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ProBatter Sells Simulators to MLB Clubs, National Cricket Teams

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In 1999, Greg Battersby, a volunteer youth baseball coach, wanted to boost his son's batting average. Where most dads might schedule extra practice, Battersby, an intellectual property attorney, teamed up with a mechanical engineer. They invented the ProBatter, a virtual reality pitching simulator that lets a hitter face the life-size image of a pitcher winding up and delivering a pitch.

The device holds 13 U.S. and 20 international patents and is used by six major league clubs (the New York Yankees, Boston Red Sox, New York Mets, Cincinnati Reds, Cleveland Indians, and Pittsburgh Pirates) and numerous Division I colleges, according to Battersby. The product line runs from \$6,000 for a video conversion kit for an existing pitching machine to \$45,000 for a high-end simulator. This year, Battersby's team invented a cricket simulator that it has sold to the English and Australian national cricket teams.

Battersby's son, Adam, now 31, did not grow up to play baseball; he became president of \$2.1 million ProBatter Sports, a six-employee company in Milford, Conn.

Chief Executive Greg Battersby, 63, spoke recently with Bloomberg.com contributor Karen E. Klein for this as-told-to Entrepreneur's Journal:

We launched our product at the winter baseball trade show in Anaheim in 1999. It was the hit of the show. George Brett came over and said he would have hit .400 four years in a row if he'd been able to use our product.

But that show was almost a tragedy. We had signed up to sponsor the opening-night cocktail reception and roll out the product there. We shipped the initial unit to Los Angeles, but it was dropped off a 747 and was in pieces. The cocktail party was supposed to start at 6 p.m., and at 4:30 our product still wasn't working.

LONG-DISTANCE TROUBLE-SHOOTING

One of our engineers came to me with a deer-in-the-headlights look. He couldn't fix it. We had a consulting engineer in Massachusetts who got on the phone and walked him through installing a new part. I still hold that guy in very high esteem.

An hour into the reception we dropped the drape on the product and started throwing pitches. It turned out great, but it gave us a hell of a scare. We had put \$500,000 to \$750,000 into beta testing, endorsements, and product development. My blood pressure must have been 240 over 80. At this point, I'm thinking being a lawyer is not so bad.

It's funny, for 35 years I sat behind my desk and pontificated about small business without having a clue what I was talking about. Once you find yourself actually doing it -- worrying about cash flow and managing inventory -- it's hard. I never understood how difficult it was.

As a lawyer, you focus on one or two things. As a business owner, you're having a conversation now about engineering, and 30 seconds later you're talking about marketing, then sales, then personnel, then tax consequences.

I spend about 50 hours a week in my law practice and 20 to 25 at ProBatter, mostly focusing on marketing. From my perspective, the invention of a new product is the easy part. Creating a market for that product is the challenge.

I initially thought we would get our patent applications in place, get endorsements, and license to a company like Wilson or Rawlings. But our initial price point was \$90,000, and their salesmen couldn't sell a product that expensive. It was competing with products that sell for \$1,500. We now sell for less, but our cost of goods is high. That's why cash flow is so important. We don't want to overbuild, but if a customer comes in the door, they don't want to wait three months for delivery, either.

STRUGGLE AGAINST TRADITION

It's not easy to break into an established industry. The players initially said, "I don't hit against pitching machines." Major league baseball players have gotten where they are because they have a specific regimen they follow for many years. Pitching machines are not in that regimen, and they're reluctant to change.

Also, a lot of old-fashioned guys in the ranks of coaches don't like technology. It took them years to adopt the radar gun at 1/100th the cost of our product, and last I heard there were pitching coaches still using stop watches.

So we decided to start at the bottom and work up. UConn features us in their recruiting brochures now. If we can get into the grass roots at batting cages and training centers, the top players will be familiar with us by the time they get to the major leagues.

Our revenue this year will be similar numbers to last year. What has really hurt us in this recession has been the credit crunch. About 60 percent to 70 percent of our installations are at training facilities, and if they can't get financing, they're not buying our equipment.

Our newest product simulates cricket bowling. We entered into an arrangement where the British national team helped fund the development of the first unit. We installed a second unit in Australia last week. Ideally, I'd like to sell four to six cricket machines around the world every year.

To contact the reporter on this story: Karen E. Klein at Karen@KarenEKlein.com

To contact the editor responsible for this story: Nick Leiber at nleiber@bloomberg.net