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Running the Region

An interview with David Sobolik

by Amy Jackson

Dave Sobolik is the co-owner of Fit Right Northwest, a running store with locations in Portland and Vancouver. He is the Western Regional board member of the Independent Running Retailers Association and the Race Director for the Lacamas Lake Half Marathon in addition to being a sponsor for several other local races. *Metroscape* recently talked with Mr. Sobolik about "running" the region in its literal and figurative forms.

Metroscape: *How many years have you been part of the running community in Portland?*

David Sobolik: We opened up in November of 2000, so definitely since then. I moved out here [from Colorado] in '98 and got involved (I was running and trying to compete in track still at that time) and did a lot with the Red Lizards running club.

M: *When did you get into the organization side of things?*

DS: I started writing my business plan in February/March of 2000, became incorporated in September of 2000, and opened up in November [of 2000].

M: *Is Vancouver a separate market or do you just see it as an extension of the Portland market?*

DS: There's some overlap, but we treat them differently. In a lot of ways Vancouver is a suburb of Portland, but it's a different clientele. There are a lot of similarities, but it's different. We found that out very much so the first year. We're six years into our second location; still very different stores. Marketing is similar, though there are things we do different in Vancouver and we realize we need to focus more on the different things up there because it is a different market in a lot of ways.

M: *How has the Portland Running community grown or changed since you've been involved.*

DS: It's definitely grown and it's definitely changed. I would say the typical demographic of [a runner] is someone who sees running as a core element of doing a lot of different things as part of an ac-

tive lifestyle, where a runner in the 70's, 80's and even into the 90's for a period—they just ran. It was more competitively focused; you didn't have the masses. Now, if you look at a road race, a lot of the finishing times aren't even as fast as they used to be, but the population of those races and the number of people doing road races is up substantially. It's because they set a goal to run a 5k or a half marathon or a marathon. It's tough; the larger the amount of people who aren't training to be competitive is going to skew those percentages. From what we've seen, running has become a lifestyle. It's a key piece to a healthy and active lifestyle that people are looking for.

M: *So the big change is that it's better for business because there are a lot of races...*

DS: Growth has been exponential in the last few years. It used to be weighted in favor of males, but since 2000, we've really seen more of a shift towards females.

M: *Why do you think that is?*

DS: Running can be very empowering. It's kind of more of a social thing too. You can see by the road races, by the training groups (our First Thursdays, for example). The social aspect of things has really grown.

M: *Tell me about First Thursday.*

DS: This is our fourth year. It's a free, fun urban adventure run. Maps go up at 5:30 with a bunch of different check points. You get raffle tickets at each checkpoint and come back here [to the store] to put your tickets in a raffle for at least \$2000 of prizes that we give away. We have

beer, a DJ. You can show up and run in our sponsor's shoes for the night. It's a chance to test the product without having to make the financial commitment to buy. It's a fun, relaxed, completely non-competitive event.

M: Back to the masses in road races, didn't Shamrock top out at 31,000 this year?

DS: That is an example of exponential growth. I don't remember the exact increase in numbers, but I think last year was about 22,000, 16,000 [the year before that], 11,000, 8,000 or 9,000 the year before that. I think they've realized they've reached their capacity. That's an example of the epitome of who's out running right now. That might be the only event that they run this year.

M: Why is it so popular? The weather is consistently horrible.

DS: It kicks off the road race season. There's something for everybody: 5k, 8k and 15k. You can run that race and still function for the rest of the day. They tie in beer and food, which is a big part of any road race. They tie in the social aspect of it. It's easy to do a big downtown race and feed into the local restaurants and bars. Sometimes they want the party to be extended. It's St. Patty's day. It's a reason to party. Not that all 31,000 party, but it's a big reason for a lot of people.

M: Are most races in the Portland area not-for-profit, and is that transitioning to for-profit companies (like Competitor Group with their Rock and Roll series)?

DS: There are very few races that are true not for profit in a road race—there are very few, especially when you get to

the big ones. One truly non-profit race that we are proud to support is Race for the Roses. It's a really good one. I think 90 cents from every dollar they bring in goes to the Albertina Kerr [Foundation]. That's huge. That's phenomenal.

Road racing started off with a higher non-profit focus. If [a race] is an organization's single event, chances are that non-profit's benefitting quite a bit. When you get into a company that is putting on multiple road races, that is their business model and that's okay, it's business. You have to realize that. Look at Terrapin events—all for profit; Run with Paula—all for profit; there are some wine country events—all for profit. The Oregon Wine Country Half marathon in September is put on by Destination Races. That is a business model that is just that—destination events; they bring in a certain clientele that is very well off and they travel; it's a very nice show they put on there.

That's what's changed too: they are more motivated to get people out to running events. That partially fuels increased road race participation. You don't just show up anymore, you might get a t-shirt, you run this race, it's closed off to traffic and you're good to go. The expectation of the race participant is higher. Fees are higher, but it's not good enough to just accomplish a half marathon. They want to be fed, to get all this prep stuff, this gear. For Lacamas, it's a pretty even split between profit and donation (after expenses). We try to get sponsorship to help us out, but we look at what we charge for registration. We're trying to deliver that value back to that participant in what they're getting—the t-shirt, the finisher medal, food and drink—so they can see the value on top of running the race. In our mind,

that justifies the price; we meet or come very close to the participant already receiving the value when they toe the line.

***M:** It seems to me that running has continued to grow in spite of the recession. Do you have any theories on why that might be?*

DS: It's one of those industries that worst case has remained flat. There are different markets; in many markets growth continues for lots of reasons. What history has shown is that in bad times, people do all this personal evaluation, look at their own health, and want to take better care of themselves. 'I can't afford a gym membership, but I can buy a pair of shoes and I can go whenever.' That's part of it. What's happened in road racing is that people are staying local and participating in a race. They want to go do something and feel like they're having a little vacation. They get some entertainment value that way. The social aspect is what drives it.

All signs show that it's going to continue to grow before it slows down. We're seeing a lot more big box stores focusing on our industry—they say they're improving customer service which is where we have our niche in the industry. It hasn't really affected us here. We've been very solid with our growth this year. In other markets Dicks and Road Runners have really hurt. It just goes back to how you run your business.

***M:** Speaking of big companies, we're right in the backyard of Portland and Adidas. Does that promote races and running in Portland?*

DS: It has no effect. I think Nike does less in Portland because they are located here. It is frustrating as a retailer because everyone has access to the em-

ployee store if they really want it. Support is very scarce; take the Vancouver USA marathon—every major company is on board except for Nike. Adidas is very good, Shamrock run for example, Adidas is definitely quite involved. Their executives are more approachable than Nike's. There are people at Nike who are great, but generally speaking, it is more difficult to speak to higher-ups there than at Adidas. **M**

Run Girl Run!

Andrea Moore is an Assistant Coach with the marathon training organization, Portland Fit. She has just started her own running company, Moxie Runners, and will be hosting her first event, Run Girl Run, on August 21st.

Metroscape: When did you start running?

Andrea Moore: I thought runners were crazy! I started running because one of my closest co-worker friends wanted me to run her in the last five miles of the Portland Marathon. She was doing Portland Fit, this group I've never heard of, so I trained to run her into the fin-

ish, and I did. It was the first time I'd ever watched a marathon (1999). I watched her finish and I said, "This is so cool, I'm going to do this." She wrote a little training plan for me and I trained and did Race for the Roses, which was my first half [marathon], and I joined Portland Fit, and this is my eleventh season with Portland Fit.

M: How have you seen the community grow or change in the decade you've been running?

AM: It seems like every year there are more and more races and they are bigger [events] because regular people, people like me—that aren't the elite, lanky, svelte-bodied athletes, are becoming runners, and it's a pretty cool thing.

M: The biggest demographic in this burgeoning community seems to be women. Would you agree?

AM: I think it's women and I think women in their early 30's to 40's is such a huge growth group. Because women go and have their kids and you feel like your life gets taken by being a mom and being a career woman and when you get through that sleep deprivation, the first couple of years after having kids and you start to get a sense of normalcy back in your life, you kind of just want something for yourself. And the best part of running for me is that running is this completely selfish thing that I can do just for me, but it is so beneficial to so many other as-

pects of my life. So even though it's a very selfish thing for me to go do, it benefits my health, it benefits my marriage, I'm less stressed because I can go and breathe fresh air outside. It's great for my relationships with my friends because most of my closest friends are now people I have either met through my running communities or I have brought into my running community. It's such a good, completely balanced healthy thing, not just physical but mental for me.

M: Why did you choose to have your first event be women only?

AM: Well, I'm a woman. I love women's races. I think the feeling that you get at a women's race, you can't duplicate that at a co-ed race. And I love co-ed races as well, but they're just different. I wanted to do something where I was picking an organization that I felt really meshed with what I'm trying to teach my children, especially my daughter, and I really found the beneficiary that I wanted to donate to (Girls on the Run) and then it made sense to then have an all-female race because the two just went really well together. There are a lot of all-female races out there, but I think it's great for newer female runners. It's not so overwhelming and intimidating to run your first race if it's all women. I like the idea of hopefully getting some new runners out there.