

# Running Down a Dream

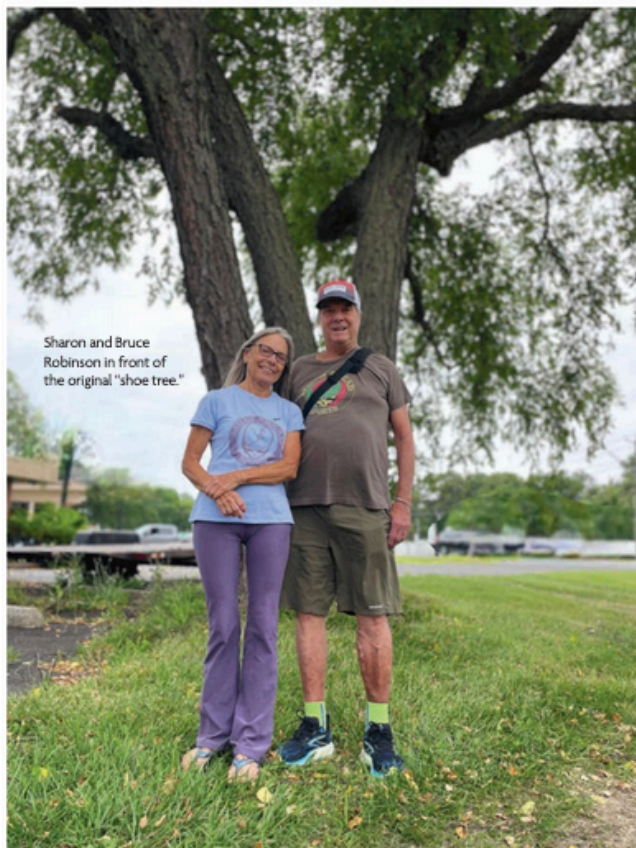
The story of Miles Ahead Sports is one of a decades-long relay race, with the baton being passed from one generation to the next.

BY MOLLY MECHLER

**L**OCATED JUST BLOCKS from the Sea Girt boardwalk, Miles Ahead Sports has grown into more than a running store—it's become a trusted cornerstone of the community. With its signature slogan, "Running at the Shore, Since 1984," the shop has spent four decades helping runners of all ages and every skill level find the perfect fit. Behind its success lies a love story, a marathoner's grit and a family's enduring passion for movement.

Bruce and Sharon Robinson have been a team ever since their days as high school sweethearts at West Essex High School in North Caldwell, New Jersey, where they graduated in 1968. In 1971, drawn by a sense of adventure, they followed a close friend who was studying art to Washington D.C. and eventually settled in Silver Spring, Maryland.

It was in Silver Spring that Bruce's athletic journey began, while working at a store called Racket and Jog. Over time, he became the go-to guy for all things running—even resoling shoes for local athletes.



Sharon and Bruce Robinson in front of the original "shoe tree."

“The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”  
~ Lao Tzu



Left: The Miles Ahead team. Right: Sharon and Bruce Robinson in their store, 2025.

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY OF BRUCE AND SHARON ROBINSON

But the pull of the Jersey Shore, where Bruce and Sharon had both spent their childhood summers, eventually became too strong to resist. In 1983, they settled in Manasquan. Bruce spent a few days a week making ice cream in his cousin's shop, Circle Freeze, when a conversation with the landlord changed everything. The commercial space next door had just become available, and Bruce was encouraged to take on his next big leap: opening a store of his own.

"We spent six months designing, renovating and setting up the space," says Bruce. In May 1984, Miles Ahead Sports officially opened its doors. The store's name is a clever nod to running but was actually inspired by the 1957

jazz album by Miles Davis, one of Bruce's musical heroes. As a lifelong music lover, Bruce saw the title as the perfect blend of his two passions.

Outside the original location stood a towering tree, which eventually became adorned with sneakers dangling from nearly every branch. The spectacle began as a playful challenge between Bruce and his brother-in-law Scott, as they were competing to see who could throw their shoes the highest. Over time, the Miles Ahead shoe tree became a beloved local landmark.

After 28 years at its original location, Miles Ahead Sports outgrew the space and the shoe tree. On March 12, 2012, following a six-month renovation, the

store opened the doors of its current location at 2100 Highway 35. With this move came an updated logo: a Grateful Dead-style "Stealie" with a runner at the center, inspired by one of Sharon's favorite bands.

Today, the store remains a lively gathering place where new and longtime customers can find the best footwear along with stories, support, race-day memories and advice from familiar faces.

#### BORN TO RUN

Over the years, countless customers have gotten to know Bruce as a friendly and knowledgeable local business owner, but he's also a legendary athlete. After taking a four-year break from

running following high school, Bruce was inspired by watching Frank Shorter and Steve Prefontaine at the 1972 Olympics. "I thought to myself, I could do that." And he did—over many years of incredible athletic success. "Kind of like Forrest Gump, I just signed up for races and kept on running."

With nothing but his high school track experience to draw on, Bruce entered his first marathon in 1973: The George Washington's Birthday Marathon, a three-loop course around government-owned property in Beltsville, Maryland. He crossed the finish line in 3 hours and 40 minutes and muttered the famous last words of countless runners before him: "I'm never doing that again."

But just two short months later, he found himself at the starting line of the Boston Marathon. And as Bruce continued to race, his times improved. He finished his first Boston Marathon in 3 hours and 5 minutes.

In September 1973, he ran his first New York City Marathon, which was then held entirely in Central Park. He finished in 2 hours and 42 minutes. For some perspective, fewer than 3% of New York City Marathon participants finish in under three hours.



Years passed and Bruce's times kept improving. His personal best? A jaw-dropping 2 hours and 18 minutes at the 1978 Boston Marathon, a time that found him passing Frank Shorter, one of his own athletic heroes. (Again, to put that into perspective: Imagine running a mile in 5 minutes and 17 seconds, for 26.2 consecutive miles.)

Bruce made personal history yet again at the 1980 Olympic Trials in Buffalo, once again edging out Shorter as he was competing for a spot on the U.S. team. His Olympic dreams were cut short when the U.S. boycotted that year's games. But his drive never faltered.

Over time, Bruce would complete 100 marathons around the world, six Ironman races in Hawaii, 20 biathlons, 50 triathlons and countless shorter

races along the way. "The celebration after the race is always the best part," he says with a laugh.

#### SOLE PURPOSE

The story of Miles Ahead has always been a shared journey. Through every mile, Sharon has been at Bruce's side, helping to raise their children Courtney and Shaun while also growing their business from the ground up.

After 9/11, Courtney left her job in New York City to raise her own family and assist in running the store full-time.

Shaun, who had occasionally helped with bookkeeping, became an instrumental part of the business after Bruce faced health challenges. In 2023, Shaun stepped in permanently to help bring the store into the digital space.



Top: Sharon and Bruce Robinson, circa 1984.

Left: Miles Ahead's first location opened its doors in 1984.



Bruce Robinson has completed over 100 marathons since 1973, including an incredible personal best of 2:18 at the Boston Marathon in 1978.

These days, Bruce and Sharon's six grandchildren can often be found at the shop, chatting with customers, helping behind the counter or grabbing a slice with Oma and Pops from Little Dom's, their go-to pizza place down the street.

Now more than ever, the Miles Ahead team feels more like family than staff. Longtime team members include Jay Russell, who started with tent sales in 1990 and has been onboard ever since; Gunnar Svendsen, a founding member of the store's original running team, now celebrating 27 years; and Keith Matthews, who brought his deep technical knowledge from Foot Locker when he joined in 2003.

"We were all runners," says Bruce. "Once a week, we'd head out for 20 miles. I never even knew how far we were going. I was too busy talking to my friends."

#### THE HOME STRETCH

Today, Bruce is sidelined from competitive running, following (simultaneous!) double knee replacements. But he can still regale a listener with decades' worth of incredible memories. He smiles as he remembers the highlights, like placing third in his very first over 40 Ironman division or running three marathons in under three months. "I just kept signing up," he laughs. "I didn't really think about how close together they were."

On an average day, a Miles Ahead customer might hear a race recap from the Honolulu Marathon, which Bruce managed to complete while recovering from an illness. They might hear a mountain biking story from Allaire State Park. They might even leave the store feeling inspired to train for their first triathlon. No matter what that customer is looking

for, Miles Ahead has always been about much more than gear. It's about life in motion.

At 41 years and counting, Bruce and Sharon are still running the race of life—with a team, a town and a great family at their sides. Their story is a decades-long relay, with the baton passing from one generation to the next. While the store has grown and evolved, its heart remains unchanged: a welcoming space where runners of all ages and abilities find more than sneakers. They find encouragement, camaraderie and a starting line just a few blocks from the sea.

*Molly Mechler is a dedicated mother, seasoned educator, avid reader, recreational runner, thrifty shopper and local beach lover infused with a visionary mind for writing.*