

Jackrabbit software leaps forward for athlete turned entrepreneur

BY SAM BOYKIN

CHARLOTTE - Mark Mahoney has parlayed his passion for youth sports into a business called Jackrabbit that caters to both sports facilities and busy parents. With a background in information technology and software development, this was Mahoney's first venture into business ownership. He said it's been a daunting process, especially as he's had to wear so many different hats as company president.

But since its inception in 2005, the company has experienced continuous growth despite the recession. Over the past few years, it has nearly doubled revenue and added more than 200 new customers.

Mahoney, 49, has been involved in organized youth sports since the 1970s, as an instructor and a coach. He also was quite the athlete, being a standout on the University of Georgia's gymnastics team in the early 1980s. After graduating with a bachelor's degree in management information systems, Mahoney developed two scorekeeping software products for the gymnastics community. He sold one product to a software company, but kept the other one, Score Master, which still has tens of thousands of users.

Over the years, Mahoney heard from a number of clients who urged him to develop a better class-management system for cheer gyms, dance and gymnastics studios, and martial arts schools, which gave him the idea for Jackrabbit.

Working with co-founder Mike Carper, Mahoney developed a Web-based application that allows schools to set up class schedules, assign instructors, enroll students and bill customers. And because it's an online system, Mahoney said clients don't have to worry about database backups, software updates and technical issues.

Mahoney and Carper began selling the software in 2005.

"We bootstrapped it," said Mahoney, who kept his "real job" selling software during the day and worked on Jackrabbit at night. That first year, the company cleared only \$26,000. But Mahoney said their product was unique and the market began to respond.

"Most of the companies we're acquiring already have a system similar to ours, but it's not online," he said. "It's the online capability that is our big distinguishing factor."

While Jackrabbit is typically more expensive than similar programs, in some cases two to three times more, according to Mahoney, its Web-based feature gives customers more functionality. One big advantage, Mahoney said, is online registration, which allows harried parents to sign up kids for classes anytime they want.

"When parents are registering their kids for classes like martial arts or gymnastics,



they want to do everything online. They don't want to go into the schools," he said. "So if a customer is ready to buy, they can sign up right then and there. It's a way for our customers to enhance their offerings."

Mahoney and his business partner stuck with it, and in 2006 revenue skyrocketed to \$153,000. Mahoney quit his day job to focus on Jackrabbit full-time, and the company continued to grow. Helping bolster the bottom line was the fact that Jackrabbit is a virtual company with little overhead costs, said Mahoney, who lives in Cornelius.

By 2009, revenue was close to \$1.5 million and the company had nine employees, all of whom work from home in the Charlotte area and oversee sales, billing and customer support. Since 2008, the company has increased its cus-

tomer base from 950 to more than 1,200.

Terry Cox, who knows Mahoney through his involvement with Business Innovation & Growth (BIG), an entrepreneurial support organization over which she presides, said it's Mahoney's disciplined approach that has allowed him to grow his business.

"Mark understands the importance of discipline for the successful execution of your business strategies," Cox said. "They have stuck to their goals and made their business plan a weekly monitoring tool for performance measurement and accountability."

Growth also is what has generated the most stress, Mahoney said. "When you start a small business, it can be a challenge because you wear so many hats. One minute I'm doing sales, and then I'm in charge of finances and the next customer service."

What's helped him work through this process is reliable employees, most of whom are stay-at-home moms, he said. "We give everyone a laptop, Blackberry and IP phone. They're all flexible, autonomous and independent."

While Mahoney said his industry has remained relatively flat during the economic downturn, he said that for the most part, it's recession-proof. "If a parent has a child in a class he or she really likes, they probably won't pull them out," he said.

And Mahoney said he's been able to continue to grow the company by branching out: Jackrabbit now has clients in 50 states and 10 countries. He expects to hire two new employees this year.



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