

Racing to Sweet Success

By Melanie Padgett Powers

Special Contributor

Liberty Herald and Brookville Democrat newspapers (Indiana)

An elite Union County runner is embracing his sweet side. Tate “T.J.” Schienbein opened Hammer Donuts near Purdue University last summer—an idea launched at a campus bar.

Schienbein graduated from Union County High School (U.C.H.S.) in 2012 and from Purdue’s Krannert School of Management in 2016 with a dual major in business management and marketing. At both U.C.H.S. and Purdue, Schienbein was a superb runner. In high school, he qualified for the state meet in cross country and track three years with his best finish being fourth place in the 3200-meter run. At Purdue he qualified for the NCAA Track and Field Championships twice while breaking the school record in the mile, 4:03.62. His parents are Tom and Cindy Schienbein. Cindy is a retired U.C.H.S. teacher, and Tom is a retired Franklin County High School teacher.

After graduating college, while preparing to move to Denver for a job, Schienbein and one of his best friends were having a few drinks. Schienbein knew he wanted to open up his own business one day, and he and his friend started throwing ideas around.

One of them mentioned a doughnut shop. “For some reason that came up because there was no doughnut shop in West Lafayette, and we just thought, ‘oh my God, this would be such a great idea; there’s no competition in the same town,’” Schienbein said.

“We woke up the next morning and decided it was still a good idea and put a business plan together in about two days,” he continued.

Nevermind that Schienbein didn’t have money or a location. Oh, and he had no idea how to make doughnuts. That would work itself out.

After that bar conversation, Schienbein moved to Denver. While he loved the city, he hated his job. Throughout those months, he continued to work on the doughnut dream. That included getting advice from fellow Purdue graduates who had started an alternative asset management firm, Gold Sail Capital. Gold Sail ended up becoming one of his business partners, along with a third-party investor.

In January 2017 Schienbein quit his Denver job and moved back to Indiana. He took a part-time job and became a volunteer assistant coach with Purdue’s track and cross country team. In March, his friend backed out of the doughnut plan because he was busy with graduate school and an internship. Schienbein would become the owner and founder of Hammer Donuts.

The name Hammer Donuts was suggested by another friend. It connects the business to Purdue, whose popular cheer is “Boiler up, hammer down!”

After finding business partners, next up was finding a hot location. Gold Sail Capital had recently purchased the popular Discount Den, a convenience store just off the Purdue campus. Hammer Donuts would have a spot there. “We’re actually a business inside of a business,” Schienbein explained. “Think about it like a Starbucks inside a Barnes & Noble.”

Next up? Learn how to make doughnuts. An acquaintance knew the owner of the Oxford (Ohio) Doughnut Shoppe, Joshua Francis, who agreed to help Schienbein. “He’s seriously

the nicest guy ever,” Schienbein said. “He let me work there and learn how to make doughnuts. And that’s what I did [last] summer. I quit my part-time job in May, and I would commute from [West Lafayette] to home every week.”

Francis even set Schienbein up with his supplier and advised him on what type of equipment to buy and where to find it. “This would not be possible if he didn’t help me out,” Schienbein said.

It was time to open Hammer Donuts. Kitchen construction took place from June to August 2017, and the shop opened its doors on Aug. 17. A grand opening was held on Oct. 3. The shop stays open late, catering to college students’ cravings.

In the beginning, Schienbein made the majority of doughnuts himself, but the pace was not sustainable. He was working about 120 hours a week, starting at 9 p.m. to make the doughnuts overnight. He would sleep every day from about 1 to 8 p.m. After about a month, he was able to hire help, which allowed him more time to meet his customers and get back on a regular schedule—although he still wakes up at about 4 a.m.

The pressure in the beginning was all about quantity and quality: trying to figure out how many doughnuts to make for each morning and perfecting the quality every time. If the quality wasn’t high, he’d have to throw out that batch. “Our unique selling point is that we make fresh handmade doughnuts every day. ... We want to provide everyone with a quality doughnut because if they’re coming here for the first time and they have a bad experience, why will they ever come back?” Schienbein said.

It takes about three and a half hours to make a yeast doughnut. Filled yeast doughnuts take nearly six hours. It only takes about 30 minutes to make a cake doughnut. Most doughnuts are ready between 5 and 7 a.m.

Hammer Donuts’ red velvet doughnut is the most popular. There’s also a signature doughnut that is a yeast doughnut with strawberry icing and blue sprinkles—the shop’s colors. There are several cake doughnuts; the yeast ones include glazed, cinnamon twist, filled, rectangles and doughnut holes. Schienbein has been experimenting with other kinds, and in December the shop started creating and selling a doughnut of the month. The shop also sells Copper Moon Coffee.

Despite being insanely busy and surrounded by sugary goodness, Schienbein is still training for races and volunteer coaching with Purdue’s team. In college, he competed in the mile, 5K and steeplechase. But now he’s focused on the marathon. He placed seventh overall in the 2016 Indianapolis Monumental with a time of two hours, 25 minutes and 26 seconds. It was his first marathon.

Schienbein plans to run the Boston Marathon in April and the Berlin Marathon in September. His goal is to qualify for the Olympic trials in 2020 or 2024. He will have to run a marathon in two hours and 19 minutes to make it.

“To be able to do that, that’s one of my lifetime goals. ... I have no expectations of making the Olympic finals because I’d have to run like 15 minutes faster, but just to be able to make the trials will be amazing.”

Schienbein’s dream job? He wants to combine his business expertise with his passion for running. He wants to open a running store one day.