

A portrait of John Crompton's career: running a marathon at quarter mile pace

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Introduction

When asked by Metin Kozak to write a biography of John Crompton, I was both honoured and apprehensive. I was honoured as I could not have more respect for another human being than I do for John; apprehensive as I often refer to John as the Pope of our field. Some of his official titles at Texas A&M include: University Distinguished Professor, Regents Professor, Presidential Professor of Teaching Excellence, and Senior Fellow. As the grad student of one of his grad students (Sheila Backman), I not only know John as a friend, mentor, and extraordinary athlete, but also as my academic “grandpa”. I have thus been influenced by John both directly through my time working with him and indirectly through Sheila.

Without Sheila's guidance I might have missed out on working directly with John. She always spoke extremely positively about working with him, and much of the way in which she mentored me she formulated from how John had mentored her. When I was contemplating which job I should take upon finishing my Ph.D., she made it very clear where I should work, by emphatically telling me, “if you have a chance to work with Dr Crompton, and turn it down, I will never talk to you again.” I could not feel more fortunate to still be on speaking terms with Sheila.

From the first week I started at A&M, John has mentored me. He has done it by simply asking “how's the writing going?” or “what are you working on?” He has helped edit my writing, has given me a sounding board for ideas, and has shown me through actions and words how to be a faculty member. Yet, more importantly, he has shown me how to find passion in what I do (both at work and in my leisure) and how to be a good citizen to the department and the field. I cannot thank John enough for these gifts.

John's personal impact on our field is likely greater than anyone else's. He has published more than any other scholar in the fields of both tourism and parks and recreation. Yet, his publications are but the tip of the iceberg of his impact. He excels at teaching both undergraduate and graduate students, has given extraordinary service to the field and his community, and is a truly great person. John's outputs go well beyond what he himself has accomplished because, like a great coach or leader, he gets the most out of all who have come into contact with him. He has done this in a career that has spanned more than 40 years. Yet, through all his accomplishments, he has been extremely humble and down to earth and does not appear to be slowing down.

Humble beginnings

“Serendipity.” That is the word that John Crompton replied to me when I asked him what led him to become a world renowned tourism and leisure researcher. Yet, it is certainly not

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by chance or luck that he has been extraordinarily successful in almost all that he has done. While he argues that his impacts are due to “being at the right place at the right time” and that his ground-breaking research was “elementary”, it is evident that he has earned his successes by doing the right thing at the right time, and by not allowing room for chance to disrupt his goals.

John Leslie Crompton was born in the village of Hightown on the outskirts of Liverpool, England. As a student at Waterloo Grammar School, it was evident early in his life that he was a gifted athlete and student. He was proficient at virtually everything he tried. Outside the classroom, he was captain of his school’s soccer, cricket, cross-country, and track and field teams, while he also played club field hockey and tennis. His passion for athletics sparked his interest in studying physical education and geography at Loughborough College. At that time, Loughborough was regarded as the UK’s premier physical education and teacher training programme, and John emerged in 1966 as valedictorian of his class en route to earning his teaching certificate.

John, who is hands-down the best teacher I have ever witnessed, started his illustrious teaching career by teaching one year of high school in Kirby. Kirby was a new town comprising 40,000 people residing almost exclusively in subsidized public housing, who were displaced by urban renewal in Liverpool’s inner city. There were few public amenities and at the time Kirby had the highest per capita juvenile crime rate in the UK. It was an excellent environment in which to hone his teaching skills, and he described his year there as, “One of the happiest, most satisfying of my life.”

Seeking new experiences, he then furthered his education by venturing to the University of Illinois, where he completed an MS in Recreation and Park Administration in 1968. A degree in this field was not available in Europe and met with scepticism when he arrived home in the UK. However, a few months after his return to Liverpool, Loughborough University announced the first degree in recreation management in Europe. It was an MS degree, comprising the full set of regular courses for the MS in business management, supplemented with three additional courses in recreation.

When he graduated along with 10 others from this pioneering course, with his second MS degree, he was invited to join a start-up company, Loughborough Recreation Planning Consultants Limited (LRPC). The company was launched by the recreation management course tutor at Loughborough University and the University’s recently retired president. John was hired in 1970 as their first full-time employee and General Manager, and was appointed Managing Director in 1972.

LRPC offered a full range of services: market research, feasibility, management recruitment and training, planning, and architecture. Their extensive list of private sector clients included British Airways; Aer Lingus (Irish Airlines); the Irish Tourist Board, numerous leisure property developers; professional sports teams; and indoor water parks (a decade before they emerged in the USA). Public sector commissions involved large recreation complexes in major cities and in resort areas, multiple aquatic facilities, and schools’ sports complexes.

By 1974, LRPC was the largest tourism and recreation consulting company in the UK, with 25 full-time and 10 part-time employees. The bottom-line business model approach; innovative facility designs, stemming from careful study of consumers’ behaviour; imaginative financing arrangements; and extensive investment in developing model research and feasibility templates were far in advance of anything being done in the USA at that time in recreation and tourism, with the notable exception of the emergence of theme parks.

John was at the forefront of the leisure field in the UK, keynoting national conferences and interacting with leading corporate and political figures in the leisure field. Through a

mutual contact, his work came to the attention of Les Reid, who was the Department Head of Recreation and Parks at Texas A&M University. John's wife Liz is a US citizen and Reid learned they had an interest in exploring opportunities in the USA.

Les had attended an international recreation conference in Europe in Spring, 1974. He detoured to incorporate a visit to LRPC's offices, visited with John, and offered him a Research Associate position at Texas A&M while he worked on a Ph.D. in Recreation Resources Development. With John's love of teaching and desire for knowledge, he gave up his first career to pursue another. That decision would have a profound impact on the fields of tourism, recreation, and sport.

Les Reid realized almost immediately John's potential as both a teacher and a researcher. He was conceptually advanced, somewhat stubborn, rich in experience, and an inspiring teacher. During the three years it took John to get his Ph.D., he worked as a lecturer and research associate in the department. His teaching prowess and innovative knowledge related to leisure services marketing prompted the Department of Marketing at A&M to also hire him as a lecturer while he was completing his Ph.D. Upon completion of his Ph.D. in 1977, he was immediately offered an Assistant Professor position in the Department of Parks and Recreation at A&M, and continued to teach classes in the Department of Marketing until 1980. He became an Associate Professor in 1981, Full Professor in 1985 and University Distinguished Professor in 2000. Distinguished Professor status is rarely achieved at Texas A&M. When he was appointed, he was one of the only 40 out of A&M's 2600 faculty. The primary criterion is that the individual "has changed the narrative in his/her field". With John's contributions to tourism, recreation, and sport, he undoubtedly deserved that honor.

Contributions to the development of tourism studies

John had considerable experience with tourism businesses at LRPC, but found that the field was in its very formative years in academia. He was blessed in that Dr Clare Gunn was on the faculty at Texas A&M when he arrived there, and was pioneering academic courses. He says that when he went to the library to see what had been written about tourism, there were four books and two of them were written by Dr Gunn.

John has frequently pointed out that conceptualization drives effective empiricism, and that most of the seminal papers in social science disciplines are conceptual rather than empirical. Conceptualization has always been his primary strength. He was a quick study. He recognized that the differences between the delivery of recreation and tourism services were relatively small, and started conceptualizing areas of inquiry that would transcend both. John will tell you that his most cited papers were nothing special. In his words, motivations, decision-making, loyalty (repeat visitation), and destination image were "elementary ideas". Yet the field lacked empirical or conceptual advancement in these areas, and he provided ground-breaking work in each. His early ability to identify the holes in the tourism and recreation literatures enabled him to generate conceptual and empirical studies that advanced these areas by a magnitude that may never be seen in our field again. The holes were large, and John made huge contributions to filling them.

While most leading scholars have one or maybe two solid research streams, John has many. Crompton's (1979a) "Motivations for Pleasure Vacations" article is likely the most cited journal article in the field of tourism. According to Google Scholar, it has been cited nearly 2000 times. John also helped pioneer the work on: destination image (Crompton, 1979b), decision-making (Crompton, 1992; Um & Crompton, 1990), tourism impacts (Ap & Crompton, 1993, 1998), evaluating tourism experiences (Baker & Crompton, 2000;

Crompton & Love, 1995), repeat visitation (Gitelson & Crompton, 1984), loyalty (Backman & Crompton, 1991), measuring novelty (Lee & Crompton, 1992), information seeking (Gitelson & Crompton, 1983), economic impact analyses (Crompton, 1995; Crompton, Lee, & Shuster, 2001), and numerous others. Each of these papers resulted in him developing a comprehensive research programme in the area to enhance our understanding of it.

While each of these areas of study is currently well understood and fairly universally known, this was not the case before he started studying them. These areas have been fueled by earlier work that John did, and many have grown because John's disciples ("Cromptonites" as his grad students called themselves) have continued to work on them once John moved on to his next research programme. Without him introducing cutting-edge applications of marketing, financing, and sound psychological principles into the neophyte study of tourism, the field would not have advanced to its present status. The impact of his contributions (and the work of his students) on the study of tourism has been astronomical.

The quantity of John's publications is overwhelming. By my count, John has published approximately 235 refereed articles with the vast majority being in tier one journals. His first article was published in 1977. In John's first decade of publishing (1977–1986), he published 50 articles, from 1987 to 1996 he published 73, and from 1997 to 2006 he published another 76. Five times in his career, John has had at least 10 articles published in the same year. In 2001 alone, he published 13 articles (enough for tenure at many universities). His academic output also includes 19 books or published monographs and at least 42 book contributions.

Even more impressive than the quantity of research he has produced is its quality. One measure of quality is how often somebody has been cited. Nobody in our field has been cited more than John. His "h-index" according to Google Scholar is 62. This means that he has had at least 62 articles cited more than 62 times. Google Scholar also reveals that he has had 3 articles cited more than 1000 times, 3 others cited more than 500 times, and another 42 cited at least 100 times. In total, John's articles have received approximately 19,000 citations, with more than 9000 citations in the past 5 years, and an h10-index (number of articles cited at least 10 times) of more than 100 in the past 5 years. These indices are evidence that John's research continues to be relevant to the field.

Other contributions and accomplishments

While the quantity and quality of John's publications are staggering, his largest contributions to the field go well beyond his research. John is a phenomenal teacher of both undergraduate and graduate students. He has taught our department's capstone undergraduate course for over three decades. The course has historically been taught as a marketing and financing class that features multiple case projects. He writes most of the case studies. They are derived from real-world problems, often based on his own consulting experiences, and are writing and time intensive. Even though he grades around a C on a strict bell-curve and requires likely twice the output of most other professors, his course is easily the one that most of our students say is the best they encounter at Texas A&M. On a five point scale, John has averaged approximate 4.9 over the past 10 years, even though his students are overwhelmed with the workload. Students in our programme fear the course prior to taking it, find a way to survive it, and praise the experience once they are done. John sets the bar extremely high for all his students, and uses his pedagogical skills to help them succeed. One of John's former students, Tori Schwarzlose (2013, Personal letter written April), wrote the following about John:

Dr Crompton does not require extravagant slide shows or websites to clarify his points. Instead he has the incredible ability to stand in front of a large class of ignorant college students, grasp their attention, and teach them more in two weeks than they have learned in their entire college career, leaving them with a positive lasting impression in knowing that they sincerely earned their final grade.

The fact that John is likely still the most influential teacher which today's students have at our university is somewhat astonishing. He is still using many of the same methods he used 40 years ago. As a troglodyte, he does not fuss with technology or flashy means to entertain his students. He uses a few notes which have been handwritten on a yellow legal pad; commands the attention of every student in the class, as they know his expectations and that he will call on them by name if they fall below what is expected; and invariably inspires them to do more than they believe they could achieve. Students are constantly reminded, they are producers of education not consumers of it, so they are expected to invest considerable effort. Through his tutelage, students are given gifts of applied knowledge and a passion for learning that will later assist them in being better people, workers, and citizens. It is an amazing contribution.

Yet, John's academic tree of graduate students might be his best contribution to the field. In the late 1970s he realized that his ability to do all that he wanted to achieve was limited by the boundaries of mortality. As a starting assistant professor, he wrote down a personal goal of graduating at least 30 Ph.D. and 30 MS students during his career, to help "institutionalize his influence". Not coincidentally, he has now chaired just over 30 Ph.D. students' and 30 MS students' graduate committees. Each of them has been taught to conceptualize abstract concepts and to empirically examine phenomena. In addition, through his mentorship, these students learn to distribute the results of their research through high-quality writing and presentations. With his mentoring and pedagogical skills, John has certainly institutionalized his impact.

It is no coincidence that his students, and his students' students, have produced a substantive percentage of the tourism and recreation literatures. His former graduate students include Muzaffer Uysal (Professor, Virginia Tech), Seoho Um (Professor, Kyonggi University), Mark Havitz (Professor and Chair, Waterloo University), Kelly MacKay (Associate Dean and Professor, University of Manitoba), Sheila Backman (Professor, Clemson University), Keith Hollinshead (Professor, University of Bedfordshire), C. Paul Fakeye (Director Ministry of Commerce, Crafts and Tourism, Republic of Benin, West Africa), John Ap (Professor, Hong Kong Poly), and Seong-Seop Kim (Professor, Hong Kong Poly). Each of the above, and virtually all of his other graduate students, has left Texas A&M not only with great knowledge and skills, but also with impeccable ethics and morals.

John is also an inspiring presenter. His command of the English language, coupled with his extensive consulting experiences and ability to utilize life lessons, has made him one of the most heavily sought-after keynote speakers in our field. In addition to his presentations in academic forums, he has delivered over 700 workshops or lectures to professional audiences in many countries and almost every state and province in North America. These include keynote addresses at the Annual Conferences for Recreation and Parks in the USA, Great Britain, Canada, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, and Japan. I have heard John speak often, yet he inspires me every time I hear him.

In addition, he has given great service to the field and to his community. He has served on multiple editorial boards, is on the Board of Trustees of the National Recreation Foundation, has been Chairman of the Texas Chapter of the Travel and Tourism Research Association, and has been on the Board of Trustees for the National Recreation and Park

Association. He has further served as President of the following: the Academy of Leisure Sciences, the American Academy for Park and Recreation Administration, the Texas Recreation and Park Society, and the Society of Park and Recreation Educators. He has also provided service to College Station, Texas, as a City Councilman, Mayor Pro Tem, Board Member for the Convention and Visitors Bureau and by serving on the city's Transportation Committee and Greenways Advisory Board.

John's exemplary research, teaching, and service to the field have led to more than 30 prestigious external awards, and virtually every major award related to teaching, research, and service that Texas A&M gives. Externally, John has been named a Fellow of the International Academy of Tourism and the Academy of Leisure Sciences, as well as a Senior Fellow for the World Leisure Academy. He has received the Pugsley Medal for Conservation from the National Park Foundation, the President's Award from the Academy of Park and Recreation, and both the Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt Award for Excellence (their highest honour for research), and the National Distinguished Professional Awards from the National Recreation and Park Association. In addition, the city of College Station has honoured him by naming a 15.5 acre park (near the A&M campus) in his name. A good summary of who John is, is on display at John Crompton Park. The plaque eloquently states:

This park is dedicated to Dr John L. Crompton, Ph.D.

Prolific author, humanitarian, devoted athlete, outstanding teacher, mentor, visionary leader and Distinguished Professor of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences at Texas A&M University. His life long passion for excellence and his hard work have resulted in significant contributions promoting park issues and conservation efforts at the local, state, national and international levels. For his dedication and service to this community, we are profoundly grateful.

Finally, John is also an accomplished athlete. In his younger years he was gifted and successful at multiple sports (in particular the 400 m hurdles). I imagine that many of the characteristics he currently displays as an academic were nurtured on those fields of play. These skills likely included hard work, striving for perfection, being a leader and a follower, superior intellect, and having a greater desire to be successful than the others he faced. John is still active today, though he does not classify himself as an athlete anymore. While his days of running sub 2:50 marathons are behind him, he recently celebrated his 70th year by completing two half-marathons and a triathlon, and most summers he heads back to the UK to complete one of that country's long distance walks (100–270 miles).

Conclusion

While John classifies his achievements as "serendipitous", his academic success has come from neither happenstance nor "luck". It has come from countless hours of dedicated work, while understanding people well enough to know with whom to work, and how to work with them. It has come from asking questions that others before him had not asked, conceptualizing issues in ways others have not considered, and by not being afraid of fighting for things in which he believes. He still studies all that is around him as if there will be a final exam on it the next day that he needs to ace. He does so because he is still competing. The hurdles that he used to race over are now symbolic of the multiple issues that he wants to explore. With each one he goes over, he quickly seeks the next.

When he is asked when he will retire, he says he will do so whenever he is done with all that is on his plate. Yet it appears as if John's plate is not going to be empty soon. He is still mentoring graduate students and faculty, conducting cutting-edge research, phenomenally

teaching undergraduate students; giving lectures that move audiences, and is still fighting for more trees and open space in his own community and the rest of the planet.

John's legacy includes the development of knowledge emanating from all of his grad students; all of his grad students' students and the countless generations of "Cromptonites" (both undergraduate and graduate) who will continue to learn from those whom John has taught. His legacy embraces leaving a field with a much better knowledge of how tourists' make their decisions to travel, what motivates people to travel, how to evaluate experiences, the role that image has on destination choice, the determinants and outputs of loyalty, how to measure novelty, tourism impacts, the repeat visitation phenomena, and how to measure tourism economic impacts. Finally, John's legacy includes a family who has been blessed with an amazing husband and father; a department that is a much happier and productive place to work due to his mentoring and encouragement; a world that now better understands the value of green spaces and how to protect them; and a field that, while young, has developed a strong applied and theoretical base of knowledge.

While John's legacy is unprecedented, it will continue to grow. For all that he has done and continues to do, our field, and all whom he has mentored will be eternally thankful. We thank him for strategically conquering his marathon of a career, one hurdle at a time, at a quarter mile pace.

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