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'Sports cars' for babies

Dynamic Brands officials are working to revitalize high-end stroller business

BY JOHN REID BLACKWELL
 TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER
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Long before they were the top executives of the Baby Jogger Co., David Boardman and Leighton Klevana were happy customers.

Boardman and his wife purchased one of the high-performance strollers when they had twin boys in 2001.

"We needed a double stroller," Boardman said. "My wife wanted one so she could go out and work out. I wanted to get her something good. I found out that was Baby Jogger from talking with different people."

"It was built like a tank. It worked great for us," he said.

Klevana and his wife also bought a Baby Jogger when they had their first child in 2000.

"It's for those who like to run, jog, or take their child somewhere that might be a challenge for any of these strollers that you see nowadays with the small wheels," he said. "It allows you to be able to take your child places that you wouldn't ordinarily be able to take them."



David Boardman (left) shows off the new Baby Jogger City Series stroller. Leighton Klevana uses a Bag Boy cart.
 DON LONG/TIMES-DISPATCH

An advertisement for BDC (Building Businesses through community investment). The top left features the text "Building Businesses through community investment" in yellow and white. The top right features the BDC logo, which includes a stylized bar chart and the letters "BDC". The center of the ad shows a close-up of two hands shaking in a firm grip. The bottom left shows a group of people in a meeting setting. The bottom right features the text "Start yours with our help." and a "Click Here." link.

It was almost serendipitous, then, when Boardman and Klevana got the chance in 2003 to add Baby Jogger to their Richmond-based company then known as the Bag Boy Co.

Now the business partners are working on revitalizing the Baby Jogger brand, which had fallen on hard times before they acquired it.

Klevana and Boardman have even featured photos of their wives and children using the Baby Jogger in the company's catalog, which likens the quality of the strollers to that of "exotic sports cars."

The Baby Jogger is just the latest addition to Klevana and Boardman's growing business.

The men are the top executives of Dynamic Brands Inc., a holding company created last year for the three companies -- Baby Jogger; AMF Golf, a maker of golf products; and golf cart manufacturer Bag Boy.

They've started or acquired the businesses since 1997 with financial help from Richmonder William H. Goodwin Jr. Goodwin, who owns The Jefferson Hotel, and a business partner sold AMF Bowling in 1996, but Goodwin retained the rights to the AMF name for golf products.

Dynamic Brands has just moved into a new headquarters on Magellan Parkway in the Windsor Business Park in northern Henrico County that houses the company's administration, customer service and product development operations, as well as a warehouse.

Employees were still moving in last week, and scattered around the office were a wide variety of golf carts, golf bags and strollers.

In one part of the building, Klevana, the company's chief operating officer, and Boardman, its chief executive officer, are setting up a showroom where retail customers will be able to take a look at new products.

The company has just began selling a new line of Baby Jogger called the City Series, which is designed for parents living in urban areas who are "always on the go." The stroller features a front swivel wheel designed for maneuvering in tight environments, but it can also be locked in place.

The first Baby Jogger stroller was designed in the mid-1980s by Phil Baechler, an avid runner who liked to take his son along with him in his baby carriage while jogging.

Baechler didn't like the way that standard carriages were unable to handle the stress of long-distance use over different surfaces. He designed a stroller with improved features, including a lightweight, aluminum frame, a nylon seat, and three bicycle tires.

That was the first three-wheeled stroller, which he named the Baby Jogger.

Baechler and his wife, Mary, founded a company in Washington state to sell the stroller. In 1986, they introduced a stroller for two children called the Twinner.

The business grew in the late 1980s and the 1990s, but eventually it ran into financial problems. Some reports indicated that Baby Jogger was undercut by competitors who moved their manufacturing overseas and cut prices.

The Baby Jogger business hit difficulties when it decided to sell directly to customers, which eroded its retail base, Boardman said.

The company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in 2003, and Klevana and Boardman, who were running the Bag Boy Co., bid \$3.5 million for it in a public auction.

"Baby Jogger hopefully will be a good investment," Goodwin said. "We won't know for a year or two. We believe the brand name is strong, and we believe we can produce a product of exceptionally high value."

Boardman and Klevana say they are rebuilding Baby Jogger's retail distribution.

The company doesn't sell its products directly to consumers. Instead, the strollers can be purchased at specialty bike or baby stores and through some specialty Internet retailers. The joggers are sold worldwide.

Dynamic Brands also moved the stroller manufacturing from Yakima, Wash., to the same plant in China that makes the company's Bag Boy carts.

"You hear a lot about outsourcing, but one of the misconceptions is that the only reason to go to China is to cut prices," Boardman said. "Frankly, that wasn't the main reason we went. Our supplier there is the best supplier that we have dealt with in the world."

Boardman said the Chinese supplier has 35 engineers on staff who can quickly respond to changes in product design. "We have improved the design, and increased the quality, while maintaining roughly the same price," he said.

"They allow us to be innovative," Boardman said, adding that outsourcing the manufacturing has enabled the company to create jobs in Richmond.

One of the innovations that the company has introduced is a patented quick-fold mechanism that allows parents to easily fold the stroller in half by grabbing a strap in the seat.

The mechanism allows a parent to hold their child while folding the stroller and placing it in a car trunk with just one hand. Dynamic Brands has applied the same mechanism to its Bag Boy golf carts.

The company's newest line of strollers, the City Series, features the one-hand folding mechanism, a multi-position handle bar, a 5-point safety harness, 12-inch pneumatic thorn resistant tires, and storage areas below and behind the seats.

The company has five series of Baby Joggers: The Performance Series, The Q-Series, The City Series, The Rental Series and The Special Needs Series.

The Special Needs joggers are designed for children with special needs, or for elderly adults. They can hold up to 200 pounds. That style isn't truly a stroller, Boardman said. "They are really indoor and outdoor mobility devices."

The Baby Joggers range in price from \$299 for a basic single model to \$749 for a triple seater.

The strollers have received safety certifications from the American Society for Testing and Materials, which tests them for potential dangers such as sharp edges, pinch points, and tipping.

Boardman said many people wrongly assume that all strollers have to be tested for safety.

Unlike child car seats, safety testing for strollers is "a gray area," he said. "There are a couple of competitors that do not have safety certification, and you can find them in retail outlets in Richmond."

The company sells its rental series to theme parks including Sea World and Disney-MGM Studios in Orlando, Fla., Busch Gardens in Tampa, Fla., and Disneyland in California.

"That is another tremendous opportunity" for growth, Boardman said. "The main reason these large parks are buying Baby Joggers is because they last so long and are safety certified."

Any ideas? Staff writer John Reid Blackwell can be reached at (804) 775-8123 or jblackwell@timesdispatch.com

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