IN THE LAND OF 10,000 INNOVATIONS, VISIONARIES FROM THE GREATER MSP REGION ARE CHANGING THE WAY SPORTS ARE PLAYED.

PROFILE: SportsEngine

When Justin Kaufenberg and Carson Kipfer were developing SportsEngine, the Minneapolis-based youth sports management and administration platform, they didn’t have to go far to get ideas for features.

SportsEngine
Sports tech
Youth sports
Software as a service
Venture capital
Talent recruiting

Youth sports are great for kids, but traditionally were a lot of work to administer. SportsEngine has built a platform that serves the needs of athletes, parents, sport leagues, and governing bodies, making the experience simpler and more effective for all parties. Today, more youth sports organizations are investing in technology as a key part of their operations, and SportsEngine is a leader in the space, with more than 5 million athletes, hundreds of thousands of teams in dozens of sports. The company is committed to its Minneapolis/St. Paul roots as a great place to recruit, operate and grow.

Justin Kaufenberg, co-founder and CEO
Carson Kipfer, co-founder and principal designer

“At the highest level, having more kids playing more sports is good for the health of the game – and the health of the kids, too.”
- Justin Kaufenberg

sportsengine.com

StarTribune
SportsTechie
Sports Business Daily

READ MORE STORIES ON INNOVATION IN GREATER MSP
When Justin Kaufenberg and Carson Kipfer were developing SportsEngine, the Minneapolis-based youth sports management and administration platform, they didn’t have to go far to get ideas for features.

“My dad was on the board of the local youth hockey league,” Justin said. “We just had to listen to what was making him mad.”

Youth sports leagues at the time still used paper forms, checks handed to coaches and schedules communicated via email lists. Kaufenberg and Kipfer, who both attended the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire, could see how a software solution delivered on the web could simplify this process. But they also saw a much greater potential.

“A lot of the needs were practical services – registration, coach backgrounds, stats and scheduling,” said Justin. “But what we kept hearing underneath all that was the fact that he had to move a lot of data around.”

BECOMING THE EPICENTER OF YOUTH SPORTING LIFE

SportsEngine was founded in 2008, after years of incubation, as a comprehensive platform that met the needs of everyone from a single athlete to sport governing bodies. It gives athletes a single profile that simplifies signing up in different leagues over the years, automates many of the administrative functions of the league, and passes data seamlessly from family to team to league to governing body and back again.

Initially developed for youth hockey, the platform now supports millions of athletes on hundreds of thousands of teams in dozens of sports. “We grew in a multifaceted way,” said Kipfer. “Our product offering grew, and so did the sports we were serving. Many of the problems we were solving were the same across sports.”

After raising $39 million in capital in its early years, SportsEngine was purchased by NBC Sports in 2016. But Kaufenberg, Kipfer and a third co-founder, Chief Technology Officer Greg Blasko, have no intention of moving the business out of Minneapolis.

FINDING TOP-TIER TALENT, FUNDING AND CULTURE IN THE TWIN CITIES

The partners first brought the business to Minneapolis because it was close to home. But while conventional wisdom says a tech startup needs to move to California, Boston or other tech hubs to succeed, they are adamant that they do not, and enjoy unique advantages in the Twin Cities.

Take finding tech talent. “Our first developer was in Silicon Valley during the boom and bust [around 2008],” said Justin. “He spent a couple years in Thailand and was coming back home to Minneapolis. He lands here, picks up a copy of City Pages in the airport, saw our ad looking for a developer and joined us.”

That trend of developers going to the coasts, gaining experience, and then returning to the Twin Cities for the quality of life has repeated itself many times. In addition, the concentration of Fortune 500 businesses in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area has attracted tens of thousands of top-tier developers and business experts, Kaufenberg said; it’s more a matter of finding them.

To attract and retain the needed talent – SportsEngine has some 300 employees, a large proportion of whom are in tech and sales – the company has also made a conscious effort to build a winning culture. A spacious new headquarters in Northeast Minneapolis, energizing work environment and benefits have been “surprisingly big parts” of the company’s success, Justin said.

“Beyond the people, we were looking for good infrastructure,” said Carson, noting that the Twin Cities has a tight-knit tech and startup community, a network of mentors who are interested in building local successes and local venture capital that was especially supportive.

Attracting funding from big tech investors hasn’t been hampered by the company’s Midwest location either. “Our timing was perfect,” said Carson. “We started hearing from venture capital on both coasts on a desire to make investments in the Midwest. The dollars just go further – salaries, real estate, everything – so you can produce more per dollar invested. Our location became a kind of selling point.”

EXPANDING COVERAGE, CREATING A B2C BUSINESS AND THE POND HOCKEY CHAMPIONSHIPS

No longer a start-up, SportsEngine has become a nexus for sports technology and other innovative businesses. The company co-operates a sports-tech incubator in its building called The Pitch, where a number of sports related startups mingle with SportsEngine employees, helping germinate ideas and build better integration. Several of these startups have succeeded to the point of outgrowing the space.

SportsEngine also got into the business of ‘eating its own dog food,’ as the saying goes, when it acquired the U.S. Pond Hockey Championships from its founder in 2010. The huge amateur tournament attracts thousands of players to Minneapolis every winter to compete on outdoor rinks on a local lake – and is run on SportsEngine’s system, and staffed by employees.

But perhaps the biggest evolution has been the launch of its consumer-facing portal at SportsEngine.com, where families can seek out leagues and teams for their kids, making it easier to find and register for sports, backed by NBC’s media power – an unmatched megaphone for the sports leagues that use SportsEngine, which often don’t have robust marketing budgets.

“That end to end marketplace is just what we want to see,” said Justin. “We connect supply and demand and offer services to both. At the highest level, having more kids playing more sports is good for the health of the game – and the health of the kids, too.”