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Lifestyle

Installing basketball hoops proves lucrative business

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE STAFF APRIL 27, 2014

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As Eric Elofson drives around Massachusetts, nothing makes him smile like the sight of small, cheap, portable, plastic basketball hoops standing in driveways with little kids dribbling and shooting around.

“Future customers,” he says with a laugh. “I’ll stop, jump out, and put a card in their mailbox. We’ll hear back pretty

soon after that.”

For 25 years, the 6-foot-2-inch, 275-pound Elofson, 53, and the crew of similarly sized workers who comprise his Mr. Hoop enterprise have come to the rescue of many local homeowners who want their own, professional-looking basketball hoop, but lack the skills, tools, time, or courage to dig the hole, mix the concrete, install the pole just right, and make sure it's properly secured and accurately measured.

The company's handiwork adorns thousands of driveways and backyards throughout Eastern Massachusetts, and, according to Elofson, the work has remained steady through recessions, and through Celtics titles and slumps.

For many families, the professional-grade basketball hoop, complete with out-of-bounds and three-point lines painted in the driveway, is the equivalent of a swimming pool — an accessory that makes their home the envy of the neighborhood.

While few outdoor courts cost as much as a pool, a truly detailed basketball court experience is no bargain. It's also why Elofson's clients have included Celtics coach Brad Stevens, general manager Danny Ainge, and former players Paul Pierce and Kevin Garnett.

Assists

Elofson said he built his business using low-key marketing efforts along with word-of-mouth advertising and customer referrals.



ESSDRAS M SUAREZ/ GLOBE STAFF

Friends Ryan Nichols, Kevin Flihive, and Domenic Casparillo, all 13, played some basketball at Nichols's home in Westborough.

Apparently it's worked.

In addition to his Celtics clients, he's installed hoops for former governor William Weld, Boston Bruins president and ex-winger Cam Neely, and New England Patriots defensive lineman Vince Wilfork and coach Bill Belichick.

Elofson said he doesn't get nervous taking on jobs for such big-name clients. He said he and his workers have mastered the science of putting up a hoop and getting it perfectly plumb, level, and precisely 10 feet high (if anyone would notice an inch or two miscalculation, it would be an NBA star).

But there was one scare — sort of.

A few months after Elofson installed a hoop at Garnett's Concord home, the 6-foot-11-inch forward attempted, and badly missed, his first shot as a member of the Celtics.

Moments later, Elofson's cellphone rang. He answered to a panicked-sounding voice.

"One of the guys on my crew calls me joking, 'Did we measure that hoop before we left?,'" he said, chuckling as he recalled the incident.

Garnett shook off his early-game nerves to put up a team-high 22 points that night and, of course, went on to help lead the team to its first NBA title in 22 years.

Taking his shot

Elofson never knew that sort of fame. But he wasn't a bad athlete himself growing up.

He was the captain of the basketball, football, and tennis teams at his hometown high school in Millis, where he earned 13 varsity letters, more than any student in school history. On a full football scholarship, he attended the University of New Hampshire. Though he played all four years, he didn't quite have the talent to go pro.

A business major, he picked up a job selling electronics for



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Mr. Hoop employees, including the owner, Eric Elofson (far right), work on an installation.

his father's company, where he envisioned a future white-collar career working in an office somewhere.

Instead, one odd job 25 years ago dramatically changed the course of his life.

Elofson was 27 and living with buddies at a house in Waltham. The easy part — buying the hoop — went off without a hitch. But, like many new hoop owners, they hit a roadblock after arriving back home. The hoop sat there for about a month.

Finally, Elofson journeyed back to the store where they'd bought the hoop to schedule a professional installer to finish the task. To his surprise, no such person or company existed.

Out of options and patience, he and his friends hung the hoop themselves. They did such a good job, Elofson figured he could do it again, for money.

His first paid installation was at his father's house in Millis.

"It's still there," Elofson said.

His first ad ran in the local newspaper on Halloween of 1989. He made business cards and dropped them off at local sporting goods stores, which referred hoop buyers to him for installations. He maintains partnerships with major chains, including Sports Authority and Dick's Sporting Goods.

After years of weekdays as a suit-and-tie-wearing salesman and weekends hauling around hoops, concrete, a wheelbarrow, and other supplies alone in his leased four-door Ford Taurus sedan, he turned to hoop installation full time. His business has grown to three pickup trucks, four full-time employees, and a couple part-timers. The Mr. Hoop logo is emblazoned on the company trucks and on the shirts workers wear. Their business' motto: "We do the work ... You have the fun."

Time vs. money

"In theory, every residential basketball hoop is designed to be installed by the homeowner," Elofson said. "There could be 100 Mr. Hoops out there, but no one wants to deal with it."

For homeowners who have the time and wherewithal, a do-it-yourself installation can be a significant money-saver.

Keith Tate is president of Pro Dunk Hoops, which designs, manufactures, and sells hoops online. The national company based in Houston also helps connect customers to a network



ESSDRAS M SUAREZ/ GLOBE STAFF

The court at the Nichols's family home.

of local installers it partners with, including Elofson, who Tate said is one of about half a dozen installers serving the Boston area.

Tate said only about one-third of hoop-buying customers venture down the DIY route.

The price for an in-ground hoop can be as low as \$250 (or as high as a couple thousand dollars). Tools and materials — including a post-hole digger or shovel to make a 4-foot deep hole and about a dozen 80-pound bags of concrete to fill the void — would cost another \$100.

The average, handy homeowner would spend between five and six hours installing a hoop, according to Michael Guerzini, engineering director for Indiana-based hoop and sports equipment maker Goalrilla. Meanwhile, professional installations typically cost about \$400, not including the hoop cost, Tate said. The work sometimes costs more than the hoop itself, and as Elofson said, “It has to be perfectly oriented and level. There’s something to it. It’s all in that digging the footing and setting the anchor bolts the right way.”

Elofson charges \$495 to install 54-inch and 60-inch backboards and \$575 for 72-inch backboard installs. The company’s all-inclusive packages — for equipment, delivery, and installation — range from \$1,900 to \$2,500, depending on the backboard size.

There have been bigger jobs. Elofson has completed larger projects that involved fencing, lighting, and paving and cost as much as \$35,000, and his company once built a \$10,000 miniature replica of the old Boston Garden in someone’s garage, complete with a Celtics banner and jerseys hanging above that court from 25-foot-high ceilings.

Last year, Elofson said his company generated more than \$500,000 in sales.

He said that while his company has gotten busier over the years as word has spread, he has not noticed any fluctuation in the demand for hoop installations.

Steady work

Elofson said he believes the business is relatively steady because it is largely dependent on children who play organized basketball, either for their town or high school.

“There are always plenty of kids playing high school and youth basketball,” said Elofson.

Basketball is the third most-popular sport for high school boys, behind football and track, and the second most-popular sport for high school girls, behind track, census data show.

More than 24 million Americans say they play basketball with some regularity. The largest age group of

recreational hoop players are 12- to 17-year-olds, of which there are 6.4 million, according to census figures.

By themselves, in-ground and garage-mounted hoops do not affect a home's value, said Chip Davis, administrative assessor for the town of Needham. However, more elaborate setups, such as a separate paved and fenced-in area sometimes labeled as a "tennis court," can boost a home's assessed value by about \$30,000, he said.

Elofson said detailed residential hoop setups have become more common in recent years. The company paints foul lines and three-point lines at between 100 and 200 homes each year, he estimated. "It's fairly new, and it's definitely become more popular."

More and more kids are playing AAU basketball and organized basketball so parents want to make sure their kids know where they're standing when they shoot a free-throw or a three-pointer.

For a standard in-ground installation, two workers will dig a hole, pour about a dozen 80-pound bags of concrete and set in anchor bolts. A few days later, after the concrete has dried and hardened, the team will return to assemble and install the hoop. Two weeks after the ground had thawed enough for this year's install season to begin, Elofson said, he had put in nearly two dozen hoops.

"Once the weather starts warming up and everyone's watching March Madness, that's when it gets really busy for us," he said.

The company completed a job earlier this month in Wellesley on Fiske Road, a quiet, well-manicured, dead-end street lined by two-story Colonial-style homes valued at a \$1 million or more. At the edge of many driveways is a basketball hoop.

The workers quickly unloaded large boxes, unpacked the hoop parts and hardware from the original packaging, and assembled the pole and backboard atop the cardboard it all came in.

The crew then lined up the base of the pole with the cemented anchor bolts — which had been installed a few days earlier so the cement could dry — lifted it into place and tightened the bolts. The rim was installed. Some tweaking and tightening got the whole thing square and level. The net was then strung into place.

It all took less than half an hour.

The Nichols family had Elofson install a hoop and paint a key in Westborough. They also set up netting to corral basketballs that bounce astray.

Craig Nichols, a software salesman at IBM, said he and his wife, Lisa, who works at consulting firm Deloitte, paid about \$3,000 for the entire setup five years ago. The couple's 13-year-old son, Ryan, and 14-

year-old daughter, Alexa — both of whom have played youth league basketball — and many of their neighborhood friends are constantly playing pickup games or lowering the adjustable hoop to try dunking.

“It’s been a huge hit, and the most spectacular investment,” Craig Nichols said. “They’re always out there.”

And he is, too.

“When I grew up, we had a hoop nailed to a tree in our backyard,” he said. “I’ve always wanted something like this, and it’s exactly what I thought it would be.”

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