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Aluminum Athletic Equipment's Tim (left) and Adam Driscoll. The company built its reputation in the 1950s and '60s with the aluminum rocker hurdle, a safer, self-righting version of the barriers that runners leap over in races. The Shot Return System, is debuting.

IN LANE 1: INNOVATION

A Montco maker of track-and-field equipment has a new product that debuts at the Penn Relays.

By Bob Fernandez

The Penn Relays, now under way in University City, are among the nation's premier track-and-field events. They are also Tim Driscoll's business incubator.

On Tuesday, Driscoll, his son, Adam, and two employees of his company, Aluminum Athletic Equipment Inc., of Royersford, Montgomery County, bolted together the company's newest product in the South Beaver Throwing Field, scene of the shot-put competition.

The Shot Return System, which is having its debut in this year's Penn Relays, is a 60-foot-long gravity-fed sluice designed to return thrown shots to athletes so they can hurl them again. With a little push, the shot rolls the length of the aluminum sluice, gathering speed. Near the end, the shot alters course and climbs a short distance to a flat section.

But would the thing work as advertised to Penn Relays officials? The Driscolls and two AAE employees assembled it in about 10 minutes. "We've only used it under perfect conditions in the plant," said an anxious Adam Driscoll, 28, who designed the apparatus with computerized engineering software.

But it did work, splendidly, with both the men's and lighter women's spheres. "Officials will love this," said Charlie Powell, the University of Pennsylvania men's track coach who watched. Competition officials typically carry the 8.8-, 12- and 16-pound shots part of the way back to the throwing area more than 1,000 times during the Penn Relays — an arduous manual chore. With this, they will roll them back. "He always comes up with something," Powell said of Tim Driscoll.

AAE built its reputation in the 1950s and

'60s with the aluminum rocker hurdle — a safer, self-righting version of the barriers that runners leap over in races. But by the 1970s, domestic competitors offering cheaper copycats were cutting into the company's market share. In the last decade, AAE has faced foreign competitors from India, China and South Korea. At one time, hurdles generated 75 percent to 80 percent of revenue. While still important, Driscoll says that hurdles produce just 15 percent to 20 percent of AAE's \$5 million to \$10 million in annual revenue.

To keep the second-generation family manufacturing business alive, and to keep its 45 employees in jobs, Driscoll has diversified AAE's product line into more customized aluminum products. He has also looked outside the company's traditional base in track and field and into team sports.

AAE has a good business selling football goal posts and ball-stopper systems. The ball-stoppers allow different sport teams to practice in confined areas. The first was designed to protect track runners from whizzing lacrosse balls. AAE also manufactures portable stat and press boxes, called Donkeys. AAE carries 250 to 300 products in its catalog. "The biggest thing is to introduce it and then mass-market it so that everyone identifies the product with you," Driscoll said.

Founded in 1949 by Tim Driscoll's uncle, John Marzocco, a track coach at Lower Merion High School who invented and patented the rocker hurdle, AAE operated out of basements and garages for years. Driscoll began at the company in 1964. The company moved to West Conshohocken in 1974. While there, it expanded twice and, in 2004 relocated to a new plant in Royersford.

Driscoll, 63, says it's a true family business. Adam works in purchasing and product design, and Adam's wife, Jen, is an inside sales rep. Daughter Leigh Diskin is marketing director. Scott Keith, a son-in-law, is director of operations, and Tom Syron, another son-in-law, is sales manager.

Times have changed drastically with foreign competition for family-owned manufacturers, Driscoll said, and he worries about their fate. To help other locally owned companies, Driscoll avoids outsourcing overseas, although low prices are tempting.

One local supplier is Globe Canvas Products Co. in Yeading, an sewing manufacturer that sews and stitches covers for AAE's pole-vault and high-jump landing pads.

Kevin Kelly, Globe's president and owner, said the landing pad covers are manufactured in winter months at track season approaches. The 16-employee Globe Canvas began working with AAE in the mid-1990s. As



Jonathan Wilson/Inquirer Staff Photographer
Joe Jackson welds a hurdle. At one time, hurdles generated 75 percent to 80 percent of Aluminum Athletic Equipment Co.'s revenue. Domestic and foreign competition have cut into its market share.

Penn Relays are a showcase of Montco company's products



Charles Fox/Inquirer Staff Photographer
Tim Driscoll and son Adam with the Donkey (background), one of their company's portable stat and press boxes.

the two companies cooperated, they halved the delivery time for landing pads from eight to 10 weeks to four to five weeks, Kelly said. "This is one of the last advantages that a domestic supplier has," Kelly said of quick delivery. If a school were to order a landing pad from overseas, delivery may take months.

Driscoll thinks the Shot Return System, which is priced between \$1,400 and \$1,500, could be a good seller. Another product he has been excited about is the Donkey.

Introduced five years ago, Donkeys protect coaches, videographers, broadcasters, statisticians and others from the glaring sun or bone-chilling rain. They also can serve as central stations for officials running sporting events.

Donkeys cost between \$13,000 and \$16,000 each, and the company has sold 30 of them. Buyers include teams at Pennsylvania State, Georgetown, Drexel, Rowan and West Chester Universities. "We have a long wish list for this item because it's a big-ticket purchase," Adam Driscoll said, "but when people see it, it sells itself."

And where did AAE introduce the Donkey? The Penn Relays.

AAE

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