

Vaulting to the Top

Ambitious Spirit Lifts Company to New Heights

By Katie Coffin

At the University of Notre Dame, football players are famously urged to “Play Like a Champion Today.” For a Frankfort-based business, the message is “Sew Like a Champion Today.”

That is what the banner over the entrance to Richey Athletics reads, though it doesn’t take long for a visitor to realize the track and field equipment manufacturer does just about everything like a champion.

Richey Athletics is run by three brothers, all age 30 and under, who each competed in track and field. Michael Griffy, president and CEO, took over in 2008 when his grandfather, founder Max Richey, became ill.

The company has averaged 48% annual growth ever since.

“I think we’re more go-getters than a lot of our competition,” Griffy contends, sitting in front of a dry-erase board not so subtly titled “Summer Warfare” that lists bold goals for the off-season. “We needed a way to differentiate ourselves from other companies.”

The organization has done that by mastering the basics – producing quality equipment and providing excellent customer service – with the dogged persistence one would expect from three fiercely-competitive former athletes.

‘Sheer force of will’

Richey Athletics’ history can be traced back to a pair of pole vault standards installed at Hobart High School in 1962.

Today, the company specializes in pole vault and high jump pits and standards and several complementary products. It engineers and designs the equipment, hand-crafts each product, completes the sales transaction with the customer, and delivers and installs the equipment in person.

It’s the personal handshake with the coach at the end of the deal that’s often the beginning of a career-long relationship, and that’s how Griffy and his team have built the business.

“We had one coach who started at (the University of) Notre Dame, moved to Wake Forest (University) and finally landed at Fresno State,” he describes. “We’ve got equipment at all three of those schools now because we treated him like he was special. We’ve watched athletic directors go gray haired and retire, and they bought equipment from us every 10 or 12 years for their entire career.”

Griffy took over the business in the middle of the Great Recession. Despite that obstacle, he quintupled revenue in 2008 by creating a web site and expanding the target market beyond the Midwest.

“It was the worst economy anybody our age has seen, and we built something when everyone else was failing,” Griffy recalls. “We exploded in that time. I would get in the office at 5 a.m. and not leave until 9 p.m. Just sheer force of will (is why we prevailed).”

Recipe for success

It takes about a day to build all-American-made pole vault and high jump pits that are durable enough to come with a 10-year warranty (and often lasting years beyond that).

Fabric is delivered from Ohio and Alabama and cut with an in-house



“Some people may think, ‘Wow, my boss can’t even work the cell phone in his pocket.’ But here, I’ll sit down at a sewing machine and I’ll sew next to everyone else,” Michael Griffy remarks. With dramatic growth each year, Richey Athletics’ pits can be found at schools all over the country.



CNC (computer numerically controlled) machine. Those parts then go through silk screening and sewing stations to build the skins. Foam is delivered from Elkhart and assembled in the glue booth. Finally, the encasements are sealed over the foam and the product is ready for shipment.

“We produce a quality product as a result of a quality process,” asserts vice president of sales and marketing Nathan Sommer, as a 3-D printer buzzing in the background creates a cap for a standard. “If you are an employee in a ‘small’ business with ambitions to change its qualifying adjective to ‘very successful,’ you carry a sense of ownership into every sewn stitch, every fastened bolt, every handshake.”

Richey Athletics has hired a workforce with the same level of dedication. The leadership team seeks individuals who have demonstrated positive work ethic, through local sports or otherwise, and gives them an opportunity to grow with the company.

“We’re a small business trying to do everything right, just like a track

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coach trying to organize his best athletes in the right events to win the meet,” Sommer remarks. “Put everyone in successful positions, and that’s exactly what we do here.”

Bright future

Griffy plans to continue maximizing the track and field market and building name recognition for now. Down the road, he says the

company will explore new products to build – possibly moving into another sport or even something that isn’t related to athletics.

One thing that likely won’t change is the location of the operation.

“I sell all over the country now, so I have no incentive to go somewhere where rents are higher or where labor is expensive,” Griffy stresses. “I’m very competitive on freight with the whole country, and labor and taxes are awesome. Indiana is a great place for us.”

RESOURCES: Michael Griffy and Nathan Sommer, Richey Athletics, at www.richeyathletics.com