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## Playing To Win

Bobby L. Hickman  
November 6, 2008

When Pat Alacqua and his partners acquired Suwanee Sports Academy (SSA) in 2002, the facility was losing money, floundering without a strategic direction and lacked the resources to make it successful.

Since then, SSA has gone from losing \$600,000 a year to profitability. In fact, SSA's turnaround has been so successful that the concept is launching under the On Court Player Development® brand nationally.

Alacqua, CEO of venture resource firm Blue Magnet Partners, says his company had planned from the start to create a successful youth sports-oriented operation that could be replicated. He admits the turnaround took longer than expected, "but these things always do."

In early 2001, Alacqua sold his 22-year-old event management business and began looking for opportunities to utilize his lifelong interest in sports. He led a group that bought SSA for a couple of reasons. For one, he had been involved in the youth sports community for many years through his children. Secondly, he felt his previous entrepreneurial experience could be applied to sports. "A lot of things weren't working, and I felt there were things we could do to improve on the processes," he says.

### The Challenges Of A Money-Losing Business

Alacqua says SSA "was a tiger to turn around. We're happy with where it is now but we faced a lot of challenges."

The main change was moving SSA from being a basketball court rental facility to an academy model with training programs. SSA's original owners had an "unbelievable vision" when they built the seven basketball courts in the late 1990s, Alacqua says. However, "They didn't really have an execution plan, their business plan did not work." According to Alacqua, SSA was built on a rental model. The new owners' vision "was to create a player development model." Today, the company has basketball, volleyball and multi-sport programs, and plans to add another major sport in about 60 days.

While a new business model was the first step, Alacqua says, the turnaround was also driven by installing sound processes and systems. Small businesses often lack the detailed planning and operational capabilities of larger corporations, he says. Some small businesses do not even realize they need those systems, he added, and the ones that do cannot afford them.

Alacqua believes SSA faced a number of issues that had to be resolved in a cost effective manner. Those included how to do a better job of marketing and communicating with existing customers; how to build better systems for registration, budgeting and other operational needs; defining staff roles; and constructing appropriate staffing models.

Developing the company's future leaders was a key concern, he says. Small businesses cannot afford to hire experienced upper-level executives, yet they need that expertise to grow. The solution tested at SSA was to leverage the skills of the academy's investors to find and train future leaders.



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At SSA, Alacqua says, he and his partners spent time training executives-in-waiting on such topics as how to run an effective meeting, communicating with employees, company planning and how to manage a corporate culture. While Alacqua has run SSA's day-to-day affairs, he has groomed Mike Eddy to take over the business.

Eddy, who has the titles of president and CEO, says he came to SSA more than four years ago. "I had been in the financial industry and was looking for a change," Eddy says. "I had always been involved in sports and I'd known Pat for a number of years. He convinced me it was a good opportunity to cut my teeth in an entrepreneurial setting, and that I would have an opportunity to lead if I was up for it. He says SSA has been a "great opportunity to learn" while combining his passions for business and sports.

Eddy says the biggest factor in SSA's rebirth has been access to resources for success. "A small business rarely has process systems and business systems where you can think and plan in a disciplined manner like this," he says. "We went from a business with little formal organization to one that, for a small business, is pretty sophisticated."



### The Next Step

What's next for the company? Alacqua says Blue Magnet Partners is about a month away from a "soft launch" that will take the SSA-tested player development model to market. He says the branding for the new offerings have not been finalized. The programs will include "programs in a box" where other sports development facilities can use the systems and processes proven to work at SSA. While the national rollout is the immediate focus, he adds, talks are already underway to take the program international.

Eddy, who will be at the "center of the rollout process," says the group will offer "everything from coach education and certification programs delivered online to program guides and manuals to sophisticated software and operating systems." Alacqua says a facilities management service will also be available for local sites that want Blue Magnet Partners to run all aspects of their operations.

From the start, Alacqua says, "Our vision has been to become the player development authority worldwide. We proved it will work with SSA and we're ready now to roll it out to the rest of the country."

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