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Big challenge to some local skate shops

A skate shop like no other, the first of its kind in the world, opened for business last month in Burlington. The Sept. 15 ribbon-cutting of the Bauer owned-and-operated store was attended by the likes of a smiling Mark Messier, an anthem-singing Rene Rancourt, even a key-tickling Ron Poster, the first-chair organist for Bruins games at the Garden.



KEVIN PAUL DUPONT/GLOBE STAFF

The new Bauer store includes a small skating rink where customers can go for a test twirl before purchasing skates.

Sure, a skate shop is a skate shop is a skate shop. We know our skate shops, big and small, here in the Hub of Hockey. I am proud to say I still scoot around occasionally in the \$90 pair of leather Tacks I bought, circa 1972, at H.A. Zwicker, Inc. in Bedford. The tidy Zwicker shop, like my old Tacks, is still going strong.

Joe Bertagna, the former Harvard goalie and longtime commissioner of Hockey East, was a Zwicker kid in the 1950s and '60s when the store was in Arlington. The intimate shop's ceiling was papered with black-and-white photos, action shots of area high school games.

"You'd bring in your skates for Homer Zwicker to sharpen," recalled Bertagna. "And while you waited, you'd stand there, maybe with 5-6 other people, and everyone would be looking up, staring at these great pictures — kind of like we were looking into the night sky for UFOs."

In a retail world gone to big box everything, small independent skate shops keep skating their wing around here. But now we have Bauer, the behemoth of all hockey gear, including skates as pricey as \$900 per pair and sticks as much as \$260 a pop, doing the mega big box with its first-ever retail store.

No question, the place is glitzy, spotless, and fascinating, and without a single black-and-white photo taped to its ceiling. Yet for all its glitter, I am uncertain what to make of the entire enterprise or how it will fit in the overall skate shop world.

For starters, the store's name is "Own The Moment" and its storefront sign in Burlington also says, in smaller letters, "Hockey Experience." No mention of Bauer, a bit counterintuitive when the idea is to build the Bauer brand.

The store's most intriguing element, by far, is the small ice rink, approximately 30 feet by 80 feet, tucked in one corner of the sprawling 20,000-squarefoot store. The ice is maintained by a resurfacers approximately the size of a sitdown lawnmower. Customers can try on skates and go for a test twirl before buying. Your mom and pop skate shop never had a sheet of ice.

"The foundation of these stores is really built around two things," said Tory Mazzola, Bauer's senior manager for corporate communications. "No. 1, a fit, learn, and experience process with our personal fit experts. And No. 2, the experience . . . and the biggest, most noticeable one is the indoor ice rink."

Bauer refers to the store's floor personnel as "fit experts." They are retail clerks who've made the vigil to the company's R&D center outside Montreal (in Blainville, Quebec, to be tutored there in the materials and manufacturing of the hockey gear). Fit experts want customers to know they know their stuff.

Across the store, there is also an enclosed shooting gallery, where customers are encouraged to pull on skates, step out on a fake ice surface, and fire pucks. Shooters are free to test sticks until they are convinced they've selected the model preloaded with at least 50 goals a season, or an equal number of assists.

"We've thought about a shooting gallery for years," said Wayne Zwicker, owner/proprietor of the Bedford shop, its inventory approximately 95 percent Bauer-manufactured. "Our worry has been, little Johnny gets his brother in there and starts firing pucks at his head. Too much of a liability factor."

Zwicker chose not to comment on how he felt about Bauer, his No. 1 provider of goods, now selling the same equipment at its own retail store in an adjacent town. The situation is somewhat akin to that of a neighborhood hardware store having to adjust to the realities of a Home Depot or Lowe's moving into town. Skate shops now have their top supplier courting the same customers.

"We'll see what happens," said Zwicker, whose father and uncle started the business in 1932. "Bauer has a great product and the new store is definitely a cool place. We've sold Bauer skates since 1934. People come to us because of service, to get the right fit . . . it's our lives, it's in our blood, we breathe hockey."

According to Mazzola, Bauer, with its corporate headquarters in Exeter, N.H., views the new venture as both brand extension and a way "to share strategies and tactics in our store that will help our retail partners." If the "Own The Moment" model succeeds, Bauer figures it has the potential to boost sales at its some 1,700 retail partners across the United States and Canada.

Bauer will open its second "Own The Moment" megastore late this fall in Bloomington, Minn. Over the next 2-3 years, said Mazzola, the company plans to have opened 10 such superstores, targeting markets such as Chicago, Toronto, and Montreal. Burlington was the first choice, he said, in part because of its proximity to Exeter, allowing company officials an easy commute to analyze the new venture.

"And it's a great hockey market," added Mazzola. "When you look at the US, you know it's Minnesota, Massachusetts, those are incredible hockey markets. Others, too, like Michigan, Chicago, and New York. But we know Boston is a great hockey market."

A new hockey season is upon us, along with a new shopping experience. The moments we've owned for decades are now a Bauer business sector.

"The old photos?" said Wayne Zwicker, age 59, referring to the shots taped to the ceiling of his dad's shop. "Long story, but that shop closed in the early '70s and they got tossed. Wish I had them. People walked out of there with a good pair of sharpened skates, and a sore neck to go with 'em."



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