

# Oconee County graduate opens running store

## WELCOME TO FLEET FEET

By Derek Wiley

On the running store's Facebook page, Dustin Shinholser has a collection of photographs to chronicle his first year as operator of Fleet Feet Athens.

There's the one from the first Monday night group run last July when the store hadn't even opened yet but nine people showed up. A contractor took the photo.

There's one of a Halloween run where Shinholser dressed up like Buzz Lightyear and Fleet Feet employee Christine Busby was a Lego person.

There's another on St. Patrick's Day. Despite the cold and rain, 11 runners showed up and one man even dressed up like a leprechaun.

There are photos from the Boston Marathon celebration when Shinholser bought a 12-pack of beer and 65 people came out.

Shinholser can look at all these photographs and see the impact his store has made in a little less than a year.

"I think it's gone about as well as I could've hoped," he said. "I think it's gone better. I think where we are in the community has exceeded my expectations."

Shinholser is also aware that opening Fleet Feet Athens could've easily never happened.

Oconee County graduate Dustin Shinholser opened Fleet Feet Athens on July 25, 2013.  
Photo by Derek Wiley



Shinholser was introduced to running through 1-mile fun runs with his mom, who's an aerobics instructor.

At Oconee Middle School, he took part in cross country club. He fondly remembers running through Northwest Woods with the other boys shooting bottle rockets at each other.

Shinholser was a senior on the Oconee County High School boys cross country team in 1998 when the Warriors won the Class AAA state championship.

It was Oconee's first in the sport. Shinholser finished fourth on the team and 19th in the state as the Warriors edged Marist 53-62.

After high school, he ran at Truett-McConnell for two years before getting a scholarship to Mars Hill where he competed in cross-country and track.

The Lions won the South Atlanta Conference Championship every year that Shinholser was there, a streak that has continued until this day. They're up to 17 in a row.

Shinholser majored in sports management and minored in business. After graduation, he took an internship with a NBA Development League team, the Asheville Altitude.

When the Altitude left Asheville, Shinholser's boss offered him a job in Charlotte to work for the Bobcats. But wanting to eventually coach in college and possibly be an athletic director, he declined.

Shinholser interviewed for two coaching jobs and nearly landed one as an assistant at Anderson College. Instead the head coach picked someone from his alma matter.

"They had gone to the same school somewhere up in Indiana so I was competing against a guy who had gone to that same school and I didn't get the job," Shinholser said. "I got a bad taste in my mouth. I realized it was all about who you know."

From there, Shinholser took a job with Inside-Out Sports, a triathlon specialty

# The Oconee Enterprise Sports

## No. 1! Runners net state title

**By Michael Meyer**  
 Oconee County's 1998 Class AAA cross country state championship made the front page of *The Oconee Enterprise's* sports section that week. Dustin Shinholser finished fourth on the team and 19th in the state as the Warriors edged Marist.

The Warriors took to the road with the goal of third and fourth place. They finished with a perfect record, 10-0, and a state title. The Warriors' success was due to a combination of factors, including a strong team effort and a key performance by Shinholser.

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store in Raleigh, N.C. He traveled all over the country setting up IronMan expos. When Shinholser wasn't on the road, he worked in the store.

"I didn't like the traveling as much," Shinholser said. "It was fun to go on these trips but I really liked being at the store, which I didn't think I would at first."

After two years in Raleigh, Shinholser moved to downtown Philadelphia to work for a bike company. He was the Director of Operations, which he quickly found out just meant paying all the bills, answering phones and doing all the stuff the owner didn't want to do.

After six months, he left and returned to Inside-Out Sports in Raleigh but working in a triathlon store wasn't what Shinholser wanted to do for the rest of his life.

"I had always been a runner," he said. "Triathlons are so focused on the bike, especially that store. The running kind of gets tossed off to the side. It's an afterthought. The company, it was a father-son

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that owned it so there was no moving up. I didn't want to go to the vendor side. I was done traveling. I knew I wanted something different and somewhere to grow."

Shinholser was looking for something with less travel, a company that was more focused on running and a place with upward mobility. He found Fleet Feet Sports.



Around seven years ago, Fleet Feet decided to start a development company.

The idea began in California when a woman and man, who were co-owners of a store, got a divorce. The woman wanted to buy her ex-husband out of the business, except she couldn't afford it. That's when the development company stepped in.

Since then it's also been used as a retirement plan.

"There's one in San Antonio, the guy owned it for about 17 years and had a girl

[Angela] work for him for about 13 years," Shinholser said. "He was just ready to retire but he didn't want to shut his doors. Angela didn't get paid enough to go buy the store so that was the idea for this whole development company, to have some kind of retirement plan for these owners who have put in their time but they don't want to shut the doors."

Fleet Feet also used the development company to buy out running stores that would otherwise go out of business.

And that's what Shinholser did in Seattle, Wash. in the spring of 2010.

"There was a store called Seattle Running Company that was going to go out of business," Shinholser said. "The owner sold his store to Fleet Feet Inc. The development company is basically an equity program. I've been working retail jobs so I don't have the money to buy a store but if you build equity and improve the store you can buy it back. It's basically a financing program."

Shinholser started with Fleet Feet at the Carrboro, N.C. store in 2007.

After three years, he agreed to take over the Seattle store.

But the Pacific Northwest wasn't for him. It was just too wet.

"I got out there and in less than a year, I knew Seattle just wasn't where I wanted to be forever," he said. "It's a nice area. It just doesn't have enough days like this [sunny] and I really like days like this. I wasn't in a hurry to leave and it was going to be for the right opportunity."

The right opportunity came about 18 months after Shinholser moved to Seattle, or so he thought.

"I was going to leave and help a guy open a store in Wilmington, North Carolina and that fell through," Shinholser said. "I had a lease for an apartment in Wilmington waiting and it literally fell through at the last minute. I'm still not actually sure what went on but all of the sudden I was coming back to North Carolina with nothing to do."

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Shinholser returned to Fleet Feet's corporate office in Carrboro but he spent most of his time on the road, traveling to different stores all over the country.

"I'd be there three or four days doing staff trainings or whatever they needed me to do," Shinholser said. "They found a place where I could fit in, which turned out to be really good because I've gotten to see around 50 stores and meet all the owners. Everyone is a little bit different so it was cool to get a lot of takeaways. I knew I didn't want to travel that much. I had a dog at the time. I just liked being in once place. I was tired of being in airports. I went to my boss at the time and said I can't do this travel thing anymore, can I just go back to working in the store? I'll take a pay cut. I don't really care. I'm not in this for the money. Every time I would get to a store, I really liked being in the store and I wanted to get back to where maybe I could have a store of my own. The guy who was co-managing the Carrboro store, he wanted to

travel and be in the corporate office so we basically switched positions."

Shinholser was only back in Carrboro for a couple of months when he started talking about opening up a store in Athens, even if the idea wasn't exactly realistic since Fleet Feet didn't already exist in Athens and there wasn't a struggling running store available to buy out. He also didn't have the funds to purchase a store all on his own and the development company had never started a store from scratch.

"That was always kind of the pipe dream," Shinholser said of opening a store in Athens. "When I got involved with Fleet Feet and this whole program, opening a store from scratch wasn't really an option. It was always something I thought would be really cool to do but it wasn't something I was ever going to have enough money to do."

But that changed when Shinholser attended a meeting where the idea of opening a store from scratch was discussed. Of course, he knew just the place.



The first person Shinholser had to convince that Athens was the right fit for Fleet Feet was Vice President of Marketing and Communications Robyn Goby.

Their first visit was in October of 2012. Shinholser and Goby met with real estate agent David Dwyer, whose son Henry was a runner at Athens Academy. Dwyer already loved Fleet Feet, so much that he drove to Lawrenceville, which was the closest store at the time, for all his running needs.

"He almost begged us to come to town because he was tired of going to Lawrenceville or [shopping] online," Shinholser said.

Dwyer also found out Goby was a huge R.E.M. fan and made sure they stopped by the band's office.

"He didn't tell us where we were going

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Nearly 40 new runners participated in Fleet Feet's first No Boundaries training program that concluded with the Butterfly Dreams 5k last August at Briarwood Baptist Church in Watkinsville. *Photo courtesy of Dustin Shinholster*

until we walked in and there's Grammys sitting there and Robyn got all wide eyed," Shinholster said.

Shinholster also got some help from another former Oconee County runner, Brian Brodrick, who was the chairman of the

Chamber of Commerce in Athens at the time.

"He's got a good business mind and I've

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always looked up to him as a runner and now business,” Shinholser said. “He knows the business world and it was super helpful having a long time friend being on the chamber of commerce. Brian also knew all the runners in town. He knew the right things to say to make Athens look good and as the chamber of commerce, he wanted more businesses to come to town and then knowing the whole running side of things as well. That was a big help. And then once I got to town, just introducing me to people, that was a huge help as well.”

The most difficult part of brining Fleet Feet to Athens turned out to be finding the right building. Shinholser had his sights set on Five Points but there was little available.

After months of searching, Dwyer found a place in late January. The building, which was previously a salon and had just gone on the market, was located on Lumpkin Street across from the Earth Fare grocery store.

“I was at home one Friday morning

watching SportsCenter and the phone rang, it was David Dwyer,” Shinholser said. “He wanted me to drive down and look at this space. It was six hours but luckily I had that day and the next off, which was pretty rare. I drove down here and the lady who owns it met us with a contractor so he could tell us what walls we could take out. I took some pictures of it and sent them back to Fleet Feet Inc. and the square footage of it and they talked numbers. It worked out. Otherwise it probably would have gotten shelved until we found a spot. Had we not found a spot, if a good store owner was ready to retire in a city that I liked, I may have jumped on that.”

Turning the building from a salon into a running store wasn’t easy. Walls had to be removed. A wheelchair ramp and parking lot needed to be constructed, which kept getting delayed due to all of the rain that occurred last summer.

Shinholser moved to Athens last April. He planned on opening the store in early

June. However, Fleet Feet Athens didn’t open its doors until late July.

Instead of waiting for construction to be complete, Shinholser took advantage of the extra time to get his name and new business out there. He went to local road races like the Marigold 10k in Winterville. He hosted two All-Comers track meets at Athens Academy and then began Fleet Feet Athens’ first training program, No Boundaries, a 5k training plan for beginners. The program lasted 10 weeks. The destination race was the Butterfly Dreams 5k in Watkinsville, which nearly 40 new runners participated in.

“It was kind of a good thing with us being so late opening,” Shinholser said. “We had more time to try and get the word out. We didn’t open the doors and not have enough time to tell people we were opening. We had plenty of time. That kind of helped get things started off well.”

Since opening the store, Fleet Feet has also had a Ton of Fun Weight Loss

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Athens Academy hosted two more All-Comers track meets this June and will offer a third one on July 8 at 6:30 p.m. Fleet Feet Athens will celebrate its one-year anniversary on July 25.

Shinholser is just happy to be back home at a job he loves.

"I'm doing what I love doing," he said. "It doesn't get a lot better. And a lot of it, like Monday night group runs, that's what I'd be doing anyway. In high school, if we weren't racing, I was at a road race. I like doing that kind of stuff. It's not work for me."



*Derek Wiley is the sports editor for The Oconee Enterprise newspaper in Watkinsville, Ga.*



Fleet Feet Athens operator Dustin Shinholser, left, dressed up like Buzz Lightyear while employee Christine Busby showed off her original Lego person costume for a Halloween group run last October. Photo courtesy of Dustin Shinholser

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