



DEALER FACEOFF

Richard Charbonneau

Strauss Skates

By Marty Maciaszek

Hockey Dealers Association Co-Director

Staying in front of the competition has always been a big part of Richard Charbonneau's life. The Minnesota native was a two-time world points champion drag racer, and his work on boats included the hydroplane speed-record setter of 171 mph. Then in 1983, after years of owning his own car repair business, Charbonneau shifted gears and with his wife Liz and their business partner Don Eyinck, bought Strauss Skates & Bicycles in Maplewood, Minn., a suburb of Minneapolis-St. Paul.

Strauss is the oldest hockey shop in the nation and celebrated its 125th anniversary in early September. Eyinck's grandfather John E. Strauss, the founder of the business, and John Strauss Jr. were renowned for making skates worn by three-time Olympic figure skating champion Sonja Henie and NHL teams such as the Chicago Blackhawks, New York Rangers and Boston Bruins. But when the recession of the early 1980s hit, the Strausses could no longer afford to make their own skates and sold their business to the Charbonneaus and Eyinck.

In this first edition of "Dealer Face-Off," Richard Charbonneau talks about the positive aspects of the being involved in the hockey business, the initial challenges of modernizing the way Strauss did business and the current challenges of Internet sales, changes in customer habits and decreasing participation numbers in the sport.

Q. How did you get into the hockey business?

A. The Strausses were getting older and wanted to sell the business to Herb Brooks (St. Paul native and coach of the 1980 "Miracle on Ice" U.S. Olympic gold medal winners), but Herb's brother was running a business and didn't want to take on another. We met the Strausses during a rough time in 1982-83 when interest rates were really high and we tried to put it together to help them.

My wife has always been a hockey fan since she was a little girl, and I was a hockey fan. I decided I wanted to try something different and get out of the garage business, and my wife was really excited about being involved with hockey and the people. The people come to you because they want to do a fun thing and it's always been a fun atmosphere. It was a nice fit and the people are wonderful. A lot of the customers and a lot of the hockey players (professional and collegiate) are such nice people when you get to meet them.

Q. What were some of the biggest challenges you had to overcome during the early years?

A. Getting computerized and having enough inventory. The Strausses were doing manufacturing and primarily did figure skating blades. It got to the point where they couldn't afford the cost of producing the product - it was a really beautiful product that was all hand-made. We were getting a lot more hockey stores (starting) in the Twin Cities about this time, and it was getting more and more competitive. Everything was done on paper, so we had to streamline it and we went from five people in the office to my wife for a long time paying the bills and doing some of the ordering.

Q. How has the Internet impacted your business?

A. The Internet has definitely had a big effect. It's pulling a lot of money and it's killed little stores ... all over Minnesota they have dried up and gone away because they couldn't afford to carry a very good selection with the prices of things. The "Amazon sales tax" would help.

Even local people, if they're five miles away, want to go on-line and have it shipped to their house. The last few years have really been the most challenging in trying to adapt to the way different people think. Before you could succeed on basically good, hard work, but not everybody is as loyal with the times and they are more price-conscious. It's getting a lot more challenging, and we have to reinvent ourselves. Something we're working on is with all of the personal and social media - promoting on phones and email is more of a factor, and we expanded that last year. We had a big party (for the 125th anniversary) and it was a bigger success than we could have imagined, and it was basically done through Twitter and email.



From left to right, Liz Charbonneau, Richard Charbonneau, Don Eynck, Steve "Moose" Younghans, Shaun Hastings and Jenelle Hastings of Strauss Skates & Bicycles.

Q. Describe the hockey market in your area.

A. Unfortunately, (participation) numbers are down. There has been some bad publicity (regarding severe injuries from hits), and it has gotten so expensive with travel teams. Even people who can afford it are being careful with their money and things are more challenging. Kids like lacrosse and soccer because it's easy to play and it's not as expensive.

Q. What do you enjoy most about being in the hockey business?

A. It's the people - 99.9 percent of the people are friendly and happy and when they come in they're smiling and you explain (a product) to them. You give good service and attention and be fair with your pricing and you don't just run them through like a warehouse operation. Coaches like to come in and talk about different issues. Many times people have said we should have coffee tables for people to sit around and chat so we could become a social center.