

PACIFIC COAST TRAIL RUNS—A 'FUN'DAMENTAL FORMULA FOR SUCCESS

by Sarah Lavender Smith

"...maintaining the low-key atmosphere of their events; and nurturing trail ultrarunning in a manner that reflects values such as environmental stewardship, personal accomplishment and camaraderie."

On a strip of open space between the rough surf of Rodeo Beach and the craggy slopes of the Marin Headlands, Wendell Doman sat at his mobile office under a canopy emblazoned with his company's slogan - Pacific Coast Trail Runs, "Serious Fun" - while managing the finish line of a 50K. His wife and business partner, Sarah Spelt, busied herself at a picnic table nearby, serving soup and heaping praise on runners, while their 13-year-old son, Aaron, alternated between helping his dad with data entry and his mom with restocking supplies.

The scene was typical of the finish-line routine at the two-dozen-plus trail runs the family directs annually, except that Wendell and Sarah seemed more animated than usual at this particular event on December 20. Sarah's raucous voice, punctuated by laughter, floated nearly all the way to the beach while she moved like a bartender at happy hour, rapidly filling drinks and stirring pots on a Coleman stove. The normally taciturn Wendell, meanwhile, kept moving away from his laptop to warmly congratulate the finishers and chat about the run.

Both of them felt a sense of relief and accomplishment that afternoon, and it wasn't just the perfect, blue-sky day in between storms that set the mood, or the fact they had successfully put on races three weekends in a row, each of which attracted an average of 385 runners. They had reason to celebrate at Rodeo Beach because the event capped a watershed year in the nine-year history of Pacific Coast Trail Runs (www.pctrailruns.com), which they started as a part-time venture with no business plan and only a handful of events. In 2008, PCTR grew to 30 events with over 9,000 participants, roughly a third of whom were experiencing their first-ever trail run. Each PCTR event typically offers varying distances, from 8 km to 50 km or longer, and the newcomers generally run the shorter courses. Sarah and Wendell also instituted a race series that, much to their relief, didn't spoil the non-competitive ethos at the heart of PCTR.

"We've done pretty much everything we want to do," said Wendell, 49, with a laugh and shake of his head that suggested a certain amount of disbelief. "Our main goal has always been to introduce runners to running on trails. The secondary goal is to give them the opportunity to develop into ultramarathon runners, so that's why we have a 10K and then graduate up to a 50K. Our third goal was to add ultramarathons, like the Diablo 50 and the Headlands 100, so we offer the true ultras that we love doing ourselves."

At their events - which have expanded beyond Northern California to include three in Southern California, two in Central California, and one in Portland, Oregon - roughly 20 percent of those who signed up for a 50K were doing their first ultra.

"PCTR has been instrumental in the popularity of ultrarunning in California, largely because their races are so much fun," said trail-running blog-

ger Scott Dunlap (runtrails.blogspot.com), whose first 50K was PCTR's Woodside event in 2004. He credits the success of PCTR in part to an event calendar that provides plenty of opportunities for adventure and never gets stale. What's more, he said, Wendell and Sarah "really love what they do, and that enthusiasm is shared by every volunteer. Put it all together, and you have a perfect mix for ultrarunners to have a great first experience and want to keep coming back."

Sarah and Wendell took time out from their weekday, when they're usually marking courses and handling the myriad details that race directors face, to meet at a café in Oakland and reflect on PCTR and the sport in general.

How did this couple develop what many ultrarunners might consider a dream job and ideal work-life balance - making a living with their passion of trail running, fulfilling their personal goals, satisfying their sense of adventure, cultivating their social network and doing it all together as a family?

They began, typically enough, as road marathoners who were looking for "the next thing," preferably off the beaten path, so they trained for a trail 50-miler and in the early 1990s got hooked on ultras. The seed was planted for PCTR in the year 2000 when Wendell was working as a personal trainer, trying to make ends meet. He says, "I thought, 'Let's put on an event to get people on the trails and also improve their lives through fitness.' Our first event was on Mount Diablo; we had 62 runners, and we just developed it from there."

Neither expected that in the years to follow they'd quit their jobs to make PCTR a full-time endeavor, hosting well over 100 events with more than 25,000 participants. "Even two years ago I wasn't thinking of 30 events a year - I thought 13 was enough," he said.

Married since 1992, the two were able to develop a strong business partnership by leveraging each other's differences, as the following exchange illustrates.

"We have very different skills and personalities," said Wendell.

Can you talk more about that?

"No."

"He can't, but I can," Sarah filled in.

Wendell: "Talking to people-people skills-yeah."

Sarah: "He doesn't enjoy that."

Wendell: "I don't like to mingle; I'm more introverted, she's more extroverted."

Sarah: "I loved being a waitress in college—"

Wendell: "She likes serving people—"

Sarah: "So that fits into my role at PCTR. I'm terrible at the business aspect of it."

Wendell: "That's what I'm good at."

Sarah: "When stuff comes up, we know almost immediately who should deal with it because we are so different from each other."

Different personalities perhaps, but a shared vision for Pacific Coast Trail Runs, which is stated on their website: The goal of every PCTR



Wendell Doman and Sarah Spelt enjoy a run of their own

event is to provide a supportive environment in beautiful surroundings at which runners can meet their personal goals and feel a real sense of achievement.

Or, as their catchier tagline goes, "Runs That Aren't Races In Beautiful Places."

They developed that tagline and the "Serious Fun" slogan to get it through the heads of first-timers who came to their events that it wasn't all about speed and finishing ahead of the other guy. Recalled Wendell, "Our 10K runners came off the road, and their attitude sucked - they were really competitive - so we intentionally said, 'These aren't races, just have a good time!'"

Over the past several years, Sarah and Wendell developed a handful of ultras that don't feature the shorter distances, and these marquee events - the Diablo Marathon and 50-Mile, Skyline to the Sea 50K and Headlands 100 - have gained a higher profile than PCTR's typical weekend runs. PCTR also created two timed events on flat, partially-paved loops - the Lake Merritt Half Day and SF One Day - for the different challenges posed by the 12- and 24-hour events. "It really strips down a lot of the variables you have in mountain running; it's a pure accomplishment," said Wendell.

"And very social, if you choose it to be," added Sarah.

When some frequent PCTR participants suggested they introduce a race series, which would award points to top finishers at all PCTR events and culminate in an awards ceremony for the year's top point-getters, they balked at the prospect but relented in 2008.

"We were scared to death" to institute the race series, Wendell admitted. "We were afraid to lose what we've developed. But it's turned out great."

Sarah explained, "It's brought about even

more camaraderie, and I thought it might make people so competitive that they'd lose that. But they're really enjoying seeing how the points shake out each time, and when they don't come to events they still look at the results."

Do they have plans for adding anything more in the coming year? Both emphatically said "no."

"With 30 events, Wendell and I can still do it [without hiring employees], but with more than that, we really couldn't and still have it be fun," said Sarah.

In 2009 and beyond, it appears their main challenge is to avoid becoming a victim of their own success. Rather than grow PCTR more, they just want to keep doing what they're doing: staying small enough to manage it all by themselves; maintaining the low-key atmosphere of their events; and nurturing trail ultrarunning in a manner that reflects values such as environmental stewardship, personal accomplishment and camaraderie. In this manner, they hope to alleviate rather than exacerbate symptoms

of the sport's growing pains even as they introduce legions more to the trail.

"It's been a goal of ours to show people that almost anyone can run an ultra, if you have the time and interest," said Sarah.

Most would agree. "Overall, I think it's good that PCTR is introducing new runners to trails and ultras," said Stan Jensen, the longtime ultrarunner behind www.run100s.com, a master calendar and clearinghouse of ultra info. "There may be more popularity and crowding at ultras, but there will also be more potential volunteers. People who've run the PCTR events have learned what to expect in terms of course marking, aid stations, littering, trail courtesy, etcetera, so they fit right in with the 'old-timers' who started before PCTR."

Plus, Jensen said, Wendell and Sarah "offer so many events each month and in so many locations, it's easy for anyone to fit them into their own schedule."

"We're incredibly lucky to be able to do what we do," said Sarah. "Just like with ultra-running, there is nothing better than a combination of difficult and rewarding." ■

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