



RACING TO THE FINISH

Family-owned firm excels in the design and manufacture of sports equipment

By Laura Catalano
Special to The Mercury

ROYERSFORD — Aluminum Athletic Equipment began 55 years ago with a single idea.

Founder John Marzucco, a collegiate hurdle star and graduate engineer, designed, invented and patented the first rocker hurdle. Then, he began manufacturing the hurdles out of the basement of his Conshohocken home.

Today, the company, still family-owned and operated, boasts some pretty impressive products. Their self-adjusting aluminum rocker hurdle, created in 1952, is now "the most imitated rocker hurdle in the industry," according to the company's Web site, www.aaesports.com.

But that is only one of about 300 products AAE manufactures and sells to high schools, colleges and sports teams nationwide. Philadelphia Eagles kicker David Akers uses AAE's Accu-Kick adjustable football goals, and the Green Bay Packers installed AAE's Hinged Off-Set football goals at Lambeau Field.

Aluminum Athletic Equipment, located in the Linfield Corporate Center, is a unique firm on several fronts. For one thing, it has steadily grown over the years, while remaining a close-knit family business. For another, it features only Made in America (made right in Royersford, actually) products, in an era when most manufacturing has fallen to cheaper overseas markets.

So how has AAE survived and even flourished? One key reason is that they specialize in custom designed equipment.

Last year, for example, they created a shot put return system



John DiValerio, shop foreman, and Tim Driscoll, company president, stand with a football goalpost gooseneck and crossbars produced for sports teams.

for the Penn Relays.

"We try to constantly come up with new products for sports," said company owner Tim Driscoll, the nephew of Marzucco, who died in 1991. "When people come to us, we're very receptive to custom-made equipment, because where one person has a need, others might, also."

Five years ago, they designed a portable, elevated multipurpose center for the University of Pennsylvania. The center, named the Donkey, serves as a scoring center, broadcasting booth or officiating station, depending on the need.

"It serves a purpose, especially for minor sports," said Driscoll, adding that high schools and colleges can purchase one Donkey "and move it to all different venues."

Another factor behind AAE's success is the company's commitment to producing high-quality merchandise and selling direct so that customer satisfaction is insured.

"The basic philosophy of our business is that nothing we make is perfect. We are always striving to improve what we make," said Driscoll. "That has been the foundation of this business and the yardstick my uncle used and passed on to me. We are constantly striving to produce the highest quality equipment."

For that reason, all AAE products and parts are manufactured in America, while many of their competitors use parts made over-

seas. Driscoll knows equipment can be made more cheaply if the parts are manufactured in China. "But the quality is not the same as the quality we are producing," insisted Driscoll. "It does not hold up under the rigorous usage required in this country. Our equipment is made to last in the environment we have in the States."

"AAE's equipment is designed to be left outside constantly and to hold up with little maintenance. Also, the fact that the company only sells direct means customers get the support they need when setting up and sizing equipment."

"A middle man would not be able to answer customers' questions or give technical support," Driscoll pointed out.

Driscoll got involved in AAE in 1964 while he was attending St. Joseph's University. He took a job with his uncle and worked 40 hours a week while going to



Above, a worker at Aluminum Athletic Equipment in Royersford welds a section of a baseball outfield foul line post.



Above left, company president Tim Driscoll looks over a moveable "Donkey." Above right, fabricator Mark Palladino cuts a piece of metal on an abrasive saw that will be used in one of the many athletic products the Royersford company produces.



school. After graduating with a degree in business, he stayed on. By that time, AAE was no longer run out of Marzucco's basement, and in 1975, they built their own manufacturing plant in West Conshohocken.

Driscoll officially took over in the early 1980s, and the business continued to grow. But, for a while, it was no longer a family business. Then Driscoll's four children grew up, went to college and now, all are involved in the business.

"It's truly a family business," said Driscoll.

His son Adam works in purchasing and product design, and Adam's wife, Jen, is a sales representative. Driscoll's daughter Leigh serves as marketing director; his son-in-law Scott Keith, is director of operations, and his other son-in-law, Tom Syron, is sales manager.

Driscoll remained in the West Conshohocken facility until 2004. "We'd expanded to the point where we were landlocked," said Driscoll. "As soon as the kids came on, I decided I wanted to leave them in as good shape as my uncle left me."

So, the company moved to Royersford, with 45,000 square feet of manufacturing space and 9,000 square feet of office space.

They also have plenty of room for expansion — an important consideration in light of the fact that AAE continues to grow. So does Driscoll's family — he and his wife now have eight grandchildren.

But just because he's a grandfather, doesn't mean Driscoll plans to retire anytime soon.

"They're going to take me out of here feet first," Driscoll joked. "I enjoy coming to work, and working on new things and new products."



Shop foreman Jim Bottari uses a forklift as he prepares to ship hurdles to a high school in Vestal, N.Y.



Adam Driscoll, product design manager, and president Tim Driscoll pose with one of the finished hurdles the company produces for the Penn Relays. Stacks of unfinished hurdles are in the background.