One thing Dallas-Fort Worth is not: a commuter market.

The distance between the two major city centers spans some 35 miles and the entire surrounding Metroplex encompasses a whopping 14,000 square miles.

The vast distances alone make it extremely difficult to commute by bike. That, combined with wide roads with no bike lanes or shoulders, discourages even the most seasoned road warriors (see advocacy story page DT-20).

“Dallas-Fort Worth is not very user-friendly—you have to really be dedicated. This is not Portland or Minneapolis where people are doing a lot of commuting,” said Steve Mattil, vice president of bike for Dallas-based distributor Hans Johnsen Company. “People here are more recreational minded than commuter minded.”

What Dallas lacks in commuting business, it makes up in strong

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Leading-Edge

Bicycles Inc. owner Lee Ericson opened his first store 30 years ago and along the way snapped up a Schwinn shop as part of its expansion into a four-store chain.

And Hoyt left Schwinn in 1980 to purchase one of five Bike Mart locations from its previous owner. Richardson Bike Mart carried Schwinn for years as it ascended into a position of market leadership.

These mega stores dominate the competitive Dallas retail landscape. With sizes ranging from 26,000 square feet at Bicycles Inc., to 36,000 square feet at Richardson Bike Mart, they are some of the largest shops in the country.

Along with size and selection, shops like Richardson Bike Mart and Plano Cycling take merchandising and design cues from mainstream retailers. Aware they’re competing with national chains, they offer inviting, well-merchandised clothing and accessory sections that capture best-in-class approaches.

“There are a lot of guys running not just a good bike business, but running a good retail business,” said Hans Johnson’s Mattil.

“You saw a lot of good retailers that know that they’re competing with other interests and people looking for their dollars. They’ve got to have an environment on the leading edge of retail. For some of those shops it doesn’t matter if they’re a bike business or a fishing business; they’ve got a good handle on how to appeal to consumers.”

Newer shops in the area have tried to differentiate themselves by focusing on high-end products and offering customization. Owners of boutique shops such as Mad Duck Cyclery and Knobbies and Slicks are corporate dropouts from the thriving telecom industry in Dallas that includes companies like AT&T, Verizon and Nortel.

Like established shops in the area, they bring an emphasis on sales and customer service tools gained from a former life. And they welcome the low-key lifestyle of the retail business.

“This is long hours, but it’s not stressful,” said Bud Zarsk, owner of Knobbies and Slicks.

Cyclist Richardson’s Hoyt said he’s seen a lot of storeowners exit the market over the years that didn’t have the stamina needed to engage the market. But he welcomes newcomers that maintain pricing and bring retail integrity.

“I want to see more strong independent retailers because it makes the whole pie bigger and then everybody’s in better shape,” Hoyt said.

—Megan Tompkins