

BUSINESS FIRST

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Run with it

Character-rich running store thrives with its diversified products and a loyal customer base

One shouldn't be fooled by the nondescript exterior of the small and somewhat hidden Auburndale Shopping Center store that houses Swag's Sport Shoes.

What the South End specialty running shop lacks in size or flashy decor, it more than makes up for in character.

Start with the store's affable owner, Erwin "Swag" Hartel, a transplant from England who came to the United States to attend Western Kentucky University on a track scholarship.

The 48-year-old Hartel has made Kentucky his home for most of the last 30 years -- all the while retaining his British accent.

Next, take a seat in the back of the shop near the television set and meet the cast of colorful characters who routinely visit Swag's. Just be sure not to take the chair reserved for Wally Bright, an 80-year-old former runner who is Swag's honorary assistant manager.

Bright, who took up running at age 59 and competed in his last race in 1989, comes to the store every day, usually bringing coffee for the employees, and he jokingly scolds anyone who takes his designated seat.

"People like coming in here because there's an atmosphere," Hartel said of his store. "There's always been a character at Swag's. You come to Swag's, and it's not just the boring old store. There's always something going on."

On a recent Monday morning, Swag's has a steady stream of customers, but it also has a group of men sitting in the back, drinking coffee and watching a replay of the University of Louisville's 1986 NCAA basketball championship win over Duke.

Birth of a salesman

Hartel moved to Louisville in 1977, after a successful collegiate track career and a brief stint running on the European track circuit. He ran professionally in road races for a time after moving to Louisville and developed strong ties among those in the local running community.

In 1978, he took a part-time job with the Athletic Attic shoe store in Jefferson Mall. He later managed that store for two years before getting a \$35,000 bank loan and opening Swag's in October 1980 on New Cut Road. The store moved to its current location at 7415 Old Third Street Road in 1985.

Hartel said he never envisioned making Louisville his permanent home or going into business for himself. Those things "just kind of happened."

"I never thought I'd be a shoe salesman, but I guess it was a logical thing," he said. "I was always good at selling."

Those who know Hartel say that he has a way with people that makes them want to return to the shop again and again.

Hartel said the store thrives on its repeat business. Swag's generated \$1.1 million in sales in 1999, he said. The store stocks shoes for a variety of sports as well as accessories and clothing. New Balance, Saucony, Asics and Adidas are among the most popular brands.

Developing a rapport with customers

Customer service is one of the hallmarks of Swag's, Hartel said. He added that people will travel from as far away as the East End and Southern Indiana to shop at his store because his six employees (one of whom is his 21-year-old son, Noel) all have experience in running and a strong knowledge of the sport.

"We get repeat customers, and that's the only way you stay in business," Hartel said. "There are only so many suckers who are going to keep coming in if you just screw them."

Hartel knows many of his regular customers by shoe size, and he said he often amazes new customers by guessing their size just by looking at their feet.

One of Swag's longtime customers is Dale Mabrey, head coach of the boys' basketball team at Pleasure Ridge Park High School. He has been bringing his squad to the store for about 10 years, he said.

Mabrey said Hartel's engaging personality convinces many first-time visitors to come back to Swag's.

"Swag, to me, has really never met a stranger," he said. "He just treats you like you're one of his personal friends or family members. He's all the time looking out for you on special deals coming through the different companies."

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