

Out of Africa

South African running legends Johnny Halberstadt and Mark Plaatjes pick up Colorado's retail pace with the Boulder Running Company. *By Marianne Bhonslay*

Hardcore runners often quote the expression, "No pain, no gain" as an inspiration during particularly toilsome workouts. But runners-turned-retailers Johnny Halberstadt and Mark Plaatjes resolutely refute that motto for their customers at the Boulder Running Company and, in fact, are making great strides to ensure that Colorado's athletes are running pain-free.

Halberstadt and Plaatjes, both South African natives who competed as elite NCAA runners, are immigrants to the U.S. With results that include Halberstadt's victory in the 1972 NCAA 10,000 meter championship, and Plaatjes' 1993 World Track & Field Championship marathon win, the two runners undoubtedly know something about pushing their limits. Their job these days, however, is to bolster running performances, whether of those pursuing recreational fitness or striving to set a personal record. How? First and foremost, by fitting runners with the right shoes.

"We are in the confidence business," espouses Halberstadt, who founded the Boulder Running Company in 1996 with partner Plaatjes. "When people leave the store [after shopping], it is

important for them to have confidence that we as retailers have done the best job possible to help them find a shoe that fits their style. Expertise and service are not a question of going into the [stock] room, grabbing a box, and getting the right shoes for customers. That is a given. 'Fit' is a given, but that is just the first stage. The biomechanics have to be right. The alignment has to be right. Not just in theory, but in a practical sense."

Halberstadt's professorial discourse is more than mere rhetoric. Along with his running exploits—which include his membership in the still-exclusive sub-four-minute-mile club—Halberstadt's product experience extends to athletic footwear designs, many of which have been patented and licensed to running manufacturers. Partner Plaatjes, meanwhile, is a certified physical therapist specializing in injury prevention who maintains his own business, In Motion Rehabilitation, on the second floor directly above the retail operation.

These side vocations not only testify to the unique expertise of Boulder Running Company's founders, but they also supported the retail business during its early start-up days. Today, Boulder Running Company consists of three stores, with locations in Colorado Springs and just outside of Denver, in Littleton, with estimated annual sales of more than \$3 million.

"We started the business with \$90,000 and one store in Boulder," offers the modest Plaatjes who, like his counterpart, rarely reveals his athletic achievements without considerable prodding. "It took us about one year to get the big [running] brands, so we started with second-tier brands and sold what we had and what people needed. After the second year, we continued to see increases."

While top-tier running brands such as Adidas, Asics and Nike are the best sellers today, Boulder Running continues to do a strong business with brands such as Brooks, Saucony and Mizuno.

"Every shoe company has a good

shoe," notes Plaatjes, who has run 38 marathons with a personal record of 2:08:58. "[But] the right shoe is a question of the mechanics of the body and anatomy. We look at [the shoes] as a tool to solve a problem. We don't try to put customers into the most expensive shoe. We try to fit each person with the right shoe."

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—Johnny Halberstadt,
Boulder Running Company

Although Halberstadt, 53, and Plaatjes, 41, competed on the collegiate level during slightly different generations, they knew each other in Johannesburg and each relays a somewhat quirky path to their chosen sport. As a 13-year-old in the early 1960s, Halberstadt recalls reading a local Johannesburg newspaper

quoting then-president John F. Kennedy encouraging Americans towards fitness with the pronouncement that everyone should be able to walk 50 miles. In response, a 50-mile walk was organized in Johannesburg. "It captured my imagination," remembers Halberstadt, who entered the event and finished the 50 miles in 13 hours. "I won a trophy and that fired me up and I started running."

Halberstadt ran all the way to a scholarship at Oklahoma State in the early 1970s, eventually earning a business degree and an MBA from the university. In 1979, he would run an ultramarathon distance of 56 miles in less than six hours. He returned to South Africa and opened a three-store running retail business called Johnny Halberstadt's Heart & Sole, with locations in Johannesburg and Pretoria. During that time, Halberstadt spotted Plaatjes at a local road race. When a U.S. collegiate coach called looking for potential recruit suggestions, Halberstadt, without hesitation, told him to pursue Plaatjes. By 1981, Plaatjes was competing for the University of Georgia.

Plaatjes' leap to inter-collegiate competition was more inauspicious than Halberstadt's. As a 16-year-old senior at Chrisjanbotha High School in Johannesburg, Plaatjes, by his own recollection, had yet to "run one step." While sitting in the stands ready to watch his school's 3K competition for runners to qualify for the State Championships, Plaatjes heard a Public Address announcement asking for volunteers to help pace the runners during the first few laps of the race. Plaatjes



Mark Plaatjes wins the marathon in the '93 World Track & Field Championships.

considered that he could probably last a mile or so and volunteered. After 1.5 miles, Plaatjes realized that the nearest racer was 50 meters behind him. He won that race, qualifying for the state championships, which he also won. That same year he won the Nationals, as well.

Plaatjes studied as fast as he ran. While running for the University of Georgia, he earned a pre-med degree in two years, then headed back to South Africa where he studied physical therapy and gained a Masters degree in that field from the University of Witwatersrand.

Upon returning to the U.S. in 1988 on a holiday with his wife and daughter, Plaatjes decided to work and run in America. He spent two years in Chicago working with the physically handicapped, and made frequent trips to Boulder for altitude training in preparation for marathons. "I wanted to remain in Boulder," says Plaatjes, adding that when the chance came to work in physical therapy in Boulder, "I took it."

Plaatjes' subsequent 10-year tenure as a physical therapist in Boulder set the groundwork for the Boulder Running Company. "I saw a lot of athletes, runners and cyclists and tri-athletes, and sent them to local running stores to buy shoes," recounts Plaatjes, who became an American citizen in 1993 and celebrated by winning the marathon for the U.S. at the World Championships that year. "A lot of times they were not treated properly, especially if they were not fast runners. And retailers did not understand the nature of injuries, or have knowledge on mechanics, or how orthotics work."

While Plaatjes, who also constructs orthotics, began formulating the idea of combining his anatomical knowledge with a retail business, Halberstadt returned to the U.S. in 1994, citing the growing crime, unemployment and political perils of his native home as reason to emigrate. And although Boulder, a city of less than 100,000, already had ample running specialty stores, the two believed they could establish a unique franchise within this peerless running haven.

"We could only pull off this type of business in Boulder," explains Plaatjes, who devotes about 60 percent of his time to the physical therapy clinic and the other 40 percent to the retail enterprise while continuing to run 65 miles per week. "The runners in Boulder are very passionate, no matter what level they compete on, and their lifestyle is geared toward their running," he says. "They do all the things [an elite] runner does. They eat well, they get massage [to recuperate from training], they take naps in the middle of the day. Even runners just trying to break four hours for a marathon are working with heart monitors and doing yoga and Pilates [to stay limber] for running. They are doing all the things that will make them better runners. Runners in other communities don't mimic the lifestyle of elite runners."

More simply, Halberstadt refers to Boulder as a "running mecca," citing a Runner's World survey listing Boulder as the number one city for running, with Colorado Springs, home to the U.S. Olympic training facility, as number three.

Boulder Running Company's success emanates from the precept that all runners are created equal. Halberstadt and Plaatjes insist that their staff—many of whom are accomplished runners as well—treat each customer with the consideration and concern of an elite athlete. All customers, whether first-time joggers or elite runners, are put on the treadmill and given a gait analysis, which includes a video assessment of their running stride. And then customers begin to try on a variety of shoes.

"We do not gear to elite athletes," explains Halberstadt, who continues to run 20 to 30 minutes a day, which he considers his "meditation" time. "We gear to the population at large. If somebody is really out of shape or overweight, we respect them. We give the same respect and courtesy to everyone, whether they are a walker or a world-class runner."

In fact, Halberstadt adds, too many footwear retailers treat their product as if it is a commodity. "This is not a business of commodities or convenience," he notes. "How many times do we hear people say, 'I don't walk anymore' or 'I don't run anymore' because of an injury? It may be that they are just in the wrong footwear. Fitting customers with the right shoes is a complicated [endeavor], but you build loyalty. You want your customers to say, 'Knowing what I now know [about footwear], I would be crazy to go to any other store.'"

While Boulder Running Company sells high-end shoes in the \$130 and above range, 80 percent of footwear sales are between \$79 and \$89, Halberstadt says. Models such as Mizuno's Alchemy and Saucony's Grid Omni are good sellers, he adds. "We don't have a big disparity between the best-selling brand and brand number six," offers Halberstadt, noting that the constant customer feedback is a repository of brand and model information for the retail staff.

The company also endears itself to customers by its willingness to take returns or swap a newly purchased pair of shoes for another model, if a



Johnny Halberstadt is committed to helping beginners find the right shoe.

runner reports the shoe is not quite right. "If people have a problem, we would rather get them out of the shoe, and switch it," says Halberstadt. "We don't want to win the battle and lose the war. We don't need one million customers who come once. We need [enough] customers who come back 20 times."

Customers are coming back. The Boulder store, which was profitable within one year, continues to grow by about 5 to 10 percent annually, Halberstadt says. Littleton, which opened a little more than one year after the Boulder store in 1997, and Colorado Springs, which opened in 2000, are also growing at a "healthy, double-digit" pace, reports Halberstadt.

Apparel accounts for about 20 to 25 percent of the business. Moreover, the store's environment at times resembles more of a running club than a retail venue, with some runners plopped on chairs reading magazines and others heading out for their daily roadwork.

"At times, a running store can be intimidating," offers one manufacturer. "Johnny and Mark make people feel comfortable right away. Having both of them at the store, and the fact that customers have accessibility to them, gives the store tremendous credibility and authenticity."

Adds Ken Barker, director of apparel for Adidas America—and also a native South African who knew Halberstadt in Johannesburg—"Johnny was a tenacious runner and is just as tenacious a businessman. He has an understanding of a runner's needs and when he gives [customers] personal attention, it is because he is truly interested in their results."

Both Halberstadt and Plaatjes say the transition from national competitors to retail owners has been relatively painless. "There is a Dutch saying which, basically translated, says, 'If you don't have the brains you better have the legs,'" relates Halberstadt. With Halberstadt's and Plaatjes' running feats, product knowledge and biomechanical expertise, Boulder Running Company offers runners the rare training credo of mind over matter—even while noting it is the shoe that comes first. ■

VITAL STATISTICS

BOULDER RUNNING COMPANY

OWNERS:

Johnny Halberstadt, Mark Plaatjes (majority owners), Aaron Bouplon (minority owner)

HEADQUARTERS:

2775 Pearl St.
Boulder, CO 80302
303-RUN-WALK or 303-786-9255

WEB SITE:

www.boulderrunningcompany.com

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:

30 full-time, 10 part-time

STORE COUNT:

Three Colorado stores: Boulder, Littleton, Colorado Springs

SQUARE FOOTAGE:

2,100 in Boulder; 2,300 in Littleton and Colorado Springs

ANNUAL SALES:

More than \$3 million