

Alumnus gives MSU fans 'More Cowbell'



Mississippi State fans have a fever; luckily Eric Vlietstra has just what the doctor ordered.

Through his website, <http://www.mycowbell.com>, the 1995 industrial engineering graduate helps supply Bulldog fans across the nation with the loudest, most unique symbol of State pride—the cowbell.

“Until recently, the cowbell gig was just a source of some extra income, but in the spring of 2010 I decided to make some bold moves,” Vlietstra said.

Vlietstra first began making cowbells 10 years ago when, after moving to Chattanooga, Tenn., he discovered he no longer had his well-used cowbell. That’s an unacceptable situation to most MSU faithful, but he soon realized that since he lived outside of Starkville, replacing the noisemaker would be difficult. At the time, there was no online source, so his only option was to mail order a couple of bells from an MSU spirit shop in Mississippi.

“I ordered one maroon and one white,” Vlietstra explained. “But when they arrived, they had not been individually wrapped, so there was white paint on the maroon one, and maroon on the white. I called the store to let them know what had happened, but they never acknowledged that there had been a mistake.”

“When I hung up the phone, the light came on. I thought, ‘I can do better than that. I can provide cowbells and quality service over the Internet. There must be plenty of State fans living outside of Starkville who could use a service like that,’” he recalled.

The cowbell has been a Mississippi State symbol since the 1930s when a jersey cow wandered onto the football field as the Bulldogs beat in-state rival Ole Miss. The cowbell soon became a good luck charm, and despite the fact that they’ve been banned from Southeastern Conference sporting events since 1975, the sound of thousands of clanging bells wielded by diehard fans is synonymous with MSU sports.

Like most Maroon and White faithful, Vlietstra fondly remembers the cowbell he bought while in college, and the games he snuck it into.

“I remember having to pass up a few meals in order to afford one,” he said. “I bought a big maroon cowbell and decorated it with decals. I rang that thing until I got blisters. Then I switched hands. Then I just dealt with the pain.”

He drew upon his experiences to develop a prototype, working with a welder to attach the handle and trying different grips to find just the right material that would provide secure, comfortable ringing capabilities for users. He learned how to build a website and by football season 2000, he had sold his first cowbell online.

“I’m not sure how long it took from the moment I published my website to the moment I received my first order, but seeing that order notification in my e-mail was very satisfying,” Vlietstra said.

Despite having very little marketing, Vlietstra’s business began to steadily grow while he worked at his day job as an engineer at a factory in Tennessee. He said that as the orders came in, the more he dreamed of selling cowbells full time. After a record-breaking year of sales in 2009, he decided he could make that dream come true.

“I resigned from my job this July, right as I was to receive my first shipment of cowbells from my new supplier,” Vlietstra said. “I enjoyed my time as an industrial engineer and without that experience I could never have made this move. There is nothing more fulfilling than owning your own company and turning it into something profitable.”

“And I put my engineering knowledge to use everyday,” he added. “Things like cost analysis and methods for inventory management come in very handy when you own your own small business and every penny counts.”

Vlietstra says his family was very supportive of his decision, which couldn’t have come at a better time. It was purely coincidental, but



as he prepared to enter the cowbell business full time, the 12 schools of the Southeastern Conference established what is being called the Cowbell Compromise, which allows artificial noisemakers to be used legally at certain times during sporting events.

Personally, Vlietstra says he wasn’t concerned with the outcome of the compromise vote.

“I knew that the tradition was already established. State fans wanted cowbells whether they could take them into a football game or not,” he said.

Although maroon, white and chrome are the most traditional colors for MSU bells, he also keeps a variety of other colors in stock. After all, most fans want their bell to be a unique reflection of their Bulldog spirit.

“I’ll provide the bell and you make it your own,” Vlietstra said. “My current prized possession is a 17-inch, three-color cowbell. It took me three days to paint it.”

And this football season, when Christopher Walken comes on the big screen prior to football games and declares, “We need more cowbell!” as part of the now famous Saturday Night Live skit, Vlietstra proudly rings his bell with 50,000 other Bulldog fans, knowing that his small business is helping keep tradition alive in Starkville.

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