

Cutting edge

Former Central athlete has new sportswear shop up and running on West End

BY REGAN SMITH

There is something big happening in a little factory on St. Paul's West End, and chances are most people have already seen the evidence skiing, biking or jogging past them.

Reid Lutter, a Lexington-Hamline resident and 1989 graduate of Central High School, is the founder and owner of Podiumwear Custom Team Apparel, 626 Armstrong Ave. The company designs and manufactures high-quality sportswear for skiers, cyclers, runners and Ultimate Frisbee players. A cross-country skier and longtime coach who competed in the 1992 and 1994 Olympic trials, Lutter founded Podiumwear in 2003 after years of frustration with other custom skiwear manufacturers' high prices, poor quality and lackluster customer service.

"I was having a lot of trouble ordering uniforms for my team one year, and when I went to nationals I heard a bunch of friends saying they were having trouble with their companies too," Lutter said. "After we got back I was sitting around with a couple of buddies and we all agreed it was ridiculous. None of these companies were doing the type of job we would want to do. So we just said, 'Let's do it ourselves.'"

Though Podiumwear started small, after only eight years it has become the top custom apparel

producer for cross-country skiing in North America, outfitting teams from nations across the globe, including Greece, Ireland, New Zealand and England. At last year's U.S. National Junior Olympics, all 10 of the Nordic ski teams were outfitted in Podiumwear apparel.

Despite its international success, the majority of Podiumwear's business still comes from the U.S. and Canada. The company's first and longest-running client is Eden Prairie High School, and Lutter is intent on keeping things local. Most of the labor that goes into every article of apparel, including printing the designs, transferring them to fabric and hand-cutting the patterns, is done by one of Lutter's six full-time employees at his new St. Paul headquarters off West 7th Street.

Where most of his competitors outsource production to China or Mexico, the only thing not done on site at Podiumwear is the sewing. For that, Lutter works with several small-business owners, most of them women from the Hmong community, and all of them local.

"Literally nothing goes more than 10 miles away, and most of it's done right here in this space," he said. "For me as a small-business owner, growing the local economy is extremely important. We don't offshore any production. It's all made in St. Paul. You can see every-



Jessica and Reid Lutter stand near one of the tables where custom team sports apparel is made by hand at the new Podiumwear factory at 626 Armstrong Ave. PHOTO BY ANNE BRANDRUD

thing we do."

Depending on the number of items in an order, the entire process from design to production typically takes about a month to complete. Lutter said customer service and extremely high-quality products are what set Podiumwear apart from its much larger, multi-national competitors. And as a company run by athletes, "we don't produce anything we wouldn't want to wear personally," he said.

Lutter is the father of two children with his wife Jessica, who works as the marketing manager at Podiumwear. In addition to running the business, Lutter is head coach of the Minnesota Valley Cross Country Ski Team and an active board member of the National Nordic Foundation, which he founded in 1997. The nonprofit organization raises

money to support the development of world-class Nordic skiers in the United States. It has financially supported every Junior Olympic Nordic ski team since 1997 and is the top funding source for cross-country skiing in the nation.

Though Lutter had a knack for entrepreneurship, he had no experience with sportswear design or manufacturing when he decided to found Podiumwear. The business has had its share of rough patches over the years, but Lutter believes he has found exactly what he wants to do for the rest of his career.

"My brother is a fashion designer in New York, so I'll occasionally call him up for advice, but it's not quite the same thing," Lutter said. "This was all totally unexpected. At one point I was going to be a history professor, at one point a profession-

al skier and at one point a coach. I feel like this path sort of chose me. It's really gratifying."

With all the work to be done at the factory, especially during the busy winter months, Lutter does not have many opportunities to ski for fun anymore. But when he does, he is often met with some extremely rewarding sights.

"It's cool to be out biking or skiing in the neighborhood, seeing someone wearing my product and getting to say, 'I made that!' Lutter said. "And if we were extremely busy at that time of the year, I may have even printed it and cut it myself."

"We've been very warmly received by Minnesota," he continued, "and that's why we're always going to stay local, support the community and try to keep the community's support in return."