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NEWS AND ANALYSIS

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## Billy Starr Means Business

**As charity walks and runs lose steam, Billy Starr's bike-athons power on. Riders bring in lots of dough—no excuses.**

By Drew Lindsay



BILL BRETT

Thirty-six people in T-shirts and shorts climb onto bikes and pedal away from a shopping mall in south-central Massachusetts. They head east, toward the rising sun, for a two-day, 200-mile ride to Provincetown, at the tip of Cape Cod, out for a good time—and something more.

Billy Starr, the outing's leader, is an athletic, blond 29-year-old. After college, Starr had stood watch by his mother's hospital bed as she lost her battle with cancer. Now he and his scruffy peloton are raising money to fight

the disease, having persuaded friends to pledge a few dollars to cancer research if the riders go the distance.

Small disasters befall the trip. They get lost and run out of food. Mr. Starr gets diarrhea from eating fried clams. But everyone reaches Provincetown. The payoff? A pile of checks, bills, and loose change that adds up to \$10,200.

The scene was 1980, a few years before national cancer-fighting groups

would host their first walkathons. Mr. Starr's ride—dubbed, with great hubris, the Pan-Mass Challenge—was the start of something big. Thirty-five years later, it's a mega-event, with 5,500 riders and 3,500 volunteers. The event's logo is emblazoned on vanity license plates and even occasionally adorns the famed Green Monster outfield wall at Fenway Park.

Over the years, Mr. Starr, now 63, has built a fundraising model that generates cash with admirable, if ruthless, efficiency. Riders raise an average of \$7,100 each; one veteran routinely collects \$1-million. This year, if all goes according to plan, the event will net at least \$45-million for Boston's Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, bringing the ride's total contribution since 1980 to a half-billion dollars.

Unlike most charity walks and runs, the Pan-Mass Challenge (or PMC, as most call it) is not a come-one, come-all event. PMC sets aggressive fundraising minimums that range as high as \$5,200, numbers that scare off all but an elite few who have either extraordinary commitment to the cause or a network of well-to-do friends. By contrast, 3 million people turned out for the American Cancer Society's Relay for Life events last year—with gross revenues of about \$100 per person.

Mr. Starr's approach rankles some people, but he makes no apologies. "The mission of the PMC has never changed," he says. "It's about raising money."



**HAPPY DAYS:** Billy Starr with his parents, Betty and Milt Starr, a few years before his mother's

## **Starting Small**

In 1969, a thousand people in Bismarck, N.D., set off on what is believed to be the first charity walk, raising \$25,000 to stop hunger. The March of Dimes followed with its debut walkathons in 1970, and by the mid-1980s, major groups fighting cancer, juvenile diabetes, and heart disease had established similar events. Over the years, these evolved into cash engines that reliably crank out tens, if not hundreds, of millions of dollars annually.

death from cancer.

Recently, however, many of these big legacy events have sputtered a bit. Relay for Life revenue has dropped 23 percent

since the high-water mark of \$439-million in 2008. Walks sponsored by the March of Dimes, the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, Susan G. Komen, the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, and the Avon Foundation have all seen revenues flatten or drop over the past five years.

## **More Choices**

Not all the mainstays are losing ground. Walks for the Alzheimer's Association and the American Heart Association, for instance, are seeing significant growth. Still, observers say traditional charity walks and runs may seem stale compared with newer, more exotic events, like color runs, the Tough Mudder series, and others.

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## **HOW BILLY STARR KEEPS RAISING MORE MONEY**

Though Billy Starr had no business background when he started the Pan-Mass Challenge in 1980, he quickly figured out how to raise money. "Billy is one of the fundraising legends," says Jeff Shuck, head of Plenty, a consulting group for nonprofits. Among Mr. Starr's guiding principles:

### **No One Gets a Free Ride**

Depending on the route they choose, riders must raise from \$1,000 to \$5,200. (Teen riders must meet a \$500 fundraising minimum; kids' rides have no minimums.)

### **Demand the Money Upfront**

Riders are warned when they register: If you don't meet the fundraising minimum, we will tap your credit card.

### **Go For Zero Overhead**

Because the PMC is self-funded, riders can tell friends that every dollar raised will go directly to fight cancer. "Every survey says that's incredibly motivating," says Mr. Starr.

### **Don't Overreach**

Mr. Starr and his staff have smartly stuck to the event's mission and home-grown roots, Mr. Shuck says. "They're not trying to boil the ocean; they're not trying to be in 50 cities. He's got a very focused ask, and it's a focused brand."

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Twenty-somethings who once filled the rosters of corporate-event teams—often the backbone of walkathons—now have many choices for doing good, says David Hessekiel, head of the Peer-to-Peer Professional Forum. "Anyone can decide: An October walkathon doesn't do it for me. But I love this cause, and I'm going to do something that appeals to what I'm into."

Hospitals have joined the fundraising-event game, with many creating bike-athons modeled after the PMC. Since 2008, cycling events to support cancer institutes have launched in Miami, San Diego, Seattle, St. Louis, Tampa, and Toronto. None are direct copies—fundraising minimums are typically much lower—but Mr. Starr has worked as a consultant on at least a half-dozen.

The Pelotonia bike-athon in Columbus, Ohio, is the pacesetter among the new events. Aligned with the Ohio State University Comprehensive Cancer Center, it brought in \$21-million in 2014, only its sixth year. When Michael Caligiuri, director of the center, started the race, he didn't even own a bike. But he had heard of Mr. Starr's success and saw a growing cycling community in Columbus. In 2008, he rode the PMC, then signed on Mr. Starr to help with the event's launch the next year. "If it wasn't for Billy, it would have taken us a lot longer to get where we are," Dr. Caligiuri says.

Growing up in the Boston suburb of Newton, Billy Starr didn't ride a bike much. "Bicycles weren't cool," he says. A three-sport high-school athlete, he went to the University of Denver, where he was swept up in outdoor adventure sports and fed a wanderlust with backpacking trips through the Southwest and Northwest.

After his mother died in 1974, Mr. Starr stuck close to home but drifted from job to job. To curb his restlessness, he often took long rides. "I'd get up at four in the morning and ride from Newton to Provincetown, which was 120 miles," he says. "I had no plan, no money."

The \$10,200 raised in that first edition of the PMC gave Mr. Starr a glimpse of a new mission for his life. For the event's first decade or so, he ran the event by himself with a handful of volunteers, working out of his father's office in the family's food-service equipment business. Tragedy struck in 1984 when a rider crashed, hit his head, and died. Mr. Starr reeled, and the volunteer staff quit, but everyone regrouped and came back. The next year's PMC featured a new helmet rule.

## **'You Owe Me'**

Over the years, Mr. Starr pieced together a powerful fundraising program. Early on, he was frustrated when riders didn't raise the money to meet their minimums. So beginning in 1995, he notified riders at registration that he would bill their credit card for any shortfalls. Today, the paperwork makes clear that riders are on the hook for the fundraising minimum. The underlying message, says Mr. Starr: "If you sign here and break your leg tomorrow, you still owe me five grand. End of story."

Starting in 1997, Mr. Starr began to add routes and expand ridership. The main ride—which draws nearly half of participants—is a 188-mile, two-day trip from Sturbridge, in central Massachusetts, to Provincetown. But riders now can pick from a dozen options, including shorter rides with fundraising minimums as low as \$1,000. Many routes start in the Boston suburb of Wellesley, which brings the race closer to the state's most populous and wealthiest communities.



COURTESY OF PAN-MASS CHALLENGE

**PEDAL POWER:** Riders in the 2014 Pan-Mass Challenge brought in an average of more than \$7,000 each—a record-breaking total of \$41-million.

important innovation. "Billy was a pioneer in the zero-overhead model," says Mr. Shuck. "To me, it's responsive to what the modern charity donor wants."

## **Camaraderie and Spirit**

The coup de grace for Mr. Starr came eight years ago. For the first time, he covered the cost of the event (including his pay, which topped \$500,000 in salary and bonus in 2013) through corporate sponsorships, in-kind donations, registration fees, merchandise, and auxiliary revenue. Now every dollar raised by riders goes directly to fund Dana-Farber. "That message resonates," Mr. Starr says. "It washes away the cynicism and empowers the individual to raise money."

Jeff Shuck, chief executive of Plenty, a consulting firm for nonprofits, says this change was perhaps Mr. Starr's most

For PMC riders, the event's appeal has little to do with money. Three-quarters of participants each year are alumni, which makes the Friday-night opening ceremonies feel like a reunion. Throughout the weekend, people line the roads to cheer riders on.

Josh Bekenstein, a managing director at Bain Capital, the private-investment firm started by Mitt Romney, has been riding the PMC since 1993. He's now Dana-Farber's board chairman, one of several riders who, having been introduced to the institute through the race, became a trustee.

An active Boston philanthropist, Mr. Bekenstein talks about the event in almost spiritual terms. "It's very inspiring. You're all working for the same goal, and there's an incredibly powerful culture and spirit."

Mr. Bekenstein has raised more than \$11-million for the PMC, and more than once he topped \$1-million in a single year. He will join the thousands on the Sturbridge starting line at this year's event, which begins August 1. Most will be togged in brightly colored, moisture-wicking synthetic jerseys, and some will ride carbon-frame bikes that cost considerably more than the \$10,000 raised in that first PMC. Not everyone will finish, but one thing's for certain: Billy Starr aims to make everyone pay up.

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