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Some Entrepreneurs Put In Olympic Effort By Emily Maltby

For Olympic athletes who double as small-business owners, the more challenging feat sometimes takes place off the slopes.

Trying to juggle Olympic training with the demands of running a small business can be grueling. For some of the athletes, training during the peak winter months is so intense and time-consuming that the business often gets pushed to the sidelines.

This winter, the goal is "hanging on and not going under," says Shannon Bahrke, a mogul skier competing in this year's Vancouver Games, who started Silver Bean Coffee Co., a coffee-roasting business in Salt Lake City, while recovering from a knee injury during the 2007-08 season.

Ms. Bahrke says she often doesn't turn her attention to her business until nighttime, after five to six hours of training, when she sometimes finds herself balancing the company books and sending out invoices.

"Skiing, massage, yoga?all that comes first. And if I have only two hours of energy left at the end of the day, that's for the business," she says.

Ms. Bahrke is planning to retire from competitive skiing in March, at which time she'll focus on expanding Silver Bean beyond the \$100,000 in annual revenue that it posted last year.

For the time being, Ms. Bahrke's fiancé and co-owner, Matt Happe, is bearing the brunt of the day-to-day work of roasting and packaging the beans.

It's difficult for any athlete training for the Olympics to hold down a job, complete an education or even maintain a social life. Those who are attempting to win a gold medal while also running their own business have a distinct challenge.

One of Ms. Bahrke's teammates, Michelle Roark, agrees that Olympic training can delay business goals. At her Denver-based custom perfume store, Phi-nomenal LLC, she has been working on a new men's fragrance for more than a year.

After the Olympics, she'll finally launch the fragrance at her boutique firm. Eventually, she hopes to get it and her other fragrances into high-end stores.

"We're small and new enough now that the model is working," she says. "But I have a lot of planning to do to grow it to the next level."

Yet entrepreneurs who are also Olympians have a good shot of succeeding, sports-behavior experts say.

"Because they already have the clear understanding of principles behind performance, it's easy to transfer them from one part of life to another," says Garret Kramer, CEO of Inner-Sports LLC, a Parsippany, N.J., firm specializing in sports psychology and behavior coaching. "They know how to let things flow naturally. They don't perform as if their life is on the line; they perform with a very clear, free presence of mind," he says.

Ms. Roark leaves the store open and in the hands of her staff when she is competing. The key to operating Phi-nomenal from afar is delegating responsibility, she says, particularly to those who are most comfortable handling the daily operations of the business, such as her store manager.

Ms. Roark's husband, an energy consultant, will sometimes handle calls or emails that she can't. "Usually in his free time, between 11 p.m. and 1 a.m.," she says, adding that the two of them sleep little.

Bengt Walden, a member of the U.S. luge team, also leans heavily on his staff to keep daily operations going at his gym in Stockholm. That's why, even when he is in Sweden, Mr. Walden tries to stay out of the employees' way.

"You have to train people to not call you when they need to change a light bulb," he says.

Still, Mr. Walden recalls instances where he has had to fly back to Stockholm to handle housekeeping activities.

"That can get expensive so I've learned to think ahead," he says. "You have to set up the business so that deadlines for paying bills and renewing contracts and signing leases are all when you're home."

Some entrepreneurs dislike being removed to that degree and instead find ways to run their businesses while training. Noelle Pikus-Pace, Olympic skeleton racer and owner of SnowFire Hats LLC in Eagle Mountain, Utah, thrives on multitasking.

"It can be a crazy life, being a business owner, a mom and an athlete, all of which are time-consuming and demanding roles," she says.

When she does light exercises such as cardio workouts on her stationary bike, Ms. Pikus-Pace often sets business materials on a stand in front of her so she can conjure up new hat and scarf designs or figure out new ways to ship and handle the products.

"It does take a specific mindset. Some people find it better to give everything to just one thing," she says. "But for me, I stay more structured and ordered when a lot is going on."

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