

How to WALK your best marathon

# NORTHWEST RUNNER

INFORMATION AND INSPIRATION FOR ALL RUNNERS

## The Girls of Greenlake

State X-C REPORT

Your best Holiday FOOD SWAPS

Safer Running at Night



NOV 2010 \$2.95



Girl power with  
the Oiselle team

# Two Moms in Oiselle running shorts



By Martin Rudow

Sally Bergesen  
and Liz Stahl  
in their Green  
Lake office.

It looks like fun and games from the outside — but it's all business, mostly, upstairs at Green Lake

Many people see a need and just shrug it off. Those running shorts don't fit or don't complement your figure?? Well, too bad—just do the best you can with what's available.

To me (this writer) it seems like the male thing to do. Heck, that's what I would do. But women are more persistent, more determined and — dare I say it — smarter about such things. Smart enough to see a business opportunity.

Quick cut to November of 2010. Sally Bergesen is getting ready for a sales trip for her nascent line of running clothing for women. From that moment when she couldn't find the right pair of running shorts to the place where her "Oiselle" brand shorts and other clothing are offered around the country, it's been a fun and enlightening journey. And the best is certainly still to come.

Bergesen and her business partner,

Elizabeth (Liz) Stahl, have developed a line of clothing from those first running shorts that Sally designed to meet her own demands. Because no matter how good your product is, you've got to back it up with other related products to get people to take you seriously and give you precious display space in their space-challenged running stores.

Although their target audience quickly accepted Oiselle shorts when they were introduced back in 2007, it was not a slam-dunk to get running stores to accept the new product. Even local stores where Bergesen and Stahl already knew the owners. Full-page ads in running magazines like *Northwest Runner*, word of mouth, and consistent appearances at running Expos around the area created demand, and soon most local running stores were indeed offering — and selling — Oiselle.

The shorts, designed by Sally, followed a fairly obvious formula, or so it would seem. But no one else was offering the kind of low-rise, makes-you-want-to-run-fast shorts of the type that carried the Oiselle label.

Sally: "Not just a lower rise, but an overall leaner fit, so when you run, your midsection doesn't balloon out. No drawstring because if they fit right, you don't need it. No tags that might irritate. A liner that is high quality and in colors that complement the shell. And logo placement that is subtle because when I run, I don't necessarily want to feel like a billboard".

Now back to their other products. Elsewhere on this page is an example of one set of clothing Oiselle now offers: shorts, long and short sleeved Ts, shirts, hoodies. You want one, you want them all, or so goes the marketing philosophy. It's certainly not overdone; there are 17 Oiselle styles now where other companies have literally hundreds. Bergesen, and a small but select group of designers, create Oiselle's products, giving them, consciously or not, something that buyers elsewhere call a "Northwest Look". It's not by intent, Bergesen quickly adds, but the women she runs with and meets in our area and at running Expos tend to be interested more in a less frilly approach. Less floral and fuchsia, more sleek and sporty. Oiselle (pronounced wa-zell, and French for "female bird", is expressed by Bergesen as the light feeling of effortless running) is headquartered in what certainly has to be acknowledged as the heart of the area's running community: Green Lake. Just a few doorways away

are such stores as Super Jock 'n Jill, Title Nine (both Oiselle customers), and Road Runner Sports, as well as Anderson Nautilus, Gregg's Green Lake Cycle and Always Running. Shoot, the first office for the 1984 Women's Olympic Marathon Trials was just a block away.

It's still a shoe-string operation, with Stahl, Bergesen, and few others still doing all the heavy lifting. Still, enough potential is there to make it all worthwhile, especially when you consider the size of the market: \$35 billion for women's athletic clothing of all sorts. And running clothing is one of the growth areas in that already huge market. There are 750 stores identified as "running specialty" in the country right now — Oiselle is in 120 of them. Oiselle has been able to grow while still being privately held.

On a recent Friday the small staff — count 'em, three on this day — was preparing for an open house and sale next to their second-story offices. Part of the preparation included carrying heavy tables up two flights of stairs and through the rain (a job into which this writer was recruited). It was a dramatic illustration of the dedication and hard work needed to make a small company survive in today's economy, running growth industry or not.

### Moms in Oiselle shorts

Liz Stahl and Sally Bergesen were not naïve when they started the venture, Sally had experience in marketing with major corporations and Liz has a law degree. Both are young mothers, Sally has two daughters and Liz a son. Even though it didn't come up as a factor, both have supportive husbands (Alec Duxbury and Greg Crowther, yes *that* Greg Crowther) who step up when needed to keep the home fires burning. Sally was about to leave for a business trip to Austin, Texas, for "The Running Event", a trade show, a few days after the sale, one of several such trips necessary throughout the year. Both ladies also keep up decent running schedules and have had successes as members of Club Northwest's cross-country teams as well as individual honors—Sally Bergesen has won several races outright in the last few years and is a regular on the over-40 Best Times List page. Working so close to Green Lake no doubt helps; it is just a few inviting steps to the hallowed running path around the lake.

Even with good products, being good runners with supportive families and having a cool place for an office, it can

be tough out in the highly competitive business world, and it's been learning experience for the Oiselle partners. One example is the production location, despite early attempts to stay domestic; eventually it became impossible to compete without having Oiselle products produced in other countries. "I found that there are good and bad factories everywhere, including here", Sally relates. "My goal is to find the good ones, wherever they may be located."

### Giving back

It seems a bit early in the business cycle to start thinking of giving back to the community, but perhaps reflecting their own club-running backgrounds, Stahl and Bergesen are already forming Oiselle teams to give support to competitive



Oiselle announced the company's serious intentions with professional graphics and design qualities and a different look for a running ad.



runners. The Oiselle Racing Team is set up for women who want to run at a high level post-collegiately. The Oiselle Running Club offers more for casual runners and especially youth teams. Pat McCurry manages the Racing team which boasts sub-17 minute 5Kers and sub-1:20 half marathoners; Sally and Liz manage and coach the youth teams. Already the youth have had major successes. Their teams have advanced to the USATF Jr.

Olympic Cross Country Championships in both 2008 and 2009 and are on track for 2010.

Will we one day see an Oiselle building that rivals such Green Lake icons as Super Jock and Gregg's? That may be in the cards, with the growth of the female side of running, anything looks possible for the right products, in the right location, and with the right people running the show. •