

# Rising Stars

The five recipients of the Brooks Rising Star Award – all women – reflect on their journeys. / By Carly Russo

A remarkable thing happened as Rick Wilhelm, VP–U.S. specialty retail accounts at Brooks, was announcing the recipients of the brand’s Run Happy Rising Star Awards during The Running Event in Austin, TX, last November. All five of the recipients were young women —ALL FIVE.

This accolade presented every year at The Running Event honors individuals within the run specialty retail industry who are pushing boundaries, challenging norms and shaping the future of the field. The fact that all five recipients were women was remarkable.

Reflecting on this achievement, Wilhelm tells *Running Insight*: “As part of the selection committee for the Rising Star Award, we are always proud to spotlight such a strong group of individuals impacting the running industry, but were especially encouraged when we realized that all recipients this year were women. Seeing this group together is a testament that the industry is on a journey to having more women in leadership. I hope as store owners look to transition out to the next generation, we will see these women as the next generation of store owners.”

As more women continue to break barriers and make their mark in the field, it is clear that the future of the industry is bright and full of potential. With dedicated individuals like these Rising Stars at the forefront, the business can look forward to a more inclusive and dynamic running world for all. Here is a look into their journey and achievements in the running retail industry.

**Lauren English, Chief Marketing Officer, Charm City Run, Cockeysville, MD**

English has a background that blends her expertise in marketing, communications



*Brooks’ Rick Wilhelm (left) congratulates the five recipients – all women – of the brand’s Rising Star Award during an emotional ceremony at The Running Event 2024 in Austin, TX, last November.*

and public relations with her deep passion for running. Before stepping into the running industry in early 2021, English’s career spanned agency work and in-house roles across various sectors, including non-profits, financial services, healthcare and higher education. She even founded her own marketing company, Maverick Marketing, named after her eldest son. Now, as CMO at Charm City Run, English oversees brand marketing for the company’s retail, training and event businesses, leveraging her creativity to promote something she genuinely loves.

English’s career trajectory has been anything but linear, yet her love for running has been a consistent thread throughout her life. After starting as a film production

major at Towson University, she initially pursued a career in television production before transitioning into public relations and marketing. From working at a global public relations agency to running her own marketing company and eventually becoming director of marketing at Goucher College, each chapter of her career added a unique dimension to her skillset.

It was during her time at Goucher that she discovered the marketing role at Charm City Run — a role that perfectly merged her professional expertise with her personal passion.

“I knew right away that this was going to be my actual dream job. It combined my background in marketing and communications with my passion for running

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Lauren English says her “dream job” at Charm City Run combines her background in marketing with her passion for running.

and I was beyond thrilled when I was offered the position,” says English. “I think Brooks chose me as a Rising Star because I have always been nimble, hard-working and driven. I’ve also had several major life events that have challenged me to become the strongest version of myself. I believe that is reflected in the work that I do and the person I am professionally as well as personally.”

Receiving this award brought immense joy to English, not only as validation from her peers but also as an opportunity to share her achievement with her two sons, ages 10 and four. This recognition has motivated her to strive for even greater excellence, both professionally and personally. Reflecting on her experience, she recalls challenges she faced in an industry traditionally dominated by men, often finding herself as the only woman in business meetings.

“For the first few years, I was often the only woman around the leadership table. I would attend The Running Event and present our marketing plans and goals for the year and it was typically to a room of mostly men,” she recalls. “In the last year, I have started to notice a small shift and within our own organization, I’m proud to say that we have more women in leadership roles.”

Throughout her career, English has been fortunate to have mentors like Stephanie Coldren, her former manager at Goucher College. Coldren’s guidance and encouragement, particularly in moments of transition, have left a lasting impact on English, shaping her as a leader. Inspired by this support, English emphasizes the importance of women empowering one another in the running retail business. Her message to women entering the field is clear:

“We are making huge strides and we have to keep pushing the limits, using our voices and empowering one another. Don’t be afraid to speak up in meetings, share your ideas and perspectives — the run retail business needs it, the world needs it.”

**Liz Coleman, Footwear Buyer, Tortoise and Hare Sports, Glendale, AZ**

Coleman’s path to success in running retail is rooted in her ability to translate her past experiences into new opportunities. Before joining Tortoise and Hare Sports, Coleman spent 12 years as a middle school teacher, primarily teaching eighth grade math and some computer science. Today, she serves as the footwear buyer for the store, where she manages footwear orders and supports her team with product knowledge, ensuring they have the resources

needed to succeed.

Coleman’s transition into the running retail industry came at a pivotal moment in her life. Feeling burned out and seeking a career outside of education, she took a summer job at Tortoise and Hare Sports, unsure of where it might lead. What she discovered was the value of her skills as a teacher — particularly her knack for asking effective questions and creating space for meaningful discussions — both on the sales floor and in the broader operations of the business.

“I appreciate that others could see things in me that I couldn’t see myself when I first started at the store. What I’ve learned as I’ve been given opportunities at Tortoise and Hare is that one of my highly valued skills in the classroom is one I take onto the sales floor and into the other work I do,” says Coleman. “I’m really good at asking questions and providing space for others to express themselves. I often ask questions that I don’t expect to have answers yet, because I want the resulting discourse to generate efficient solutions.”

Receiving the Brooks Rising Star award was a meaningful milestone for Coleman, symbolizing acknowledgment of her growth and the impact she has made in her role. She emphasizes the importance of hard work and perseverance, acknowledging that the most satisfying achievements often come from the most challenging tasks.

As a woman in the industry, Coleman has faced her share of challenges, including managing the demands of her role while navigating female-specific

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*A former middle school teacher, Liz Coleman transferred her ability to communicate when she transitioned into her role at Tortoise and Hare Sports.*

health issues that are unique to her experience. She credits the compassionate and supportive ownership at Tortoise and Hare Sports for making accommodations on tough days, allowing her to bring her best self to her work. While gender dynamics in the workplace can pose their own set of challenges, Coleman views herself simply as a person with no problem speaking her mind.

Coleman credits mentorship as a crucial aspect of growth. She draws inspiration from Carole Kellerman and Sue Larson, two teachers who have shaped her approach to high-performance conversations and personal development. Additionally, Christine Pederson, the former GM of Tortoise and Hare Sports, played a pivotal role in helping her transition from teaching to

retail, showing her how transferable her skills could be. Coleman also credits Parker Karnan for sharing insights on improving operational efficiency and helping her apply aspects of her educational training to the business world.

To women entering the running retail business, Coleman offers a powerful message of encouragement:

“The hard things we do are the satisfying things. It’s part of the reason I liked teaching math — the spark that lights someone up when they realize they understand is so cool. And it’s the difficulty that makes that light shine brighter. So we can’t be afraid to go out and do the hard things, they’re worth it. I know anyone who has crossed a finish line knows what I am talking about.”

**Kristin Phillips, Director of Merchandise, Fleet Feet Chicago**

Phillips has been an integral part of Fleet Feet Chicago for the past decade, steadily carving her path in the running retail world. Her career began in 2014 as a part-time sales associate, but her determination and passion quickly propelled her into a full-time role.

Over the years, Phillips managed two suburban Fleet Feet stores, gaining invaluable experience in retail operations and leadership. Her skills and dedication eventually led to a transition in 2021 to the role of apparel and accessories buyer. Today, as the director of merchandise, Phillips oversees Fleet Feet Chicago’s buying department and Visual Merchandiser. Her responsibilities include managing the open-to-buy, fostering vendor relationships, coordinating the Chicago Marathon Expo and

collaborating with her team to curate an exceptional product assortment for customers.

Phillips’ journey exemplifies hard work and a deep commitment to the industry. She credits her success to her collaborative approach, innovative problem-solving and consistent drive to achieve both team and personal goals.

“Being selected as a recipient of the Rising Star Award is a reflection of my commitment and passion for the industry,” she tells *Running Insight*. “Whether it’s collaborating with team members, finding ways to elevate our work or driving innovative solutions to challenges, I take pride in my work and strive to give my best effort to achieve our objectives as well as my own personal goals.”

While running retail has traditionally been male-dominated, Phillips is encouraged to see the landscape evolving. Her own

*As director of merchandise at Fleet Feet Chicago, Kristin Phillips credits her success to her collaborative approach and consistent drive to achieve her goals.*





*Lara Zacharewski believes that receiving this award alongside four other women is symbolic of the still-growing influence of female leaders in run specialty.*

experience has been shaped by supportive and encouraging colleagues from both the retail and vendor sides of the industry. She is optimistic about the growing presence of women in leadership roles and views this shift as a promising signal of progress. For her, the industry’s collective mentorship and collaboration have been instrumental in her professional development. She reflects on the many individuals who, through their advice and insights, have helped her grow as a leader and a teammate.

Phillips’ advice for women entering the running retail industry is grounded in the importance of community and self-growth.

“As women in the industry, it’s important we build a strong network. Share our experiences and empower each other,

always push yourself out of your comfort zone and constantly challenge yourself both personally and professionally.”

**Lara Zacharewski, Footwear Buyer, Gazelle Sports, Grand Rapids, MI**

Zacharewski, footwear buyer at Gazelle Sports, brings a blend of creativity and analytical expertise to her role. Growing up, Zacharewski had a passion for clothing and fashion, but she never imagined it could translate into a career. She devoured fashion magazines and admired the art of merchandising, but assumed her interest would remain a personal hobby.

It wasn’t until college that she discovered her love for working with numbers and data, which eventually led her to the retail industry. Zacharewski’s career

began somewhat unexpectedly, but her path became increasingly intentional as she found joy in the combination of art and science that defines successful buying.

After leaving her role at Nordstrom in 2023, Zacharewski embraced an opportunity to return to the running industry, taking on the role of footwear buyer at Gazelle Sports. Her current responsibilities include inventory strategy and planning, product assortments, purchase orders and overseeing inventory for all seven store locations. She also fosters strong vendor relationships and supports store teams with her expertise in buying strategy and product knowledge.

Zacharewski’s career in the industry began during her college years at Michigan State University, where she worked at Playmakers in Okemos, MI.

“I quickly became fascinated with the business from my time on the sales floor and wanted to learn more about retail buying and merchandising,” she says. “I asked to shadow the women’s apparel buyer for the following summer as an internship credit for a class. My internship never truly ended after that and I transitioned from learning to buy apparel to buying lifestyle footwear during my senior year of college.”

Her early experiences showed her the impact of dedicated mentorship and ignited her passion for specialty retail. After moving to Seattle, WA, to work in Nordstrom’s buying office, Zacharewski gained invaluable insight into large-scale teamwork and strategic processes. However, she missed the closer connections and autonomy

found in specialty retail and decided to return to the running industry, bringing with her the lessons learned from her diverse experiences.

Being named a Brooks Rising Star was a milestone for Zacharewski, affirming her place in the industry despite her relatively short tenure.

“With various roles held in the past five or six years but not a lot of longevity or history in any one place yet, it can be tough to feel settled. Receiving this award feels like I am solidifying my personal place and role,” she says. “More importantly, receiving this award alongside four other women is the most meaningful of all and is symbolic of the still-growing influence of female leaders in this industry.”

Yet, the path was not without its challenges. Transitioning from apparel to footwear buying was an adjustment, as she entered a category that was even more male-dominated. At times, she felt her ideas and perspectives, shaped by her identity as a young woman, were undervalued or misunderstood.

Additionally, during her early career she faced the challenge of isolation, lacking a broad network of female colleagues to share experiences and insights. However, with time, she has formed meaningful connections and relationships with other women in the industry who have offered inspiration and support.

Mentorship has played a vital role in Zacharewski’s growth. From the leadership team at Playmakers, who nurtured her curiosity and ambition, to her first female footwear buyer supervisor at Nordstrom, Zacharewski has been fortunate

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*Seeking a career that aligned with her passions, Jenn Urban has found Fleet Feet Nashville to be not just a workplace, but her extended family as well.*

to learn from strong mentors. Now, at Gazelle Sports, she thrives in an environment led predominantly by women. Working with an all-female buying team and collaborating with leaders who empower each other has strengthened her belief in the value of community and collaboration.

Zacharewski's advice for women entering the running retail is simple: "Staying curious and being open to all opportunities is key for seeing true self development and momentum. It takes a lot of personal strength, grit and hustle to find a place anywhere and it's important to share your perspective, demonstrate your passion and ask questions that have not been asked before. I do believe that will help pave the way for not just you, but for the other women who will follow behind you."

**Jenn Urban, Director of Human Resources, Fleet Feet Nashville, Nashville, TN**

Urban's career at Fleet Feet Nashville began nearly 20 years ago and has flourished through her dedication and passion for people. Over the years, she has embraced a variety of roles, from delivering customer service and coaching running groups, to purchasing product lines and stepping into leadership positions.

Her pursuit of growth didn't stop there — while working, she completed her Master's Degree in social work, which shaped her perspective and opened doors to a non-profit workforce development role. Additionally, earning her SHRM-CP certification has been instrumental in her current role as a Human Resources leader, where she focuses on cultivating organizational culture

and supporting Fleet Feet's talented team.

Urban's entry into Fleet Feet came at a pivotal moment in her life when she sought an environment aligned with her passions. She initially entered the running retail world with little knowledge about the industry, but with a love for running and a desire to contribute to the community.

"When I first found Fleet Feet, I was burned out and stressed out of my Monday through Friday job. When it comes to employment, I have always pursued fields that align with my passions. That's what led me to Fleet Feet," Urban recalls. "I didn't really know much the running industry at the time. I certainly didn't know that someone could have a career working in run specialty. I only knew that I loved running and Fleet Feet seemed like an incredible place to work and be able to support the community. Lucky for me, the people I worked with and the community we served quickly became my family."

Over time, Fleet Feet Nashville became not just her workplace, but her extended family. With countless opportunities to grow and develop professionally, Urban attributes much of her success to the people and mentors she has encountered throughout her career. Whether it was leading training and onboarding during challenging times or helping employees recognize their potential, her contributions have had a meaningful and lasting impact.

Receiving the Brooks Rising Star Award was an honor that reinforced her dedication to creating a supportive environment

for future industry leaders. Urban takes pride in both her role and her place within the running industry, a field she notes is filled with inspiring people and strong opportunities for growth. Her experience as a woman in the business has been overwhelmingly positive, bolstered by the influence of Fleet Feet Nashville's female ownership and the franchise's roots in female leadership.

Mentorship has been another key factor in her success, with figures like Christi Beth Adams, owner of Fleet Feet Nashville, and Jeff Wells at Fleet Feet Richmond, providing guidance that shaped her career. Adams' passion for lifelong learning and people-first leadership, coupled with Wells' expertise in creating outstanding customer experiences, have left an indelible mark on Urban's approach to her work.

Urban's advice to women entering the running retail industry is to stay curious and proactive:

"The running industry provides a wealth of opportunities for people with a passion for serving others and a willingness to roll up their sleeves. It is full of creative leaders with vision who love mentoring and helping others realize a goal. It's also a great place to learn and gain experience while on the job. If you have an interest in a particular type of work, don't be afraid to reach out to someone, whether it's a store owner, a store employee or an employee of a running brand. You'll likely find someone who can offer you advice or make a referral to help you on your path to reaching your goals," she said. ■