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## North Jersey baseball stores reinvent themselves as youngsters push to club teams

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\* Local merchants selling customized goods

Essentially, baseball today is the same game it was when it was drawn up by Abner Doubleday, or Alexander Cartwright, or whomever back in the 1840s. But independent North Jersey retailers who cater to the sport are, in some cases, radically different than they were only 20 years ago.

Stiff competition from large-chain sporting goods stores that sell lower-priced baseball equipment, coupled with players' shifting away from town Little Leagues toward club and travel teams, has forced the stores to rethink the way they do business. Instead of the mass production business model that used to feed town leagues, the focus is now on orders from club teams or personalized equipment for individual players.

"We've evolved with the times," said Joseph Gilligan, a co-owner of Akadema Inc. in Hawthorne. "We aren't reinventing our products, we are just reinventing how we do business."

Akadema manufactures and sells bats, gloves, helmets, catcher's gear, and other baseball and softball equipment for both younger players and even major-leaguers like former Red Sox star Manny Ramirez and current Red Sox outfielder Shane Victorino, among others. While some Akadema products are sold in stores like Sports Authority and Dick's Sporting Goods, they also offer customizable equipment that club players seek out — which is how they differentiate themselves from the larger chains.

"We sell the \$19.99 kind of glove, but that was never really our thing," Gilligan said. "Our products are focused on quality, not being the cheapest."

Akadema offers customized baseball mitts featuring different colored leather and bindings that cost between \$224.99 and \$44.99 depending on the age group.

Gilligan, who co-owns Akadema with his brother Lawrence, said his store did 40 percent of its business with high school, college, and inter-town baseball and softball teams in the 1990s.

He said, however, that today the number more accurately reflects business with club teams. The change in business has led to more custom-ordered equipment and fewer bulk orders from town Little Leagues, he said.

A bulk order of any equipment can range from a "few thousand dollars" to more than \$15,000, depending on whether the team is inter-town or club, Gilligan said.



Joe Gilligan, left, and brother Lawrence, co-owners of Akadema Inc. in Hawthorne. The company makes baseball gloves, bats, uniforms and other products, including sports apparel.



"In the mid-'90s, I had 3,000 Little League players come in, 30 of them would be on club or travel teams," Gilligan said. "Today, it's mainly club players coming in. Because of that, the town Little Leagues don't spend like they used to."

Other businesses, such as Sports Time in Norwood, focus on producing and embroidering equipment and uniforms for both club and Little League teams.

Evan Baumgarten, the owner of Sports Time, said his company screen-prints team names, sponsors and numbers on uniforms for different towns and schools in North Jersey – but also sells hard goods such as catcher's equipment and baseballs.

"Kids only focus on playing one sport instead of trying out a few, which is why you are seeing a decline in Little League numbers," Baumgarten said. "It's affected the business; there are less uniforms being ordered. A few years ago, a league might order 500 uniforms; now it is something like 425."

Baumgarten said he has begun offering schools and other teams "player packs" that include screen-printed or embroidered sweat pants, sweat shirts or other apparel. He did that, he said, to offset the loss of business he once got from a larger volume of uniforms needed for inter-town leagues

"We had to reinvent ourselves a little bit," Baumgarten said.

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