



BOCA GLADIATOR

Only 2 percent of women-owned businesses break \$1 million in revenue, so 15-year-old **Rachel Zietz** decided to make hers one of them.

BY LYSSA GOLDBERG
PHOTOGRAPHY BY GINA FONTANA

Fifteen-year-old entrepreneur Rachel Zietz spends late nights and early mornings on business video calls with her product factory in China. Sometimes she'll squeeze in a nap on the bus ride to school in Fort Lauderdale. But more likely, the high school sophomore uses that time to do homework, since her afternoons are busy with lacrosse practice for one of the three teams she's a part of.

The Boca Raton native owns Gladiator Lacrosse, which aims to sell higher-quality, lower-cost equipment than competitors. Rachel, who has been playing lacrosse since the fourth grade, felt the goals and rebounders she practiced with at home would too easily rust and tear. Not to mention, she was spending up to \$230 every few months to replace broken equipment—way more than a teenager like herself could afford. “Whenever there’s a problem, that really means an opportunity,” she says.

So, Rachel turned her longtime passion into a lucrative business. She launched Gladiator Lacrosse as a middle school student in 2013 after developing the idea through the Young Entrepreneurs Academy. She sells rebounders (\$159.95)—a trampoline-like net wall used to practice throwing and catching skills—and goals (\$79.95) built to last a couple of years, primarily through her online store, gladiatorlacrosse.com. She has also launched her products at select retail stores.

Last year, the company earned more than \$1 million in revenue, garnering Rachel recognition from Gov. Rick Scott, who heard about the business after Rachel introduced herself at a local event; he later honored her with Florida’s Young Entrepreneur Award.

When Rachel first launched the company, she set the goal of selling 500 units total. To her surprise, she’s selling at least 500 a month. Now her ultimate goal is to make Gladiator Lacrosse the brand everyone is using.

How’d she get to this point? The teenager found out that only 2 percent of women-owned businesses reach the \$1 million mark and decided to do something about it. “I was like, ‘Well, that’s got to change. It says right here that no one can do it, so we have to do it,’ she recalls.

Of course, there was more than a spur-of-the-moment decision at play. Rachel is competitive—both on the lacrosse field and in the business world—and has a keen sense of determination. Those two qualities make her a successful entrepreneur. It also doesn’t hurt that Rachel was born into an innovative, business-savvy family. Her parents are seasoned entrepreneurs themselves, and her younger brother has also caught the bug, founding GameReef, a video game console rental company.

When Rachel first started selling Gladiator Lacrosse products at local tournaments—a marketing strategy none of her competitors were using at the time—she was hesitant to leave her booth and go out and get customers.

“They’ll come if they’re interested,” she thought. But, her father would teach her that customers don’t know they’re interested until you show them the product. She’s learned that in business, just as in lacrosse, you need good “field vision” to act selflessly and assess the situation from other perspectives.

“It takes a lot of guts to go up to someone not knowing what’s going to come out of that, but I definitely got over my fear,” she says.

With that kind of mentorship and encouragement from her father, Rachel has turned into the type of young woman who’s bold enough to walk up to a professional lacrosse legend and pitch him a business partnership.

After spotting Major League Lacrosse player Casey Powell at a South Florida tournament, she approached the athlete to ask if he’d be interested in collaborating with Gladiator Lacrosse.

“When I went up to talk to him, like many other people, he was surprised that I was running the business so young,” she says.

Together, they launched a Casey Powell signature edition line of ultradurable rebounders and goals. And it doesn’t end there. The budding businesswoman gave her elevator pitch to the cast of “Shark Tank” last summer. The episode will air on May 13.

Now when Rachel walks into business meetings with older execs, she wears heels and a power color like red, and remembers she has her own experiences to bring to the table.

“I knew I always wanted to do this. I just didn’t realize I could do it this young,” she says. ■