



Managing the Details

The Bruno Event Team handles management duties for more than 30 events throughout the country, with seven satellite offices stretching from Georgia to Seattle, and more than 60 full-time employees.

By Casey Estes

Gene Hallman still hears the question. More than 15 years after arriving in Birmingham to oversee the operations of a new golf tournament, casual acquaintances continue to ask Hallman what he does with all his free time.

Hallman is best known among the local populace for his work with the Regions Charity Classic PGA Champions Tour event (originally known in 1992 as the Bruno's Memorial Classic Senior Tour event). The connection is so strong, in fact, that some people believe Hallman's job begins and ends with the annual tournament.

"They ask me what I do the other 51 weeks of the year," Hallman says with a smile. "I go, 'Well, we

actually have a lot going on.”

That’s because Hallman no longer is the director of a single golf tournament. He is the president and CEO of the Bruno Event Team, a sports marketing organization he founded with former Bruno’s Supermarkets CEO Ronald Bruno. And the company’s responsibilities stretch far beyond the grounds of a local golf course. The Bruno Event Team handles management duties for more than 30 events throughout the country. In addition to the headquarters located off U.S. Highway 280 near I-459, there currently are seven satellite offices stretching from Georgia to Seattle, and more than 60 full-time employees.

“We never had a business model when we first started that planned for the size [the company] has grown to today,” Bruno says. “We started strictly with that one event we did here in town. That was it.”

Things began to change with a confluence of developments in 1995.

First, Bruno’s Supermarkets was acquired in a leveraged buyout by the investment firm Kohlberg Kravis Roberts & Co., leaving Ronald Bruno looking for new opportunities.

That same year, George Bryan of Bryan Foods fame managed to lure the 1999 U.S. Women’s Open golf tournament to his home state of Mississippi. Bryan had a long-time business relationship with Bruno, and he asked if Hallman and the rest of the Bruno’s Memorial Classic event staff could handle the planning and management of the Women’s Open.

In addition, spillover soccer matches from the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta were scheduled to be held at Legion Field. Larry Lemak, who had worked to bring the matches to Birmingham as chairman and founder of the Alabama Sports Foundation, also turned to Bruno and Hallman for assistance in managing the event.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, a new business was born. “There’s no way we could have ever formulated all this in a strategic plan,” Hallman says. “We work hard, but we’ve also had some tremendous opportunities placed at our feet. So much of this has been perfect timing.” The Bruno Event Team remained a relatively local organization through the turn of the century. Then in 2001, the company found itself as one of three finalists to handle the 2004 U.S. Women’s Open in St. Louis. The competition consisted of two behemoths in event management: IMG and Octagon. Both companies had hundreds of employees and offices worldwide.

“It was almost as if we were picked [as a candidate] as an afterthought to round out the selection process,” Hallman says.

But apparently the United States Golf Association was impressed with the work the Bruno Event Team did with the 1999 Women’s Open as well as the prep work for the 2002 Open in rural Kansas, which the company also was handling. The Bruno Event Team was awarded the 2004 tournament and has run every U.S. Senior Open and nearly every U.S. Women’s Open since then.

“That was a crossroads event for us,” Hallman says. “St. Louis was a big market. We felt like if we won that event, it would lead to a ton of other USGA business.”

The company has branched out beyond golf over the years. In conjunction with the Alabama Sports Foundation, the Bruno Event Team has helped promote and operate the annual Magic City Classic

football game, the Southeastern Conference baseball tournament, the U.S. men's Olympic marathon trials and several soccer matches involving both the U.S. men's and women's national teams. The company also has handled University of Alabama football gameday operations for the past three seasons.

In addition, an offshoot of the Bruno Event Team—called ZOOM Motorsports—was formed in 2003 to provide promotion and management for the Barber Motorsports Park in nearby Leeds. ZOOM manages events at the facility more than 120 days a year, including annual races for the Superbike and Grand-Am Sportscar national touring series.

“George Barber builds the finest road course right in our backyard, and then calls and asks us to help him run it,” Hallman says. “Then Alabama calls us in 2005 and asks us to look into taking over game day for the following fall. We could have never planned all that.”

Nor could they have foreseen that the little golf tournament that started it all would still be going strong 16 years later. Or that the tournament would have generated more than \$10 million in charitable donations.

“That's just phenomenal,” Bruno says. “I never would have dreamed that we'd give \$10 million to charity.”

It was the success of the Bruno's Memorial Classic that laid the foundation for the creation of the Bruno Event Team and all that has followed.

The tournament quickly gained distinction among both the golfers and spectators as being a well-run event that emphasized taking care of the smallest details. And as the tournament grew, so did the reputation of those running it.

“Our philosophy for managing that event mirrored the Bruno's Inc. corporate culture,” Hallman says, “which was a very simple straightforward premise that you take care of the customer and manage a million details and make it look effortless. That's what we still try to do.

The early years of the Bruno's Memorial Classic set the tone for our company that exists to this day.”