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## Summer Sports

### Bike shops go extra mile with service, community

By Amy Moritz

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Winter may have held on to Western New York for a bit longer than normal and our spring was drenched in rain, but as soon as the sun started to peek out, Ethan Johnson was swamped with work.

"This has been our busiest summer ever in the history of our shop," said Johnson, co-owner of Campus WheelWorks on Elmwood. "We opened in 1996 and this has been the busiest month we've ever had."

Bike Mechanic Al DeRosa works on a deluxe tune up as Senior Bike Mechanic Tom Seiler does a new bike tune up at Tom's Pro Bike shop. John Hickey / Buffalo News

Dave Borodzick, owner of Runner's Roost in Orchard Park, echoes the sentiment -- business is particularly robust this year.

While the national business headlines continue to talk about a troubled economy, the small local athletic shops seem to be doing just fine in Western New York, at least anecdotally. From the small cycling shops to running, outdoor and triathlon stores, local businesses seem to be thriving despite the availability of deal-hunting online and the convenience of big box stores.

"We're seeing a lot of new runners and people need to go where they can get answers," Borodzick said. "We're going into the sixth calendar with double-digit sales growth. It's been phenomenal. It hasn't stopped growing.

"It's hard to pinpoint exactly why we're so busy," Johnson said. "It's probably due to multiple things. The long winter gives people cabin fever, and once the weather breaks they feel they need to get outside. I think the economy is doing better now. I'm not an economist but people do seem like they're ready to get out there and buy bikes not just for transportation but for recreation."

Western New Yorkers are familiar with superstore Bert's, a local bike retailer with four locations in Buffalo and Rochester. But the smaller, neighborhood-type shops not only have a cult following, but are attracting new customers thanks to their experience and expertise. Small, local shops can excel in areas which breed repeat business and success: service, community and personality.

### **Customer service**

Touting customer service is the mantra for a small business. In a consumer world filled with choice, being able to offer a personal touch is what sets the small local shops apart from other outlets, especially when facing price point competition.

"Somebody can be in the shop with the Internet on their cell phone, scan a bar code and have an app that gives them the three cheapest places to buy the product online," Johnson said. "That's impossible to compete with when you're trying to run a store and pay your employees a living wage. The only way we survive and keep people coming back to us is to make it so they appreciate the service."

Customer service often conjures up dealing with problems, but it also comes in the form of getting people into the proper gear to begin with. Borodzik, who opened Runner's Roost in 1978, has seen trends in footwear come and go, but he and others like him pride themselves on being knowledgeable. It's not about the shoe but about getting people into the right shoe.

"I think people come here because we're old school," Borodzik said. "Here, they get fitted. You talk to a person. I can't believe the number of people who come in here not wearing the proper size. They're wearing good shoes, but not the right shoes and they wonder why they're getting injured or not running well."

It's not just that small stores take good care of their customers. They're in the business to begin with because they love their respective sport. Owners often are in the midst of the nitty-gritty of the shop and employees are athletes and participants themselves. The knowledge and passion translates well to patrons of all ability levels.

"Folks who work at the local shops tend to have a passion about their job or what their job is about," said Nick Brodnicki, a Buffalo triathlete who frequents Fleet Feet and Tom's Pro Bike. "Buying running shoes, for example, at Fleet Feet or Runner's Roost you will find employees who actually run, and run all sorts of different things. They tend to have an in-depth knowledge on every single thing they carry. Usually they have to, otherwise, they wouldn't be employed there anymore."

### **Community**

When Sarah and Kevin Beckwith started Gear for Adventure, it was a web-based business in their home. As they became more successful, they decided to open a brick-and-mortar location in the village of Hamburg. That was a year and a half ago and business has been steadily growing.

While the couple translated their own love of the outdoors -- camping, hiking and other adventures -- into a business, they also found a niche community. The store hosts weekly guided hikes in the summer and snowshoe walks in the winter while hosting backpacking and other classes. The store becomes not just about commerce but about becoming a meeting place of sorts for like-minded people.

"I think people are getting back into being outdoors," Sarah Beckwith said. "We find a lot of people who go on one of our hikes or snowshoe with us once come back. And you get to develop a good relationship with a customer, ask how their trips are going and what they're planning to do. It becomes more personal and it's more fun."

Local stores of all kinds host clinics and group events. Fleet Feet runs one of the most popular running groups for beginners with its "No Boundaries" program. Local cycling shops, such as Tom's Pro Bikes, have weekly group rides which meet at the shop in the summer and does an indoor time trial series in the winter. Other shops are more informal, but equally as important in creating a connection. Borodzik notes that at Runner's Roost, strangers will strike up conversations about running and people will use the store as a meeting point for group runs, albeit with no formal plan.

Training takes on a different tone at Tri Spot in Williamsville. The triathlon-specific store sells gear for running, cycling and swimming but also has a Computrainer Time Trial Race Zone and an Endless Pool on site.

Stores also sponsor teams, from cycling to triathlon, for various levels of athletes and help sponsor and promote local events. Campus WheelWorks, for example, is working to promote the sport of cyclocross, a type of off-road cycling event, by putting on an event in Delaware Park. On Nov. 6, the shop is scheduled to offer the second Cross in the Park as a way to introduce riders and spectators to the sport.

## **Personality**

Small shops often have their own unique sensibilities and, particularly in the cycling world, cater to different types of customers. Long-standing traditional shops like Handlebars and Tom's Pro Bike tend to attract cycling enthusiasts and race-focused customers. City Shops like Campus WheelWorks and Rick's Cycle Shop tend to be focused on commuters and recreational riders.

Regardless of ability or reasons for participation, local shops tend to cultivate personal relationships and build on their reputations whether it be for recreational athletes or hard-core enthusiasts.

"You can get a deal on the Internet, but the Internet doesn't have a personality," Johnson said. "We have a personality and a face. If anybody has a problem, they can come and talk to me about it."

"I love how the personality of the local shops is so welcoming and encouraging," said Brodnicki. "If you want to be left alone, they usually let you do your thing, but the minute you walk in everyone is so interested in what you're doing. They're so open and really conscientious of new folks who show a bit of trepidation if they are new to the store or to the sport."

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