

# The Race Is On

Super Jock 'n Jill Battles Road Runner Sports. *By Cara Griffin*

In the 30 years that it has been in business, specialty retailer Super Jock 'n Jill has become a Seattle landmark and a touchstone for the running industry.

"Super Jock 'n Jill is one of the top running specialty stores in the country," says Steve Prince, West Coast regional sales manager for New Balance.

But according to the store's owner, Chet James, one thing that he has never aspired for Super Jock 'n Jill to be is a retail chain. He asserts that his store's strength is in its total focus on one storefront.

"People have always asked me why I have never opened another store," says the 47-year-old James, whose mother opened Super Jock 'n Jill as one of the nation's first running specialty stores in 1975. "The American way is that more is better, but to me it is not about money. If we had three or four stores I would not be able to have us be doing our best in each one."

with untapped potential," notes Abood.

The neighborhood where the new Road Runner Sports store and Super Jock 'n Jill are located is across from Greenlake Park, an extremely popular area for runners and walkers in Seattle. There is also a Title 9 store nearby.

Abood points out that Road Runner Sports was already serving 10,000 Seattle-area customers through its catalog and Internet business before the company even decided to open the store. "So we are not exactly a new competitor to the stores in this area," he says.

Still, the industry is on alert. As one vendor puts it, Road Runner's retail move "has caused a stir in the industry." The vendor, who asked to speak off the record on the topic, says that while he is reliant in different ways on both types of accounts, "You do not really want to see any account open up a half-block away from another one."

Super Jock 'n Jill's 2,200-square-foot store does an estimated \$4 million in business per year.



developing and maintaining relationships, and he says that will remain a special ingredient that differentiates his store.

"This is going to keep us on our toes and put a fire in us," says James. "We feel like we take retail to another level, and we just have to be more clever and quicker and smoother and take care of our customers. Our offense is to do what we do best."

Super Jock 'n Jill's roots in the community include relationships not only with fitness groups and high school running teams, but also with members of the medical and business communities. Doctors and physical therapists in the area often send patients to the store for proper shoe fittings, and James regularly gives talks to businesses in the area—including Boeing, among others—to help educate people about the benefits of proper shoe fitting. James describes this type of grassroots marketing as typical of his store's soft-sell approach.

"I don't view us as a retailer, but as footwear, or rather, suspension, managers," says James. "We have changed the expectations of retail in Seattle."

He also refuses to label his store a specialty running store, insisting that he caters to any person who is active or wants to be active. "In our eyes, if you have a heart rate, you are an athlete," says James. "We don't stereotype."

Rick Wilhelm, VP of specialty retail sales at Brooks, says that watching a customer come into Super Jock 'n Jill speaks volumes about the store. Customers are often stunned that the staff will let them go outside and test-run shoes.

"They go, 'wow, you mean I can walk out without even buying these yet?'" says Wilhelm. "You can go in and you might see a geriatric patient seated next to an elite athlete, and the staff will treat each customer with exactly the same attention."

That specialized service is the defining characteristic of the store and has given it tremendous brand awareness in the area.

But Road Runner Sports has also begun marketing itself to the community through involvement in grassroots events as well as radio advertising. The Seattle store is the first in what will likely be a number of "regional superstores." Which means little guys all over the country might take note of James' resolve and lace up their shoes. Industry buzz has Road Runner Sports with 20 more retail doors already in the works.

"That's entirely possible," says Abood. "First, we are going to measure the success of this store, but we are capable of expanding pretty quickly."

Start the clock. The race is on. ■



Seattle's Greenlake Park is filled with potential customers for Super Jock 'n Jill and its new neighbor, Road Runner Sports.

It is slightly ironic then that it is catalog giant Road Runner Sports, and its foray into being a retail chain, that has caused a ripple not only in James' neighborhood, but in the industry, as well. Road Runner Sports, with annual sales topping \$80 million per year, has long operated a sole flagship store next to its San Diego headquarters. But the company is now making a move into brick-and-mortar retail, which began with the opening of a retail store in Seattle on September 1, just a block away from Super Jock 'n Jill.

According to Chuck Abood, GM of the retail division for Road Runner Sports, the company chose Seattle as a launching point based on research in its customer database showing that the market was saturated with active consumers.

"Many of our vendors agree that it is a market

Seattle's vast active community means there are likely enough customers to go around, but for James, the reality is that vendors will offer Road Runner Sports the exact same product that he carries. And with 7,000 square feet of retail space, the Seattle Road Runner Sports store will also be carrying a broader selection of product than James' shop and will likely dwarf his annual sales. The Road Runner Sports flagship retail store in San Diego, a 5,400-square-foot space, does \$10 million per year in sales, according to Abood.

"Are they a specialty store or a chain?" asks James, before answering with a laugh. "If it looks like a wolf and smells like a wolf, then it's probably a wolf."

Despite the rhetoric, James actually seems more steeled than scared by the competition. The focus for Super Jock 'n Jill has always been on