

BUSINESS

Lace'em up. Longtime Lexington retailer set to open its J&H Running Co. Friday

By Piper Hansen

Updated May 30, 2025 11:42 AM  Gift Article



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want you to be a customer for life.

Since the 1970s, J&H Outdoors has outfitted Lexington residents with outdoor clothing, equipment and accessories. Now, it's opening a storefront exclusively for footwear, running clothing and other gear.

"The whole mission for us here is inclusivity," said Woody dePerna, J&H's footwear buyer and an employee since 1991. "We don't want to be the kind of

store where you walk in and feel intimidated, where you feel like, ‘I have to be an elite runner.’

“We’re here to help everybody,” he added. “And that’s whether you’re running or walking or just need a good pair of shoes to work in all day.”

J&H Running Co. opened Friday at 197 Moore Drive off New Circle and Nicholasville roads. A grand opening for the running store is still being planned for sometime in mid- to late-June.



Store employees conduct quality checks, stock shelves, and arrange products for future purchase in preparation for the grand opening of J&H Running Co. at 189 Moore Dr. on May 22, 2025, in Lexington, Ky. Tasha Poullard tpoullard@herald-leader.com

Its parent company, J&H Outdoors, will retain its storefront in the same shopping center and will continue to sell shoes and other apparel for activities and recreation beyond running. dePerna said the run shop will have brands the outdoors shop won't carry and vice versa.

The new store will feature an entire wall dedicated to displaying a menagerie of running shoes. In between men's and women's sections, a 3D foot scanner will aid customers in getting fitted for their next pair.



A two-lane short track located inside J&H Running Co. assists the sales team with conducting gait analysis for proper shoe fitting on May 22, 2025, in Lexington, Ky. Tasha Poullard tpoullard@herald-leader.com

Two track-like lanes stretch through the store front to back so trained employees can watch a person's natural foot strike as they walk or run and take measurements to find the best fit.

On the other side of the track lanes, different zones are set up to display apparel, gear and a variety of energy gels and other on-the-run fuel.

The store's manager and event coordinator, Makenzie Rink, said as the store evolves and better understands the demographic of its customers and their wants and needs, brands found in the store may change.



&H Running Co. store manager and event coordinator, Mak Rink, gives a tour of J&H Running Co., located at 189 Moore Dr., on May 22, 2025, in Lexington, Ky. Tasha Poullard tpoullard@herald-leader.com

Next to the registers is a display of smart watches and the area surrounding it will be home to a recovery zone by the store's grand opening. A pair of compression boots, designed to improve the leg's circulation and speed up recovery, will be available for customers to use.

Also inside the store is a community room. Rink said the space could be the future home of yoga classes, race packet pick-ups, demonstrations from industry professionals and other small events.

The idea to separate its running retail from the rest of its merchandise has been talked about among J&H managers since the pandemic which Rink and dePerna said fell in line with a rise in run clubs, run culture and customers looking for ways to get in on it.

dePerna said footwear specifically for running had become the most popular among J&H Outdoors customers and that drove the decision to create a space just for it.

But what sets J&H Running Co. apart from John's, Fleet Feet and other shoe retailers in the area, dePerna and Rink said, is that the store goes beyond running.

Custom fitting transcends beginner runners looking for their first shoe, Rink said. Most of her hires are not runners, which has been intentional, she said, to fill gaps in connecting with customers.

Rink said she's anticipating customers in the likes of University of Kentucky students who want new sneakers, health care workers looking for suitable shoes to wear while standing for hours, intermediate runners training for their third or fourth race.



J&H Outdoors footwear buyer, Woody DePerna, explains why he supports the J&H Running Co. business model, assisting with grand opening preparations on May 22, 2025, in Lexington, Ky. Tasha Poullard tpoullard@herald-leader.com

Originally from North Carolina, Rink moved to Lexington earlier this spring to be closer to family and to pursue being a fitness influencer. The opportunity to join the J&H team sort of fell into her lap, she said, and it's felt like more of a sprint than her usual marathon to get the store up and running.

“I have worn so many hats in the last five weeks that I never thought I would wear,” Rink said. “It has been so involved, but it’s also been so rewarding. I think for individuals who still really like structure but need change every single day, retail in the perfect job.”

Rink graduated from North Carolina State University in 2023 and moved home shortly after to help run social media campaigns for her family’s consulting business, which works primarily with outdoor, bike and run retailers.

It was around that same time Rink began to document on her own social media pages her training blocks for the Chicago Marathon. She tried finding a community in the local running scene after already completing some training and shorter races but was dropped on a group run.

In one of her first videos, a caption says, “Calling all runners that didn’t grow up running, take walk breaks during their runs, average 13 or more minute miles, don’t look like the ‘stereotypical’ runner, or are relearning to love running!

“Let’s go into 2024 and show the running industry what it’s missing and prove we are worthy and BELONG in this community just as much as the rest of them.”

Now, she still uses running as the medium for her message that movement is important and that it can be the start of a connection that “leads to community which leads to change.”



J&H Running Co. store manager and event coordinator, Mak Rink, gives a tour of extra space that can be reserved for group fitness and mindfulness classes at J&H Running Co., located at 189 Moore Dr., on May 22, 2025, in Lexington, Ky. Tasha Poullard tpoullard@herald-leader.com

“It [running] shows you that you’re capable,” Rink said.

“It has the power to show you that you’re capable of more than you realize and it shows you how to regain control. ... Running has shown me how strong I am even when I don’t want to go, even when I don’t want to keep going.”

Along with community building, Rink said managing the store is actualizing for her and her recent hires that retail can be a career.

“We are hungry and ready for growth,” Rink said. “We really want to be a community first and let people come and be a part of it.”

This story was originally published May 30, 2025 at 7:56 AM.

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Piper Hansen is a local business and regional economic development reporter at the Lexington Herald-Leader. She previously covered similar topics and housing in her hometown of Louisville, Kentucky. Before that, Hansen wrote about state government and politics in Arizona.

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