

It's a new ballgame for iconic City Sports chain



A City Sports store on Boylston Street in November, before it closed down. The athletic apparel chain declared bankruptcy late last year and shuttered its stores.

By Jon Chesto GLOBE STAFF FEBRUARY 23, 2016

City Sports is getting back in the game.

Two brothers who run a New Jersey-based soccer equipment retailer have embarked on an ambitious plan to revive the City Sports business, after buying the brand name and related intellectual property.

Although beloved by a core customer base, City Sports filed for bankruptcy in 2015 and eventually closed after doing business in Boston for 32 years.

Now the brothers, Brent and Blake Sonnek-Schmelz, say an e-commerce site is in the works, probably launching within the next few weeks. They hope to pick their first brick-and-mortar location for their new firm, City Sports USA, by the end of the year.

The focus at the start, Brent Sonnek-Schmelz said, will be on locations in Boston and New York.

For now, they'll run City Sports out of the headquarters of their chain, Soccer Post, in Eatontown, N.J. But Brent Sonnek-Schmelz said they will be run as separate companies, with Soccer Post aimed at suburban consumers and City Sports targeting urban ones.

The chief operating officer of the new City Sports company said the brothers were longtime City Sports customers, visiting stores in New York and Philadelphia. He said they were surprised to learn last November that the chain would close. The previous management tried to find a buyer for 18 of those stores, but two liquidation firms offered the best bid, and all 26 stores were shuttered.

“It was a great store, and everyone was shocked,” Sonnek-Schmelz said. “It’s not like the brand deteriorated over time and they were limping along. . . . We saw that as an opportunity.”

So the brothers bought the City Sports intellectual property — such as the brand name, the logo, and the customer lists — for \$400,000, with a goal of building the chain back up again.

“It’s not like you’re starting from scratch,” said Jon Hurst, president of the Retailers Association of Massachusetts. “You’re starting with a real trademark, a real valued seller that had a loyal following.”

The new locations won't be the same as the old locations, Sonnek-Schmelz said, but the revamped stores probably will be near the old ones. Some of those previous locations are expected to be used by the competition: Modell's Sporting Goods acquired the leases to three of them, including the one at 480 Boylston St. in Back Bay.

City Sports' demise was blamed on its expansion in recent years to locations away from its core urban base. The competition in the suburbs was tough, and the brand wasn't as well known farther from the cities.

The audiences were different, too. Sonnek-Schmelz said the typical city customer is a single person looking for exercise clothing, and equipment, while a suburban customer is buying for their kids as well.

"They tried to expand too quickly, especially in suburban markets, and just lost track of who their core customer was," Sonnek-Schmelz said. "What we plan on doing is not repeating those same mistakes."

'We want to bring back a good city-based retail experience. We're just excited to get it going again.'

Brent Sonnek-Schmelz, whose company bought City Sports's intellectual property and plans to open new stores

Sonnek-Schmelz said he has reached out to former City Sports vendors and is working with them to build up an inventory for the business. He doesn't have employees for the new City Sports yet, but he expects to hire some after the e-commerce site becomes operational. He's also working with a team of six students at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School to craft a launch plan for City Sports.

"City Sports is an amazing brand with an amazing following," said Dave Spandorfer, co-founder of local running apparel firm Janji. "It definitely deserves another shot."

Its new owners' biggest hurdle could be picking storefronts that aren't too expensive but also not too removed from high-traffic areas.

"Someone like City Sports that needs some scale, finding a space that's big enough is a challenge," said Daniel Dain, a commercial real estate lawyer in Boston. "If they're going to survive, they have to be different from the [competitors in] the suburbs, and they have to know their urban audience."

Tony Post, chief executive of Newton-based running shoe company Topo Athletic, said City Sports' success could hinge on how well its managers connect with local residents and give them a reason to not shop online.

"Boston's a city where you kind of have to live there to know the heartbeat of the city," Post said. "Hopefully, they'll have the right kind of management team in place that can be connected to the community."