



When registration for the 2014 Seneca7 running relay opened November 1, few people expected what would happen next: The race completely filled all 200 team entries – a total of 1,400 runners – within a mere five days. Two hours after the race reached capacity, news of the closeout spread through social media, and the wait list swelled to 90 teams.

The Seneca7 – a seven-member relay team running event covering 77.7 miles around Seneca Lake - has exploded in popularity since it began in 2011. But to fill to capacity in just five days? The news was surprising to all, including the race organizers. Many Seneca7 runners, volunteers, and organizing committee members, who have witnessed the effort and dedication of its co-directors Jeff Henderson and Jackie Augustine since the event's beginning, however, knew that this race was no overnight success.

Borne From An April Fool's Joke?

When Augustine and Henderson began to develop a race that would circle Seneca Lake, one of their primary goals was to showcase the beauty of the Finger Lakes. Henderson's own Musselman Triathlon, a swim-bike-run race that originated in 2004, did just that, inviting triathletes from across the country and around the world to visit the Finger Lakes. They came by the hundreds at first, and over the years that race, too, would grow until it filled to capacity each year. With an average 2,000 entrants visiting the Finger Lakes every July it would become a tourism juggernaut.

Over the eleven-year history of the Musselman Triathlon, Henderson has sent out a number of April Fool's Day emails to the many participants who have subscribed to the race's distribution list. On April 1, 2009 he announced the Seneca EPIC – a super-triathlon that invited athletes to swim across Seneca Lake, cycle around its perimeter, and then run



a half-marathon back to Sampson State Park. The email came complete with a link to a fake website where would-be participants could register for the race. Surprisingly, despite the daunting distances, athletes raced to sign up, only discovering it to be a joke at the last stage of registration. Many promptly emailed Henderson to express a double-dose of disappointment: at themselves, for not realizing that they'd missed the many April Fool's Day cues within the email; and at Henderson, as well, for offering them the opportunity to see all of Seneca Lake during an event, and then cruelly retracting that offer at the last second.

That got race organizers Augustine and Henderson thinking. As champions of tourism in the Finger Lakes for years, they have long teamed up to interest Musselman Triathlon athletes in seeing all that Seneca Lake has to offer during that event, partnering with winery and restaurant sponsors from around the lake and encouraging athletes to take advantage of lodging and wine tour packages throughout the Finger Lakes. The two began exploring the possibility of turning the prank into something more than just an April Fool's Day joke.

"Jeff and I were waxing philosophical about Geneva's future," Augustine recalls. "I had appealed to him to do more races, and he asked me to help create one. Our goal would be to create an event that would showcase the Finger Lakes, build awareness of pressing environmental issues, and highlight good stewardship practices," she remembers. "And, of course, give people a chance to have a really good and healthy time."

The Race Links Student Action with Community Building

Henderson and Augustine were both named Leaders in Residence at the Hobart & William

Smith Colleges (HWS) Centennial Center for Leadership for the 2010-2011 academic year. They were charged with engaging students in projects of community impact that aligned with their areas of expertise: Augustine had become known for community building and social activism, and had also organized some running races in the past; Henderson had nearly a decade of triathlon race direction under his belt, and had worked to promote sustainability in sports. Could all of these things be combined to create an event that would serve both the community and their students?

A student organizing committee was established to participate in event logistics. HWS students would gain an understanding of all the aspects of event development and would learn about the community organizing that goes into it. Community outreach was, from the very beginning, an important facet of the Seneca7 mission; nearly everything, from the food served at the post-race meal to the finisher awards, is grown or made in the Finger Lakes.

"Principles over profits is extremely important to us," says Augustine. "All of the gifts we give our athletes are either locally-sourced or sustainably-made. We have a partnership with (t-shirt manufacturer) Atanye to promote the use of recycled fabrics instead of newly-made polyester, which is essentially plastic. Our first sponsors, Red Jacket Orchards and the Geneva Bicycle Center, are both based in Geneva, and their close involvement with the race each year has helped participants really gain an appreciation for, and connection with, the area."

Race Organizers Also Seek to Use the Event to Raise Awareness of Local Issues

The Seneca 7

A Seven-Member Relay Team Running Event Covering 77.7 Miles

“We try to select themes to highlight in the course guide and in newsletters and on the official website,” Augustine says. “Our first theme was the geography and geology of the region. In 2012 we highlighted the issue of water quality and landfill risks, and in 2013 we shared the mission of the many non-profits in the region that meet critical community needs. This year we will again focus on the environment, including the risks of hydrofracking and the proposed LPG storage facility outside of Watkins Glen.”

Sustainability is an important theme for the Seneca7. The race has moved away from printed course maps and instructions, instead encouraging relay team captains to download these documents on smartphones for use during the event. It also gives teams the option of purchasing carbon offsets, encourages them to carpool to the race, and – especially important – asks them to consider choosing not to use motorized vehicles at all.

To this end, race teams are encouraged to use “pedal power” for their escort vehicles – the race support vehicles that accompany runners along the course. Each seven-member running team choosing to “go by bike” instead of the traditional car or van is not only doing its part to improve the environment, it’s also helping with another issue: safety.

Race organizers find that the limiting factor to participant numbers is the number of vehicles that can safely park at relay exchange points around Seneca Lake. Teams that choose to bike instead of driving free up space, so shortly after announcing that all spots had been filled, race organizers decided to open registration to teams willing to commit to the use of bicycles in place of their team vehicle. Teams had to agree to be accompanied exclusively by bike, regardless of weather; In this way several dozen more teams were able to register.

Each team racing without the accompaniment of fueled vehicles will receive an EcoBasket, gift baskets sponsored by local companies sponsoring the race. “They also receive our undying appreciation.” Augustine and Henderson, in turn, receive the undying appreciation of the hundreds of runners who will converge on Geneva for race-day – April 27. They have created an event that showcases the beauty of the Finger Lakes while promoting community outreach, sustainability, and a host of other regional issues of importance. The race’s exponential growth shows the ripple effect that the ideas and efforts of two people can have on an entire community.

“My goal in life has always been to get people to care about important things,” says Augustine. “If our athletes can think about Geneva, Seneca Lake, and this region, and decide that they like this place as much as we do and want to make sure it’s well cared for, then we’ve succeeded in what we set out to do.”

Seneca7 2014 Schedule www.Seneca7.com

Saturday, April 26th

- Noon – 3:45 p.m. Van Decorating Contest (Seneca Street Parking Lot, Geneva)
- 1 p.m. – 3 p.m. Volunteer Check-In (Smith Opera House)
- 1 p.m. – 4 p.m. Teams Packet Pickup (Smith Opera House)
- 4 p.m. Pre-Race Briefing (Smith Opera House)

Sunday, April 27th

- 6 a.m. – 9 a.m. Bike Lounge Open, Geneva Bicycle Center
- 7 a.m. Race Start
- Waves: 7, 7:30, 8, 8:30, 9, 9:30
- 5 p.m. – 9 p.m. Post-Race Celebration
- Food, Music, Revelry
- 7 p.m. Lighting of Lakeside Bonfire (Lakefront)
- Subject to Weather Conditions
- 7:27 p.m. Awards Ceremony (Lakefront)
- 7:57 p.m. Race Cut-Off

