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AMERICAN BASEBALL CAP

PIONEER MANUFACTURER OF BASEBALL HELMETS

Written by June Grayson, Photographed by Richard Grayson

(or any of our aliases)

NO BUSINESS IN THE SPORTING# GOOD#INDUSTRY HAS A BETTER NAME

Lindsay Wo!fe knows his ABCs. He a!so knows the other 23  
letters of the a!phabet however they are arranged in today's  
sports business wor!d.

Wo!fe is the president of American Baseba!l Cap, the com-  
pany that manufacturers protective p!astic he!mets for a!! of the

major leagues, college teams, and Little Leagues - indeed, wherever hardball is played.

He also does his part about the United States balance of payments. Americans may buy Japanese cars but the Japanese order their baseball helmets from Lindsay Wolfe.

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Wolfe is a lifelong sportsman, mechanical engineer and, at the age of 67, a cogent philosopher about American business practices.

You won't find Wolfe a part of any merger and acquisition deal. He belongs to the school that knows that small is beautiful. His thesis? "We would all live happier lives and enjoy more of every day if we just did one thing well and kept at it."

Any baseball player standing in front of a ball hurtling toward him at 100 miles an hour can be thankful that the one thing that Wolfe has chosen to do well is to make protective baseball helmets.

Baseball history before 1950 is loaded with players whose careers were shortened because they were hit in the head with a baseball. "Once you have been hit, it's disastrous," says Wolfe.

"We have even had some men killed in baseball. In those days all

they said was 'he was hit and had a hemorrhage.' Now we know that any heavy impact to the head can cause neurologic damage of some sort, as well as a subdural hematoma."

Watch the films of the 1950 World Series between the Philadelphia Phillies and the New York Yankees. No one wore a helmet.

Branch Rickey, manager of the Pittsburgh Pirates and father-in-law (then) of Wolfe, said about that time, "I wish someone could show me how to protect the heads of my players, as they do in football."

Ralph Davia, a young inventor, helped Rickey develop

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the first plastic helmet. Rickey and friends founded American Baseball Cap in Pittsburgh in 1952. Wolfe was on the board of the new company from the beginning.

Rickey was already an innovator. He developed the farm system. He broke the color line when he was the first to sign talented black players. Now he did it again. He made it a team policy in 1953 that his players had to wear helmets when up to bat. The National League voted in 1955 to make it a league rule and the American League followed suit in 1956.

At first players did not want to wear the helmets, afraid

they would look like sissies. When some of the greatest names in baseball became convinced that helmets provided protection the other players fell in line. PeeWee Reese and Jackie Robinson were early believers. They knew that their friend, Joe Alcock of the Milwaukee Braves, survived a head hit because the ball shattered his helmet instead of his skull.

"Remember the 1981 World Series," says Wolfe, "when Dodger third baseman Ron Cey was beamed by the Yankee's Goose Gosage? It was sickening. But Cey's helmet protected him. He even played in the next game."

Some major league players will only wear the helmet when at bat. Some wear the helmet with one ear flap on the side facing the pitcher. Others will choose the two ear flap helmet. And others have designs altered just for them.

A few players will now wear the hard helmet throughout the whole game in place of the regular soft baseball cap. "That

is the trend," Wolfe says. "Little Leaguers and college players wear the hard helmet throughout the game. When they advance to professional baseball they are already sold on full protection."

Wolfe became president of ABC in 1960. He moved the corporate headquarters from Pittsburgh to Media, a small Philadelphia suburb, when he bought the company in 1971.

ABC subcontracts the manufacture of its helmets to a

Somerset, Pa., company where ABC owns its own molds and machinery.

After the helmets are formed, they are shipped to Media for painting and decorating with team logos.

Wolfe lets the quality of his product speak for him. You will find no impressive business campus in Media. Wolfe, his son, other corporate employees, and a few seasonal workers operate ABC out of a modest frame building across the street from the local commuter train.

"We could have added our own manufacturing facility. But why should we? We are a seasonal business. This is the most efficient way to operate. I have never tried to impress anyone. We do what we do best - research, development, sales, and distribution. Then we hire other companies to do what they do best."

That is why Wolfe works closely with Wayne State University, Detroit. "They have the best facilities to study head injuries as any place in the country. They have designed a head form that so perfectly simulates the human head that they can study its interaction with the speed of any ball and protective materials. We send them new plastics and configurations constantly seeking ways to improve our products."

A helmet has a plastic shell, the foam for the ear pads,

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a leather liner with a different type of foam inside, and a crown pad.

"We mix these products to determine the combination that best reduces the impact of the thrown ball. I was on the first committee to work with Wayne State to develop standards to prevent baseball injuries. So I know that they know what they are doing."

"It would cost us thousands of dollars to replicate the whole testing process. Wayne State does it best. We do what we do best. We know how to sell."

Every spring Wolfe or his son, Lindsay, visit all of the major league clubhouses. "We throw out the helmets that should be thrown out, refurbish some helmets, write up an order for the helmets needed, and send them a bill. No contracts involved. No endorsements."

Wolfe has never sought an endorsement for his products. In fact, he doesn't believe in them. "It is your integrity in the marketplace that counts," says Wolfe.

Wolfe does not even worry about competition. "Plenty of people make good helmets. They can muscle into my territory and they do. My philosophy is that every competitor is a sales person for me. He is selling his products and I am selling mine and I learn from him how to make my product better. Then I reach the point where the buyers know my product is the best."

This explains why ABC now sells only baseball helmets and riot helmets. ABC riot helmets protected the police during the student riots of the 1960s. ABC has shipped riot helmets

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to the Shah of Iran and European police.

"We experimented with helmets for other sports. There were too many variations in playing conditions and state laws. We couldn't be sure that our products were the best under all circumstances, so now we don't even try."

Plastics deteriorate. "That is why we tell everyone to get new helmets every three years. The major league clubs buy a new set of helmets each year so that is not their problem. But it could be a problem for amateurs. The sun and other environmental conditions affect different plastics in different ways. So the goal always is to find the best product for each set of conditions."

Product liability laws concern American business and ABC is not immune to these concerns. "It is ironic that a helmet which has prevented so many serious injuries is now sometimes faulted if it does not prevent injuries to other parts of the body - something it was not designed to do," Wolfe says.

Theoretically, it should be possible to develop protective equipment to prevent all injuries. "Who would wear it?" Wolfe asks. "You would look like a space explorer."

Research may develop a better plastic someday. "A General Electric or General Motors could stimulate such a sudden material

development because they would use thousands of tons of it. Our needs are relatively so small in the total market place that we remain dependent on what is already available."

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Wolfe thinks that a small, family-owned business is best structured to provide a quality product for the long haul. "I disagree with the whole philosophy of growth in American industry today. Just because you are successful in one company, why do you think you have to acquire 8,000 other companies?"

"Many an executive in America today with a big company is looking at his own personal track record, not what is good for the company 20 years down the road. He wants to show how he made the company grow. Then he will be hired away by another company at a bigger salary."

"But how does he do this? To show profits for the short term, he will use cheaper materials, cut the price, and raise the sales. Then other companies start saying 'there's a guy who is a real comer' and he moves on for more money. But what did that executive do to the first company where he was responsible for its reputation and the lives of the other workers? The company's



reputation has soured, the costs are out of line, the stockholders are angry because the dividends are down - all just to get a quick sales curve for his own advancement."

"I am not against growth or competition but our decisions should be based on what is best for a company in the future, not the short term benefit of the chief executive officer."

Wolfe has spent his life keeping his eye on the ball. "Put a ball in front of me and I'll follow it," Wolfe says. "It doesn't make much difference what the ball is. I played

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football and captained my team at Swarthmore College. I was an All-American lacrosse player. It was my privilege to be associated with Branch Rickey, a really great man. And I still get to follow the ball in my business."

"Anyone who knows me well realizes that I don't spend much of my time worrying about what is going to be left in the evening. Every day is a great day. I enjoy building a good product and giving good service."

Lindsay Wolfe has adapted the principles of good sportsmanship to his business as well as his life.

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