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## Business Spotlight: A Soccer Ball That Scores on All Levels

By Tristan Baurick  
For the Kitsap Sun  
Sunday, September 7, 2008



Lenna Himmelstein | Kitsap Sun Fair Trade Sports, Scott James' Bainbridge Island sports ball company, not only provides fun for its consumers, but good ethics.



Lenna Himmelstein | Kitsap Sun Fair Trade Sports on Bainbridge Island is the first American fair-trade-certified manufacturer of sports balls, and the first in the world to earn an earth-friendly certification.

### BAINBRIDGE ISLAND

There's nothing about Scott James' soccer ball that improves its chances of reaching the back of the net.

It's a simple, sturdy ball comparable in quality to ones stamped with swooshes and pumas.

But the ball was built to outscore the big brands in the areas that matter most to James and his Bainbridge Island-based Fair Trade Sports company.

"For me, it's about the planet, people and community," he said. "If I'm going to sell something, it's got to be about more than profit."

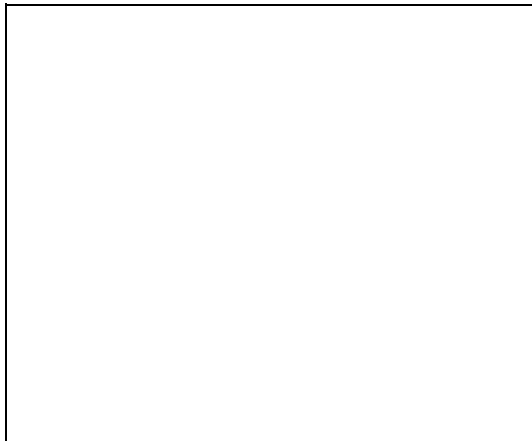
The two-year old company is the first American fair-trade-certified manufacturer of sports balls, and the first in the world to earn an earth-friendly certification.

The inner-bladder of Fair Trade Sports balls are made from rubber harvested in India and Sri Lanka using practices approved by the Forest Stewardship Council. The outer shell is bound with animal-free adhesives and hand-stitched in Pakistan by union workers who enjoy health benefits and livable wages.

Every inch of a Fair Trade Sports ball is built in accordance with James' values.

"Except the thread," he said, fingering the crevasses of a one of his trademark orange and white soccer balls. "I hope to use organic cotton. We're still working on that."

The company is also still working on turning a profit, but James is confident that Fair Trade Sports'



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third year will be a money-maker. Of course, James will likely see little of it, as the company's after-tax profits will be split between the Boys & Girls Club and Room to Read, which establishes libraries in rural Asia and Africa.

"We blatantly ripped-off Newman's Own as our business model," he said, referring to actor Paul Newman's food company, which funnels profits to charities.

James believes what works for salad dressings and pasta sauce can work for Fair Trade Sports' line of basketballs, footballs, volleyballs and soccer balls.

"We've seen that people will switch to a relatively unknown brand based on the 'goodness' of the product and its social and environmental aspects," he said. "We've got that all wrapped up in a really

fun product."

James estimates his sports balls are about \$10 to \$15 cheaper than comparable balls. He achieves the lower price, he said, through a largely word-of-mouth marketing approach and by keeping the David Beckhams and Landon Donovans off the payroll.

"I don't pay millions to celebrity endorsers like the other guys do," he said. "If one wanted to promote my product, I'd be thrilled. But not for millions of dollars. I'd rather see that go to the people stitching the product."

Fair Trade Sports does most of its business online, but it has recently found shelf space in the Whole Foods market chain, "green" product catalogs and at a few local sports stores.

The 12-employee business is also primarily run "virtually," James said, with the main office and online team on Bainbridge, a product designer in Pakistan, the warehouse in Auburn and marketing managers dispersed around the United States.

A 10-year Bainbridge resident and former Microsoft marketing and product manager, James had an epiphany after the birth of his son, Justice, five years ago.

"It just triggered something in me," he said. "I realized that someday he'd ask me what I do for a living. I didn't want to tell him I sell software or just widgets."

He quit Microsoft and began marketing for Pura Vida, a fair trade, organic and shade-grown coffee company.

After about three years in the fair-trade food business, James realized he could combine his passion for social change with his passion for soccer.

During the lead-up to the last World Cup soccer tournament, the Fairtrade Labelling Organization established standards for the manufacture of soccer balls. A British company jumped at the opportunity to produce a fair trade ball, as did an Australian company.

"But nobody was doing anything in the U.S.," James said. "We decided the time was right."

Entering an industry in which 100 million soccer balls are made each year, the three fair trade companies' sales probably amount to little more than a "rounding error," James said.

"But I like to think in people terms, and of how many families are now getting fair wages because of what we do," he said, estimating that several hundred workers build Fair Trade Sports products.

But rather than sell more than the bigger companies, James wants to change the game entirely.

"My primary purpose is to create market pressure on the big five multinational companies," he said. "I know there are good people with good ethics in these companies. They just need the impetus to change. They're already drinking fair-trade coffee and

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fair-trade tea. So when they see that I and 10 other people figured out how to do the same for soccer balls, I'm sure they'll find a way to figure it out, too."

FAIR PLAY

For more information on Fair Trade Sports, visit fairtradesports.com.

Comments

Posted by [TomRosendale](#) on September 8, 2008 at 10:33 a.m. ([Suggest removal](#))

This is a pretty interesting article and for a local company too. I am curious though. Just how many ways are there to empty a cup attached to a rubber tree? Who decides what a 'livable wage' is in Pakistan? And, is there any other type of cotton other than 'organic' cotton?

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