From a 3,330 square-foot space in an unassuming two-storey brick building 200 kilometres southwest of Toronto, a Canadian recreational-technology company gives its Silicon Valley competitors reason to sprint.

Since 2012, London-based Race Roster, arguably the biggest online race registration platform for endurance sports in Canada, has expanded its reach across 10 provinces and 50 states. The vision of five enterprising high school friends has become an example of Ontario’s innovation corridor in action.

“We are definitely one of the youngest in the sector, and two of our competitors (active.com and eventbrite.com) are multi-million dollar companies. The challenge, which we enthusiastically embrace, is that we are 36 people up against these giants,” said co-founder Chantelle Wilder, 30, who manages the sales team.

Wilder, who qualified for Team Canada at the 2009 World Cross-Country Championships, and her brother Brandon Laan, 32, both competed as semi-professional runners. They each earned scholarships to the University of Hawaii and represented their universities and country at different stages.

In 2011, Laan and Wilder (then living in the U.S.) decided to launch their own 10K charity road race in London. The siblings recruited three high school friends with business and tech savvy to ensure the event was properly branded and marketed. The registration software available at the time did not allow for their desired level of autonomy. So, the group created a stronger solution. That improvised formula became the foundation for Race Roster.

Wilder would eventually move from California back to London to reunite with the other founders: Chan Yin, Bob Pluss and Alex Vander Hoeven.

As a former member of the New Balance Silicon Valley running team where talking tech on runs was the norm, Wilder sees fertile ground in Canada’s entrepreneurial ecosystem.

“At a recent London workshop for women in technology, my female colleagues and I were so encouraged to see more than 65 women come together,” said Wilder, a first-time mother to toddler Damien.

Wilder likes to admit to others in the field that balancing family and business is tough, and that’s OK. There’s beauty and opportunity in the chaos, she points out. And it’s important to tap into a helpful support system.

“London is our support system. Without it, we would not have been able to take the risks we’ve taken and the leaps of faith required to get a startup ‘up,’” said Wilder.

That support came in many forms. From relatives babysitting, to indirect guidance from thought leaders like Toronto Mayor John Tory and Communitech CEO Iain Klugman. A small business prize valued at $40,000 gave them direction, while accelerator programs in New York and San Francisco exposed them to best entrepreneurial practices.

Today, the company’s focus is on runner engagement, targeted marketing, trusted relationships and nimble technology as the startup transitions to a scale up. The founders have been able to hire computer science and business focused talent out of Fanshawe College and Western University – eager minds who want an excuse to stay in town.

The Office culture is relaxed and embraces
an active lifestyle. Headphone-clad developers have to bypass Yin’s strict criteria for new ideas or risk triggering the blast of his “no” button; there’s an office shower for commuting cyclists and runners, daily spinach-mango smoothies and coconut milk lattes and competitions like Pluss’ 25,000 push-ups in a year (his 65-year-old father also did it). Vander Hoeven’s retired father is the company’s accountant.

Race Roster’s solutions seem to answer race directors’ known and unknown needs across North America (70 per cent of their business is in the U.S.).

“When Chantelle showed me the form, the dashboard and back-end functionality, I was floored,” said Charlotte Brookes, event director at Canada Running Series. “It gave race organizers so much control over form updates, questions. It was pretty close to the ideal system for our business. They have a much better understanding of what runners and race organizers are looking for because they are runners and race organizers.”

Brookes values the communication, the heat mapping and quick visual graphs. “They are also our shuttle bus managers, our social media guru support system, our command centre dispatchers and a sounding board when we have tricky registration scenarios that we need their help with.”

Wilder and her brother see many parallels between competitive running and business.

“Every title or championship at high school and university was earned on hard work and sweat, and of course, an extensive support network. For every win there were countless times when things didn’t work out as planned. Every athlete can relate,” said Wilder. “The same can be said for business. That commitment to perseverance and faith, flexibility and fun is an incredible lesson to take from the track to the office.”

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