

Business goes into high gear

Hoots Gear started with a \$60 sewing machine a decade ago. Today, the company sells protective armour to high-calibre riders across the globe.

By JENNIFER MALONEY
Staff Reporter

Donning dreads, knee-length shorts and an energy that makes one think he'd embrace any one's neighbour, Jay Hoots does not come across as a stereotypical entrepreneur. While anything but typical, Hoots' possesses the entrepreneurial spirit that has pushed him to build a local empire out of his passion for mountain biking.



A trip to a bike shop in search of bar pads over a decade ago led Jay Hoots (above) to create a thriving mountain bike gear and accessory business.

"We believe it's not a matter of creating armour for if you get hurt," Hoots says from a sunken chair at a Lonsdale coffee shop. "It's creating armour for when you get hurt."

Hoots comes from a BMX background and was used to wearing protective gear while racing off dirt ramps and popping tricks. The concept of mountain bike armour, however, didn't exist 13 years ago when he and his peers were pioneering a subculture that the North Shore is today internationally recognized for.

It was the purchase of an expensive mountain bike that led Hoots into a Vancouver bike shop in search of a protective bar pad, but what he found was a simple design of foam and material that carried a price tag of \$25.

Unsatisfied with his shopping venture, he went home to create the first Hoots' bar pads, in which he put foam both in and outside of the products, hand drawing unique labels on each one. He took them back to the shop, which agreed to sell them.

"It was a tester to see if I was interested in doing it," Hoots explains. "It was also a demonstration of what I thought I should get for \$25."

Vancouver-based companies like Roach and CoreRat were starting to get into mountain

which he opted to use in place of the bulky half inch foam found in most pads at the time. He started out making shin and kneepads using North Shore Plastics, which used heated guns and a vacuum to create the plastic. Local students shaped the substance on to molds. At home, Hoots sewed and riveted the pads onto the plastic molds finishing about 150 in the first year. The gear was sold at local shops like John Henry, Dizzy Cycles and On Top Bike Shop.

"I took the best parts of other sports pads and kept 99 per cent of the protection, but lightened it to make it breathable," he explains. "If you're getting into trouble you're taught to jump off the bike. In skateboarding the first thing you do is go to your knees. There's no reason that philosophy can't work in the forest — in fact it works better."

The next phase he embarked on was a clothing line, which he'd created from home after returning from his day job. Hoots spent nights at the library reading books on screen printing, from which he learned how to build his own clothing press.

He started out hand printing the T-shirts and hoodies himself, but soon hired four seamstresses — half of whom were retired — to keep up with the demand.

It was also at that time that the May 1998 edition of *of Bike*, an influential American publication, came out lauding the North Shore for having the "sickest" riding trails on the continent.

"All of the sudden, I was inundated with international orders," Hoots recalls. "America, Australia and Germany were

biking armour, but the friends Hoots was riding with were going beyond the protocol of what the stores could offer. That soon became the epiphany of Hoots armour.

His workshop started with the purchase of a 1934 sewing

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— Jay Hoots on what makes his armour so popular

machine, equipped with a large hand wheel, which he bought at a garage sale for \$60. He fixed the machine's motor using leather shoelaces and began using the handwheel to punch through quarter inch foam,

buying like crazy. It was absolutely insane. I was getting cash orders, and everytime I sent out an order somewhere, I had a new product. That was a huge benchmark."

Hoots moved to six seam-



Rob Nevill photos

The cost of getting outfitted: Body Armour (Vorpak Jacket), \$299; FreeRide Shins, \$69; FreeRide knees, \$79; FreeRide Arm, \$69; Hoots Formula Short, \$89; Hoots 'Only' Gloves, \$44; Ryders Python Glasses, \$49; Helmet, \$49; Jersey, \$149; Norco Bike Approx \$3000. Total: \$3896.

stresses from four, but they were just meeting orders and the demand was getting stronger.

"I could only screen print so much and then it started to get very intense," Hoots remembers with frustration. "I was ready to sell my soul."

While the whirlwind of a surging business proved tough at times, Hoots found a mentor in his brother-in-law's friend who had started a windsurfing distribution company called Trident Performance Sports. In 2001, Hoots decided to partner with the company, which took over the business from a distance providing research and development as well as structure and financial background. Hoots remains in creative control of Hoots Gear and still custom makes special orders like the high school uniforms for Rockridge school's mountain biking team. All of the six local seamstresses except one have since slowed down or stopped working for the company, which now does most of its manufacturing out of China. Last year, Hoots Gear did just over 200,000 units in sales, a third of these were international orders from as far as Australia, Italy and the Czech Republic.

"We're not a big shop that does tons and tons of business,"

says Hoots. "We do under a million dollar sales a year, but we understand to be a pro rider you need to be protected. People with responsibilities can't afford to get hurt."

With a whole new contingency of young riders emerging on the North Shore and beyond however, the local entrepreneur is planning on taking the concept of mountain biking armour to a whole new level, which he expects will triple sales in the next two years.

"We're about to converge on the next level of technical advancement going from a small company that's been borrowing technology to actually creating our own," Hoots confesses, but is tight-lipped when pressed for details on the new line. "I'll leave you guessing."

The first phase of Hoots' new gear is expected to be in stores in 2006 with the second phase planned for 2007. For more information on Hoots visit www.hootsgear.com ©

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The Riders

Part 4 (June 2):
The Future