

## UP CLOSE

SCOTT GOLLNICK

# From a Czech niche to a minor league phenom

## OT SPORTS STARTED WITH HOCKEY APPAREL AND NOW COVERS BASEBALL AND MORE

In 1992, Scott Gollnick decided to put his business studies to good use while in college at Charles University in Prague.

Recognizing a void in the Czech market for souvenir hockey jerseys, he teamed up with his older brother, Chris, to produce them for the 12 Czech Republic League teams.

The company gained a foothold in the U.S. in its first year thanks to the 1992 National Hockey League strike, which forced many of the game's biggest stars to keep their skills sharp in foreign leagues. OT began selling jerseys of NHL stars in the Czech Republic League to U.S. sporting goods stores.

Now located in a former hosiery factory near the intersection of Boone Street and Webb Avenue between Burlington and Graham, OT Sports produces game jerseys for teams in five different minor leagues in hockey. They include the American Hockey League, East Coast Hockey League and U.S. Hockey League.

In 1999, it picked up the license for Minor League Baseball, allowing it to produce replica jerseys for all 160 affiliated minor league teams across the country, including the Greensboro Grasshoppers and Winston-Salem Dash.

The Gollnicks turned that opportunity into a booming niche business, one-off player jerseys for special theme-night games minor league teams host throughout the season. Last year alone, OT Sports produced 350 different specialty game jerseys for minor league baseball teams. That, in addition to its hockey business and growth in amateur athletic uniforms, has its nearly 100 employees busy year-round.

**How did you end up in the Czech Republic?** I served on a LDS (Latter Day Saints) church mission in Czechoslovakia where I learned the language and afterwards got accepted to attend school there to study economics and business in the Czech language.

**How did you get to Burlington?** There was a Burlington company we were outsourcing different aspects of production to when my brother and I were running the business out of my parents' attic in Atlanta. Part of the reason we picked Burlington was the ability to find skilled laborers in certain areas like sewing. This is an old hosiery town, so being able to find people who could sew and cut has been helpful. Rather than continue to go back and forth between Atlanta and Burlington, we decided to move up here (in 1997) so that outsourcing was within arm's reach. Eventually that company went out of business and we basically purchased their assets and equipment. That allowed us to bring in all aspects of manufacturing.



Scott Gollnick is co-founder and vice president of sales and marketing at OT Sports.

JULIE KNIGHT/TRIAD BUSINESS JOURNAL

**Sublimation, the transfer of ink designs into polyester-based fabric, is OT's calling card. How did you discover it?** Sublimation was commonplace in Europe. That's where I became familiar with the technology in uniforms. It was not at all prominent in the U.S. People here were skeptical. The market is very traditional here. The mindset was, the heavier the hockey sweater the better it was, which means the more panels that were cut and sewn on made it a better jersey.

**Are all sports like that?** In baseball, jerseys had to be twilled. They had to be solid gray or white, unless it was an alternate jersey. We found baseball and hockey to be the two most conservative sports. We started doing things with even Champion back then, doing NBA sublimation. We did some things with New

Balance and some private-label projects with Brine, companies that were starting to see the benefits of sublimation.

**How did you launch the specialty game jersey business that's really pushed the company's growth?** It took a couple of teams and a couple of guys to think outside the box and say, 'you know what? We could be the first to have an American flag go across the entire jersey instead of just a red jersey with blue sleeves to celebrate the Fourth of July.' It took a couple of those and a couple other decision makers to say, 'oh, that's cool' or 'that's terrible.' Either way, we were getting media exposure. Other teams started calling us, and it just snowballed.

**Where are the company's next growth opportunities?** Our base business is

### ► CLOSER LOOK

**Title:** Co-founder and vice president of sales and marketing

**Age:** 45

**Education:** Brigham Young University and Charles University (left school after three years to start OT Sports)

**Family:** Father, Al (company president); brother, Chris (secretary and treasurer)

team uniforms, but we're looking at our options to sell at retail. We are meeting on it weekly and we're still analyzing it. We're also looking at expanding further in the minor professional sports market. We're going after the fraternity and sorority market as a form of fundraising. We just finished putting sock designs together for the Reebok Crossfit international competition. There are a lot of opportunities out there.

**What are the challenges you face as you try to take advantage of those opportunities?** People knowing about us. We don't have a major sales force. Most of our sales are driven through Internet searches, league contracts or word of mouth. How do we increase those sales? Do we put together a sales force in a couple of major areas, or do we just continue to put our focus and money on driving people to the website and getting them to call us? Our product speaks for itself, but it's getting people to understand that, which is hard to do through the Internet or the media.

**What is the competitive climate like?** We're combatting overseas market penetration. There are a lot of Pakistani and Chinese companies in our space, and we're hoping the U.S. consumer sees the benefit of buying in the U.S., both from a quality and a service aspect. We've had major pushes into the baseball, hockey and lacrosse markets. Now, we're pushing into volleyball and wrestling. We're working with the Piedmont Volleyball Club, for instance, putting together an apparel program for them. We feel like the volleyball market isn't being serviced and isn't saturated yet.

**Do you enjoy working with your brother and father?** My father was the intermediary initially because when you have two brothers working together it's nice to have a third person there to break up the arguments. If you look at any other family business, you'll see the same dynamic as ours. The best thing in the world is working with my family. The worst thing in the world is working with my family.

— Compiled by Chris Gigley, a freelance contributor