

August 19, 2007

THE GOODS

A Soap That Goes to the Mat

By **BRENDAN I. KOERNER**

SEASONAL businesses have devised some creative ways to earn year-round revenue. Several ski resorts, for example, open mountain-biking trails during the summer. Many retailers of patio furniture stock up on pool tables and bar stools when cold weather hits.

And Guy Sako, the creator of Defense Soap, keeps his sales consistent by marketing to some of the planet's most ferocious athletes — practitioners of M.M.A., for mixed martial arts, who use a variety of techniques to kick and pound each other into submission.

Before marketing Defense Soap to M.M.A. fighters, Mr. Sako sold it exclusively to amateur wrestlers, whose seasons typically run from early autumn to late winter. Mr. Sako, a police officer and youth wrestling coach in Cleveland, invented his soap in 2005 to combat ringworm, impetigo and other skin infections that can be transmitted via sweaty wrestling mats.

He first looked into whether he could make a soap containing powerful antifungal chemicals. But that would have required getting regulatory approval from the [Food and Drug Administration](#). He instead turned his attention to what are known as natural remedies, finally settling on a combination of tea tree and eucalyptus oils. Soaps containing these oils don't require F.D.A. approval, as long as the product doesn't claim to be antifungal.

Mr. Sako, who wrestled for Cleveland State University in the late 1980s, enlisted a tiny soap manufacturer, the New England Moon Soap Company of Ayer, Mass., to make the first bars. "They just made it in a kitchen, and cut them by hand," he said. "It was just like a chunk of wax — it didn't look like a bar of Dove."

Nevertheless, the bars sold quickly in Cleveland, where Mr. Sako carried a cooler filled with Defense Soap to wrestling tournaments in late 2005 and early 2006. He said the team he coaches experienced only four cases of ringworm during the 2005-6 season, compared with 100 the previous season.

After selling his first 1,000 bars, he switched to a larger soap manufacturer, Twincraft of Winooski, Vt. "They made me a bar that looks just like Dove," he said, "something mainstream Americans might be a little more willing to buy, because it doesn't look so foreign."

The revamped bars became available just ahead of the 2006-7 wrestling season, and sales grew outside the Cleveland area as he built a site, [DefenseSoap.com](#), and started advertising on "Takedown Wrestling Radio," a syndicated weekly program.

But he worried about the summer lull, when wrestlers usually avoid the mats. "My customer base was a little

thin," he said. "Then I thought, 'I should turn this into a product for mixed martial artists.' "

He was already familiar with the world of M.M.A., because so many of the participants are former wrestlers. Chuck Liddell, for example, a major star on the Ultimate Fighting Championship circuit, once wrestled for California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo. To reach the M.M.A., Mr. Sako bought ads this spring in Fight! magazine. And he provided free samples to members of the U.F.C. and the rival International Fight League.

HE says he is now selling half of his soap bars, which cost \$5 each, to wrestlers and the other half to mixed martial artists. "But M.M.A. is a runaway freight train," he said. "It's going to surpass wrestling pretty soon." According to SNL Kagan, a research firm, the U.F.C. earned \$205 million from pay-per-view bouts in 2006.

The future market for Defense Soap, however, may depend in part on state legislatures: mixed martial arts bouts are still illegal in more than two dozen states, including New York. And, unlike wrestling, M.M.A. will probably never have youth teams.

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