

A passion for Sweets

North Branch grad fuels kendamas craze

by John Wagner

john.wagner@apgecm.com

Matt Jorgenson still remembers the moment when he first saw the toy that would change his life.

"I was at a cousin's house while I was in college," said Jorgenson of that fateful day in 2009. "He was a skier and snowboarder, and we were watching a snowboarding movie where the people went to Japan. Amongst all the different parts of the movie was a moment when the snowboarders playing with a kendama, doing tricks with it. When I saw it, I was intrigued."

The kendama is a Japanese skill toy that includes a handle with a cup at the bottom, as well as two cups surrounding a spike. The kendama also has a ball that is connected to the toy with a string.

The idea is to complete tricks by variations of juggling the ball in the three cups or spiking the ball on the spike.

"My cousin had one, so he pulled it out for me, and I was immediately enamored with it," Jorgenson admitted. "I was stunned by the number of things you could do with it, and how difficult it was – and how much I really wanted to keep playing with it."

Little did the 2006 North Branch graduate know that he would do more than just "play with it." Jorgenson created a company called Sweets Kendamas that has become one of the top retailers of the toy in the world.

That Jorgenson would become consumed by a kendama came as no surprise to his father, Jim Jorgenson.

"Matt was always very good at gaming," the elder Jorgenson said, noting that his son grew up



Matt "Sweets" Jorgenson shows off his skills with the kendama. Jorgenson is an expert in using the traditional Japanese skill toy to perform tricks. He has one trick, the Sweets Special, named in his honor.

playing with toys of skill such as yo-yos and diabolos while also juggling, riding unicycles and walking with stilts. "I remember when we bought the Tiger Woods PGA Tour game in 1998. By the end of the day, he had beaten the whole game.

"And I remember when he was 11 years old and wanted to buy a \$50 yo-yo to compete in a yo-yo tournament at Roseville Mall. I told him, 'If you win the tournament, I'll buy the yo-yo for you.' And sure enough, he won the tournament."

After his introduction to the kendama, Jorgenson tried to buy one for himself.

"I called every store in town, and I tried to buy one online, and I couldn't," he said. "No one has heard of it, no one has seen it. So I found one on eBay, but it was in Japan, and it cost me as much in shipping as it did to buy the kendama. But I bought some, then sold them to my friends at cost so we all had something to play with."



Matt Jorgenson holds a cake celebrating the 10th anniversary for his business, Sweets Kendamas. Behind him is a cabinet at his Minneapolis business that features a number of the kendamas that his company has made and painted since its inception.

Submitted photos

The good news was that his friends quickly took the toy. But there was a problem: The kendamas he received quickly lost their paint after a few uses.

"The thought I kept having was, 'If all these 21-year-olds love it, I bet I could get 12-year-olds to love it,'" Jorgenson said. "So I started practicing the kendama to get better at it – so I could teach people how to play it, and if they loved it, I would sell more kendamas."

Jorgenson said that entrepreneurial mindset is a tribute to his parents, Jim and Carrie Jorgenson. His parents at one time owned the Dairy Queen in North Branch and still own the Pine City Dairy Queen.

Jim Jorgenson also owns an auction business in North Branch.

"Since I was 12, I've seen how a business owner starts and runs a business," Matt Jorgenson said. "I had the knowledge of entrepreneurship, so it wasn't a scary idea to run a business of my own."

"And I didn't want to get a real job, so I decided to give it a shot."

In August 2010 he started the business he called Sweets Kendamas. He began by purchasing natural wood toys and painting them in a backyard shed.

"There's no blueprint for running a kendama company in the United States because nobody had done it before," Jorgenson said. "There was a lot of bootstrapping at first – in the early days, workers were paid in sandwiches and beer. I took help

See **SWEETS** on page 11

INSIDE



Nice scholarship

Rush City's Sydney Fulcher wins \$100,000 scholarship from 'Turtle Out of the Circle' contest.

page 2

SPORTS



Top honors

Cambridge-Isanti's Gaven Ziebarth named Co-Running Back of the Year in North Central Blue Division.

page 23

COVID TRACKER

As of Dec. 15, Chisago County has 3,669 confirmed cases and 24 deaths. Isanti County has 2,297 confirmed cases and 25 deaths.



Index

Community	2
Education	3 & 6
Your Voice	5 & 11
Government	7
Focus on Faith / Senior	8
Obituaries	9-10
Christmas Worship Ads	14
Classifieds	15-18
Public Notices	18-20
Sports	23
Business Spotlight	24

234 So. Main St.
Cambridge, MN 55008

(763) 691-6000

FAX (763) 689-4372

www.countynewsreview.com

facebook.com/CountyNewsReview



EAST CENTRAL MINNESOTA



8 34493 00011 3

SWEETS

Continued from front

wherever I could, and if someone would string a kendama or paint a kendama, I would pay for their lunch.”

In the 10 years since it was launched, that backyard shed has grown into a warehouse in Minneapolis that houses 13 full-time employees.

“Everything I’ve accomplished has been a dream,” Jorgenson said. “Literally, a dream. I would think, ‘Maybe if I work hard enough, some day this, this and this will happen.’ Now I have to make new dreams every year, because the dreams turn into goals, and the goals turn into reality.”

While Jorgenson did not feel it was appropriate to talk about his company’s sales numbers, he did confirm its status as an industry leader.

“We sold a lot this past year, thanks in part to an agreement we have to sell kendamas at Target,” he said. “We are one of the largest, if not the largest, seller in the world.”

“Some people have had a little excess income that allowed them to buy kendamas. And some people had more time

available, and that allowed them to play with kendamas. All I know is that sales have been up during this pandemic.”

Jorgenson said much of the reason for the success of the business comes from the love and support of his wife, Alexandra, and daughter Emma Jean, who is 2 1/2 years old.

“She has had my back through all the craziness,” Matt Jorgenson said of his wife. “She has supported me, especially through all the craziness of my travel and all the work I need to do. I’ve done a lot of crazy things, and she has given me support – and given me great ideas as well.”

Jorgenson also credits the company’s growth to CEO Gabe Klemm and to Matt Paulson, who creates the company’s eye-catching designs.

“I’m the goofy guy out front who plays with the kendama, but my two business partners, Gabe Klemm and Matt Paulsen, are key to the business,” Jorgenson said.

“Gabe gave me the money I needed to make the dream happen; I had the ideas, but he was the one who put the business in motion. And Matt is our graphic designer who brought the brand to life; he designed the packaging and everything that makes us look awesome.”

But the “pied piper” of the kendama is Jorgenson, who walks around the offices with one draped over his shoulders like a scarf. He is an expert player, having recently passed the Japan Kendama Association’s 6 Dan test to become one of only two players outside Japan to earn that title.

He also has had a trick he created, the Sweets Special, recognized by that association, and he has traveled to more than 25 countries while making friends around the globe because of the kendama.

His company has a section on its website teaching others how to play with the toy (<https://sweetskendamas.com/pages/learn-kendama-tricks>) as well as a YouTube channel with more than 100,000 subscribers.

“I think the reason the business is successful is because of the love we have for kendamas,” Jorgenson said. “We have 13 employees, and all of them love kendamas as much as I do – and care about how our kendamas look and feel and play as much as I do.”

“I hear from people all over the world who tell me kendamas have changed their life. It’s really crazy.”

How ‘Sweets’ got his name

How did Matt Jorgenson get the nickname “Sweets”?

“It was a joke that went too far,” Jorgenson said.

The nickname originated during his first week of college at the University of Minnesota in 2009.

“I was IMing my girlfriend, and for some reason she said, ‘Oh hi, sweets,’” Jorgenson explained. “She had never called me that before, but for some reason she did. My roommates thought it was hilarious, and they called me that the rest of the night.”

You might expect that joke would eventually be forgotten. It was not.

“We went to a fraternity party – at a fraternity I ended up joining – and my roommates were introducing me as ‘Sweets,’” Jorgenson said. “From then on, everyone knew me as Sweets.”

And it is a nickname that has not only stuck, but was used as the name for the business he created soon after.

“I’ve always thought that, on a list of nicknames, ‘Sweets’ isn’t terrible,” Jorgenson said. “I could have been called a lot worse.”

—John Wagner

Investment lessons from 2020



Financial Focus

Jacob Chesla

As the year draws to a close, it’s fair to say that we’ve all learned something about the social, political, physical and environmental forces that have affected everyone. And, in some ways, our lives will be changed, perhaps permanently. But as an investor, what lessons can you learn from 2020?

Here are some to consider:

- The markets look ahead. Here’s something many investors discovered in 2020: Investment prices don’t always move in the same direction as the overall economy. This might not have seemed apparent right after the COVID-19 pandemic struck in mid-February, as the overall economy and the stock market took big hits. But just about five weeks later, the markets began a rally that lasted several months. During this time, the economy also recovered somewhat, but still remains on weak footing.

What can explain this discrepancy between the markets and economic activity? Essentially, economic numbers, such as the unemployment rate and gross domestic product (GDP), reflect what’s happening today, but the markets are always looking toward tomorrow, which means they are anticipating a stronger economic recovery and the results that come with it, such as greater corporate earnings in 2021. No one can say for sure what the future holds, but you can usually know the market’s opinion by its performance.

- Opportunities will always exist for investors. Although the coronavirus seems unprecedented, the equity markets have rebounded from many crises before it. From war to global financial meltdowns, the market has seen it all. But even

at the height of these events, when the markets might be most affected, individual segments or industries can do well.

For example, in the current environment, when many people have been forced to work and shop from home, and get their entertainment online, it’s probably not surprising that some parts of the technology sector have seen their economic activity grow, along with their stock prices. Here’s the key point: Investment opportunities always exist, especially in times of market stress – and smart investors will find them and incorporate them into their portfolios in a way that’s appropriate for their goals and risk tolerance.

- Patience and discipline can pay dividends. As mentioned above, the stock market dropped sharply in the weeks immediately following the pandemic, but then gained steadily for months afterward. Investors who tried to “cut losses” and exited the market likely did so at the wrong time and missed out on the beginning of the upturn. Unfortunately, this is not uncommon – investors who overreact to market declines often find themselves on the investment sidelines just when a new rally begins. Rather than being reactive in this way, you may be better off sticking with a long-term investment strategy, and buying and selling investments only when it makes sense for your situation, such as when you need to diversify your portfolio.

For many reasons, it’s unlikely that we’ll see anything exactly like 2020 again. But some of the investment lessons we learned are applicable in every year – so keep them in mind for 2021 and beyond.

Jacob Chesla is a Financial Advisor and Kimberly Cheney is a Branch Office Administrator with Edward Jones Investments in Isanti. They can be reached at 763-452-0135. This article was written by Edward Jones for use by your local Edward Jones Financial Advisor.

Thinking big and making it happen



Vikings Update

Sara Paul
North Branch Superintendent

It has been an exciting journey for me to get to know all that makes up North Branch Area Public Schools. Joining the district in July, I have had the opportunity to see first hand how members of the district prepare all

learners for success in school and in life.

COVID-19 has been challenging, yet providing safe learning environments has given us the chance to model integrity and instill hope in our students, staff, families and communities. Even in this challenging time, we have been able to look to the future, and consider what it means to inspire our students to think big and take ownership of their future. We are designing a system to help them make it happen!

Graduating from high school opens doors to exciting career opportunities right away, with a two-year degree, or four-year degree. We need to help each student lean into their passion and empower them to create their best life!

I have had the opportunity to review themes from previous Thoughtexchange engagement efforts, and all of the input that informed the current Continuous Improvement Plan. As our work moves forward. We are launching Phase 1 of our high school redesign. Some of the key strategies from our Continuous Improvement Plan are:

- Personalizing Learning.
- Expanding Partnerships.
- Adding Career and Technical Education Courses.
- Adding College-Level Courses.
- Prioritizing Financial Literacy.
- Prioritizing Life Skills.

We will be engaging many stakeholders during this process, including students, parents, and staff. We also need to engage the community as a whole! Look for opportunities to attend virtual sessions with Director of Teaching and Learning David Treichel, High School Principal Coleman McDonough, and me, in January of 2021. Thinking big and making it happen! Go Vikings!