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SPORTING JUDGMENT

Wehrman runs his way to CARA board presidency

Former competitive athlete, Olympic trials qualifier plans to recruit new members to 8,600-strong group

BY PAT MILHIZER
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Christopher D. Wehrman once ran a marathon in two hours and 17 minutes — about 12 mph.

An associate at Swanson, Martin & Bell LLP, Wehrman serves as president of the Chicago Area Runners Association (CARA) Board of Directors.

"At the end of the day, the goal is to continue to grow the organization and increase the positive impact that CARA has on the Chicagoland running community," Wehrman said.

"I want to have a bigger, more powerful, more efficient, economically comfortable organization that people can turn to and say, 'Yes, this is the epicenter of running in the Chicagoland area.' I think we're on our way there. ... It really is a lot of pressure to ensure that the organization is everything that it should be and it can be."

Wehrman, 35, knows pressure. He primarily practices family law and also handles product-liability and medical malpractice defense.

He started running in high school and joined the track and cross country teams at Michigan State University. While in law school, he competed in Chicago road races and joined CARA for the discounts that members receive to run various races.

He's won so many races that he can't remember all of them. He won the city's half marathon five times and finished first at Race Judicata three times.

He also qualified for the Olympic marathon trials in 2004 and 2008.

For three years in a row in the last decade, Wehrman won the most points in CARA's annual circuit. The competition awards points to runners for their

performance in a series of races.

CARA works with the city, the Chicago Park District and suburban park districts to ensure that races meet high-quality standards.

The association's efforts ensure that vehicles are cleared from racing routes, courses feature enough water, the running surface is safe and that courses have adequate mile markers and accurate distances.

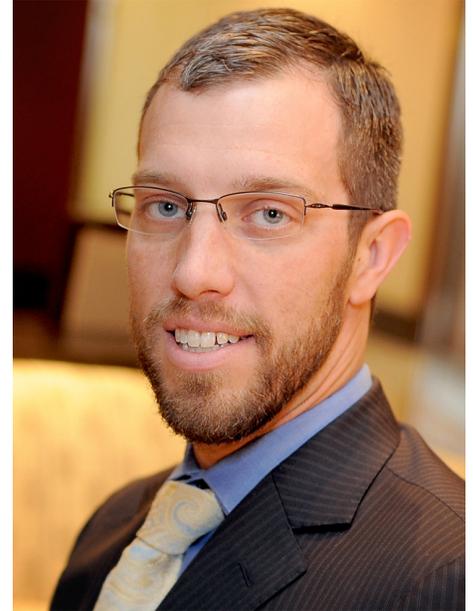
"We want to make sure when people are signing up for races ... they want to know the races they're going to are quality events. Races aren't getting less expensive; they're getting more expensive," Wehrman said.

Permits for street closures and park use drive up the event costs, he said.

"It's not as if the city of Chicago or any Chicagoland cities are just giving the space up to city to use," Wehrman said. "Money always has to change hands."

CARA board members elected Wehrman, who served on the board since 2007, as president for this year and next year. He will try to increase group membership, which stands at about 8,600 members.

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Christopher D. Wehrman of Swanson, Martin & Bell LLP
Marina Makropoulos

Runners pay \$44 for a one-year CARA membership and \$35 to renew each year.

CARA offers training programs runners can use for races of varying distances. Wehrman retired from competitive racing but still runs about 35 to 40 miles a week.

"He's obviously well known because he was such an elite athlete," said CARA Executive Director Wendy Jaehn. "I just see that he's got a good vision. ... His passion for the sport — that's really critical for anybody involved in the organization. You have to really love to run."

Having an attorney in the organization also offers advantages.

"He provides a lot of pro bono legal expertise, which helps," Jaehn said.

Swanson, Martin & Bell supports Wehrman's CARA involvement.

"It's important to him personally and he feels that he can contribute to make CARA a better organization," said Timothy G. Nickels, the firm's managing partner. "I just think it makes our lawyers more well-rounded when they pursue their passions outside of law."

Running certainly isn't losing popularity in this city, where spots in this year's marathon sold out in six days.

"Marathoning is still, I think, the one challenge that people from all walks of life can do," Wehrman said. "It's something that they can wear with a badge of honor. ... To me, it means that running is increasing in popularity overall."