The Ever-Evolving World of Participant Photography

By Jim Gerweck

In the early days of road racing and photography, about the only picture from a race was of the winner breaking the finish tape, assuming it was a slow news day and the desk editor felt like assigning someone to shoot the finish.

Fast forward a century or so to the running boom of the late 1990s and virtually everyone in a major race, from the winner to the last place finisher, was photographed, often midrace but certainly at the finish, by a team of shooters from one of a handful of sports photography companies. Just as your blisters from the marathon were healing, an envelope with tiny proofs of you in action, cresting Heartbreak Hill or crossing the finish by Tavern on the Green, would arrive in the mail, accompanied by a form to order prints to frame and hang on your wall or put on your desk at work.

Jump ahead a few more years and photography underwent a digital revolution. Film and negatives were out, replaced by pixels and memory cards, and an almost instantaneous posting of race photos on the event website. As you were finding your place and time, you could also order commemorative prints of your accomplishment, almost before the sweat had dried on your brow.

But that digital technology proved to be a double-edged sword to the race photography companies. Cell phones were able to take pictures almost as good as those produced by dedicated cameras, and social media like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram usurped physical walls and desks as the preferred display location. With post-, pre- and even mid-race "selfies" becoming the photographic coin of the running realm, the race photography industry business model has undergone a significant transformation in the past year or so.

A New Model

The new watchword is "sponsored images" – the same high quality, professionally produced photos that previously were offered for sale to race

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IN THE NEWS

Mo Trafeh Retires from Sport After Being Found with EPO

The Moroccan-born U.S. citizen and 8-time U.S. road champion told *LetsRun.com* that he had never used EPO when he was found in possession of it when stopped by USADA officials. Trafeh maintained that fighting the drug charges would be too costly, according to *Runner's World Online*. Trafeh moved to the U.S. in 1999 and became a U.S. citizen in 2008. Because Trafeh passed drug tests at the events where he won U.S. championships (including the Fifth-Third River Bank Run in 2013 where he set the American 25K record of 1:14:18), it is likely those marks and placings will stand.

"Traditional" Running Events Up 11%

The 2013 participation figures provided by industry trade association Running USA pegs the growth of runners in "traditional" events (excluding untimed color runs, mud runs, obstacle runs, etc.) at 15 million, up from 13.5 million in 2012. Counting "non-traditional" events, the percentage growth swells to 19%. The report estimates 23,600 organized "traditional" running events in the U.S. and 4,600 "non-traditional" events. Female participation increased by 1% of the total, as it has for the last three years, to an all-time high of 57% (8,180,800 male finishers and 10,844,200 female finishers). The

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Photography

participants, but are now being given away for free – with the logo, or logos, of sponsors attached to the picture.

Boston-based startup Gameface Media has been leading the charge into this new market landscape. Founded in late 2012, Gameface gave away about 1 million photos of an estimated 100,000 participants in 2013. This year, the company is expecting to give away about 20 million photos of 2.5 million participants, and in 2015, the company expects to give away about 40 million photos of 5 million participants, according to company CEO and co-founder David Lavallee. The photos – taken by a network of 800 professional freelance photographers across the country– are free to race-day participants; revenue for the company is generated through sponsors, advertisers and the athletic events themselves.

Each participant gets between six and ten free photos featuring two logos–one of the event and one of the sponsor, Lavallee said. The company also allows sponsors, advertisers and brands, including TomTom and Under Armour, to host the collection of photos on their own Facebook page or website.

"People are used to having almost instantaneous pictures of themselves or their friends in races, and posting them to social media sites just as quickly," said Lavalee. "We're providing them with more professional, better images than what they could take themselves, but at no additional cost."

Gameface's target events are medium- to large-sized races of 1,000 entrants or more, although recently the company signed a deal with the San Francisco Marathon, which attracts more than 25,000 participants. "This is the first major city marathon to ever give away free race photos," Lavallee said. "We think this is going to help change how participants and event directors see photography."

Gameface's entry and growth has certainly changed the way more traditional event photography firms are approaching the market. MarathonFoto, perhaps the pre-eminent firm in for-sale race imagery, has responded to the challenge presented by Gameface by emphasizing its Sponsored Image Services program, which was recently expanded to global availability. MarathonFoto began the service more than six years ago and has provided free images for its event clients at the Boston Marathon, Marine Corps Marathon, Rock'n'Roll Marathon series and numerous other events. "The endurance photo market is constantly evolving," said company president Bruce Franke. "Digital photography has had a significant and very positive impact on our business as well as on the general photography industry. It has allowed us to capture more images than ever, deliver them to participants faster and in more ways.

"The traditional 'retail' model of offering images continues to be very viable," Franke continued. "As the market shifts to delivering images to participants in other ways, we will continue to develop innovative methods to deliver those images, including social media. We are working on several new initiatives that will be introduced over the next few months, including launching our new Rewards Club. We are very excited about the future possibilities in this industry."

Options for Smaller Events

Whatever the model, most larger event photography firms are geared toward events of 1,000 participants or more, leaving smaller neighborhood races to fend for themselves in offering race photos. Often a volunteer with photographic skills or smaller local shooters can perform this task, but recently races have been able to virtually automate the process through race photos and videos linked to results provided by ChronoTrack Live (CTL), the online registration and results counterpart of the ChronoTrack transponder timing system. Normally provided as an added feature of transponder timing, small cameras are positioned near the timing mats at the finish or on the course, and clicking on an icon in the online results takes runners to a photo and/or a video of them crossing that point. Those images are usually branded, with logos of the race as well as one or more presenting sponsors.

"The platform is very modular," said Matt Downin, the company's National Director of Key Accounts. "We have the ability to deliver images without timing or registration, but it's easier and more efficient if everything is integrated."

Downin feels there is a huge untapped market for CTL's image service. "Out of 150 timers who have timed 10 million athletes, there are probably only a dozen who use the photography platform consistently.

"This is a valuable piece of media real estate," he continued. "I think everybody's going to land there eventually."

- **Elite Athletes Encouraged to Tell Stories about the Event on Social Media:** At the athlete technical meeting and at other times, race officials encouraged the elite athletes to post Facebook messages and tweet about their experiences at the event using #ajcprr and Tag@atltrackclub on Facebook and Twitter whenever possible.

Other Marketing Initiatives

Although not connected directly with elite athletes, the ATC sent out post-race blast emails inviting Peachtree participants to join the Atlanta Track Club (and promoting the club's year-round schedule of events and activities) and, of course, a final opportunity to purchase Peachtree and ATC merchandise.

Kenah Sums Up the Experience

A few weeks after the race, Kenah replied to some specific questions from *Road Race Management* about the experience:

Road Race Management (RRM): How open were the athletes and their agents to these initiatives? Did you pay appearance fees to those athletes whom you used in these initiatives?

Rich Kenah (RK): Both athletes and agents seemed to understand why we made the change and appreciated the efforts to promote the athletes in a new way here in Atlanta. I didn't get any direct complaints. This may be related to the fact that we made it clear that this was not a permanent shift in our strategy.

I am not sure we'll ever get into the business of paying appearance fees just to come here and race. But we are open to elite, accomplished athletes who want to make a significant commitment to [the] Atlanta Track Club in the days, weeks and months outside of Peachtree week. When an athlete spends her or his time creating connections to our club and our running community, it makes it easier for us to justify inviting them back to do other things for [the] Atlanta Track Club.

RRM: Do you think a similar initiative can work with international athletes?

RK: Absolutely. While I have been in the sport for most of my life, I am a relative newcomer to the road race community so I want to learn more about what works and what doesn't before I suggest what our focus will be on the elite side going forward.

That being said, I am bullish on the use of elites as long as the athletes become and remain relevant to the thousands of our other participants. At the AJC Peachtree Road Race we have 60,000 runners on a point-to-point course. The elites are done with the race well before the vast majority have even started, so the opportunities for interaction are not obvious. Our team is going to spend time looking at ways to weave our elites into the fabric of the race. We'd love for our elites to have an on-going, meaningful dialogue with our 60,000 participants. Not sure what that will look like just yet. ∎

Photography

Combo Approach for Bigger Events

One very large race that made that jump this year was the Lilac Bloomsday 12K, which with nearly 50,000 participants is one of the biggest events in the country. Organizers there used a combination of automated cameras and human photographers to provide race pictures to all the participants.

"We were pretty happy with the results overall compared with previous years," said race director Don Kardong. "One problem with human photographers in a race our size is they can't get everyone, but I don't think I've run into anybody who didn't get at least one photo."

Kardong admitted the process wasn't perfect, nor without additional effort. "There are some things we need to tweak, like the positioning of the automatic cameras," he said. "There's a little bit of a learning curve, but we have a better idea of what we want to do now.

"The other thing we found was that it required more coordination on our end than it did in the past, much more pre-race planning to make sure it worked," he continued.

"In the past, we had complaints from people asking why they had to pay so much for photos. That all went away."

Conclusion

While it's doubtful for-sale event photos will disappear completely, it's clear there has been a sea change in the business model and the medium for providing such photos to race participants. Just as no one could have anticipated the almost universal spread of digital photography and social media sharing a quarter century ago, race organizers and event image companies must be open to and ready to adopt similar technological advances to come, or risk being left in the photography starting blocks. ∎