

Craig Masback

by Sieg
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MAYBE when you're talking about a former miler like USATF CEO Craig Masback, it's most appropriate to assess results after four laps—or in this case four years on the job.

At T&FN we like taking splits, though, and since Masback has been at his job now for just over a year, we decided to check in and see how he thinks it's going.

The 43-year-old former lawyer and TV talking head has had a busy 15 months, flying about virtually nonstop to meet with USATF's constituency, athletes, sponsors, media members and others. He and wife Sarah also brought their first child, daughter Grace, into the world in July.

Grace, according to her father, "already has muscle definition in her legs. She can be the sprinter I never was. As [miler] Peter Elliott once said, 'We would all run the 100 if we could.'"

Grace's arrival, Masback adds, will finally make it practical for he and his family to relocate from their present home in the Washington, D.C., area, to USATF's national base in Indianapolis.

T&FN checked in to ask a few questions as track's CEO dashed through airports en route to the Chicago Marathon.

T&FN: After a year-plus on the job, how has your perspective on the sport changed?

Masback: I'm more enthusiastic than ever about the sport and the sport's potential. There really is a tremendous amount going for the sport that's structural, that's real [see box].

We have lots of assets. The other side of it is—one, prior to this year we weren't aware of our assets; two, they were not organized in a coherent fashion to be sold by anybody; and three, we had just not been present in any kind of marketplace to be telling the story about our sport or to be packaging our sport in a businesslike function that could sell it.

So our brand and the awareness of our brand—using that word to describe our sport and all our sport is comprised of—is virtually unknown and certainly undervalued by the marketplace. That presented an immediate challenge to go out and begin a process of education, often on a one-on-one basis, with major corporations and with major media outlets.

T&FN: Would you consider the promotion of general media coverage of the sport your toughest challenge thus far?

Masback: I would consider it the biggest failure thus far. I don't think I've succeeded in moving the dial any way in a positive direction in raising the general public's awareness of our events. I don't know if it's the toughest task because I don't think it's that complicated what we need to do.

When I took Allen Johnson to meet the editors of *USA Today* to describe our sport for them and discuss why we're not getting the type of reaction that we could, their reaction could not have been more positive. It was, "We love your sport, it's central to what we do, we are proud to have Dick Patrick as a writer, we are going to give him more chances to cover the sport, and we want to work more closely with you."

So what explains the fact that their coverage this year was probably the worst it's been since their founding? I don't know. I think that probably I need to go back now and ask them. It's going to take a process over several years.

I think intuitively the problem is that until we have regular and promotable domestic events, a definable season that the media can clue into, it is going to be difficult to build the general newspaper coverage of the sport. That makes the objective in 1999 of having an aggressive rebuilding of the indoor and outdoor seasons that much more important.



After his first year as the CEO of U.S. track & field, Masback still finds plenty to cheer about

T&FN: Can we expect to see anything like such a domestic series this coming year?

Masback: Yes, there will be a more regular television presence in 1999.

T&FN: USATF is a volunteer organization bound by an act of Congress to service the sport, "from cradle to grave." Have you found this structure to be unwieldy?

Masback: I think I've been very encouraged by the organization's willingness—even eagerness—to consider major change.

I think major change was the spirit of our annual meeting last year, and that resulted in a

restructuring task force that will be presenting a very aggressive and very positive plan to restructure the governance side of USA Track & Field—not the professional, Indianapolis side, but the governance side.

The plan includes a sizeable reduction in the size of the board of directors. It includes other radical and significant recommendations, to create a long-distance-running division, to put all the elements that involve high performance in another division, to group together the mass-participatory elements of athletics and our associations and Masters programs in another important division so that the actuality of the organization will look like the actuality of the sport.

Some of what has driven this is how the national office is being transformed to operate more like a business and to be service oriented toward the key segments of the sport. I have committed to having a full-time long-distance running person, to having a youth person, to strengthening our service of our members and our associations.

T&FN: *You can't add staff without money. What is USATF's financial status?*

Masback: I think the financial situation was the most disappointing thing for me when I took the job, not because it was a problem that couldn't be overcome—we are solving it—but because of the mental and physical energy that were required to deal with that when we should have been working on new ideas and reaching out to others around the sport and changing things.

On a cash basis, the organization lost over a million dollars in 1996 and was heading toward losing well over a million dollars in 1997 when I took over.

That's pretty shocking—to lose \$1.3 million in the Olympic year—and pretty disturbing that the revenue shortfall in '97 was so significant in a year after the Olympics. That was the main problem. It wasn't that the organization was overspending its budget—it's that the revenues were significantly short.

T&FN: *What's the current financial picture?*

Masback: We've lived within our means in '98 and we've developed some new revenue sources that can cover the shortfall so we can start to grow the organization in terms of both revenues and programs in '99.

T&FN: *Who is now handling the duties of marketing the sport to potential sponsors?*

Masback: In house, we have a marketing coordinator by the name of Melissa Minker, and ['87 NCAA cross country champion] Kim Betz also assists in the marketing.

We also have an outside marketing agency, API/Advantage that is really well suited for what we need out in the marketplace.

Secondly, we have a full-time person, James Thornton, who had a brief career in the shot put for Pennsylvania but was mainly a football player. James is going to be our director of events. It's not enough to add to the calendar of events; we've got to make those events more entertaining and more exciting. That's going to be his full-time responsibility to make sure that our events start to take on, in terms of

presentation and organization and fan experience, more of the feel of other modern sports.

T&FN: *What suits Thornton to this role?*

Masback: His background is primarily with the NFL. Most recently, with the NFL in Europe. So there he was trying to sell football to people who really didn't want to watch it, which we think has some analogous benefits to our status.

T&FN: *What other key objectives do you have?*

Masback: For one thing, we need to provide to our athletes a fuller complement of support and services, especially to target that period of time between college and what has been on-average Olympic success.

The average age of our Olympic team is 28; the average age of our medal winners in Atlanta was 28. So that means on average there's a 6-year period in which people need to craft a career in order to bridge that gap. That's a very critical reason why we need to have domestic competitions, because there may be people who are not ready yet to fly to Japan or fly to Europe, and can't get those invitations.

T&FN: *Do you have any other projects currently in the works to help post-collegians?*

Masback: One thing we're putting together is a post-collegiate survival guide that we will send to every college senior next year. It's a guide that provides very practical hints on how to craft a post-collegiate career.

T&FN: *What else?*

Masback: We obviously need to target some dollars towards those people. Our athletes have made some very helpful suggestions about what they need and have suggested a concept of some regional magnet areas, which we would look to attract athletes into, letting them know that there would be some coaching, some medical rehabilitation support, local competitive opportunities—in a sense recreating what some clubs used to provide.

T&FN: *Many of these ideas either haven't yet produced concrete results or have yet to be financed and initiated. Where among your accomplishments in this job to date would you encourage people to look for evidence of your approach?*

Masback: Let me give you a couple of concrete things that I think I failed to mention. One is the shortening of the program at the outdoor nationals, which I hope is a model for our organization going forward.

People were dissatisfied with the nationals in 1997. We looked at what could be done about it and immediately were able to implement going from a 5-day format to a 3-day format for '98.

Track Has Its Strengths

Those of us in track, says Craig Masback, "are very good at criticizing ourselves and knowing what our shortcomings are, but we're not so good at trumpeting our successes and strengths."

The USATF head cites two major pluses for our sport, all part of a baseline of track & field "assets" predating his own tenure:

- "The U.S.'s status in the Olympic and track & field world as the best country in what is the best sport in the Olympics."

Says Masback, "When you compare us with U.S. soccer, where they hope by 2010 to be competitive in the World Cup, we're already the world's best."

Mass-participation road running continues to grow "aggressively," and when track and cross country for boys and girls are combined they constitute the No. 1 participatory sport at the high school level.

- Television likes Olympic track. Explains Masback, "Twenty percent of NBC's broadcast time for Atlanta was devoted to track, which is almost double that of any other sport. And the ratings were records; there were record numbers of viewers of track in the history of Olympic coverage."

"The demographic mix of who takes part in our sport is extremely attractive—and demonstrably so—to sponsors and advertisers and television networks." Between track and road running, the sport attracts high-income as well as minority groups.

Furthermore, Masback says, "Even though our programs are not part of defined series as you have with the NBA, even though they're not heavily promoted, we do extremely well in our ratings vis-à-vis other sports."

"No, not football, not pro basketball, not vis-à-vis those, but versus college basketball, Major League Baseball, hockey on Fox, French Open tennis on NBC, we do well."

Was it perfect? No, and I think we see ways to improve over what we've done. But the fact is the entire organization—not just us at the national office, but the members who are in charge of men's and women's track & field—were responsive and gave things a try.

Same for the indoor nationals where we changed the orientation of the track to try to move it closer to the stands. I just want to use those as examples of how we will continue to try things. We might offend some purists, but at the same time, our sport needs to move into the modern era.

T&FN: *Any final comments?*

Masback: I think the last thing that I would cite is the importance of our athletes in rebuilding the sport. I spent much of my competitive and post-competitive career working on athletes'-rights issues and trying to get the athletes to form some kind of association to pursue their own interests.

Even though I'm now in this post, I believe more than ever that the athletes have to be organized and have to work to extend the professional aspects of their involvement with the sport as far as they possibly can for the sport to realize its potential. I will support any efforts to encourage that. □