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Bob Sweeney: Heart of a champion

Washington Business Journal - by [Lee Matsos](#) Contributing Writer

"I'm going to see Tiger Woods for lunch," Bob Sweeney says before an interview. He is meeting with Woods to discuss the superstar's AT&T National Tournament at Congressional Country Club in July. But as president of the **Greater Washington Sports Alliance**, Sweeney does more than woo national sporting events to D.C. He also gets local people involved in sports.

How important was bringing the NCAA Frozen Four to Verizon Center? This is one of our largest successes. What we pitched to the NCAA was this: "They already play hockey in Boston and Minneapolis and Duluth and Denver. Why don't we give it to Washington to showcase the sport, get kids involved and bring the event to them?" They gave us the first year they awarded. It sold out a year ago. You couldn't have asked for more storybook finish. We have pages of quotes from players in the tournament and from fans about their experiences in Washington.

What strategies do you use to promote local teams? Every year at SneakerBall, our black-tie and tennis shoe event, we celebrate sports in Washington and raise money for our foundation. We bring out the star players from each of the franchises — the Redskins, Capitals, Mystics, D.C. United and Nationals. We're going after the MLB and NHL All-Star games. We've already won the MLS Cup twice, and their All-Star game two years ago. We work with the Capitals to create an ice hockey program for the department of parks and rec. Young people can start to learn how to use a stick. Then they become fans and help the Caps build a new fan base.

Can D.C. ever be a Boston or Chicago? Do those cities have an image favorable to sports that D.C. is unable to match? We were created in large part to overcome the image that Washington is a government town. We are the capital of the Free World, but we're also the fourth largest economy in the United States, behind New York, L.A. and Chicago. Over the past five years we've tried to market that we are a sports town. We have an affluent and young work force who buy tickets to events. We started the SunTrust National Marathon, and we had over 8,000 people qualify to participate last year. This year we are shooting for 10,000. That's a lot of people to be in a fourth-year marathon.

Does Obama's public fondness of sports do anything to increase interest in D.C. sports? I think the president's fondness for athletics is great for young people. A big part of our



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foundation is about getting active. We always say “stop screen time” — we want kids to get out and play. We’re hopeful that his fondness for sports will drive people to more athletic events. It’s crazy when he goes to a game, with all the security involved, but hopefully he’ll come to more. His kids play soccer, so we’d love to have him come out to a D.C. United match.

Do you think that D.C. needs more sports venues? Do you feel any of the venues need to be upgraded? Most of the sports venues in D.C. are phenomenal. There is no better arena in the U.S. than Verizon Center. FedEx Field is 91,000 strong, and it’s a great facility. RFK needs to be refurbished or rebuilt. As an organization, we support D.C. United’s quest for a new stadium. Our role is mostly influence and connecting the right players to the process to make that happen — the right business leaders, politicians and the team ownership. I’m fairly confident it’ll happen.

What youth organizations do you support? We support six youth investment organizations every year. The Washington Tennis and Education Foundation and the Southeast Tennis and Learning Center train children to play tennis. The Progressive Sports Entertainment Alliance has internships for young people in sports management, and they support the National Marathon with hundreds of volunteers. Through the Washington Mystics Foundation, we started a rec league for girls basketball in the District. It targets 12 to 15 years old and focuses on building skills and fondness for the game. We had 350 girls participate in our first year. This year we’re going to make it even bigger.

What do the Redskins do to maintain a strong fan base and how can you build that vicious enthusiasm for other area teams? The Redskins have been our franchise since 1934. Every other franchise in Washington is relatively new, and building fan loyalty is a long-term process. Obviously, the Nationals will get there. D.C. United does have a very loyal fan base, and they draw 25,000 fans a game. Now that the Capitals are winning you can see people coming out of the woodwork to support them. It’s not really our function to grow a fan base. We study it. We understand what the issue is.

How have you been able to maintain funding during the recession? Funding hasn’t really changed this past year. We work harder to get funding, and for SneakerBall we’re working very, very hard. We have seen that dip 30 percent, so on the charitable-giving side it has hurt us a lot. But we’re trying to create an event that is really fun and exciting, so that people will choose to spend their limited dollars with our organization.

What has been the most consistent source of funding in rough times? We raise \$750,000 a year with the SneakerBall. We also get funding from the city, and that has been very significant. We usually raise about half a million dollars from our board of directors every year. The marathon and our volleyball tournament have grown every year, so we’ve increased our funding from both of those events.

What is the greatest challenge you’ve faced as president/executive director? Changing the perception of Washington, D.C. People look at you funny and say, “You want me to bring my sporting event to D.C.?” Then once you sell them on it a little bit, they say, “Wow, what a cool

backdrop,” or “What a phenomenal place to have a finish line!” or “What a great opportunity for the student athletes.” We’re trying to give people an alternative idea of what everyday Washington is like and draw attention to the fact that we do have the Redskins and the winning Capitals.

What is the biggest achievement of the alliance during your time? Winning the Frozen Four and creating the National Marathon. There wasn’t a sports alliance here six years ago, and growing it to be one of the pre-eminent commissions in the country has been the thing I’m most proud of.