



## TRANSITIONS

Newcomers Run and Walk, June 2007

### Into the Fold | by Marcel Acosta

Over the last six months, the DC Front Runners witnessed a surge of new members. More than 70 people have joined the club since June, which more than doubles the number of members who signed-up in the last six months of 2006. At our weekly runs and walks, we have seen many new faces, and some of our new members have been actively participating in our race circuit and attending our club happy hours and parties.

Runners and walkers have a variety of reasons for joining DC Front Runners: to get fit, make new friends, find motivation to train for an upcoming race or improve their running or walking abilities. Recently, we spoke to some of our newest members about their reasons for joining DC Front Runners and observations about the group.

#### Why Join?

The desire to get fit and exercise more is a primary motivation for joining the group. "I

quit smoking and started running last year," said Ron Tomasso, a local architect. "I didn't want to gain 30 pounds so I started running as a new year's resolution."

Front Walker and journalist Michael Mosestigg noted that socializing during and after exercise was an important reason to join. "While I go to the gym four to five times a week, the social part of walking is fun. It's two for the price of one," said Mosestigg.

Moving to a new city often requires finding a new set of friends. Front Runners provides an outlet for people who have similar athletic interests to meet and socialize. "When I moved to DC, I didn't know a lot of people, and I didn't want to meet new people through the bar scene," said Danny Waggoner, who works for an international economic development organization.

Sometimes, the reason to join the group is profoundly personal. "Early in the summer, my mother died and it made me think about my

own life and what was important," recalled attorney Eric Sonnenschein. "I was working really hard in my profession and not focusing enough on my own social life, so I thought a good way to meet people was through Front Runners. And, I didn't want to run alone thinking about my mother's death."

#### First Impressions

Unlike a decade ago, when the club relied on local newspapers, booths at local LGBT events, and word of mouth, many of our newcomers discovered the club through the internet. It has complemented our traditional outreach efforts in important ways. "I was looking for local running routes on the web, and I found a map on the DC Front Runners website," said Waggoner. "Later, I recognized the booth at the Pride Festival, got on the e-mail list and came to June's newcomer event."

Being part of a worldwide organization also has its benefits. "I used to run with the Ann Arbor Front Runners when I went to

# TRANSITIONS

school at Michigan," said Jeff Gonzalez, a statistician and graduate student. "I knew that there were other chapters in different cities and I learned about DC Front Runners and the newcomer's event on the web."



Tomasso

For some newcomers, coming to their first club run or walk was a bit intimidating. "I didn't want to embarrass myself since I was a beginning runner," recalled Tomasso. "It was a big deal for me to go to Front Runners, so I tried running on my own for a few months before I went to my first (club) run. I tried to run three miles on my first day and had to stop and catch my breath. But I've gone every Saturday ever since and I've really progressed."

The manner in which our members greet our first timers leaves an important impression. "I was so nervous and overwhelmed on the first day that I was actually talking to someone at the run about my toaster," said journalist Stephen Sawchuk. "Suddenly, this really friendly, half-naked guy (Richard Isaacs) comes up to greet me, and I thought that this won't be so bad after all!"



Sawchuk

"My first time at Front Runners was on a Tuesday night in late August, when we ran to Iwo Jima, said Sonnenschein. "I was amazed how many people came out on a Tuesday night.

Some of the club members greeted me and made me feel welcome right away."

## Running with a Group

Many members had always run alone prior to joining DC Front Runners. "Running was always a solitary thing for me. It's the first

time I've run with a group," said Waggoner. "I like both; completely running on your own can get boring, but it can clear your mind and you can think. Yet, I've enjoyed running and socializing with people on our Saturday and Tuesday runs."

There are important benefits to running with a group, including the structure and discipline that weekly group runs provide. "I like pacing with people. It's easier to pace when you run with a group," said graduate student Travis High. "It's motivating to run with a group and I really like the routes."

"I found the club's long distance Sunday runs really motivating," said Gonzalez. "I needed the structure of the group. I don't think that I could have successfully trained for the Marine Corps Marathon on my own."



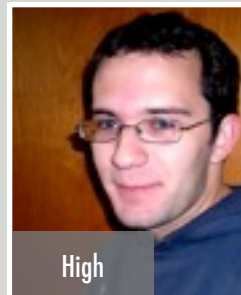
Sonnenschein

Finding other members that share the same running goals and abilities is an important aspect of the club. "I like the wide variety of abilities and ages in the club," said Sawchuk. "Before I came, I kept thinking that I was going to be the slowest person there, but I was really surprised to see a wide variety of running abilities. I've become a more confident and better runner since I've joined."

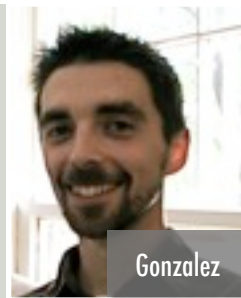
"The club has made me run more miles and run faster," said Sonnenschein. "When I was running alone, I was going through the motions. I'm 34 and I'm setting personal records now. It's a nice feeling."

## Learning to Race

Front Runners' Race and Walk Circuit provides a fun and supportive way for people to participate in local races and walk events. "I went with Ralph (Bayer) to the anniversary party and listened to the announcements and awards, said Tomasso. "Ralph said if we did six races, we could get certificates too. We made a pact to run six races this year and get a certificate at the next Anniversary Party." During the fall, Tomasso has already completed



High



Gonzalez

four races, including his first-ever when he finished the Cooperative Development 5K.

"My first circuit race was the 'Digging your Heels 5K,'" said Sawchuk. "At the finish line, I remember that (race director) Jeff Dutton was standing at the finish line, cheering on every Front Runner that passed by. It does say something about the club."

"I've participated in the walking circuit, including the AIDS walk," said Mosettig. "And I want to participate in more circuit walks since they are for a good cause."

## New Ideas

New members bring a fresh perspective and vital energy to the club. Given their recent experiences, some of our interviewees had a few suggestions to improve our organization.

It is not readily apparent from the club's name that Front Runners has an active walking group. "It makes sense to change the name of the group to attract more walkers," said Mosettig. "In other towns, they have the name (Front Walkers). Here, people have to make an effort to find out about our walking group."

Some have suggested that the club increase its level of support for beginning runners. While DC Front Runners has recently started a 5K training program, Ron Tomasso would like the club to pay more attention to the needs of inexperienced runners. "I came into running blind," said Tomasso. "It would be great if we could have an educational component for the club, like posting running tips on the website and holding occasional running clinics."

High and Waggoner, both in their twenties, suggested that the club should increase outreach towards younger LGBT runners and walkers. "I was a little worried about the average age of the group on the first day, but everybody that I've met has been really friendly



Mosettig



Waggoner

and it's not a problem," said Waggoner. "While I really enjoy coming to the runs, it would really be great if the club can attract some more younger members," echoed High.

"I'd love to see women attend more regularly," said Sawchuk. "That said, I don't think Front Runners is your typical D.C. GLBT club. I've met a really interesting cross-section of people from different places and a wide variety of backgrounds and professions in my short time with Front Runners."

## A Part of their Lives

How has the decision to join DC Front Runners affected our new members? Improving running abilities and higher fitness levels have been major benefits. "I consider myself a runner now," said Ron Tomasso. "It's been a really good experience, and I like the running, making new friends and I feel physically better now."

Other members have mentioned that running with the club helps them achieve their running goals. "I'm motivated by some of the competitive runners in the club, and I think it will help me reach my goal to run a 5K in less than 22 minutes," said Travis High.

Some members have enjoyed attending a weekly run or walk because of the social aspects of the club as well as the promise of regular exercise. "If I'm in town, I'll be there," said Michael Mosestigg, who frequently travels. "It's now part of my weekly routine."

"I really feel more connected to Washington since I've joined the club," said Eric Sonnenschein. "For me, the social benefit outweighs the running. If you took Front Runners away, I would still run consistently, but I would be losing a nice part of my routine and a group of people who I've gotten to know."

Seth Kalish, the Coordinator of the DC Front Runners, encourages our veteran members to proactively greet newcomers who attend our weekly runs or walks. "I feel proud of DC Front Runners when I see that a fairly new walker or runner starts showing up on a regular basis and appears to be really getting something significant out of this group they've joined," said Kalish. "I think it's important that newcomers feel welcome to the club. And that welcome can come from any member who just says hi and asks if the person is new." ▼



THIS ARTICLE IS AN EXCERPT  
FROM THE WINTER 2007 EDITION  
OF FRONTPAGES, THE QUARTERLY  
NEWSLETTER OF THE DC FRONT  
RUNNERS.