

NFL alumnus scores with health drinks

By SUE JOE
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The white, hot sun high above signifies noontime, and typically in Starkville, it also means getting better acquainted with license plates, as traffic jams cars bumper to bumper while everyone rushes to grab a burger during their lunch hour.

Day after day, eating fast foods becomes a habit not only for meals, but for snacks, especially among college students. But as they cruise down Highway 12, scanning many restaurants, on the far west end of town a different option lures diners — Smoothie King.

Unlike many stores here, Smoothie King, located across from the National Guard Armory, specializes in nutritional drinks and health foods. Customers can find Smoothie

shakes in over 36 flavors made with ingredients like honey, ginseng and Vitamin C. Smoothie King also supplies vitamins, herbal teas, snacks, muffins and Power Bars.

Franchised in 1989 by founders Steve and Cynthia Kuhnau, Smoothie King stores can be found mostly in the Southeast, Arizona, Texas and California, but expansion is planned into Northern states, says Starkville franchisee Kirby Jackson, who opened his store in January.

"We are for people who think that Smoothie King is a yogurt or ice cream store — we are not," Jackson says. "We would just like to invite people to come out and give us a chance. We think that once they try it, they'll like it."

"I think that what we offer to Starkville and Mississippi State students is an alternative," the former Buffalo Bills defensive back said. "It's something new to Starkville because it gives people a choice instead of going to a fast-food restaurant for lunch."

Jackson opened his store after learning about the franchise from a Buffalo teammate who worked part-time at a Smoothie King in New Orleans. A native of Sturgis, Jackson said the presence of university students played a huge part in his decision to open a store here.



Jim Weber/SDN

Smoothie King employee Chad Rutherford mixes one of the health food store's specialty fruit drinks.

"When you look at the background of the customer profile for a Smoothie King customer, it fits in well with a student population. You look for a young, educated person. Those are the people that are usually attracted to nutrition and care what they look like and what they put into their bodies," Jackson said.

"I wanted to come back home and open a store that will be attractive to the students because I think they add a lot to the economy, and I wanted to do something that included the students."

Wanting to start a business after turning in his jersey wasn't the only reason for opening the franchise, he said. Being a professional football player also contributed to Jackson's interest in nutrition.

Jackson played for Buffalo for seven years, which included four Super Bowls. He retired from the NFL in 1995 and returned to the Golden Triangle a year later.

"The fact that I played football — I had to watch what I ate," he said. "It seemed that all the things that tasted good weren't good for you, and that's what attracted me to the

Smoothie concept. The Smoothie is something that is good for you but actually tastes good. That's what is unique about a Smoothie."

Speaking of taste, Jackson said the Power Punch Plus and the Caribbean Way tie for best-selling flavor. And while customers take to these two drinks, Jackson said he appreciates the community's positive reaction and support of the business.

"They had no idea what a Smoothie King was, and I didn't know how the community would react," he said.

Jackson says he also strives to support the Starkville community. He has donated funds to the Sportsplex and has participated in the American Heart Association.

"I feel that a store should be very involved in the community. I think that if the community is your customers, you should give back to the community. Even though we're young and we haven't made a lot of money right now, I still try to put money back into the community," Jackson said.

Editor's note: Sue Joe is a senior communication major at Mississippi State University.