



## DEALER FACEOFF



**Greg Peckham**

### **RG Hockey/Center Ice Hockey**

*By Marty Maciaszek*

*Hockey Dealers Association Co-Director*

Hockey has been a lifelong passion for Greg Peckham. But he never imagined it becoming a part of his livelihood when he was playing club hockey and studying engineering at the University of Maryland in the mid-1990s.

Using a set of Mattingly goalie pads led to an opportunity to work for the company. The next step was ownership of his own pro shop, Center Ice, in Fort Wayne, Ind., and the chance a couple of years ago to run the RG Hockey Pro Shop at a rink in Romeoville, a far southwest suburb of Chicago.

“I never thought of it as a real job until I was well into my 20s and close to 30,” Peckham said. “That’s probably when I realized this is what I would do for the rest of my life.”

In this edition of the Dealer Faceoff, Peckham discusses the challenges he faced to go from hockey player to business owner and how he is able to run two shops in two different states.

**HDA: How did you get into the hockey business?**

**GP:** Mattingly decided to consolidate to Fort Wayne and they offered me a job where they had me open up a retail storefront for goalie pads. Then I opened Center Ice and everything kind of fell into place. I certainly didn't have any grand plans or long-term plans.

**HDA: What were some of the biggest challenges you had to initially overcome?**

**GP:** Especially as young as I was, the biggest challenge was learning the business and not thinking of the store as a hobby or fun, and thinking of it as a business. The person I worked for in 1998, he didn't want to expand, so that's when I needed to find a partner and reality set in that I need to get a little more serious. I wanted part-ownership for all of the work I had put in, so that was hard to find, and my current partner was the only one to offer any ownership.

From 1996 to 1998 we had a retail storefront in Hometown, Ind. Coming from the East Coast, with a small specialty store, you come to expect people are going to find you even though we were eight miles off the busiest shopping area in Fort Wayne. But I went to the owner because of where we were located and said this isn't going to work. In 1998 we moved into the free-standing store with my new partner.

In 2000, there was one (single sheet) ice rink in Fort Wayne, and it was renovated to two sheets and I got the lease to move in. From 2000 to 2002, I ran two stores and that was probably the biggest mistake I ever made. Those were the only two years I didn't show a profit and it was probably the hardest I ever worked. The main reason I did that is I had a lot of time left on the lease at the free-standing store, so I learned from that one.

**HDA: What are the challenges you face operating two pro shops in two different states?**

**GP:** When Canlan (Ice Sports) bought Romeoville as a foreclosure two years ago, they were really happy with what I was doing in Fort Wayne. It made me nervous at first, because at most of their rinks they do their own pro shops. Fortunately, I have a great reputation in Fort Wayne and the local organization was pretty vocal about keeping me around. Canlan saw I was an asset to the rink and a lot of people plan their hockey shopping around when they come to Fort Wayne.

At first, logistically I had to figure out dealing with computer software and different state regulations and taxes. Inventory-wise, I could get the inventory back and forth (3 1-2 hour drive) as needed.

My manager in Fort Wayne, we worked side-by-side for six months before I made the move and it was a pretty smooth transition. The biggest challenge so far is my own nerves. The biggest hurdle has been overcoming the need to not have to micromanage everything. I'm starting to get a good reputation around (Romeoville) from people who use other rinks and that's what I need.

**HDA: What are the hockey markets like in Fort Wayne and Romeoville?**

**GP:** So far, the experience with Canlan has been very good. I think things are steady to slightly down (in Fort Wayne). My best year ever was 2010, but that's when the brand-new rink opened. In Romeoville, from what I predicted, I'm doing 10 to 20 percent better, so it's promising.

**HDA: Did the NHL lockout have a negative impact on business?**

**GP:** I do have a bit of a theory that in a hockey store you don't see much of an effect until five years down the road. The last time there was a lockout, I went back and looked at the numbers and you could see pockets of kids where it was light in the years when they were 5-year-olds and impressionable. The (Romeoville) rink just did a free skate deal in January, and the program blew up (with participants) . I think the talk of the NHL getting back and going was a large part of that.

**HDA: How has the Internet impacted your business?**

**GP:** Customers are a lot more informed and sometimes misinformed. It's definitely a totally different type of customer than what we used to deal with 10 years ago. All of our employees, and we deal with this daily, will say, 'But that's what the customer wants.' I tell them it's your job to convince them to make a good, educated purchase. You have to prove to them your experience because they assume you're not an expert.

I think about 20 percent of the hockey market wants face-to-face interaction and education and those are my customers. I have to accept that I have only about 20 percent and I have to make sure I do everything I can to make them happy. I usually get the beginning to mid-range hockey player and I'm a small store, so I'm not going to have everything.

**HDA: What are the biggest concerns you have regarding the hockey business?**

**GP:** For my own stores, the biggest thing is always staff. Employees absolutely make or break the store and it's what keeps me up at night. I'm not too concerned about the Internet or a big-box store down the street, because it comes down to that 20 percent of people who want that 1-on-1 attention or help. I have a good group of kids working for me right now but every year you just never know.

**HDA: What do you enjoy most about the hockey business?**

**GP:** Right now I think I'm pretty good at it, but it's taken a long, long time. I've got a nice little niche on how to run an arena pro shop because it is a different game than a free-standing store. I'm happy with where I'm going and happy with running two stores. I think the way I run a store and train the staff enables me to succeed where others don't do so well.