

A Hooky—Playing Son's Field of Dreams

Build a better sweet spot and they will come....That's what Bud Hillerich did and the great hitters all came to Louisville.

BY HOWARD MUSON

A Hooky—Playing Son's Field of Dreams

Build a better sweet spot and they will come....That's what Bud Hillerich did and the great hitters all came to Louisville.

BY HOWARD MUSON

AROUND Louisville, Kentucky, the story is as legendary as “Casey at the Bat.” A young apprentice plays hooky from his father’s wood-working shop and goes to a ballgame. The star hitter for the Louisville Eclipse team of the old American Association—Pete “the Gladiator” Browning—is suffering a slump and, to make matters worse, has broken his favorite bat. After the game, the young apprentice invites the depressed ballplayer to his father’s shop, where under Browning’s watchful eye, he hand-turns a new bat out of a hunk of white ash. They work through the night, with Browning taking practice swings from time to time, until the bat is just right. Next day, Browning goes three-for-three using the bat and pulls out of his slump.

The year was 1884, and the young apprentice, John Andrew “Bud” Hillerich, was just 17 years old. Pete Browning went on to compile a lifetime average in the majors of .341.

The bat was the first Louisville Slugger, but before the family launched its new product, young Bud had to convince his dad.

The father, J.F. Hillerich, was a German immigrant and master craftsman. He was in the business of making bed posts, tenpins, wooden bowling balls, newel posts, and butter churns. He regarded baseball and making bats as trivial.

It was a classical family business story: Skeptical elder resists newfangled idea of eager, determined offspring. Just as when the young Sam Johnson showed his father an insecticide he wanted to produce, and H.F. Johnson, look-

ing over a sample, said, in effect, “Where’s the wax?”

An innovative spark is often essential to preventing family companies from stagnating toward the end of the senior leaders’ reign. One of the great benefits of leadership succession is that it can unleash the talents of a Bud Hillerich, a Ted Turner, and a John

T. Dorrance, who take relatively modest businesses and build them into phenomenally successful companies. We now have Louisville Sluggers, Turner Broadcasting, and Campbell Soups because, fortunately, entrepreneurial genes surface as often in the second, third, and fourth generations as they do in the first.

The rest of the Hillerich & Bradsby story is well known. The Louisville Slugger became a registered trademark in 1894, and the company went on to fashion wood bats for generations of big hitters—Honus Wagner, Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth, Ted Williams.

According to the current CEO, John A. Hillerich III, 54, Bud’s grandson, wood bats are now just a small part of the business. Today the biggest market is for aluminum bats, manufactured mainly in California by H&B, for colleges, little leagues, and softball.

Jack Hillerich says his company may take a hit from the baseball strike, because other sports like soccer may have gotten kids’ attention during the layoff. The company also suffered from the hockey strike because no one saw Mark Messier of the New York Rangers play with H&B’s new high-tech, composite hockey stick.

Hillerich & Bradsby today is a \$100 million company which also produces baseball gloves, hockey equipment, and PowerBilt golf clubs. It remains tightly held in the hands of the Hillerich family. A fourth-generation leader is waiting in the wings: 30-year-old John A. Hillerich IV, Jack's son, is vice-president for finance in the golf division. (Mr. Bradsby, widely respected in the industry for sales, died in 1937.) This year the company will move its wood bat and golf club factory, which has been across the Ohio River in Indiana for 21 years, back to Louisville, where it will be ensconced, along with a new headquarters and visitors' museum, in a downtown convention center. The Louisville Slugger—long kidded by sportswriters as “the Indiana Slugger”—will be coming home. ■

Howard Muson is a writer, editor and consultant, and former editor and co-publisher of Family Business Magazine.

Source: Family Business Magazine, Spring 1995

Copyright © 1995. Family Business magazine. Subject to the provisions of the Terms and Conditions of the Family Business Web Site, subscribers to Family Business Magazine may print and distribute copies of this article, electronically or otherwise, provided that (a) such printing and distribution is done only for your personal, informational, non-commercial purposes, and (b) you do not re-move or obscure the copyright notice or other notices. For other uses, including reprint permission for non-subscribers, contact Family Business magazine.