

LONG ISLAND  ROAD TO RECOVERY★
LI BUSINESS

Lessons from lacrosse

LI fabricator diversifies into sport equipment

BY SHERYL NANCE-NASH
Special to Newsday

Little did Tom Schaefer realize when he tinkered with the design of his kids' backyard lacrosse equipment that, years later, it would be a game-changer for his business.

Schaefer is co-owner of T&M Fabrication in Patchogue, which makes custom and mass-produced fiberglass tooling and parts for the marine, automotive, construction and entertainment industries.

Three years ago, he capitalized on his expertise in boat-building and fiberglass production to fine-tune a piece of lacrosse practice equipment that he had made for his kids after he tired of replacing their backyard softwall lacrosse rebounders, which he says rusted and ripped.

He created a subsidiary, Laxworx, which makes the Rebounder that hit the market in 2018, and the upgraded Lacrosse Hardwall Rebounder 2.0 last year.

The pandemic impacted both the parent company and the subsidiary. One of T&M Fabrication's biggest customers was school bus manufacturers, for which it made complete sets of fiberglass parts. "This industry took a massive downturn immediately," Schaefer said.

To make matters worse, automakers the company works with shut down at the start of the pandemic and all purchase orders were canceled. "The mod-



Tom Schaefer, right, of Laxworx and T&M Fabrication, alongside T&M co-owner Mike Bergamine with the Laxworx Rebounder used to practice lacrosse shots.

els we needed were postponed for production until 2022."

The pandemic took and gave. "People quickly realized they would be in quarantine and wanted to set themselves up to train on their own," Schaefer said. Sales of the Rebounder 2.0 took off, to about triple what they had been the previous year for the original product. The sales helped the company

weather the blow from the drop in other sectors.

Schaefer switched gears to focus on the Rebounder.

How were you able to transition to the Rebounder?

We were lucky. We had our tooling set up and ready to handle the surge of business just as it happened. Because we are diversified in what we manufacture

we were able to survive the curveball that the pandemic threw us. We are a small company of eight to 10 people. We pivoted those workers to the fabrication of the Rebounders and were able to produce them at a much greater rate and keep up with increased demand.

What challenges did you face?

Shortages and massive price

increases in raw materials certainly have played a challenging role — from the cardboard and wood we use in packaging and shipping, to the raw materials we use for the products we make. Our business is based mainly on fiberglass and resin, and the supply lines for that has been crippled. The shipping industry changed a lot during the pandemic and now there are logistical issues, as well as cost issues. ... Shipping costs doubled overnight. That happened twice. We took a step back and worked with FedEx engineers and made adjustments that resulted in us having dimensions better suited for new shipping guidelines.

How did you fund the growth of the Rebounder?

I took a risk and used capital designated for the fabrication side of the business for the Rebounder. It was a big decision to put that money in a different direction, especially with so much economic uncertainty, but it worked out. Word-of-mouth, social media, Google and Facebook ads fueled sales.

Where do things stand now?

Business with fleet trucks is coming back, but the school bus portion hasn't yet. This summer, sales of the Rebounder are double what they were last summer. The Rebounder was 10 to 20% of our revenues; it's now almost half. The pandemic brought home the importance of diversifying. You can't have all your eggs in one basket. You can disappear if you rely on only one thing.

KEY STAT

16%-18%

U.S. workers covered by a noncompete clause with their employer in 2020

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RESOURCES

- **Hofstra University's Business Development Center** provides education and support to business owners through seminars, workshops and boot camps ([newsday.com/hofbusiness](https://www.newsday.com/hofbusiness)), 516-463-7214.
- **La Fuerza Unida Community Development Corp.**

([newsday.com/unida](https://www.newsday.com/unida)), 516-922-8100, provides economic growth opportunities to low-income, minority- and women-owned enterprises. For information about financing and technical assistance, call or text 516-666-5071 or email: Covid19@Lafuerzaccdc.org.

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