

Nothing but Net (Profits?)

Former Pacer Turns Entrepreneur With Leg Trainer

By Matt L. Ottinger

Growing up in Picayune, Mississippi, Jonathan Bender didn't think much about the quest for profits or the aches and pains of launching a start-up business. Now, he's pounding the pavement in an effort to sell the JB Intensive Trainer – a device he's created to help users build leg strength without stressing their knees.

“(When I was young,) I didn't know what was out there or the possibilities,” he reflects as his long legs emerge from a chair at a friend's workout gym on Indianapolis' northeast side. “Where I'm from, we play sports – especially as a young African-American. In my family, nobody had any businesses or anything I could look at and say, ‘That's interesting.’ I just knew I could play ball.”

Though he had a thin frame, Bender ultimately grew to be seven feet tall. His towering height, coupled with his athleticism, garnered a great deal of attention. He became the fifth pick in the 1999 NBA draft (selected by the Toronto Raptors but immediately traded to the Indiana Pacers). After a career plagued by frequent knee injuries in between flashes of encouraging play, however, Bender left the game. He did return briefly with the New York Knicks (where he reunited with then former general manager and now current Pacers consultant Donnie Walsh) after being rejuvenated by his own training device, but ultimately retired in 2010.

(Bender now resides in Sugar Land, Texas, while his sister and her family still call Indianapolis home).

“I believe that things happen for a reason,” he contends. “But just being human, it weighs on you mentally. I'm a guy that stands in faith and I understand God lets everything happen for a reason. There were some battles mentally though. Going to Boston (for rehab with Dr. Dan Dyrek) and staying there for two or three weeks at a time away from the team, I felt like an outcast.”

Learning from adversity

Hidden in Bender's constant struggles with injuries were opportunities to learn from the medical professionals who were treating him.

“I feel like a doctor myself, having been around these guys for all these years as they tried different things on me,” he notes.

He began developing a training apparatus for himself in



Former Indiana Pacer Jonathan Bender is parlaying his history of knee injuries into life as an entrepreneur by helping others with similar problems.

The JB Intensive Trainer works many lower body and core muscles together to improve strength, balance and synergy.



2006 that could help him increase leg strength while going through basketball movements – yet take pressure off his joints.

“I had a really big problem increasing my quad and glute strength, which are very important in protecting the knee ... so being able to wear this device and do actual movements related to the game really helped me improve,” Bender relays.

He remembers the first generation of the product was a bit of an ad hoc spectacle.

“I went down to the store, grabbed some tape, ankle braces and bands, and made this contraption; it looked like a piece of garbage, but it worked,” Bender bluntly states. “I tested it on myself and took it from there.”

He came up with the idea for the product by sitting in a park and simply watching people run.

“I watched how they moved, how they lifted their legs and put them back down – the body mechanics,” Bender says.



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“From what I’d learned from some of the best therapists in the world with the Pacers, I knew what muscles I needed to engage.”

Watching from the bench

According to Bender, the concept of developing a business intrigued him early in his playing career as he contemplated the intricacies of professional sports.

“(Pacers owners Herb and Mel Simon) influenced me,” he asserts. “I used to look at these guys who came into our locker room every two or three months and ask, ‘Who are these guys?’ I didn’t know a lot about the business, but I started to understand they were our owners (and what that entailed).”

His curiosity about the inner workings of the NBA allowed him to start developing his business acumen.

“I’m always the type who wants to know who’s pulling the strings,” Bender remarks. “Me, coming from a small town, this is the biggest business (the NBA) in the world, but this is a side play for them. Their main business is commercial real estate.”

Bender realized that although NBA players earn large sums of money, a major distinction reveals itself when comparing them to owners.

“I realized NBA players are paid a lot of money, but we’re still employees,” he qualifies. “At the end of the day, you just have money but no process. But to build wealth or any type of legacy, you have to own something and put your feet in the dirt and learn a process you can do over and over again. That got me excited about starting a business.”

He adds that there are many attributes that professional athletes and successful entrepreneurs have in common.

“Determination, consistency and being able to stay focused on one thing even if you’ve failed in some areas over and over – and the work ethic – are all critical,” he outlines.

Penetrating the defense

While Bender is having success bringing his product to market, he’s been met with the same challenges that face any prospective innovator.

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“Creating a product from scratch is difficult,” he admits. “It’s like you’re putting a piece of yourself out there. The toughest thing is manufacturing in the beginning – finding someone who can help with it. It may take you months to get a piece back, and then you have to refine it with a factory that’s overseas.”

He adds that the product itself has evolved with the help of consultants – to a level that even surprises him.

“Now it’s doing things I never thought it would do, and every expert we give it to gives us new information,” Bender reveals. “The evolution of it is amazing to me – what it’s doing for people with back, sciatic nerve and dropped foot problems.”

Finding mentors with experience is another tip Bender would give to aspiring entrepreneurs. Additionally, doing the leg work, so to speak, of meeting with companies that can help with distribution is a matter of effort, he believes.

“The next step of knocking on doors and getting people to say ‘yay’ or ‘nay’ to your product is a big step,” he shares. “That’s something I had to do myself. That’s what I did with

Relax the Back (a chain of stores that sell products to ease back pain). I walked in there with my sales pitch, and I was able to get into those stores.”

He adds that being realistic about production costs – and shipping fees and taxes – is critical, as well as determining a fair market price.

“You have to let the market dictate that,” he surmises. “You can throw a number out there, but most of the time the market says the number is too high and people won’t buy it, or they’re buying like crazy because the price is too low. Going through all those moving parts can create a big learning curve. Those are a few things that were challenging.”

The JB Intensive Trainer sells for \$130 and can be found at www.jbintensive.com.

INFORMATION LINK

Resource: Jonathan Bender, JB Intensive Trainer, at www.jbintensive.com