deals. The athlete base continued to grow, thanks to the popularity of the triathlon, ESM’s focus on family, and the production of quality events. With revenue steady and a now more experienced and hungry staff, Tebon’s next challenge was growth. The question was where to

take the company.

In a sense, the answer was easy. ESM's forte was grassroots sports, so expanding its program of lifestyle sports events was the logical next move. At the time, ESM had another property in its infancy. The Bud Light Beach Volleyball Series (see Chapter 4) was born because of the company's ongoing relationship with Anheuser-Busch, and it began to gain a foothold on Florida's beaches. Still, there was room for more. With Corporate America becoming more interested in grassroots sports programming, the ESM brain trust just had to figure out which sports gaining popularity among the lifestyle community they could capitalize. The company decided on mountain biking and adventure racing.

"From a grassroots perspective, we were the leading promoter in Florida," said Tebon. "We knew how to market, implement, and execute. Increasing revenues allowed us to take risks that other companies our size just couldn't take. So, we made the decision to expand our event portfolio. It was a risk, but a very calculated risk."

Mountain biking had just become an Olympic sport, and it was super hot. Adventure racing had also been experiencing an increase in interest and participation thanks to the media coverage that major races such as the Raid Gauloises and Eco-Challenge received. Although ESM had no plans

to compete against big mountain downhill races or multiday adventure treks through tropical jungles, one thing was clear. As the old adage says, “strike while the iron is hot,” and that’s what Steve Tebon and his band of grassroots sports experts did.

“We never had any intention of competing with those big, high profile events,” smiles Tebon. “What we knew we could do was this. By being creative, we could adapt a mountain bike event or adventure race to fit our event profile, our strengths as promoters and race directors.” There was to be no reinventing the wheel. It was a simple process of capitalizing on a core philosophy Tebon constantly stressed—know your assets and build on them.

With that mindset, ESM created the Bud Light Mountain Bike Challenge and the Toyota Tundra Adventure Racing Series. Both programs centered on the weekend event model, the short/sprint course format of the Gatorade Sprint Triathlon Series, and the fact that just about anyone could participate in either type of event, especially the type of athletes that the Publix FFW attracted. Both the mountain biking and adventure racing programs were perfect “crossover” events, meaning that it would not take much for existing triathletes, runners, swimmers, or cyclists to “convert” into a mountain biker or short-course adventure racer. After all, many athletes already did some off-road riding, and the format for adventure racing included

mountain biking, running, and a water challenge. In addition, logistical issues proved to be minimal. ESM held many of the mountain bike/adventure racing events at sites at which they held FFW races. Some courses were interchangeable. Other venues had the necessary terrain. For the athlete, familiarity proved to be a major draw. They enjoyed new sites, but the fact that some of these races were held in familiar places limited anxiety. They knew where they would be going and where they would be racing, and there is much to be said for that.

Without getting into unnecessary detail, both the Bud Light Mountain Bike Series and the Toyota Tundra Adventure Racing Series enjoyed successful, multiyear runs. It was a good time at ESM, and Steve Tebon was a happy man. Hard work was paying off. His company was growing. The future looked bright, not only in Tebon's eyes, but more importantly, in the eyes of his sponsors and partners. Greg Turner, a marketing executive at Southeast Toyota at the time, and current Director of OEM at JM Family Enterprises, had this to say about working with Steve and ESM:

*Steve's passion for his ideas and desire to make them work kept Toyota involved for years in bringing vehicles out to events and constantly thinking outside the box. Steve was a pioneer in coming up with creative*

*ways to get the brands exposure, not in the traditional platforms, but to a younger, lifestyle group that spelled success for the events and resulted in “bottom line” sales for the local auto dealers.*

“There is no question that, as a company, we poured out hearts and souls into making it,” says Steve. “Every company, especially small ones in niche markets, has to. At the same time, we were also lucky and took advantage of the times. Fitness and recreation were on a roll in the 1990s. The economy was good. We had established a loyal following, both from sponsors and athletes. We did everything in our power to build our brand and create new opportunities for the company because we wanted to make our mark in the industry.”

## **SPONSORSHIP**

The Publix FFW served as the foundation for everything that ESM did and would do. Steve Tebon had cut his teeth on those pre-FFW deals and quickly learned his most important lesson as a sports marketer—the ability to sign and keep sponsors is what separated the men from the boys.

*Sponsors equal revenue. Revenue keeps the bills paid and provides the chance to grow and take risks. For someone just entering this business, the importance of estab-*



*lishing a solid sponsor base can't be stressed enough. You have to establish relationships and earn trust before you can even present a deal, forget close one. It's by far the most time-consuming and mind-messing part of the business. But if you can do it, you'll earn a lot of respect, and a lot of doors that may have been closed at one time will begin to open. Your ability to sell will determine how far you can lead your company.*

## **THE POWER OF THE TITLE**

As a sales-minded CEO, Tebon was able to realize the importance of the “deal” early. Although having/not having sponsorship didn't necessarily mean the end of a sports marketing business—there are certainly examples of companies who have made a go of it on the revenues brought in solely by entry fees—bigger budgets obviously give you a better chance at survival.

In the beginning at ESM, Tebon labored to get any sponsorship. Be it for cash, product, in-kind services, or media, every little bit helps the company just getting off the ground. When the cash sponsors initially started to arrive, ESM didn't always have a plan with respect to where to put them in the overall marketing/promotional plan. Knowing how to “position” sponsors would be a major learning process. With that in mind, Steve Tebon learned one

lesson quickly—a Title Sponsor made life for a program and a company a hell of a lot easier.

If nothing else, a Title Sponsor can generally guarantee one thing—credibility. Regardless of who it is, an event will always be looked at more closely with a name such as “The So-and-So 5K Run,” as opposed to “The 5K Run.” People associate with names. All these factors were crucial in the evolution of The Publix FFW.

Ironically, the sponsor that might have had the most impact on the success of The Publix FFW was Anheuser-Busch. Long one of the most dominant names in sports marketing, Anheuser-Busch and its family of brands were a pioneer and visionary with respect to the grassroots/lifestyle sports industry. Tebon established his relationship with the company at the local level, working with distributors and on-premise (restaurant/bar) accounts early in ESM’s history with events such as the Club Olympiad Tri and the South Florida Sprint Series. The Bud Light Sprintman Triathlon Series was a precursor to the Publix and Gatorade affiliations, and The Bud Dry Rockin’ The Rim 3-on-3 Basketball Series (see Chapter 5), another early venture.

*ESM was built, to a large degree, on Anheuser-Busch philosophies. We learned their business, which in turn helped us learn ours. They taught us about loyalty, because if you*

*were loyal to them, they would be loyal to you. Our relationship with Anheuser-Busch taught us to go the extra mile and do everything first class. For example, we'd spend the extra money to do full-color marketing materials even if the costs were prohibitive at times because it showed them we were serious about what we were doing and our relationship with them. They appreciated the efforts, and as I look back, there is no question that it was the right way to go.*

There is no question that Anheuser-Busch felt the same way. During the timeframe of 1995–2005, any property that ESM owned and promoted was supported by one or more Anheuser-Busch brands, and it certainly was not a coincidence. Anheuser-Busch Senior Sports Marketing Manager Mark Wilson sums up their relationship with Tebon and ESM here:

*What sold A-B on Steve and his events was his willingness to learn our ever-changing business and develop programs with our retailers to move product. He took the time to find out what we wanted and then wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty to go above and beyond the branding partnership. We sponsor everything from the Olympics to the NFL, but Steve found a way to give us high profiles for products with post-event functions and banners every three to four feet like Arena Football that earned our trust and longstanding sponsorships.*

## **THE “POWER 4”**

Another key to becoming a successful sports marketing company is to create your own identity, whether it be through the events you develop and produce, the marketing/promotional concepts you create and use, or the innovation you use for your sponsors/partners. This is another lesson Tebon and ESM learned early. At a time when sponsors other than the Title and Presenting were generally considered mere afterthoughts, Tebon’s “Power 4” brought exposure and prestige to the next level of corporate sponsor.

At the time the Power 4 was introduced, many other companies were parading partners around as “Associate Sponsors,” or “Gold/Silver/Bronze Sponsors.” In reality, they were seldom more than glorified names on the back of an already logo-laden T-shirt or another invisible gas station banner on a long finish-line chute. The Power 4 is significant because the thought behind it was ahead of its time. Despite his success in signing sponsors, Tebon was a realist. He knew there was no such thing as a “lifetime” deal, regardless of how well you performed for somebody. With that, Tebon also realized that if you brought somebody on at a lower level, he could be groomed for a step up the ladder based on how he saw more high profile partners were treated. Once again, his rationale was right on the money.

When asked about this sponsorship strategy, Tebon says the first question he always gets is, “What’s the significance of the name?” His answer? There is none. “As I recall, Dennis and I came up with Power 4 because it was a play on the NCAA’s Final 4. Being basketball guys, it was just a term to take the place of the all too used generic terms people used at the time for secondary sponsors.”

The one obvious word that seemed to get the attention of sponsors was *power*. It’s a term that conveys importance. Along with that, there was some ego-stroking significance behind the number four. It was a limiting number, showing that there were only six “major” sponsors associated with the program in the Title, Presenting, and Power 4. And although it wasn’t mentioned much, there was some practicality behind limiting the category to just four positions. “In all honesty, four fell perfectly into our marketing strategies at the time,” notes Tebon. “In addition to the Title and Presenting Sponsors, we designed out T-shirts to include just four additional logos. It also fit our television profile, as we had room for four opening/closing billboards on each 30-minute television show. Most importantly, it was significant to those sponsors because it was a high visibility position and provided them with an identity within the Family Fitness Weekend.”

## **SELLING A “NON” MAINSTREAM SPORT**

If Tebon had one problem when making sales pitches for the FFW, it was where triathlons and endurance events sat with respect to the sports/events hierarchy. He was not selling the NFL, NBA, or the Olympics. His product was a lifestyle sport aimed at the grassroots recreational market. At the time, it was about as far away from the mainstream as you could get. So, how was he successful in attracting the interest and dollars of the corporate world?

As he stressed earlier, it came down to using his company's assets as sales tools. ESM had a proven record of accomplishment. They were in Florida, a highly desirable market. The athletes were from the socio-economic demo sponsors wanted. They knew media and could provide it. The program provided sponsors with state, regional, and national exposure thanks to the schedule and TV deals. The tools were in place. It was his job to see they were used correctly, and that meant getting a deal signed, sealed, and delivered.

“You can be the smartest activator or strategist in the world, but if you don't have the sponsors, you're not in the game,” said Tebon. “The simple fact is sports marketing is still a sales game. Everything else you do comes as a result of the sale.”

## **MAKING THE JUMP FROM THE MINORS TO THE MAJORS: GETTING THE MULTIYEAR DEALS**

When asked about seeking out and having the confidence to pitch a multiyear deal to a sponsor, Steve Tebon smiles. A headshake follows, then a straight ahead serious gaze.

*Multiyear deals? Consider them your coming out party or your promotion from the minors to the big leagues. When you've reached a level that allows you to sign sponsors for two or three years, I think you can proudly say you've made it in this business.*

According to Tebon, there's no worse feeling than making it through a long event season and realizing that was the easy work, because now you have to focus on getting the deals to get the company through the next year. "For any company, sponsorship sales time is the hardest part of the year regardless of how good your sales skills may be. Personally, it was all consuming. It's a quest like no other because the simple fact is that if you don't raise the cash, you don't have a company."

During ESM's early years, Tebon was happy to get one-year, or even one-event deals, because it meant there would be a tomorrow. Once the FFW became established, that mindset had to change. There was a full-time staff. There was significant travel. A con-

stant stream of equipment and supplies had to be purchased and paid for. The only way to insure that all the bills could be paid was to have a constant stream of revenue coming in the door, not just during the six- to seven-month event season. Multiyear deals are the cure-all for this dilemma.

Because the FFW was a proven and respected entity by its second full year, Tebon knew that he had the experience and credibility needed to approach sponsors about a two- or three-year commitment. He was confident in this regard, but there was also another major hurdle—the money—which meant, for the major sponsors, asking for a yearly commitment of mid-five figures and into six figures. For a grassroots recreation program at the state and regional levels, this was almost unheard of. But Tebon had to make the pitch, not knowing if he would be taken seriously or be laughed at and thrown out the door.

According to Tebon, nothing prepares you more in the hunt for the big deal than a successful record of accomplishment, a good existing relationship with the sponsor, and having the confidence that you can get the deal done. “Asking for a multiyear deal takes preparation. More than anything, you have to be confident that the sponsor will see the same value you see in what you are pitching. The six-figure, multiyear deal? That’s a whole new ball-



game. You have to know what you are selling, inside and out. You have to sell to the sponsor that this is a deal that they can't live without. You have to be activating, generating, running on all cylinders, because there is absolutely no margin for errors."

When asked how he prepared himself for a major pitch, Steve Tebon was happy to share some of his game plan.

*Days I had a face-to-face meeting or potential deal-making phone call with a sponsor always started the same way. I'd get up early, then go to the gym and work out. Fitness always helped me keep my mind sharp, so the workout was a given. Then, I'd take my time getting ready, making sure I knew my notes/presentation backward and forward. Prior to this, I also made a list of possible questions I'd be asked and wrote out my responses so I'd be prepared. Facing a meeting like this was in my mind like playing in a big game. You had to be at your best, because you knew the person across the desk or at the other end of the phone line would be. Inevitably, it was going to be a win or lose situation. It was my goal to win every time, and this is what helped me to do it.*

Although he touched on it previously, the one thing Tebon said that you have to prepare for more than anything is the barrage of "what ifs" you'll likely get from the person holding the budget into

which you are looking to tap.

*It's been my experience that corporate decision makers want to see more than a solid track record and a good plan for their involvement. They want to make sure that you are creative, can think on your feet, and have the talent to adapt. Remember, no matter how well prepared you may be, a lot of what you say is going to be reactionary, because you hadn't anticipated that question or that person being in the meeting. Will you get the deal? Who knows? But you'll be able to leave the meeting confident that you gave the best presentation possible and were able to react to anything that was thrown your way.*

A final piece of sponsorship advice Tebon gives to peers or individuals looking to start any type of business is this:

*A problem I've seen too many times over the years with small companies getting into the industry is that they put too much of an emphasis on the event, and not enough on the sponsorship deal. If I own, or am the CEO of, a small company, I'm going to spend my time learning the sponsorship side of the business and developing my sales skills. The event stuff you can figure out or have somebody else figure out for you. But in just about all cases, you've got to close the deal before you can have a race or event. First and foremost, train yourself to sell. That will*

*prove to be the biggest asset to your company.*

## **THE SERIES. THE DESTINATION. THE CHAMPIONSHIP.**

Although ESM's introduction to the world of grass-roots sports events consisted of a three-race, local schedule, Steve Tebon learned early that expanding out of your comfort zone was necessary because "going on the road" would open the door to bigger sponsor budgets and a bigger customer (athlete) base. In addition, there would be the opportunity to attract new and more media coverage, which is always desirable.

ESM got its first taste of travel in the late 1980s when the company left its home turf in Palm Beach County to travel fifty miles south on I-95 for a race in Miami Beach. It was an exciting moment, but not without its anxieties. Steve Tebon remembers it like yesterday.

*Taking an event to Miami was a huge deal for us at the time. It was exciting, because it would be exposing the company to an entire new market of athletes, and we were looking forward to the challenge of pulling something off in an unfamiliar environment. At the same time, it was one of the most nerve-racking times of my life. We were out of our comfort zone. We were dealing with people and entities we had no prior relationships*

*with. It required an entirely new logistical plan. It was expensive! There was a lot riding on that first race in Miami Beach, but we knew we had to go there and produce in order to get ESM to the next level.*

Fortunately, the race went off successfully. The experience was important because it would set the foundation for the future of the Publix FFW.

## **DEVELOPING A SCHEDULE**

The concept behind setting a series schedule was simple. ESM wanted to be in Florida's biggest markets for three main reasons. First, big markets have more media, increasing the opportunities that a Family Fitness Weekend would be featured in newspaper and magazine stories. Local television coverage was not out of the possibility either, so being in Miami, Tampa, or Orlando increased those chances. Second, the bigger the city, the bigger the athlete base. The FFW had established a significant core base, but local athletes drove the events. You wanted to be where the recreational athletes were. Finally, the bigger markets were a key to sponsors. Publix, for example, had more stores in the major metropolitan areas, which meant more customers going through the doors potentially to buy products affiliated with the program.

With the model in place, it was now time to map

out the schedule. In the early days of the FFW, the series would travel to eight to ten cities each season. Tebon and his staff put much thought into the formatting. Originally, it was a little South Florida heavy, as this was ESM's "home turf." It was a big market with respect to the number of potential athletes available, and more local events helped to keep budgets in line. Schedules in those early years usually included event weekends in Boca Raton, Miami, Ft. Lauderdale, and the Florida Keys, with remaining events visiting the West Coast, metro Orlando, and Florida's Northeast Coast.

### **RESORT DESTINATIONS: THE KEY TO SUCCESS**

Another major innovation ESM instituted that set them apart from other grassroots promoters was how they went about selecting event sites for FFW events. At a time when most promoters were staying close to home and using city, county, or state parks to hold events, ESM knew that to keep its favor among sponsors and athletes, it had to get more creative and step "outside the box." To do that, Tebon came up with the idea of first getting a quality hotel/resort involved as the event host, and then building the logistical aspects of the event around that.

*Early on, we realized that if we could get the athlete, and more importantly, the athlete and his family to travel, we would have another asset that could be used as a sales tool. After meeting with a number of hotels/resorts and industry experts, it became apparent that if we could get athletes to consider the Family Fitness Weekend as a mini-vacation, and book a two- or three-night stay, as opposed to just an overnight, it gave host hotels a lot more incentive to work with us, as we were helping to put ‘heads in beds,’ thus becoming a viable revenue source for the property.”*

With races, a sports expo, clinics, and parties happening over a three-day period, it was only a short time before hotels/resorts started making calls to ESM regarding the possibility of hosting a FFW. Another major attraction for the industry was something about which other categories of sponsors either didn’t consider or didn’t care—the schedule.

*“Family Fitness Weekend events took place from mid-April to mid-October. This was important for a number of reasons to the properties, and as a consequence of that, for the athletes. In Florida, that is off-season, the months where properties are not filling to capacity. Because of that, they had rooms available. For the athletes, it was a great*

*deal because we were usually able to negotiate a highly discounted rate for them, sometimes allowing them to stay for three nights for the same amount of money that would have allowed only a one-night stay during season. It was a win-win for everyone and allowed ESM to establish some great partnerships that lasted many years.”*

The host resort relationship also benefitted ESM. By getting “heads in beds” for the property, ESM was able to get a marketing/promotional fee, complimentary rooms for staff and VIPS, food and beverage trades, and gift certificates and additional comp rooms for contests, giveaways, and entertaining. In addition to the short-term benefits the property received, Tebon also stressed the long-term residual benefits that could come their way.

*“The Family Fitness Weekend athlete generally had significant disposable income, so it was not unusual for a family to come back and stay at a resort at other times of the year. In addition, sponsors often held meetings and employee incentive trips at properties that ESM introduced them to. A number of athletes who were business owners brought sales meetings or company events to the resorts. A lot of the properties we worked with received significant business outside of the FFW. It was good business for them and really helped us to continually form new rela-*

*tionships because we brought them an event that had a proven ROI.”*

With respect to revenue for the company, the main source for resort/hotel deals was the marketing/promotional fee ESM charged the property. According to Tebon, the price for hosting an FFW depended mainly on where the event fell on the schedule and where it was located. “Basically, we sold on a sliding scale. For example, early season races did not receive near the amount of marketing, promotion, or advertising as events at the end of the season, so the value—perceived and actual—was less. The Series Championship was obviously the most expensive because everything led up to it, and it had the most prestige.”

As far as that promotional fee, the range was anywhere from a couple thousand dollars up to \$25,000+ for Championship Weekend. Another major factor that played a role in the pricing was the number of athletes and family members attending. A race with 800 was far more valuable to a resort because there was the opportunity to put more “heads in beds.” Additional revenue for ESM came through grants, marketing deals with local sports commissions, tourist development councils, convention and visitor bureaus, and other sports- and economic-related entities (see Chapter 7, Champi-



onship Weekends and Destination Events for more on this subject).

Some properties/businesses that ESM forged successful long-term working relationships with included The Cheeca Lodge (Florida Keys), Hawks Cay Resort (Florida Keys), The Ritz Carlton (Jacksonville/Amelia Island, FL), The Peabody Hotel (Orlando), The Boca Raton Resort & Club (Boca Raton, FL), The Marriott Corporation, Holiday Inn, and the Columbia Restaurant Group. Many were partners for ten years or more, and those relationships cultivated some lasting friendships for Steve. In a business where producing results was the key to success, Tebon and ESM proved time and time again that there were few better in the grassroots sports industry. Mark Jackson, Central Florida Director of Tourism & Sports Marketing summed it up with this:

*Creating events for sites is an art. Steve understood the needs of venues hosting his National Championships whether it was at Cypress Gardens or at the Grenelefe Resort, He created a win-win by putting heads in beds and creating an economic impact with a healthy, lifestyle event. We never had to worry about details and the event being first class and professional from start to finish. Steve is a pro, and his word was his bond.*

