

*by: Chris Moody, VAS Contributor*

Every Commonwealth Games Opening Ceremony starts with an invocation. Since 2017 the person offering those words of prayer has been Mark Long.

That wasn't a matter of random chance. Long is a perfect union of faith with sports. His life is given to both.

Long leads the Community and Endurance Sports Ministry of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. It's a true passion for him as spreading the Word of Christ is his true mission.

Note that his flock includes endurance athletes. Long is not ministering to them, he's with them. He's one of them.

"A little more than 20 years ago with some guys at work, we started to run, bike or swim at lunch or after work. I then competed in the Smith Mountain Lake Sprint Triathlon. That was my first event," Long said.

The SML Spring Triathlon is still a favorite event, which Long is looking forward to on May 1, at Smith Mountain Lake State Park.

"There's still spots available and I'm hoping we can have the registration full," he said.

From that point to now Long has competed in over 100 triathlon events including three Ironmans and nine half-Ironmans. He twice qualified for nationals which includes a spot on Team USA at the World event. Those events were held in Auckland, New Zealand and the Gold Coast of Queensland, Australia. Travelling to the other side of the world to compete in a world triathlon is the very definition of passion for the sport.

Not very event Long enters is a triathlon. He recently competed in an ultra-marathon and, run over a dozen marathons, including the Boston Marathon, and once ran the Blue Ridge Marathon's Double Marathon. Since the Blue Ridge bills itself as America's Toughest Road Race, imagine finishing 26.2 grueling miles then doing it again.

"It was strange starting a marathon at 2:30 in the morning," he said of the starting time for the double.

Long loves training on the Roanoke Valley Greenway near his Roanoke County home.

"Roanoke offers so many amazing places to run," he said.

Running, for Long, transformed from a chore to a passion.

"It was interesting that my first attempt at running, I thought this is not something I enjoy. Over time I came to love it," he said. "I love getting out there in nature, being with God."

After more than 30 years in the corporate world, Long lost a job in a merger. Instead of looking to hitch his wagon to another big company, he felt God calling him to the ministry. The job loss, he reckoned, was “a clear signal that God was moving me in a new direction,” Long said.

Already a board member for the FCA who loved the organization’s mission, Long took the opportunity to join as a staff member, allowing him to be a minister full time. He also helps the FCA raise money, promoting the organization’s upcoming golf tournament on May 7, at Roanoke Country Club.

“It has been an incredible journey,” Long said. “I had the opportunity to move into an area I’m passionate about, and feel called to do what I love do.”

The FCA has several endurance sports groups in the Roanoke Valley.

“For me it’s a great retirement job,” Long said.