



DEALER FACE-OFF



Jason Minier

Georgetown Stars Pro Shop

By Marty Maciaszek

Hockey Dealers Association Co-Director

Jason Minier was familiar with tackling challenges during his days as a defensive lineman on the football teams at Jenison High School in Michigan and Washington University in St. Louis. But the one-time field engineer would not have envisioned a return to his hometown to run the hockey pro shop and concession stand at the Georgetown Ice Center in Hudsonville, which is about 14 miles southwest of Grand Rapids.

Minier moved into those roles in August, 2008 and to quickly get up to speed with the industry with another hockey season quickly approaching. He referred to Bob Raygoza, who came on board just a couple of weeks later with experience in skate sharpening and hockey equipment, a “godsend.” In this edition of the Dealer Faceoff, Minier talks about making the transition to a sport he wasn’t that involved in, the challenges he faces as an owner of a pro shop, which depends heavily on traffic at the Ice Center, and some of the other issues facing hockey retailers.

HDA: How did you get into the hockey business?

JM: My family skated at the rink, and the (Georgetown Township) talked about privatizing the rink. It was an opportunity to come home and take on a big project. I was working in a suburb of St. Louis as a field engineer (for about six years) and spent a lot of time on the road. It was great because I loved St. Louis, but it was also tough because all of my family was back in western Michigan. That's what drew me back.

HDA: Were you apprehensive about making the change?

JM: A little bit. I felt confident I would be able to run the business end of things, but as I quickly found out, there's a business end and a hockey end. I was fortunate to find another employee (Raygoza), who was one of the best skate sharpeners in town after his business closed. It's a good thing he was there to help because I didn't know the first thing about sharpening skates or fitting a helmet. I'm still thankful he's here helping me because it lets me take care of the back-office stuff like buying and selling.

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

JM: Learning inventory. That was part of the Township's problem when we came in. Learning inventory, turning inventory and how much to have is still an ongoing process. We definitely have very informed consumers who ask about the first new thing coming out before I hear from my reps.

At this point, we've built relationships and have key vendors for the shop, so we're able to stay more up-to-date on what and products are out and when they're released. Now the trick is how much product do you bring in, and that's one of the things we struggled with last season. The rink lost a bunch of teams to go to other rinks and our traffic went down.

HDA: What are the challenges you face in operating a pro shop at a rink as opposed to a retail store?

JM: The positive is you have a captive audience. Players will say, 'Oh, I forgot my mouthguard. My stick just broke on the ice.' When parents and players come in here, it's always an hour before a game, and they're always looking around.

The downside is you're hampered by space ... there's not a lot of room to grow and we're not a destination. People don't come to get stuff if they're not coming to the rink anyway. In the Grand Rapids area there are a lot of rinks (nine) within 20-25 minutes, so there is a lot to choose from and a lot of places available to skate. Every year is pretty cyclical and people move from rink to rink. We had one big coach who a lot of people liked and he decided to move rinks and took four or five (teams) with him. The rink itself was hurt because of that.

HDA: What is the hockey market like in your area?

JM: It's alive and well with a lot of people playing hockey and skating. The numbers over the last five years have probably gone down a bit but people are still skating.

HDA: Did you feel any effects from the NHL lockout and are you concerned about any long-term ramifications business-wise?

JM: For us, I almost can definitely say it hurt. We buy a lot of team-branded merchandise ... usually in September with a second order around Christmas-time. This year we never got to the point of needing a second order. I hope it doesn't (hurt long-term). Getting visibility and watching on TV is so important. A lot of kids say they want to be like (Henrik) Zetterberg and (Nicklas) Lidstrom or the kids in Chicago (Patrick Kane and Jonathan Toews), now. I hope it doesn't deter interest, but I'm afraid it could.

HDA: How has the Internet impacted your business?

JM: It's been huge, it's taken us awhile to evolve and we're still evolving. People come to us to try things on and test this out, say 'OK, thanks,' and leave. There are more outlets now and people can find things I can't buy for the prices online. We don't have a website but we've taken to eBay to sell some products. My fear is it's going to drive a lot of small businesses like me that are service-based out.

We have to keep evolving and we're turning into a service-based industry. There are definitely some customers who come in that have been loyal ... and will pay the extra \$5 or \$10. We get a lot of repeat business that way. Our store manager does a great job of building those relationships. We've almost turned into a shop of necessity.

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

JM: What I've said most when I made the career move from engineering is this is just an atmosphere of fun – skating for fun and recreation. Unless somebody breaks a stick, everybody is in a good mood. It's a totally different atmosphere, and you get to have a lot of fun.