

# MSU fan engineers cowbells to make a living

## Lifting ban on the noisemaker offers new opportunity

By Kyle Venzey

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More than a decade ago, lifelong Mississippi State University sports fan Eric Vlietstra lost his cowbells while moving to Chattanooga for a new job.

No worries, he thought. He made a call and ordered two of them — one maroon, one white — from a store back in Mississippi. When they arrived, there was maroon paint chipped onto the white one and vice versa. He wasn't happy.

"I thought, 'Well, heck, I could do a better job than this,'" he said.

Starting this month, he'll be doing it as his full-time job.

Twelve years after that banged-up order of cowbells prompted him to start assembling and selling them on the side, Vlietstra, a 39-year-old Northwest Rankin and MSU graduate, quit his job on July 30 as an industrial engineer at a Dayton, Tenn., factory.

What once became a way to contribute to his son's college fund became his new full-time job.

"It's a little bit scary doing that because you have insurance to worry about," he said. "It's something that I think about, but I just feel like I've been doing this long enough, it's just a matter of stepping it up a little more by doing a little more marketing."

The bells sell from \$12 to \$25 based on the size and color. The company offers discounts for bulk purchases.

With his friend Gene Redden, a Jackson native, Jackson Prep and MSU grad and Chattanooga resident, they're doing just that. A website, mycowbell.com, will be the starting point of the new business.

Vlietstra figures he needs to sell about 3,000 cowbells a year to make it worthwhile. In 2009, he sold 820. In 2008, he sold 612. And in 2007, after receiving a late crush of orders in advance of State's trip to the Liberty Bowl, he sold 783.

But as Redden points out, all this has been done with virtually no marketing. Though Vlietstra had a web-



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Eric Vlietstra, an engineer in Chattanooga, Tenn., and a Mississippi State University grad, once welded cowbell handles on in his spare time, sold them and put money in his

kid's college fund. Now, he's quitting his job to sell them full time. He said the "cowbell compromise" (lifting the ban on them) has increased demand enough to support him.

site for years, it wasn't easy to find.

"He's got 12 years worth of solid sales to back him up," Redden said. "Econ 101 will tell you if a product doesn't go completely away after four years, you've got to find some kind of growth."

The product, of course, is a little out of the norm.

Lore has it the cowbell became a symbol for State when a jersey cow wandered onto the playing field in a 1930s game against Ole Miss.

State won; the cow became a good-luck charm.

Through the years, the typical bell came attached with a handle. Southeastern Conference rules banned the bells in 1974, but they kept coming into Scott Field. The ban probably made them more popular, as they

See COWBELLS, 5B



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Eric Vlietstra sells his cowbells through the website at [www.mycowbell.com](http://www.mycowbell.com). They cost \$12 to \$25 depending on size and color.



# Cowbells: Timing of SEC's vote coincidental

From 6B

were a symbol of defiance for State fans.

In June, faced with growing pressure to increase restrictions on bells, Southeastern Conference athletic directors reached a compromise that will allow the bells in the gates of the stadium for the first time in 36 years.

It'll also regulate when they can be used, and even the most optimistic State fan isn't sure how that'll work.

Vlietstra said he made this decision back in March, so the early June vote by Southeastern Conference athletic directors to legalize them but regulate their use is just a coincidence.

He's been making them way before that, too.

He gets a shipment of cowbells — "just like you'd see from a cow," he says — and the trick becomes assembling the handle to it.

He buys tubing, which he then cuts into sections, and has a former co-worker weld them onto the bell. Back in his garage, Vlietstra paints them and puts grips on the tubing, which he gets in boxes from another supplier.

Vlietstra's business isn't all Mississippi State, though, which could help balance out his business if the cowbell compromise fails.

He gets orders from fans of the Syracuse Crunch, a minor



Eric Vlietstra, a Chattanooga, Tenn., engineer and a Mississippi State University graduate, shown with his son, Conner, 11, is leaving his job to sell cowbells full time for fans of his alma mater.

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league hockey team in New York, and from fans of the Washington Freedom, a women's professional soccer team.

He's working on selling more to high school booster clubs. He sees that as a win-win: He gets a bulk order and

a relatively easy sale; the booster club gets a fundraiser and a way to start a new tradition at its school.

"We're selling them everywhere," Redden said.

In the meantime, Vlietstra is handling the fears and frustrations of every entrepre-

neur.

It's just a bit different product than most.

"I've made more and more money every year with it," Vlietstra said, "and (I thought) I might make a stab at doing this full time and quit working for the man."