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Going for the Gold: Corporate Race Isn't Just Fun and Games

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Vying for the 'Corporate Cup' Involves Stiff Training— And Hiring Good Runners

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DALLAS—Kathleen Matustik, a 23-year-old ash-blond with long, muscular legs, glistens with sweat in the evening Texas sun as she runs 200-yard sprints, then jogs 200 yards to recover.

It is a typical ending for her day after leaving her job as a computer programmer. She and a group of co-workers, some of whom were college track stars, are preparing to carry the colors of dear old Texas Instruments Inc. in the third annual Corporate Cup Relays at Stanford University in California July 18 and 19.

Texas Instruments won last year's competition among 72 corporate teams and 900 runners in 13 events. The relays are a veritable corporate olympics, complete with torch bearer, young women parading with company placards and flags, and olympic theme music played as the medalists take their places on the winners' platforms.

"It's kind of like a fantasy for all of us who were never good enough to be world-class competitors," says Gage Hotchkiss, 49, program manager for a General Electric Co. plant in Schenectady, N.Y.

Competing for Runners

But it is also serious business for companies like Texas Instruments, which wants to repeat as champ. It may be tougher this year. One of the company's best runners, Thomas Marino, who runs 10 kilometers in about 28½ minutes (within a minute or two of the world-record time), has been hired away. He will be competing this year for Mostek Corp., a unit of United Technologies Corp. and the cross-town rival of Texas Instruments in the semiconductor field. With Mr. Marino's help, Mostek hopes to improve on its 26th-place finish of last year.

Needless to say, the hiring away of Mr. Marino has heightened the rivalry between the companies. And it underscores the heightened competitiveness of the Corporate Cup Relays in general.

That isn't what the founder and sponsor of the event, Robert Anderson, publisher of Runner's World magazine in Mountain View, Calif., had in mind. "I intended this to make employees feel good about where they work, but it could turn into a roller derby if things get too carried away."

Many contestants blame Texas Instruments for the rising fanaticism. Robert McLennan, 32, an attorney with Pacific Gas & Electric Co., says the relays were fun the first year. Without much formal training, Pacific Gas runners easily won the cup that year. But the second year, he says, Texas Instruments fielded "a lot of new faces who turned out to be great runners and this crazy trainer who worked out to the hundredth-second everyone's expected time on little calculators."

Some Sour Grapes

The result was a "brutal and crushing" defeat of Pacific Gas and admitted sour grapes for Mr. McLennan. "It suddenly became the amateurs versus the professionals when they hired such good runners," he says, adding, "Getting wiped out isn't that great an experience."

Richard Brown, general manager of Texas Instruments' recreational programs, pooh-poohs critics like Mr. McLennan. Friendly competition is a nice concept, he says, but the rivalries were bound to intensify. "And Texas Instruments competes on the field the same way it does in the market," he adds.

Texas Instruments, in turn, grouches about the tactics of Mostek. Texas Instruments athletes say in hushed tones that Mostek has hired good runners who were rejected by Texas Instruments as professionally unqualified.

Mostek denies this and implies that Texas Instruments itself is guilty of such hiring tactics. For his part, Mr. Marino, the former Texas Instruments runner who earlier ran on the track and cross-country teams at Southern Methodist University, says he simply took a better job offer at Mostek. "I'm afraid everyone's getting too serious about the Corporate Cup," he says, "and it would be a shame if it stopped being fun. After all, some of my best friends run for Texas Instruments."

In any case, they aren't the only companies accused of letting their desire to win at the races influence their hiring practices. Ball Corp.'s aerospace research division in Boulder, Colo., recently advertised in a running magazine for "engineers and runners." Ball acknowledges that when it is hiring good engineers, it doesn't hurt if they are good runners as well. One of Ball's engineer-runners, Chuck Downey, 42, says, "When I'm out on that track, I'm running for Ball Corp., and I'm going to beat all those b---- bad."

It's going to take more than talk, how-

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ever, to beat the Texas Instruments runners, known as the Texins Striders, who are being urged by the company brass to "go for the gold." Last year, the company spent about \$10,000 to send a full team to the championships. And Joseph Zimmerman, group vice president and a runner, says the company just loved the publicity it received as Corporate Cup champ.

The Striders work out on a 2½-mile path hugging the security fence at corporate headquarters and also on a local university track. They are led by Rio King, the "crazy trainer" who so irritated Mr. McLennan of Pacific Gas. Mr. King, 38, tall and looking rather underfed, is a software-design engineer who donates his time because "I'm a rah-rah company man who will do anything for that trip to California."

Under Mr. King's tutelage, at least, Texas Instruments runners are unlikely to encounter the problem of a woman half-miler for PepsiCo's Frito-Lay unit last year. A former Frito-Lay employe recalls how she ran most of a race on the outside lane, oblivious to screaming teammates urging her to shorten the distance by moving to the inside. She lost handily.