

Enhancing Participation at WMA Championships for U.S. Masters Athletes through “Go Fund Me” Initiatives

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For masters track and field athletes, competing at the national and international level can be an expensive proposition. Athletes must fund their own participation, with little or no support available from other sources. At both the national and international levels, championship meets do not require qualifying marks. The expenses of attending these championships include entry fees, travel, lodging and meals. The one exception is that since 2015 – reflecting USA Track & Field’s growing interest in supporting U.S. competitors in the World Masters Athletics (WMA) Championships – entrants are provided with the required competition uniform by USATF as well as a steep discount on other national team apparel and gear.

Because participation is self-funded, in addition to time constraints, financial constraints can play a major role in who competes at USATF Masters and WMA Championships. Based on the expense of traveling to a particular location, many masters athletes, including some likely medal winners at the USATF Masters and WMA Championships, must forego competing for lack of funds.

The USATF Masters Track & Field Committee is seeking to ameliorate this situation and enhance the competitiveness of Team USA at the world level, but its ability to do so is very limited in a direct sense. An athlete assistance program is being piloted for the 2016 WMAs in Perth, Australia (October 26 - November 6) on a very limited basis (two to four athletes will receive a total of \$5000 in post championship expense reimbursements). Awards are being made in late July based on need and the likelihood of an athlete winning one or more medals at the meet.

Another potential source of outside funding for masters athletes is the relatively new phenomenon of “crowdfunding.”

GoFundMe, the highest profile crowdfunding program is arguably the best current vehicle for helping U.S. masters athletes raise funds.

- What is GoFundMe and how does it work?
GoFundMe is a private company founded in 2010. It is a “crowdfunding platform” that allows people to raise funds for a wide range of events and situations – everything from celebrations such as weddings or graduations to challenging life circumstances such as medical expenses, tragic losses etc. The link below explains how to create a fundraising website which you can then share with your email contacts and social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. As a business model, GoFundMe generates revenue by automatically deducting 5% from every donation.
<https://www.gofundme.com>
- What strategies increase the success of a GoFundMe initiative?

Although a small number of GoFundMe campaigns have gone viral and attracted donations from people with no personal connection, generally this has only been true for high profile stories and/or cases of exceptional need that have received substantial publicity. Masters athletes, like most GoFundMe campaigners, will need to rely primarily on their social circle. Here are links to GoFundMe pages that address successful strategies:

<http://support.gofundme.com/hc/en-us/articles/203604494-6-Steps-to-a-Successful-Campaign>

<http://support.gofundme.com/hc/en-us/articles/203604514-Tips-for-Promoting-a-Campaign>

- How do you customize a GoFundMe initiative for championship caliber masters athletes? Tell people of your goal to represent the U.S. by competing for Team USA at the WMA Championships. It is important to tell a compelling story. Talk about your track & field accomplishments and make your story come alive with photos and video clips. When and how did you get started? What medals and championships have you won? Have you set American or world age group records? What obstacles or adversity have you overcome in order to compete at a high level? It may be helpful to have a coach, mentor or teammate offer a testimonial and recommend that people donate to you.

Additionally, masters athletes should ask their track club for a small travel or support grant and also ask their USATF Association. There is great variance in the financial resources among the 57 associations, but some would be able to offer a small support grant (\$100 - \$200 range) and it never hurts to ask.

It is vitally important for you to be honest with prospective funders though – honest both about your past accomplishments and your prospects at the world championship meet. As we all know, there are no guarantees in competition. The level of competitive fitness may be founded on talent but only goes as far as our ability to stay healthy and engage in high intensity training and technical practice.

In case you don't know this, whatever your level of athletic accomplishment and however deserving of support you may feel, a fund raising program like GoFundMe is not primarily about you, it is about them, your prospective funders. Anyone who contributes has their own needs and the needs of those close to them to consider and they also support many worthy causes, charities and organizations. **So help people feel good about funding you.** Be bold and ask – because the opportunity to compete at the WMA world championships means so much to you – but be humble and appreciate the support you receive. Give thanks and express appreciation for support. Provide your audience and funders with updates along the way.

For the WMA championships in Perth (October 26 to November 6), we are estimating that travel, housing and other essential costs will be about \$3,000 per athlete. Given the distance from the U.S. and Perth's isolation in Australia (80% of Western Australia's population is in the Perth area) this is probably the most expensive WMA to date. It is best not to expect donors to fully fund you, but rather to offset a portion of your total expense.

In providing this guidance for GoFundMe initiatives, masters athletes, obviously have no obligation to inform the USATF Masters Committee if they launch a GoFundMe campaign or how successful it is, but it will help all masters athletes if we can learn what works - and what doesn't work so well. This will help us refine guidance regarding self-funding efforts in the future.

So – you are invited to let us know about your GoFundMe campaign or other fundraising initiatives. Contact John Oleski, Marketing Chair for USATF Masters Track & Field at jperformax@earthlink.net . He will be happy to compile information and, where possible, provide you with feedback and guidance to support your success.