

# The LetsRun Phenomenon

The virtual place where running coalesces.

BY TITO MORALES

Ryan Shay's death caught everyone completely off guard. On November 3, 2007, the 29-year-old Shay, one of marathoning's most respected stars, lined up at the start of the 2008 men's Olympic Marathon Trials in New York City. A short while later, he collapsed in Central Park, and the entire running community was mourning his loss.

Within minutes of the news, runners and nonrunners alike scoured the Internet for the most updated information on Shay. Many eventually logged onto *LetsRun.com*, a running-related Web site whose popularity has done nothing but grow since its inception in 2000.

Robert and Weldon Johnson, twin brothers and the Web site's founders, set up a special message board thread devoted exclusively to Shay, and the site quickly became a meeting place for visitors to share their grief. Internet users from around the world came to pay their respects. Some who posted messages were close friends of Shay's. Others were former teammates. And still others, who had never even met Shay, explained in their messages that they were compelled to write because of how the news of the runner's premature death had affected them.

"The whole thread reminded me of all the good that goes on with the site," says Weldon of the emotional outpouring. "I thought it was so refreshing. A lot of people didn't know Ryan, but they felt as if they did. He touched so many people in some way."

As the condolence messages continued to pour in, Alicia Shay, Ryan's wife, visited the site to gain solace, and she posted poignant personal photographs of her and her late husband. Joe Shay, Ryan's father, also contributed to the thread, and he made a point of personally phoning the Johnsons on behalf of his entire family to express his gratitude for what they were doing.

"It was totally flattering and a great honor," says Weldon. "But I felt as if we didn't deserve it. *He's* the one who carried himself with such class."

For a sport historically viewed as being populated by loners and social misfits, the manner in which the long-distance running community pulled together during the Ryan Shay tragedy was both inspiring and touching. It was also unprecedented. Before the advent of the Internet, there were no readily accessible venues such as LetsRun for like-minded running aficionados to instantaneously exchange ideas, let alone to share such spontaneous, communal grief.

## “Anything you can do . . .”

In truth, LetsRun began more as an afterthought than anything else. When they were in their mid-20s, Robert and Weldon Johnson, now 35, suddenly found themselves with a great deal of spare time on their hands when they decided to put their fledgling professional careers on hold so that they could devote themselves to their life’s passion, distance running.

The Johnson brothers have pretty much always been involved with the sport. They spent the bulk of their childhood in Dallas, Texas, and realized early on, during their elementary school’s Presidential Physical Fitness Test, that running might be a sport in which they could excel.

“No one in our school had ever hit the 99th percentile in the running part (a one-mile run),” recalls Robert, who eagerly accepted the challenge of trying to become the first to do so.

His physical education instructor guesstimated that it would take 16 laps around the blacktop in the required time frame to reach the magical mark, and once the stopwatch started, Robert took off as if Olympic gold were at stake.

“My partner was counting for me,” said Robert. “I got to 16, and we started celebrating as if I’d won the Super Bowl. But there were still 30 seconds left, and I heard [my instructor] screaming, ‘Keep going! Keep going! I’m not sure if that’s right!’”

Though Robert managed to recompose himself and continue along the loop until time officially ran out,

► Even as youngsters, Robert (left) and Weldon Johnson possessed “hidden talent and hidden speed.”



Photo courtesy of Robert & Weldon Johnson

his tenure as big man on campus was short lived. Weldon's PE class was later in the day, and much to Robert's chagrin, Weldon ended up besting his brother's record-breaking distance by about 10 yards or so.

"I would have beaten him, if only I hadn't stopped," chuckles Robert ruefully.

Buoyed by their mutual success, the Johnsons joined their school's cross-country team in the seventh grade.

"I really liked cross-country," says Weldon. "I was pretty good at it."

"He beat me in *every* race," Robert corrects. "I would get top 10, but he would always get first or second."

By the ninth and 10th grade, though, Robert, after a little focused training, turned the tables. "I think I beat Weldon in every race."

"They had hidden talent and hidden speed," recalls John Kellogg, their coach at St. Mark's High School. "You could tell there was a kind of rhythm there. They were young, and they didn't realize how fast they could run because they hadn't had enough of a running background. It was almost as if every year they would reach a new level."

Unfortunately, Robert's athletic career at St. Mark's finished with a whimper as he began to battle stress fractures during his junior and senior years. Weldon, meanwhile, steadily improved, capping off his career with a solid, but certainly not stellar, 4:28 in the 1,600 meters.

But the real highlight of their running at St. Mark's, both quickly agree, was coming under the tutelage of Kellogg, a veritable guru who would one day become instrumental in their decision to create LetsRun.

## Ivy-Leaguers "r" us

After high school, Weldon enrolled at Yale and Robert wound up farther south at Princeton. Both entered college still excited about their running and eager to continue trying to maximize their abilities. But when all was said and done, they would both look back upon their collegiate careers as years of frustration and untapped potential.

Robert, carrying forward his bad fortune, spent most of his Ivy League stint injured and unable to compete. During those stretches when Robert wasn't hobbling around, his roommates—Scott Anderson, an eventual 3:38 1,500-meter runner; and Chris Lear, another talented athlete who has since gone on to write two highly acclaimed running-related books, *Running With the Buffaloes* and *Sub 4:00: Alan Webb and the Quest for the Fastest Mile*—kept trying to coax their friend into joining them on the track team. It wasn't until his junior year that Robert was good to go.

Even then, Robert and Weldon were both intrigued by the marathon distance.

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▲ Weldon's career at Yale showed few signs of what was to come.

“I remember typing up my goals going into the season, and my number one goal was running a 2:22 marathon,” recalls Robert.

“It’s the perfect distance,” says Weldon. “It really is challenging, for the first-time marathoner to the professionals like Haile Gebrselassie. There’s so much history with the marathon. I think it’s perfectly marketed to the masses as the ultimate fitness test.”

But Robert’s injuries continued, and he never really did get a chance to compete while at Princeton, let alone attempt a 26.2-miler.

“I think my claim to fame was running 4:48 and being the intramural mile champion in my senior year,” he says.

Weldon managed to stay healthier than his brother, but he, too, fell far short of his ambitions. Between his time in New Haven and a fifth year of eligibility at the University of Texas, he did manage to produce a 10K PR of 30:14, but to this day he is convinced that he went about his training all wrong. In a candid assessment that appears on the LetsRun Web site, Weldon writes that as a collegian he was “consistently mediocre,” and he pleads with other young athletes not to make the same mistakes he did.

Curiously, it is quite conceivable that had the Johnsons’ collegiate careers turned out differently—had they found greater success with their running—there might not be a LetsRun today. But as it turns out, their having left so much on the table probably contributed as much as anything else to their desire to launch the Web site.

## Tough journalism



*LetsRun* . . . There is something about the site’s feel-good name that lures the visitor in. “Let’s run”—it’s simple, cheery, and playful. On the one hand, it’s an invitation, and on the other, it’s a friendly suggestion. But such a folksy air belies the site’s no-holds-barred approach to covering any and all running and track and field-related news.

“In the past, it was almost as if the running community was so small that everyone’s attitude was, ‘Well, we had better be happy with [whatever coverage] we’ve got,’ instead of saying, ‘Hey, things can be done better!’” says Weldon. “There are too many people in the sport who would never criticize the establishment.”

From the get-go, it seems as if Robert and Weldon have wanted to change the general public’s perception of track and field one computer user at a time. For starters, they make it much easier than ever before for fans to have access to all of the most updated sport-related news from around the globe. The results of the recently concluded Fukuoka Marathon, for example, or an update on Paula Radcliffe’s current fitness level, or an interview with Mary Wittenberg, the president of the New York Road Runners, are just a few mouse clicks away.

For far too long, the mainstream sports media have treated track and field, especially during non-Olympic years, as nothing more than filler—secondary,

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or even worse, to such mainstream fare as professional football, basketball, and baseball. But, thankfully, the World Wide Web has changed that.

“The Internet is perfect for smaller sports that never had an audience,” says Weldon. “The Internet lets everyone pursue their own little passion.”

“When I was growing up, you had to wait for *Track & Field News* to hit the stands in order to find out where people stood and see how fast they were,” says Kellogg. “Nowadays, we’ve got that instantly. You can get a handle on everything out there almost instantaneously.”

If a site such as LetsRun treats the London Marathon as relevant, it *is* relevant, whether the major television networks agree or not. If a high school star such as German Fernandez breaks a 29-year-old national record at the Nike Outdoor Nationals, fans of the sport no longer need to gnash their teeth at the woeful lack of coverage by their regional newspaper.

“We started from the idea that there was a lot that could be improved with the sport,” says Weldon. “That was one of our original goals.”

Certainly, the Johnsons can never be accused of lacking opinions. Few news stories are posted without comment, and no one—from the organizers of the Boston Marathon to track and field’s governing bodies to the sport’s biggest shoe conglomerates—is immune from criticism.

“So many other Web sites have conflicts of interest, or they don’t want to tell it like it is,” says Robert. “If you’re a race Web site, you don’t want to upset your sponsors. If you’re a *Runner’s World*, you don’t want to upset your advertisers . . . . We basically just always say what we think is the truth.”

LetsRun epitomizes a new brand of renegade journalism that has flourished with the Web. The site eschews such traditional media conventions as aspiring to completely unbiased reporting, grappling with space limitations, and being forced to adopt a cautious storytelling approach for fear of insulting or alienating readers.

“I think when you’re younger, you’re not afraid to ruffle as many feathers,” says Robert.

“We’re not using our platform correctly if the people who have power in the sport aren’t every once in a while having to question whether there’s a better way to do things,” insists Weldon.

## Fighting the good fight

A well-publicized dispute with publishing stalwart *Runner’s World* helped cement the Johnsons’ reputation as rugged nonconformists. Someone at the magazine took exception to LetsRun’s habit of linking to the *Runnersworld.com* Web site and wrote a letter threatening legal action. Naturally, the Johnsons made the matter public, and the story, which quickly took on David versus Goliath proportions, galloped through the Web like a herd of wild horses.

“To all of these Internet, dotcom tech people, we were suddenly a cause celebre,” laughs Robert. “We had lawyers offering to support us for free.”

Eventually, the fanfare died down once Rodale, the publishers of the magazine, realized that in the new world order, it is commonplace for Internet sites to link to one another—as long as it is clear, as has always been the case with LetsRun, that the linked site is in no way associated with the site providing the link.

One of the reasons LetsRun caught on so quickly with the running community is that the Johnsons hurled themselves headfirst into issues that had previously been swept under the rug, particularly their hard-line stance on the issue of performance-enhancing drug use.

“For us, it was personal,” says Robert. “We were working really hard to be the best runners we could be, and we thought that people were cheating to compete in the Olympics.”

One athlete whom the Johnsons scrutinized hardest was former star Regina Jacobs.

“Everyone within the elite level of running knew she was on drugs,” says Robert. “Her performances defied reason, and yet she was getting all of these media stories. The USATF loved her. All these meets loved her. It just made me sick.”

In January 2002, while other journalists at a postrace press conference elected to avoid bringing up the delicate issue, Robert confronted Jacobs about alleged drug use, and Jacobs blithely dismissed any suggestion that she might not be performing cleanly. Ultimately, the suspicions did, in fact, prove correct when



Photo courtesy of Robert & Weldon Johnson

▲ Weldon’s post-collegiate running success brought him all the way to the 2000 Olympic Marathon Trials in Pittsburgh. Shown here, from left to right, Uncle Ronnie Swartz, Aunt Ellen Johnson, Weldon in white, Robert, Uncle Ray Ottenberg, Aunt Margaret Johnson, and cousin Chris Smith.

Jacobs tested positive for THG, a drug designed in the notorious Balco Laboratories, and she retired in disgrace.

“The people who don’t ask those questions, who ignore them, I just think they’re being naïve,” says Robert.

“Pretty much everything that has ever been written on the site, I’ll stand by it and I’ll defend it,” says Weldon. “Of course, people are going to disagree with some of the things, but at the end of the day we’re pretty fair to everyone.”

## Unfinished business

After graduation, both Robert and Weldon felt confident that they were much better runners than they had demonstrated. The real question, though, was whether they would ever have the opportunity to prove it.

As they segued into the working world—Robert pursued teaching and Weldon took a job as an economic consultant in Washington, D.C.—they sought out the expertise of Kellogg, their coach from St. Mark’s. Weldon, in particular, needed assurances.

“I knew that I wasn’t training the exact way I wanted to, and I felt that with the proper training I could get a lot better,” says Weldon.

Weldon flat out asked Kellogg, who has worked with a number of athletes at all levels, what type of times he could expect to achieve if he committed to Kellogg’s program once and for all.

“He mapped out times four years later, and he had me running 28:30 for the 10K and some other times,” says Weldon. “I didn’t hit a single time on his list until 2000. I dropped a minute and a half in my 10K.”

“What they were doing in college was not bad,” says Kellogg. “I mean, it’s good to have competed in college because you get a chance to become familiar with running at your limits and competing really hard. . . . But there are so many meets that you don’t get a chance to properly train. You don’t get a chance to recover.”

Robert, too, began to wonder just how far *his* ability could carry him.

“My first boss told me, ‘Every time I come into the office you’re on some damn running Web site. It seems like you’re more into running than your job,’” says Robert. “And I thought about it, and I realized, ‘You know what? He’s right.’”

Robert, like his brother, decided that he too would completely buy into Kellogg’s ideas.

“I was going to try to do it smart—not try to get in shape in three months, like I had in the past,” says Robert. “I went from zero miles to 20 miles, then to 30 miles. . . . I think by the end of the year I was probably around 75 miles a week.”

“In order to run well, you have to run,” says Kellogg. “You have to do a lot of it. You have to basically do as much as you can do safely.”

► Robert (left) and Weldon (right) have become maverick journalists.



Photo courtesy of Robert & Weldon Johnson

In 1998, as Robert’s and Weldon’s running continued to progress, they finally decided to give the marathon distance a try. Weldon targeted the Marine Corps Marathon, not only because it was in his backyard but also because he felt he had a good chance of being competitive.

“I ended up winning,” says Weldon. “I think that helped my confidence a lot. At the time, it was the slowest winning time ever, 2:25. It was really hot that day.”

The victory not only validated Weldon’s talent but also made him a local celebrity of sorts.

“I was the first thing on the sports news,” he laughs. “I’d be running home at night—I was working full time—and some of the bicycle messengers would go by and say, ‘Hey, you’re that guy! You won that race, right?’”

Robert, meanwhile, had set his sights on the Dallas White Rock Marathon several weeks later.

“My whole goal was the marathon,” says Robert.

Even though Robert had been training hard, no one really knew what to expect because his career had been so inconsistent. In his heart, he believed that he could run a sub 2:30, but he was hesitant to make his intentions known because such a result would represent a dramatic improvement on what little he had accomplished in the past.

“I kept my goals to myself and went out and ran 2:29 in my first marathon,” says Robert. “Basically, within a year and a half of getting focused, I could almost run a marathon at my 5K pace. I think the key was being smarter—training on soft surfaces and just really building up.”

Now, Robert and Weldon, blown away by their improvement, hungered for even more.

“[Kellogg] kept telling me that the best way to train is to do this high/low thing,” Weldon says, referring to adjusted-altitude training. “Finally I said, ‘Look, I’m already sacrificing a lot by running this much. If I was just running for fitness, I wouldn’t be running this much. What if I just do it now? We can try . . . and we’ll see what happens.’”

Weldon moved to Flagstaff, Arizona, leaving his neckties and briefcase behind. And Robert, resurrecting his long-dormant goal of reaching the Olympic

Trials Marathon qualifier of 2:22, eventually quit his job also and moved to join his brother.

“I knew I was only going to be young once, and I didn’t want to have any regrets,” says Robert. “I didn’t want to think, *What would have happened if I’d only trained?*”

The two brothers, always the best of friends, became each other’s best running partners in Flagstaff. It might seem as if twins competing in the same event might develop a heightened case of sibling rivalry, but according to Robert, that has never been the case.

“Most of my running career has sort of been as his number one fan and training partner,” Robert says. “I always felt, honestly, that whatever he achieved . . . it was me achieving it, too. After all, at one point, we *were* the same person.”

## A launch at altitude with attitude

When Robert and Weldon Johnson dropped stakes in Flagstaff, setting up a computer homepage that would one day develop into one of the Internet’s most popular running-related Web sites was probably the that last thing on their minds. Since even the most dedicated of athletes can train only so many hours a day, though, it was the Johnsons’ suddenly finding themselves flush with free time that formed the genesis of LetsRun.

“I wasn’t working, and all of a sudden I had this huge block of time available,” says Weldon.

“In some ways it may have started out of boredom,” laughs Robert. “We needed something to occupy our time.”

Initially, the Johnsons were so impressed with how Kellogg had resurrected their flagging athletic careers that they wanted to create a platform from which to sing his praises.

“We wanted to spread [Kellogg’s] training philosophy,” says Weldon. “We wanted to share his knowledge.”

“We were just so amazed as to how we had been transformed with our running, and he was the one who was responsible,” says Robert.

Today, eight years after the fact, the brothers playfully quibble over the exact details of which of them came up with the initial spark that has evolved into the LetsRun phenomenon.

“I’m pretty confident that I did the logo,” says Robert. “I want to say I did the name, too, but he may say that he did.”

“He’ll tell you *he* did it, but I’m pretty sure I came up with the name,” says Weldon. “It was sort of a catchy name.”

Who coined the Web site’s slogan, “Where your dreams become reality,” is also open to debate.

Factual discrepancies aside, one thing is certain: at the time there was little on the Internet that approached running as an interactive computer population. *TNFMedia.com* was a pretty big hit for a few years, but it petered out just about the time LetsRun began hitting its stride.

“I’m kind of surprised at how big this has become,” says Kellogg. “It came out exactly at the right time. It filled the void that was vacated by TNFMedia. The timing was perfect.”

“We basically wanted to set up a community where similar people could get together,” says Weldon. “With runners, half the time when you’re not running you’re talking about it. So the Web site would be a place online where people can have the conversations they have on their runs.”

Since neither of the brothers had any computer science background, most of the early days were devoted to learning the basics of how to put a Web site together.

“A lot of it was trial and error,” says Weldon. “When we first started, we had no idea what we were going to do with it and how it was going to work.”

Robert credits Weldon for rolling up his sleeves and learning the necessities of Web site creation.

“He definitely was the one who learned all the programming,” says Robert.

“I self-taught myself a lot of database stuff and other programming stuff,” says Weldon.

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What began as a labor of love—a hobby, really—quickly escalated into an insatiable beast. Successful Web sites continually offer fresh content, and fortunately for the Johnsons, there is running-related news to report virtually 365 days a year, be it pertaining to high school, collegiate, postcollegiate, or road race coverage.

The beauty of the site, both brothers agree, has always lain in its simplicity.

“Runners are special people,” says Robert. “They like the fact that it’s not corporate and that it’s simple. Yes, it needs to be reorganized. We keep saying that over and over. But I do think that simplicity has its appeal.”

What truly helped bolster the site’s popularity in the beginning was Weldon’s meteoric rise through the elite distance-running ranks, particularly since he made a habit out of wearing the LetsRun logo whenever he competed.

“My running sort of took off that year and people saw the name on my singlet,” says Weldon.

As anyone who has ever surfed the Internet can attest, though, attracting visitors to a Web site is one thing; enticing them to bookmark the site for regular visits is an entirely different matter.

## The world (in)famous message board

The real allure for LetsRun visitors, and perhaps the principal reason why the site attracts so many repeat guests, is the message board. True to their original intent, the Johnsons, with their message board, have created an Internet community where those interested in running—from novices to elites—can interact with one another on a variety of subjects.

Runners preparing for their first ultramarathon can log on not only to connect with others who can lend guidance but also to research how best to map out a training schedule. Others struggling through injuries, such as plantar fasciitis or iliotibial band syndrome, can search the archives to learn what to expect with regard to treatment options and recovery.

The Johnsons take pride in the fact that running legends such as Henry Rono and Bill Rodgers visit the site, along with some of the best coaches in the world, including Jack Daniels, Renato Canova, Antonio Cabral, and Brad Hudson.

“We’ve got seven years worth of archive that’s filled with training advice,” says Robert.

According to Kellogg, it is no coincidence that there is a direct correlation between the growth of the Internet and the improvement over the last several years in U.S. distance running.

“You can look at the performance lists from 1990 all the way to today—for high school, college, and postcollege—and the performances show exactly the impact of the Internet,” he explains. “The growth of message boards and mailing

lists parallels the rise in performances. There are no other factors which would contribute to that.”

Kellogg is convinced that the exchange of ideas on LetsRun has contributed about as much as anything else in getting this country’s top runners training, and consequently performing, at a level not seen since the 1970s.

“These guys [Weldon and Robert] basically provide a nationwide running club,” he says.

To be sure, though, the message board is not just about running. A sampling of recent posts as this issue was going to press includes such diverse subject lines as “Girl sends over 14,000 texts in one month—is this possible?” “When will the recession end? Make your prediction,” and “Can you stir fry arugula?”

In deference to author Alan Sillitoe, whose classic book title *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* has long been assumed to capture the basic makeup of those who pursue the sport, a great majority of runners apparently has no interest in going it alone. They want to feel connected to others who share their passion—even when those interactions are only tangentially associated with what brought them together in the first place.

Unfortunately, as is the case with most Web-based chat rooms that allow visitors to make anonymous posts without fear of reprisal, the tone of some LetsRun posts is reckless, disrespectful, and malicious. First-time visitors are often dismayed by the rivers of negative muck that contaminate even the most innocuous of threads.

“I do think, at some level, that ultimately a lot of people don’t achieve their dreams or goals,” says Robert, when trying to account for the high level of antagonism on the site’s message board. “In a race, there’s only one winner. I think it’s human nature. I think it’s being a little envious of what other people have.”

“It’s hard to monitor it,” says Weldon of the troublesome posts. “We try to ban people. We remove certain posts, but then people complain that we remove too much.”

The Johnsons *do* intervene when they see fit. Of the well over 2 million posts that have been made to date, close to 90,000 have been removed.

“It’s more the nonrunning threads that are problematic,” says Robert.

Weldon and Robert have considered implementing a

► Robert motivating the next generation of runners at Cornell University.



Photo courtesy of Robert & Weldon Johnson

registration process in which posters will be held accountable in at least some small way for everything they write, but so far they have resisted such an extreme measure.

“Ultimately, people like the fact that they can express their opinions and it’s not going to get censored out too much,” says Weldon. “Sure, there are times when I’m disappointed with the tone of some of the things that are said on there. The problem with the Internet is that 95 percent of the people get along and 5 percent don’t, and you’ll always hear from that 5 percent. All in all, though, at LetsRun I think people get along pretty well. I’ve come to realize that it’s like any other community. There are good things and bad things, and nothing is ever going to be all positive. In any community, you have your problems. It’s just a matter of trying to keep those things in check.”

## Life as an open book

In a perfect world, both Robert and Weldon would have become Olympic champions. But while each proved that he could compete at the elite level in distance running when healthy, life is rarely, if ever, perfect.

At the height of his career, Robert missed qualifying for the 2000 Olympic Marathon Trials by the narrowest of margins—running a PR of 2:23 at the 2000 Las Vegas Marathon. And Weldon, who lowered his 10K PR to 28:06 and who was once the fourth-ranked runner at the distance in the country, failed to earn a spot on the U.S. Olympic team despite having participated in both the 2000 and 2004 Olympic Trials. In listening to both Robert and Weldon today, though, it is clear that they have no regrets about having poured their heart and soul into the chase for glory.

“My running career was pretty short, but very sweet,” says Robert, who counts helping to pace Catherine Ndereba to a 2:18:47 world record at the 2001 Chicago Marathon as one of his favorite highlights.

Achilles’ tendon problems, coupled with his accepting a coaching position at Cornell University, pretty much tempered any aspirations Robert might have had about continuing heavy training after 2004.

“Sometimes I still wonder,” Robert says. “Last January I thought, *Maybe I can still run a 2:22*. But I feel now that I’m helping other kids achieve their dreams.”

Weldon, after years of frustration with battling what he now believes was an undetected stress fracture in his right foot, has only recently begun to train with any type of regularity again.

“I tell people, ‘I just want to be able to go out and run 30 minutes or an hour and not have pain,’” he says. “I like competing, and maybe I’ll start doing local road races and stuff. But my first thing is I like running and I miss doing it.”

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As the years of 120-mile weeks slipped further and further away, Weldon came to understand that nurturing the site he and his brother had created was just as rewarding as trying to reach the Olympic Games.

“At some level, I wanted to finish my running career personally and then turn my attention to the site,” says Weldon. “But now I’ve come to the realization that my running is totally secondary and what I really want to do is work on the site.”

As it turns out, it is becoming increasingly clear that the Johnsons’ biggest impact on the sport is being made in front of a computer screen and not while crossing the finish line of a footrace.

Though they have never conducted a formal demographic survey, the Johnsons estimate that LetsRun receives in excess of 200,000 unique visitors each month, and recently they have begun looking at new avenues to expand LetsRun’s reach even further.

“Weldon keeps telling me, ‘We’re not making any money,’” says Robert. “But now, with the Internet advertising in the last four or five months, we’re pretty confident that we’ll be able to make a profit in the next year.”

“We’ve realized that there is so much potential for the site,” says Weldon. “There are so many ideas with what we can do.”

► Weldon (carrying the torch) and Robert have a passion for running that has proved to be both inspiring and infectious.

In 2008, a huge marketing firm approached the Johnsons about buying LetsRun, but after months of often stressful negotiations, the brothers declined, and today they are convinced that they made the right decision.

“Ultimately, it was the greatest vote of confidence in what we have,” says Weldon. “In the end, I think it’s fantastic that [the sale] didn’t happen. It’s a relief.”

The Johnsons became rejuvenated about their site and, according to Weldon, became even “more committed to all the things we’ve talked about and thought about doing.”

There has been talk about LetsRun races or large gatherings for LetsRun enthusiasts. They have discussed creating a Web venue where runners can not only learn about a particular upcoming race but also uncover racing tips and even sign up for the race. In the weeks leading up to the 2008 U.S. Track and Field Olympic Trials, they began to incorporate a ranking system of runners and their events. They have slowly begun incorporating more video onto the site and have discussed branching out to focus more of their attention on high school athletes. And the list goes on and on.

“It’s a combination of trying the right things to bring in revenue and still keeping everybody happy,” says Weldon. “The people who come to LetsRun are what really make the site.”

More than anything else, Robert and Weldon Johnson have always been dreamers. Just as it was their dream of becoming elite runners that compelled them to relocate to Flagstaff, it was their dream of sharing their love of the sport, coupled with their genuine desire to help others improve their running, that motivated them to create LetsRun.

“One of the things that I’ve always found exciting is we try to help you,” says Robert. “Weldon spends a lot of time going through the Internet, looking through the links, finding the good news, and finding the articles that might inspire you...”

“People can accomplish a lot more than they oftentimes think,” says Weldon. “That’s especially been the case with me.”



Photo courtesy of Robert & Weldon Johnson

