

Tasich

Continued from previous page

TASICH IS quotable the way fish are floatable:

"Detroit is the Beirut of retailing: a free-fire zone."

Or, "How can a (censored) or a (censored) sell shoes so cheaply and make money? 'Cause they cheat. There is more and more dishonesty in the trade. They're selling closeouts, irregularities and seconds and not telling the consumer. How often have I had a sales rep come in and say, 'Hey, I've got some seconds for you. You want 'em? You can make \$10 more on a pair.'"

Or, "I can make a more lasting contribution as an educator than as a seller of sneakers and stringer of racquets. But I can make more money selling sneakers and stringing racquets. I guess you can say I sold out."

Tasich came to this country in 1952, when he was 11. His father, Nikola, who owned several meat-packing plants in Yugoslavia, unsuccessfully fought the Communists, then fled to Italy after World War II. He eventually emigrated to the United States and summoned his family, from whom he'd been separated since 1940.

TASICH WAS so naive, so cut off from the world in eastern Europe, that when he landed in Boston and saw a black man in the airport, he thought he must have been taken to Africa by mistake.

Though his father was a capitalist, Tasich got into retailing almost as an afterthought. He began teaching at Ferndale in 1966 and taught tennis at the Livonia Y in his spare time.

He began moonlighting merchandise out of his home, becoming successful enough for his wife, Patricia, to suggest he open a store. He did, in 1979, and three years later took the plunge completely and retired from teaching.



Ben Tasich strings a racquet in his Racquets Unlimited store in Livonia.

He had known his days in education were numbered, anyway, he says, when he was ordered not to suspend a girl caught with drugs because her father was an Ypsi school board member.

"I got out because I couldn't play political games," explained Tasich. "I hated making decisions that were politically sound and educationally bankrupt."

JUST AFTER his tennis store opened, the tennis boom became the tennis whisper. Courts that had been full became empty overnight. Cracks formed in the asphalt; weeds grew. Racquets sat unused in closets, playthings for spiders.

Tasich did the smart thing: He expanded into the running market, where sales quickly peaked and are, he says, off 25 percent the last two years, another boom busted.

These days, Ben is in turmoil. Should he sell the business? Should he expand? Should he franchise? Should he go back to teaching? Should he do that deal with WCAR for a live broadcast from his store?

"I'm kind of at the crossroads. On the one hand, I'm 45 and I'm doing what I want. On the other, I'm almost as old as Tom Monaghan and don't have anywhere near his kind of money. Seriously, I'm excited. It's time to make some changes."

A BIG CHANGE was dropping his racing team, which was highly successful the last three years in terms of wins, and an utter bust in terms of business generated. At \$5,000 a year, the team was more for his ego than his bottom line, Tasich decided.

Instead, he has decided to become a runner himself. "I'm walking three miles a day and it's killing me," he said. "But this is a promise: By the end of the summer Ben Tasich will have run his first three-mile road race."

(Though he has yet to run a race, he is at them all the time, passing out flyers and meeting would-be customers. "You only get a response of half a percent on the flyers," he explained, "but that's half a percent I didn't have the day before.")

A bigger change is the realization that he had to stop pushing his younger daughter, Becky, so hard at tennis. "I realized I was gaining a tennis star but losing a daughter. It's got to be her needs that are fulfilled and not her dad's. And you don't know how hard that is for me to say."

Becky, 16, was All-Catholic as a sophomore for Farmington Mercy last fall, and has been ranked in the midwest. Though she will continue on the Mercy team, she cut back on her tournaments, took up skiing and put her racquet in the closet for the winter.

"It was killing me," said Tasich. "People were no longer coming up to me saying, 'Your daughter the great tennis player, how is she doing?'"

— Tom Henderson

On the run

The loneliness of the long-distance runner is unknown to many recent newcomers to road racing. What once used to be a solitary sport is no longer. Races, once rare, are seemingly ubiquitous. The state motto soon may be: If you seek a pleasant race, look about you.

Every weekend there is at least one race, and often three or four, in the metropolitan area. They range in size from the 20,000-plus extravaganzas of Emily Gail to fun runs drawing 90 or 100. The courses can be as short as a mile, as long as 26.2. They come level, over hills, on dirt, concrete or blacktop. They start in the morning and finish with yogurt, and start at night and finish with pizza and kegs of beer. Always they include men and women, young and old, fast and slow.

The following is a listing of some area races of interest. A few of the best outstate races are also included. Race fees vary, as do entry deadlines, starting times and what's included (from T-shirts and all you can eat and drink to nothing at all). For a complete listing of upcoming races — some runners even plan their vacations around interesting resort-locations runs — look for Michigan Runner magazine, a monthly available at many newstands:

JUNE

June 21: 8th annual Canton Festival 5-miler, 9 a.m. For information or entry form, call Bob Dates, c Canton parks and recreation, 397-1000.

June 22: 7th annual Plymouth Family YMCA runs. Choice of 10 kilometers (6.2 miles), 5K, 1 mile. 8 a.m. 453-2904.

June 28: International Freedom Festival, Stroh's Run for Liberty 10K. Downtown Detroit. 2,000 expected for Statue of Liberty benefit. 10 a.m. Ed Kozloff, 544-9099.

June 28: Discover Northville Rotary Run, 10K, 5K, 1 mile. 9 a.m. 476-7330.

JULY

July 5: Westland 10K Challenge and 1-mile fun run. 8:30 a.m. 722-7620.

July 12: National Cherry Festival, Traverse City. 15K open, 1 mile invitational, 1,600 entrants. One huge hill, gorgeous views of Grand Traverse Bay. Finish along Cherry Festival parade route in front of

It's more fun to run with a pack. For groups to join, see the story on page 23.