

PROFILE

HELEN ROCKEY:

Back in the Games

By Ed Kromer



There is an elegance to the games that is so rare as to be nearly extinct in the hyperlinked modern world.

The wooden dice tumble in satisfying *plahnk-plahnk-plahnks* across the yellowing treasure map of Dread Pirate. The cast metal playing pieces of Stretch Run fill the hand with honest heft. The miniature Circa Baseball stadium evokes the smell of hotdogs, the crunch of peanut shells underfoot.

Front Porch Classics swaddles its old-fashioned, coffee-table board games in sepia-toned nostalgia, as if they were crafted—not fabricated—in a less-disposable epoch. “It’s really a beautiful product,” says Helen Rockey (MBA 1980), the retro game company’s first CEO. “We’ve taken rich themes, a beautiful aesthetic and provide game play that is interesting and compelling for all ages. It’s an opportunity for families to connect in the middle of today’s hectic lifestyle.”

It’s tempting to proclaim the Front Porch idyll a metaphor for the mellowing of Rockey’s own harried career. But then, present company excepted, leisure has never really been her speed.

The woman who would earn the nickname “The Rocket” has known she wanted to build businesses almost from birth. She studied economics at the UW, then proceeded straight on to claim her MBA in 1980. After a career prologue at Boise Cascade, she went to work at Nike selling excess inventory, which turned out to be a great way to learn the business. In 11 years, Rockey’s star rose quickly. She worked in sales, product and finally as general manager of accessories and graphics.

When she was recruited to lead Brooks Shoes, Rockey inherited a real fixer-upper. Multiple buyouts had decimated the once-strong brand, and Brooks shoes had become the cut-rate product you might find in a K-Mart.

Rockey reorganized the company, and shifted to a limited line of high-end products for the serious amateur runner, “the best athletes money can’t buy,” she recalls, “because we didn’t have any money.”

After delivering Brooks to a dramatic resurgence, Rockey became CEO of Alabama-based Just For Feet, where she envisioned building an athletic superstore. But the company had mortal financial instability, and Rockey soon found herself negotiating bankruptcy and sell-off. “Once the slide started, I couldn’t stop it,” she says. “It was really exhausting. And disheartening.”

She returned home to Seattle and took some time off, until Front Porch Classics came calling. “After coming off the brutal experience with Just For

Feet, I just wanted to work with a small company, involved in consumer products, with people I like,” she says. “I’m a simple gal.”

Rockey has not-so-simple goals for the company, which she believes is poised for dramatic growth. She has broadened the selection of award-winning games on offer, deployed a sales force of independent reps and brokered non-traditional retail partnerships with Nordstrom, Orvis, National Geographic, LL Bean, Barnes & Noble and other “high-touch” channels.

Since her arrival, Front Porch has more than doubled its sales.

Of course, games are not all that Rockey is into these days. During her sabbatical, she also founded Wildbleu, a line of moisture-wicking sleepwear for menopausal or pregnant women who have difficulty keeping cool and dry at night. The idea came to her while at Brooks, when women began clamoring for the promotional high-tech T-shirts that had been given to their marathoner husbands. Now the silky soft sleepwear is selling briskly online and in specialty stores.

Naturally, there are plans to expand both current ventures, which ensures that Rockey’s life will continue to be crazy. But that’s the way she likes it.

“What I learned when I took time off was that I love working. I love making products and selling them,” she says. “You have an idea. Then you see a sketch or a sample. And then you show it at a tradeshow and later in a store. And later you see it in somebody’s house, which is an awesome feeling. If I can do this for 50 more years, hallelujah.” ■