

Rethinking Elite Athletes in Your Event

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Road Race Management Race Directors' Meeting
Sunday, December 15, 2024



Introduction & Overview

- **Eli Asch:** Founder & Principal of Endurance Sports Consultancy
 - Former Race Director of two top-10 American Marathons:
 - CIM (2014-2019)
 - Twin Cities (2020-2023)
 - Both with Professional Athlete Programs



Introduction & Overview (cont'd.)

- **Presentation Agenda:**

- A (very) Brief History of Elite Road Racing...
- Why Have an Elite Athlete Program?
- What Does it Take to Have an Elite Athlete Program?
- Elite Athlete Program Case Studies
- Takeaways: How to Drive Value for Your Race from Elites

- **Presentation Purpose:**

- To help races that have an Elite Athlete Program think strategically about how it can better drive value for the event
- To help races that don't have an Elite Athlete Program consider whether adding one, in any form, could drive value for the event

A (very) Brief History of Elite Road Racing...

- **Amateur Era: 1880-World War II**
 - Preceded by professional “pedestrianism” with prize purses and wagering
 - Amateurism codified to keep working class from competing with the leisure class
- **Shamateurism: Post-War-1981**
 - Increasingly global Olympic movement not beholden to amateur ideals
 - Under the table payments by road races
 - First running boom (beginning in 1970s)
- **The Untenable Compromise: 1980s**
 - 1981: Cascade Run-off & Association of Road Race Athletes
 - TAC Trusts



“1896: Three athletes in training for the marathon at the Olympic Games in Athens”
(Burton Holmes: Public Domain)

A (very) Brief History of Elite Road Racing... (cont'd.)

- **Modern Professional Road Racing Emerges: 1990s**
 - Over-the-table payment allowed at road races without trusts
 - African athletes begin to compete on US roads circuit in larger numbers
- **Second Running Boom: Late 90s-Early 2010s**
 - 1994: Oprah runs Marine Corps Marathon
 - 1996: 100th Boston Marathon has 38,708 entrants
 - 1998: First Rock 'n' Roll Marathon
 - Municipal fees to races substantially increase
 - By end: Prize purses stagnate or decrease
- **Post-Boom: Mid-2010s-Today**
 - Road race participant numbers stagnate or drop
 - Global pandemic causes race cancellations, budget austerity
 - Prize purses remain stagnant or even on chopping block



Runners in the 2010 Boston Marathon
(By Anonymous - [CC BY-SA 3.0](#))

A (very) Brief History of Elite Road Racing... (cont'd.)

- **Today: A New Running Boom...**
 - Mass participation road race numbers rebounding to or above pre-pandemic levels
 - Professional Field prize purses not similarly rebounding

EVENTS

Event-Record 160,000 People Apply for the 2025 Bank of America Chicago Marathon

December 12, 2024

Source: [Running USA](#)

| Year | Prize Money Men Actual \$ | Prize Money Women Actual \$ | Inflation Adjusted \$ Prize Money Men Dec 2023\$ | Inflation Adjusted \$ Prize Money Women Dec 2023 \$ | 1st Place Men | 1st place Women | How Many places paid (m/w) | How much does 10th get? |
|------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|--|---|---------------|-----------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| 2024 | \$300,000 | \$300,000 | \$300,000 | \$300,000 | \$80,000 | \$80,000 | 10/10 | \$7,000 |
| 2020 | \$270,000 | \$270,000 | \$321,049 | \$321,049 | \$80,000 | \$80,000 | 8/8 | \$0 |
| 2016 | \$330,000 | \$330,000 | \$427,266 | \$427,266 | \$80,000 | \$80,000 | 10/10 | \$7,000/\$7,000 |
| 2012 | \$260,500 | \$260,500 | \$352,535 | \$352,535 | \$80,000 | \$80,000 | 10/10 | \$4,000/\$4,000 |
| 2008 | \$260,500 | \$260,500 | \$378,564 | \$378,564 | \$84,000 | \$64,000 | 10/15 | \$2,000/\$7,000 |
| 2004 | \$271,500 | \$260,500 | \$449,684 | \$431,465 | \$89,000 | \$49,000 | 15/20 | \$5,000/\$10,000 |
| 2000 | \$225,000 | \$230,000 | \$408,874 | \$417,960 | \$75,000 | \$45,000 | 20/20 | \$6,000/\$10,000 |
| 1996 | \$250,000 | \$250,000 | \$496,674 | \$496,674 | \$100,000 | \$45,000 | 15/20 | \$4,000/\$10,000 |
| 1992 | \$214,000 | \$78,000 | \$475,334 | \$173,253 | \$58,000 | \$20,000 | 20/10 | \$4,000/\$1,000 |
| 1988 | \$150,000 | \$157,500 | \$397,683 | \$417,566 | \$50,000 | \$25,000 | 20/25 | \$2,000/\$5,000 |

A history of Olympic Marathon Trials Prize Purses
Source: [LetsRun.com](#)



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Why Have an Elite Athlete Program?

- **It depends, but quantifiable reasons may include:**
 - Earned media
 - Social media content
 - Use in paid marketing efforts
 - Sponsor retention and sales
 - Increase charitable fundraising
 - Event broadcast or livestream
 - Participant experience for non-professional athletes
- **Does it drive engagement, awareness, partnership dollars, or participation?**

Why Have an Elite Athlete Program? (cont'd.)

- **Possible “softer” reasons may include:**
 - To enhance event prestige
 - To maintain tradition
 - To inspire your runners and community
 - To develop the sport in your region/state
 - To “support the sport”
 - To better achieve your event or organization’s positioning or mission
- **These have more “feel” to them... but that doesn’t mean they’re not important**
 - Also, these “softer” factors may contribute to your quantifiable goals

What Does it Take to Have an Elite Athlete Program?

- **Prize Purse**
 - Plus travel money?
 - What about appearance fees?
- **Elite Athlete Recruiter/Coordinator**
 - Paid professional, or volunteer?
 - Other committee roles?
- **Lodging and Transportation**
 - Hotel or homestay?
- **Hospitality/Amenities**
 - Elite suite & massage?
 - Gift?
 - Pre-race dinner?
 - Technical Meeting
- **Race Day Logistics**
 - Transportation & tents
 - Officials
 - Separate Elite start(s)?
 - Fluids
 - Awards ceremony
- **Drug Testing**
 - Needed?
 - Conducted by whom?
 - Policies for previous offenses?
- **Administration**
 - Tax form collection
 - Proper withholding

What Does it Take to Have an Elite Athlete Program? (cont'd.)

- **Course Certification (USATF)**

- Assures distance is (at least) correct distance
- Required for Boston qualifying
- Required but not sufficient for Olympic Trials qualifying, USATF/WA records, world rankings, international qualifying times

- **Event Sanction (USATF)**

- Required for Olympic Trials qualifying (not Boston) and USATF records
- Required but not sufficient for WA records, to be on World Athletics Calendar, world rankings, international qualifying times
- Required if any single cash prize is over \$500
- SafeSport training required to apply

- **World Athletics Calendar (WA)**

- Required for World Athletics record eligibility, world rankings, and international qualifying times
- Must become USATF-approved World Athletics Event Organizer in advance
- World Athletics measurer required to measure course (every 5 years vs 10 for USATF)

- **World Athletics Label (WA)**

- Additional fees and requirements for higher-level labels (Elite, Gold, Platinum)
- Athletes earn bonus points for high finishes in events at higher WA Label tiers

Elite Athlete Program Case Studies

- **Case Studies:**

- Boulderthon: Boulder Marathon
- Detroit Free Press Marathon
- Medtronic Twin Cities Marathon
- Atlanta Journal-Constitution Peachtree Road Race

Case Study: Boulderthon

Event Name: Boulderthon: Boulder Marathon

Date of Next Edition of Event: 9/28/25

Distances: Full Marathon, Half Marathon, 10K, 5K, Kids Run

Total finishers (all distances): About 7,500 finishers in 2024



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Case Study: Boulderthon

Distances with Elite Field Field: 5K, Half Marathon, Marathon

| | 5K | Half Marathon | Marathon |
|------------------------------|-------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| # of Athletes in Elite Field | 40 | 20 | 10 |
| Prize Purse in Distance | \$20,000* | \$4,000 | \$5,200 |
| 1st-Place Prize in Distance | \$5,000 | \$1,000 | \$2,000 |
| Places Deep Paid | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Winning Times | 13:58/15:50 | 1:04:45/1:15:51 | 2:30:41/3:05:10 |

Total Prize Purse: \$29,200*

*Plus \$10,000 Colorado State 5K record bonus (not hit)

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Case Study: Boulderthon

- **Boulderthon 2024 Elite Athlete Program Budget*:**
 - **Prize purse:** 75%
 - **Appearance fees:** 3% (Sponsor, PUMA, provided multiple athletes)
 - **Travel & lodging:** 5% (Plus value in-kind sponsor contribution)
 - **Hospitality:** 2%
 - **Drug testing:** 5%
 - **Program staffing, operations, and administration:** 10%
 - **Other:** N/A
 - **Total:** Approx. \$40,000

*All numbers approximate



Case Study: Boulderthon

- **Strategic Elements:**

- **Why does the race have an Elite Athlete Program:** “We want to attract world-class athletes to Boulder and showcase our race.”
- **Earned media:** Utilizes a PR firm which, among other things, uses pros for storytelling.
- **Social media:** Prize purse promoted on social, brought in Kara Goucher as starter and 5k FB Live commentator, created social media graphics welcoming elites to Boulderthon and released during two weeks before race, existing photo/video team deployed on specific elites.
- **Sponsor relations:** “Puma is Title Sponsor, so brought in Rory Linkleiter, Molly Seidel, Dakotah Lindwurm for appearances and panels on Expo/Race Weekend.”
- **Achieve event’s mission:** “Our mission is to grow and strengthen the running community, and professional athletes bring much-needed excitement and energy to the sport and more fans/runners.”
- **Maintaining relationships within professional athlete community:** “We have an Elite Coordinator and make this a priority.”
- **Unique elements:** “I think having our Title Sponsor was very helpful. Also, doing a \$10K bonus for breaking the [Colorado state 5k] record was unique.”

Case Study: Detroit Free Press Marathon



Event Name: Detroit Free Press Marathon

Date of Next Edition of Event: 10/19/2025

Distances: Marathon, International Half Marathon, Motor City [U.S. Only] Half Marathon, Marathon Team Relay [5], 5k, 1-mile, Kids Run [Little Detroit Dash], Kids Marathon program. Also have 3 challenge series involving 5K & 1Mile + 26.2 or 13.1

Total finishers (all distances): 19,157 in 2024



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Case Study: Detroit Free Press Marathon

Distances with Elite Field Field: Marathon, Half Marathon (International)

| | Marathon | Half Marathon |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| # of Athletes in Elite Field | 47 | 34 |
| Prize Purse in Distance | \$18,600* | \$9,200* |
| 1st-Place Prize in Distance | \$3,000 | \$1,500 |
| Places Deep Paid | 5 | 5 |
| Winning Times | 2:17:47/2:42:46 | 1:06:56/1:14:29 |

Total Prize Purse: \$27,800

*Including 3-deep Masters and (Marathon-only) 1st Michigander/Ontario money



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Case Study: Detroit Free Press Marathon

- **Detroit Free Press Marathon 2024 Elite Athlete Program Budget*:**
 - **Prize purse:** 80%
 - **Appearance fees:** N/A
 - **Travel & lodging:** N/A
 - **Hospitality:** 10%
 - **Drug testing:** N/A
 - **Program staffing, operations, and administration:** Yes (no % given)
 - **Other:** 10% (Elite Fluid Stations and Misc support items)
 - **Total:** Approx. \$40,000



*All numbers approximate

Case Study: Detroit Free Press Marathon

- **Strategic Elements:**

- **Why does the race have an Elite Athlete Program:** “We feel the program is table stakes to become relevant in the sport of American long distance running, while also providing needed story line (sic) for media coverage around our event, with the goal of securing a local broadcast partner to increase our media exposure.”
- **Earned media:** “Our PR team was successful in leveraging stories from our elite field to generate additional earned media this year.”
- **Social media:** “We used social media to announce our elite participants, but also followed up with profile/bios for our audience to learn more about our field, tagging our athletes. We utilized FB live to do Q&As around training, tips, etc.”
- **Maintaining relationships within professional athlete community:** “For year 1, we've been working hard to build relationships and over communicate leading up to the race with our elite field. It was important to us to hire a strong elite coordinator with hands-on knowledge of elite programs and was active in the local elite community, which is why we chose Zach Ornelas - two-time Freep Marathon champion and multiple US Olympic Trials Qualifying athlete to lead the way.”
- **Unique elements:** “This year, we focused on the basics since it was year 1 - attract the right elite for our race (focus on up and coming American/Canadian elites looking to PR with bottle access), provide great communication and race weekend experience, and offer bottles to aid in their pursuit to take the next step in their career.”

Case Study: Detroit Free Press Marathon

- **Bonus questions about first-year Elite Athlete Program:**

- **Why did you choose to add the program?** “We’ve been looking at adding a program for many years. We felt strongly that we were missing this key element at the top of the race to become relevant in the sport of American long-distance running. We also knew that without the professional division, we didn’t have what we needed secure a local broadcast partner to increase our media exposure and ultimately be in the conversation as a true sporting event here in a very competitive professional sports town.”
- **Did you view the first year of the program as a success?** “Yes - We had a great 1st year in a few key areas. 1) We’ve received rave reviews from the elites that participated and know that word of mouth will help us continue to grow the quality of the program. 2) We had [a tremendous story](#) at the finish - Andy Bowman and Sydney Devore-Bowman, our marathon champions are a husband & wife that live locally...the earned media exposure from that story (they may be the first married couple to win the marathon together?) has been tremendous.”
- **What metrics will you use to judge its ongoing success:** “Field Quality (both US and Canada - our focuses) Top 1-20 times & spread, earned media reach, sponsorship \$ increase, broadcast agreement in 1-3 years.”

Case Study: Medtronic Twin Cities Marathon



Event Name: Medtronic Twin Cities Marathon

Date of Next Edition of Event: 10/5/2025

Distances: Marathon and 10 Mile Sunday; 5K and 10K (plus untimed mile, half mile, and kids' events) the day before

Total finishers (all distances): 20,415 (in timed events) in 2024



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Case Study: Medtronic Twin Cities Marathon

Distances with Elite Field Field: Marathon, 10 Mile

| | Marathon | 10 Mile |
|------------------------------|-----------------|-------------|
| # of Athletes in Elite Field | 46 | 73 |
| Prize Purse in Distance | \$72,000* | \$30,000 |
| 1st-Place Prize in Distance | \$10,000* | \$6,000 |
| Places Deep Paid | 10 | 5 |
| Winning Times | 2:10:17/2:28:52 | 45:13/52:29 |

Total Prize Purse: \$122,000*

*Including \$20,000 dedicated for “Best of the Midwest” invitational and wheeler prize money (Marathon-only), and Minnesota, Minnesota Masters, and non-binary prize money



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Case Study: Medtronic Twin Cities Marathon

- **Medtronic Twin Cities Marathon 2024 Elite Athlete Program Budget*:**
 - **Prize purse:** 63%
 - **Appearance fees:** N/A
 - **Travel & lodging:** 16%
 - **Hospitality:** 8% (including 3% for shuttles to and from the airport)
 - **Drug testing:** 5%
 - **Program staffing, operations, and administration:** 7%
 - **Other:** 1% (awards, thank you gifts)
 - **Total:** Just under \$200,000



*All numbers approximate

Case Study: Medtronic Twin Cities Marathon

- **Strategic Elements:**

- **Why does the race have an Elite Athlete Program:** “As an organization we have a large emphasis on celebrating the back of the pack and being inclusive so want to match that enthusiasm at the front of the pack as well. Running as fast as the professional athletes do deserves to be celebrated and rewarded. In addition to being able support our sport at a professional level it offers a lot of added value to our event... We want to be one of the best debut marathons for pros and continue to put effort into our professional athlete program to give the newer pros the feeling of being at a major marathon but also with a chance to place high in the field and get noticed.”
- **Earned media:** “Twin Cities In Motion has a Live Show [broadcast] which is coverage of the 10 mile and marathon... In 2024 we had Clayton Young join the show to talk about the 10 mile and his race in Paris and later in the day Dakotah Lindwurm join the live show as well (even though) she did not race in 2024.”
- **Social media:** “We do share about the athletes running on our platforms and some of them share about us if they are active on social media. Allie Ostrander made a great video about her race at the TC 10 Mile in 2024 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ecV6y3OXXK2k>)... Our social media manager shares on Instagram, Facebook, X, and other platforms frequently highlighting the professional athlete field and our World Athletics Label. Our marathon and 10 mile winner posts each year are some of the most interacted with and have the largest reach.”
- **Participant experience (for non-elites):** “This year (2024) Conner Mantz and Clayton Young were big names that joined our 10 Mile field and got a lot of media attention. Clayton was a huge addition to our Live Show on event day when he talked about his Paris experience. In conversations I've heard since the race lots of participants thought it was so fun they were racing, it's cool to spot running celebrities at your hometown race!”

Case Study: Medtronic Twin Cities Marathon

- **Strategic Elements (cont'd.):**

- **Maintaining relationships within professional athlete community:** “Twin Cities In Motion is a sponsor of the Minnesota Distance Elite Team year round and help with their events when we are able. They also have a presence at our spring events and often the athletes lead warm-ups for and help with our kids races. We are also looking at expanding our professional athlete programs outside of marathon weekend and currently offer a small prize purse in our Get in Gear half marathon held annually at the end of April.”
- **Achieve the organization’s mission:** “TCM’s mission is to ‘move for more’ and to build community around movement. The new Best of the Midwest program ties into this mission and the emphasis on recruiting emerging professional athletes for our marathon capture this spirit as we look for ways to support athletes looking to make running a career. It is a way for us to give them space in the professional running community and share their stories to inspire the rest of our running community. This year (2024) Molly Bookmyer had an amazing marathon PR and her story has been shared more since winning the race. Her story about health, resilience, and chasing her passion all capture the move for more spirit and TCM is happy to have given her the platform for such a breakthrough race.”
- **Unique elements:** “In 2024 we launched our Best of the Midwest program to provide opportunities to emerging and established professional athletes with ties to the Midwest. We have an additional \$20,000 prize purse for athletes competing in this race within the marathon. Being able to support our local Midwest runners and give them the experience of racing at the front of a professional marathon is a great first step into the professional road racing scene.”

Case Study: Atlanta Journal-Constitution Peachtree Road Race



Event Name: Atlanta Journal-Constitution Peachtree Road Race

Date of Next Edition of Event: 7/4/2025

Distances: 10K (July 4), Peachtree Junior the day before

Total finishers (all distances): 43,378 in 2024



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Case Study: Atlanta Journal-Constitution Peachtree Road Race

Distances with Elite Field Field: 10K

| | 10K |
|------------------------------|-------------|
| # of Athletes in Elite Field | 40-60 total |
| Prize Purse in Distance | \$70,000* |
| 1st-Place Prize in Distance | \$12,500 |
| Places Deep Paid | 8 |
| Winning Times | 28:03/31:12 |

Total Prize Purse: \$70,000*

*Plus wheelchair prize purse (equal 1st-place money to ambulatory), top Georgian money



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Case Study: Atlanta Journal-Constitution Peachtree Road Race

- **AJC Peachtree Road Race 2024 Elite Athlete Program Budget*:**
 - **Prize purse:** 50%
 - **Appearance fees:** 5%
 - **Travel & lodging:** 40% (grouped w/ hospitality as one line-item)
 - **Hospitality:** 40% (grouped w/ travel & lodging as one line-item)
 - **Drug testing:** 5%
 - **Program staffing, operations, and administration:** Minimal
 - **Other:** N/A
 - **Total:** Approx. \$140,000



*All numbers approximate



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Case Study: Atlanta Journal-Constitution Peachtree Road Race

- **Strategic Elements:**

- **Why does the race have an Elite Athlete Program:** Tradition. Peachtree has always had it and claims to have been the first pro non-marathon road race (1978). The goal every year is to be the best 10k road race in the world. Believes supporting elite running and having a pro field is the right thing to do. Investment in elite sport is investment in credibility. Legitimacy comes to an event with top athletes and prize money.
- **Achieve event's mission:** The ATC's mission is to make Atlanta healthier through running and walking, and hosting elite Athletics events and telling that story is inspiring. Also, it's our goal to have a program or event for everyone, and that includes pros. Doesn't have to be "back of the pack" vs "front of the pack," should be "yes, and."
- **Participant experience (for non-elites):** Top athletes on an Expo panel and/or at Peachtree Junior.
- **Earned media:** Elite stories go head-to-head with other, non-elite Peachtree stories. In 2024, added Elite High School Division with 20 top Georgia HS boys and girls and garnered media attention (exposing them to professional runners—sending them to the technical meeting and the pros dinner—also fulfills ATC's mission). The race is broadcast on the local NBC affiliate as well as (the last two years) on the Atlanta Track Club and adidas YouTube channels.
- **Sponsor relations:** adidas is a major sponsor of Peachtree and the Atlanta Track Club (including the Elite Team), and adidas cares about the pro race. Although adidas doesn't push it, the race gets a stronger field because of the adidas partnership.



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Case Study: Atlanta Journal-Constitution Peachtree Road Race

- **Strategic Elements:**

- **Unique elements:** Big Course Record bonuses (but without ATC-provided pacers), because a record race is more exciting than a record chase. USATF Champs (on July 4). High-profile American athletes (including wheelchair athletes). Strong on “southern hospitality” for elites. Tried teams (didn’t work).
- **Maintaining relationships within professional athlete community:** adidas-sponsored in-house pro team, ATC Elite. Focused on mid-distance (Atlanta training environment), often not even competing in ATC’s hosted events. These athletes work in the ATC office and volunteer at youth events (holistic development). They inspire young people—as a diverse team, youths can see themselves in the pros (on ATC Elite or in the Peachtree pro field). To best develop that connection, ATC Elite must be in the community, not just on IG. Mother of a kid in the ATC Kilometer Kids program texted Olivia Baker after the Olympic Trials!

Takeaways: How to Drive Value for your Race from Elites?

- **Case Study Themes:**

- Leveraging partners (shoe/apparel, hotel, travel) to build field and fund program
- Working within constraints/making constraints strengths:
 - Boulderthon: 5K biggest purse (because of altitude) with big state record bonus
 - Detroit: Emerging American & Canadian elites
 - Twin Cities: “Best of the Midwest” program to attract runners with local/regional following in marathon, higher-tier athletes in 10 Mile (NYC tune-ups)
 - AJC Peachtree: World’s best 10K race, prefers competition over time (hot, tough course)
- Targeted prize money—not just “American-only,” but state/region residents, Masters, non-binary, etc
- There’s special resonance when athletes have local ties, overcome hardship, or have made connections made with local community (especially youths)
- All have professional Elite Athlete Coordinators, either contract or full-time staff (or both!)
- Pro fields matter to broadcasters

Takeaways: How to Drive Value for your Race from Elites?

- **Other Tactics:**

- Application form/process:
 - Social media presence/activity and/or willingness to do media
 - Short answer about reason wanting to run
 - Lets you select right athletes—both foreign and domestic
- Build a field with a story:
 - Recruit around a story/theme (“Best of the Midwest,” Colorado state record attack), which may emerge organically and be different every year
 - Can be planned, like CIM (OTQ year depth/bonus pools vs. non-OTQ year course record attempts)
- Non-binary: to have or not?
 - Local community engagement is key!
 - Can have prize money/field acceptance time standards... if you have for Men’s & Women’s field, too!
- Other ways to engage pros beyond a Professional Athlete Program:
 - Meb pacing pace groups
 - Des running a tune-up workout after panel/shakeout at DC Half

Takeaways: How to Drive Value for your Race from Elites?

- **The final word:** Don't let perfect be the enemy of good. Even an “imperfect” Elite Athlete Program can be the perfect addition to your event. It doesn't need to be the fastest, or the deepest, or have the winner you expected—surprises are a big part of what's exciting about live sports—you just need to decide what you want to get out of it, recruit and plan properly, then take the plunge!



Peachtree Wheelchair, Open, and Elite High School Winners
(Courtesy of Atlanta Track Club)



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Thank Yous & Questions

- **Special thanks to:** Eric Heintz, Aaron Velthoven, Phil Dumontet & Alexa Squillaro, Alana Dilinger & Jim Estes
- **Thank you** to Phil and Jeff
- **And thank you** for listening!

Questions?



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