



DEALER FACEOFF

Larry VanOstrand
Instant Replay Sports, Ithaca, NY



By Marty Maciaszek

Co-Director, Hockey Dealers Association

One phone call changed it all for Larry VanOstrand.

VanOstrand had carved out a successful 18-year career with Klein's All-Sports, a sporting goods retailer in upstate New York and western Massachusetts. His family had just moved into a new house in his hometown of Lansing, N.Y., just outside of Ithaca. Then, one early-December 2004 morning, VanOstrand received the news that Klein's owners decided to close all 13 of their stores and begin an immediate liquidation of their inventory.

"It just flabbergasted me," said VanOstrand, who ran a Klein's store in Ithaca for 13 years and was a district manager for five years.

Fortunately for VanOstrand, a new opportunity wasn't far away in Ithaca with a store called Instant Replay Sports, which was modeled after Play It Again Sports. VanOstrand bought the store in April, 2006

and now he oversees a full-line retail store, a specialty hockey/soccer shop in a facility housing an ice rink and indoor soccer fields and an on-line E-Bay store.

“Everything happens for a reason,” VanOstrand said in a recent interview for the Dealer Faceoff.

HDA: How did the opportunity with Instant Replay Sports happen?

LVO: In the back of my mind, being my own boss was something enticing but I never seriously looked into it. I didn’t know the business existed but a guy who started Instant Replay Sports was looking to sell it and it was more of a hobby to him. I negotiated with him ... and it turned out to be a great deal so that’s how it all came about.”

HDA: What were the early challenges with Instant Replay Sports?

LVO: The first couple of years, like anything else, you have your ups and downs and peaks and valleys. I remember the first week I walked into the store, which was a dump compared to now, and thinking, ‘What the heck am I doing? Why am I doing this?’ I didn’t have a big enough customer base to have someone work full-time at the main store and I thought, ‘We’ve got to make some changes here.’ In the long haul it all worked out.

HDA: What is unique about being part of the hockey industry?

LVO: It’s something about real hockey players, most of them will go to a specialty shop and won’t go to a Wal-Mart, Target, Dick’s or Sports Authority. They know a specialty shop will have what they’re looking for and fit them properly.

HDA: How did you get into the sporting goods and hockey business?

LVO: It’s something I always had an interest in. I played sports and I started working in retail management at a furniture store for a few years before going to Klein’s. In what I am, there wasn’t a very viable option for kids and adults who play hockey in this area to get equipment. I’ve made it a very important piece of my business and it’s a business decision to make sure hockey is something we did right.

HDA: How do you combat “showrooming”?

LVO: My personal feelings are the only thing you can do from a retail level is provide the best service, and we’re adamant about it, because that’s how you compete against the Dick’s and other big stores. Provide smaller store, hometown, top-end quality service. Providing that service to them is No. 1 in whatever industry you’re in, but obviously it’s extremely important in the hockey industry.

HDA: How would you characterize your part in the Ithaca hockey community?

LVO: Our local youth association has about 400 members, and since it’s become an upper-middle class sport it’s not a viable option to too many people with the cost involved with it. There is enough for me to justify having a hockey shop but I wish it wasn’t so seasonal. It will be tough for the next five months

so I couldn't exist on (hockey) alone. It's so competitive, too, and I've utilized the (on-line) option, but the big hockey on-line dealers take a big hit out of the retail end of the business. But there are still enough people who like the idea of 1-on-1 customer service and ask, 'Can you fit me for this skate,' and ask questions about different skates and never go on-line.

We cater to the youth programs and work very closely with the youth-level associations and run a lot of promotions with them. Some of the kids we fit for equipment when they were 4-5-6 years old seven years ago are still our customers.

HDA: What some of the biggest concerns you have in the hockey area of the sporting goods business?

LVO: The biggest one is just the numbers – maintaining the numbers to justify doing enough business to maintain one store that hockey is an extremely important part of it and another where hockey is a main part of it.

The on-line dealers don't hurt me as much because I don't go after the high-end customer, since there aren't enough high-end customers in the market where we are.

With a pro shop, youth programs are a major factor. If there is a tournament and people from out of town come to Ithaca, they know there's a hockey shop in the rink that's fairly well-stocked with decent customer service. Last year we had three or four tournaments that we didn't have this year and that hurt (business).