

Rhonda Kirkwood Has Hayes Running at Full Speed

BY JASON NORMAN

MEQUON, WI—For 20 years Rhonda Kirkwood ran competitively, from 5Ks to marathons, from Big Sur to Boston. Those experiences must have served her well because when Kirkwood landed at Hayes in May 2001 she had to indeed hit the ground running.

“My first day was spent meeting with the bike team,” said Kirkwood, vice president and general manager of Hayes Bicycle Group. “My second day I was on a plane to Taiwan. I didn’t know the difference between a rim brake and a disc brake. I had to get out a map to see where Taichung was. It was definitely trial by fire, but most of my career has followed that path.”

Before coming to Hayes, Kirkwood held a variety of management positions in different industries. She began her career in retail, and then shifted

early on into technical and engineering-driven manufacturing environments.

“When Rand (McNally, chief executive officer) called me to ask if I was interested in running the bike business at Hayes, I jumped at the chance,” she said.

Big things happened last year at Hayes, with a change of name and ownership to HB Performance Systems, and the acquisition of Sun Components.

“We’re also looking at other potential acquisitions that are a good fit culturally, that align with our values and our product lines, particularly those bicycle components that could be integrated with our current



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products,” Kirkwood said.

“We are currently talking with a few people, but we’re not at the point where I can freely discuss the details,” she added.

Are you happy with the results of those two key moves last year?

Kirkwood: The new name is more indicative of who we are today—a systems provider—and who we plan to become. We are adding other products to our brake offerings in all of our businesses. Our total HB Performance business has doubled in a little over five years to \$120 million and our plan is to continue to grow at around 15 percent to 20 percent per year. All of the growth we experienced has been internal through new product development. In addition to Sun bicycle products, we also acquired Sun’s other businesses, which include rims for lawn and garden, wheelchairs and a Chinese sourcing business. We’re currently focusing on the operations side of the business and relocating the U.S. operations from Indiana to Wisconsin. We’ve already integrated sponsorship, tech support and warranty and will focus next on the product range, product development and the brand. We’re very excited to be able to blend this product line into our brake business, and so far we’re pleased with the results. Our goal is to have the same double-digit growth in the rim business as we have experienced in the brake business.

What challenges do you face as a woman in this industry?

Kirkwood: I spent 18 years in a very male-dominated industry (industrial boilers) and was often the only female executive in meetings, at trade shows and industry events. When I was asked by other women what advice I would

offer to help them get into a top management position, I used to laugh and say they should “be prepared to work twice as hard for half as much.” Today there is much less overt discrimination than there used to be and women have come a long way, especially in terms of pay scale and opportunity. But there is still a bit of truth to the fact that it is not easy for women to break into front line executive positions, particularly in a predominantly male industry, such as the bike industry. We are not part of the “boys’ club” and are often watched a bit more closely to see if we have what it takes, if we can get the job done, if we can survive and fit in. Mistakes that our male counterparts make are not as glaring and are often overlooked. Many women simply choose not to deal with the pressures and the struggle and opt out for more female-friendly industries and organizations. Others start their own businesses. I think that’s really unfortunate for corporations since the real value of diversity in an organization is to provide a different viewpoint. Women are just as capable, just as qualified and just as motivated as men and can be strong leaders who add value and creativity to a company.

Describe your business and leadership style.

Kirkwood: My management style is first and foremost to be a coach and mentor. I can’t say enough about the team of people I have the opportunity to lead at Hayes. We have a set of values that we use to guide our decision making process and one of those key values is teamwork. Every person on

the team has a defined role and responsibility. Each person understands that they need to play their position and that every position is important. If you are not the kind of person who works well in a team environment, if you use the word I more than we, you’ll have trouble fitting in here. We watch each other’s back, we respect each other and we support each other. Coaching and guiding this team is truly an honor and huge responsibility that I don’t take lightly. We also have a lot of fun while at work. We are really like a family. It’s not unusual to see someone’s children or pet—usually my golden retriever—in the office. Everyone rides their bike, often as a group over the lunch hour. We work really hard and are very focused, so those lunch rides are a great way to unwind and relax a bit.

How have you seen brakes evolve since you’ve been at Hayes?

Kirkwood: In the short time I’ve been at Hayes, disc brakes have seen tremendous growth. Most downhill mountain bikes and a good number of European comfort bikes have disc brakes. Retailers and consumers alike are knowledgeable about disc brakes and are able to maintain and service them with little or no problem. You will continue to see penetration throughout price points in all categories of mountain bikes, from downhill to freeride to all-mountain and cross-country bikes. I believe you will see the comfort, trekking, city, tandem and road markets begin to embrace the technology, particularly from a safety and maintenance standpoint. The key drivers in these markets will

be price and weight. Hayes intends to continue to take a lead role in the evolution of disc brakes. We have a strong IAD (Innovation and Advanced Development) group within HB Performance Systems that supports the bike team. They are very forward looking and continually researching all types of new technologies, from ABS to linked braking to two-stage master cylinder designs. We are currently focusing on the best way to speed up the entire R&D process in order to get products to market more quickly.

Are manufacturers and retailers offering enough women’s products?

Kirkwood: I think the bicycle industry will find what the auto industry and the housing market have already discovered—women are a formidable consumer and can be a boon to the business. But I think we need to do more than simply market the product to women. We need to understand why women ride bikes and maybe more importantly, why they don’t. I have a girlfriend who told me recently, “When you figure out a way for me to get that bike onto or into my car easily so I can get it to a safe place to ride, then I’ll think about buying a bike.” Safety, convenience and comfort shouldn’t be overlooked and may mean more than short-reach levers, color and weight. We need to look at the experience as a whole and market the lifestyle and attributes that are important to women.

Where do you see your career going?

Kirkwood: I have a cottage in the Wisconsin Northwoods and that is where my heart is. I feel most at home running, hiking and riding my bike on the trails or walking with my dog through the woods. I hope to be able to figure out a way to work from there at some point in the future. I raised my two children as a single mother while working full time in corporate America. Life went by pretty quickly and my son now lives and works in San Francisco and my daughter is a teacher in Illinois and just had her first child. I’d like to be able to spend some quality time with them and slow down a little since our early years were very hectic. But I love what I do and I love working at Hayes. We still have a lot left to accomplish in order to continue to expand this business and create opportunity for all our young people. I plan to stick around to see that through and then maybe I’ll head up north to relax for a bit. **BRAIN**