

Q&A: Brent Martin Son builds on father's vision to supply line of affordable sunglasses

By Jason Norman

NORTH VANCOUVER, British Columbia—Ryders Eyewear is celebrating a quarter century in business this year, but the seeds for the Canadian company were planted much earlier, in 1970.

"I grew up in the industry," said Brent Martin, who founded the company with his dad, Don Martin, in 1986.

It was Don, however, who first started sourcing sunglasses in Japan in the early 1970s. He would load his Cadillac up when product arrived, and hit every convenience store he could find in Western Canada. "That was my first introduction into the world of sunglasses," Brent said. "He was considered a renegade salesman in his Cadillac."

As for the younger Martin, he went to school, did a little bit of adventure travel and moved to Whistler, British Columbia, to build log cabins. He also dominated on a mountain bike, winning a Canadian mountain bike championship in 1986.

"At the time mountain bikes were just coming into Canada," Martin said. "I saw what my dad was doing and saw a need."

It was around that time, too, that Oakley released its Factory Pilot eyewear, but the sunglasses were priced out of the market for many. "I thought, we can do something that's in reach of my buddies who like to use that stuff," Martin said.

Ryders hasn't strayed from that initial vision to build eyewear that's comparable to the high-end brands in function and performance, but at a lower price. The company recently unveiled a new logo and website while signing on more pro athletes as it cements future growth. And even though Don no longer owns a stake in the company, he's still on the board of directors and a mentor to his son.



Brent Martin
circa 1986

Did Ryders enter the market to appeal to a different consumer than those who purchase Oakley sunglasses?

Martin: Yeah, a different demographic. Although we do sell to the same customer. A lot of our customers will have their Oakleys or their Smiths (Smith Optics). They'll actually use the Ryders more day to day, but they'll pull out their Oakleys on special occasions. If they're going on a really dirty day, they'll pull their Ryders out. And that's where we want to play. We're accessible and people aren't afraid to use our glasses or scratch them.

Has competition in that lower price range increased?

Martin: We were the first ones into that. Bike shops at first were a little bit resistant about getting into eyewear at that price. We've been able to develop a pretty healthy business, getting these shops to see a customer that is looking for

that. We've forged the way, and now other competitors have moved into that \$40 to \$50 space and recognized that there is a good market there.

Who are your main competitors?

Martin: Tifosi, Serfas and Optic Nerve.

Have the company's roots in mountain biking served to its advantage?

Martin: We've been a little too humble in marketing that in the past. I've been involved in mountain biking since I got my first mountain bike in 1979 or 1980. Whistler's our back yard. The North Shore is our back yard. We sponsor trails. That's one of our big things is giving back to the playgrounds we most enjoy. There are a lot of companies based here in the Northwest in Vancouver. There are just a lot of riders per capita in Vancouver. This market is our home.

How do your sales in Canada compare to your business in the U.S.?

Martin: It's one of our visions to be stronger in the U.S. We're quite mature in Canada. We have a sales force that's been in place for 25 years. They have relationships that run deep. It's been a little more difficult in the States, but we have had a sales manager based in Boulder, Colorado, for the last few years. Our goal is to have a more central house or office in the U.S.

How have sales fared through the first half of 2011?

Martin: In Canada we've had a very slow summer. We're just having our first warm days in Vancouver. We're holding our own compared to last year. We haven't lost any ground. But we're not seeing the growth that we expected. **BRAIN**

They're Here!

DURO
DUROTIRE.COM
866.788.2060

Fixie Pops
They're Skidalicious!

DURO
Fixie Pops
They're Skidalicious!

DURO
700 x 24c
IN STOCK NOW

Collect em All!!