



Ahead of the Curve

John Sarkisian personifies the essence of the entrepreneurial spirit. He is the founder and CEO of SKLZ, a comprehensive line of athletic performance and skill development training products, the engine that drives athletes around the world.

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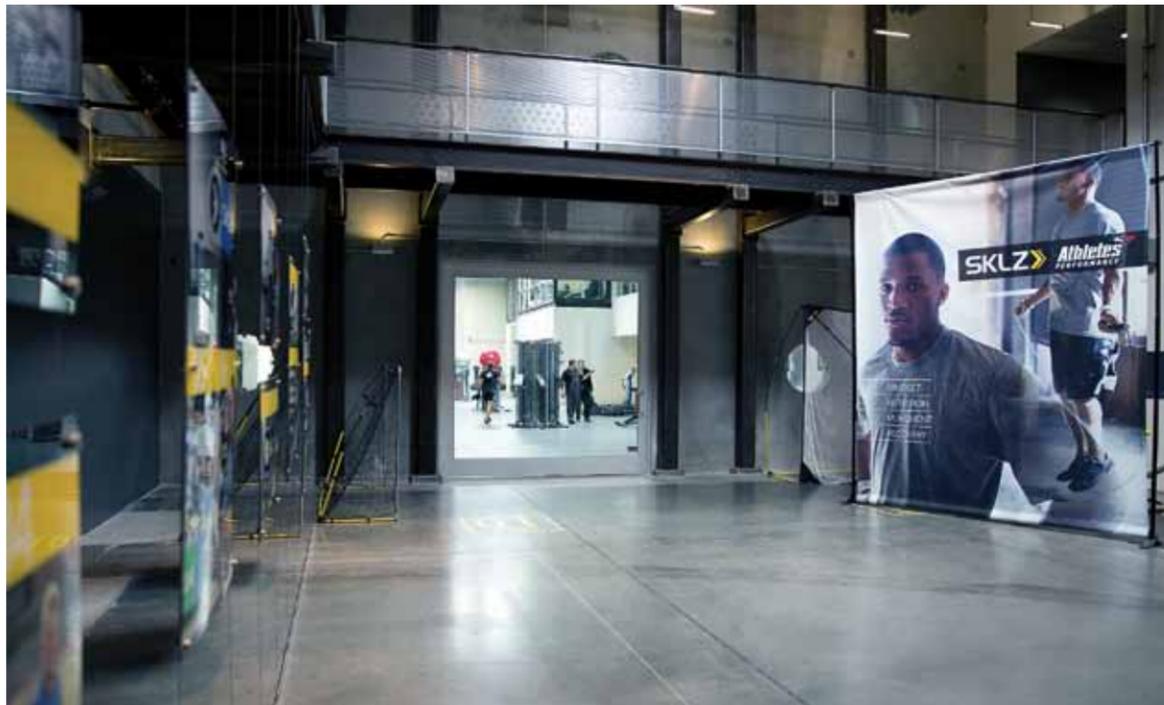
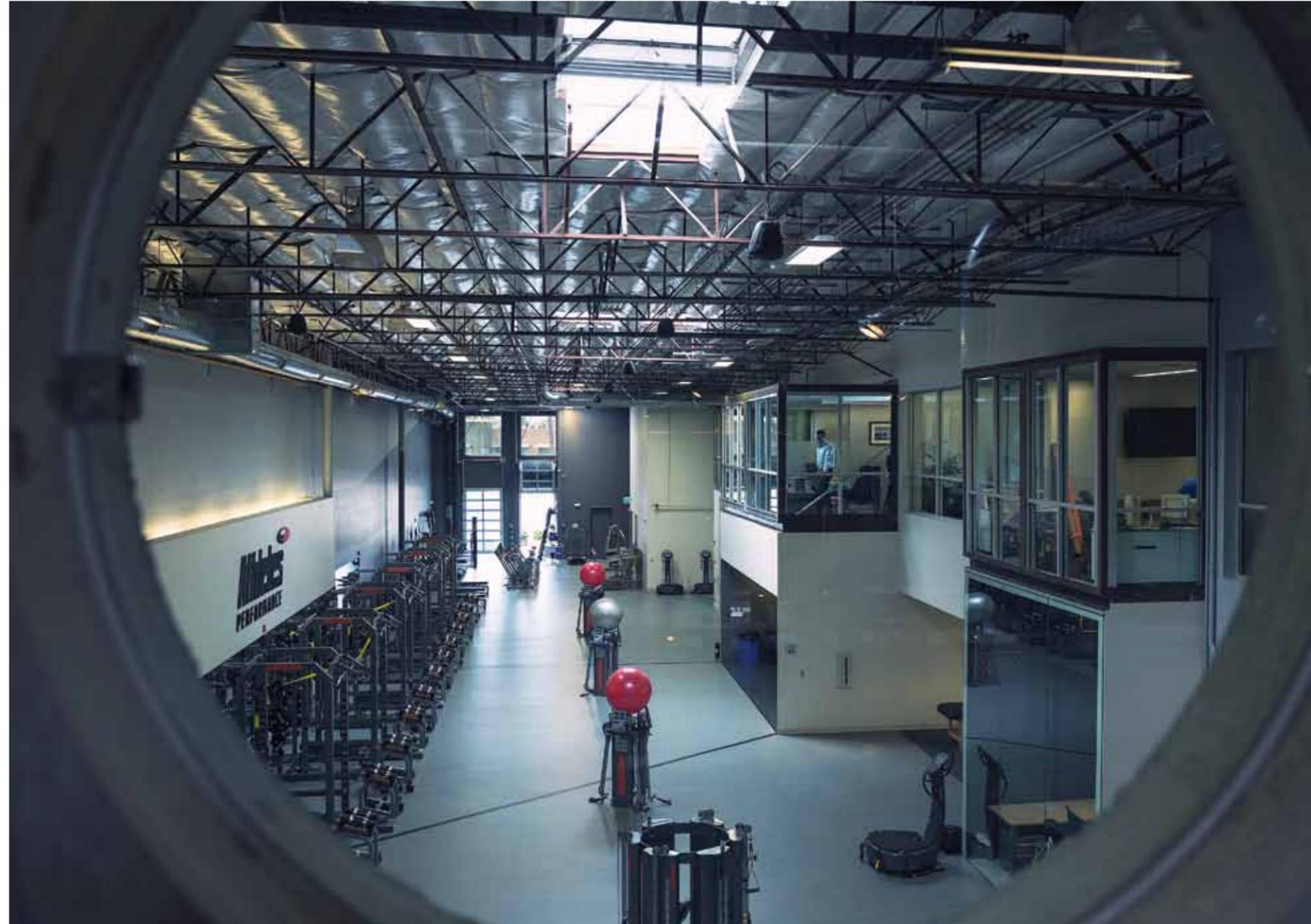
When Detroit native John Sarkisian was a University of Michigan undergrad studying economics, he came to a realization: he didn't want to work for a corporation. He was more interested in running his own. The only way his serial entrepreneurial drive would be quenched was building businesses from the ground-up. So he liberated the businessman within him when he settled in California years later. His first career opportunity came in the field of real

estate when he was still in San Diego State University's MBA program. In 1992, a wife and four children led him to start Pat and Oscar's restaurants, a successful chain of family restaurants in Southern California and Arizona until Sarkisian sold it to Sizzler International in 2000. He then got his feet wet in credit card security technologies when he co-founded Semtek Innovative Solutions. He sold that, too. It was right around the time the avid outdoorsmen's interests were changing.



John Sarkisian was a father to three little-league-playing boys in 2002 when he founded Pro Performance Sports to commercialize the Hit-A-Way baseball swing trainer. It was the perfect way for his sons to learn the fundamentals of hitting and increasing their hand-eye coordination, while not paying hundreds of dollars at the batting cages. With that being his only product, Sarkisian sold 600,000 units to consumers through direct marketing TV ads in two years. By the third year, he had already attracted Walmart as his first major retailer, Derek Jeter as an endorser, and he created the subsidiary SKLZ, which is now a comprehensive line of athletic performance and skill development training products. "Whether it's the kid trying to make the team in high school, the everyday guy who wants to run a triathlon, or a professional athlete who wants to get better, we give them the ability to train and reach their potential," says Sarkisian. "We deliver the tools, instructional content and programs to aspiring athletes." ▶

Sarkisian's vision at SKLZ is to elevate the athlete within you. He not only promotes an active and healthy lifestyle, but lives it as well – even with a nagging knee that needs replacement surgery. Sarkisian is an avid cyclist and participates in about a half-dozen criterium races a year. "It's not only about being physically healthy, but mentally as well," he says. "Everything we do with our team is – how do we directly talk with the consumer? And how do we ethically deliver on our promise?" In essence, his natural performance-enhancing products are the anti-video games, anti-sedimentary lifestyle remedy for today's generation. Sarkisian has an open door policy on innovation. If the idea aligns with the company's mission and demonstrates efficacy, they'll develop, manufacture and market the product. Such was the case with Joe Mauer, the MVP catcher for the Minnesota Twins, and his family. Mauer's father Jake built a contraption that dropped baseballs down a tube from eye level and released them at waist level. It would help Joe to become the No. 1 overall pick out of high school, a lifetime .320 hitter and the best catcher over the last ten years. The Mauer mechanism turned into the product that is commercially known today as the SKLZ QuickSwing PX4 Baseball Hitting Trainer.



Last year, SKLZ signed San Francisco 49ers running back LaMichael James to an endorsement deal to represent the company as its ambassador. James, a 2010 Heisman finalist who finished his career as the all-time leading rusher for the University of Oregon, tells *Yerevan* magazine that the SKLZ line of products have tremendously improved his already stellar skill set. "Once you get to the professional level, everybody is trying to get the upper hand. You can't take any days off because the next person will pass you. Training is truly important, and you have to have that approach on and off the field. With

all of their resources, I'm trying to be the best player that I can be," he says. The speedy James averaged five yards a carry throughout his 2012 rookie season, and he's looking to build on his explosiveness by using products such as the flat rung agility Quick Ladder. "I'm blessed to be one of faces of the SKLZ organization. It's my part to be honest with the product. When I say 'they have the best training equipment,' I really do believe it. Everything an athlete can possibly need, no matter what sport they play, it's there. And their training facility... wow, it's mind-blowing. I've never seen anything like that in my life." ▶

SKLZ built on its strategic partnership with Athletes Performance, the program for training and development of America's top athletes and future stars, this April when they launched a 7,000 square foot training space outfitted with an outdoor turf field and a sprint track. The state of the art facility serves more like a Taj Majal for fitness that offers the full line of Athletes Performance programs that have been made famous by college and professional players from all major sports. If Athletes Performance were a country, with the combined sportsmen that have trained in their Phoenix, Los Angeles, Florida, and Texas facilities, it would have ranked

sixth in the 2012 Olympics medal count. The laboratory at SKLZ will provide tailored programs personalized for each individual's needs – all based on the latest science and data gathered over years of working with elite athletes. Sarkisian says that the transfer of knowledge through instructional content and the development of new training products truly excites him. "There are not a lot of brands with our scope and size, and Athletes Performance knows what is going on in the world in terms of assessing mindset, nutrition, movement and recovery. The partnership is a momentous occasion for our company that allows us to stay ahead of the curve."



Sarkisian used the original revenue from the Hit-A-Way to begin developing a wide range of other training tools. Today, SKLZ has an expansive catalog of over 350 products for football, golf, baseball, soccer, lacrosse, basketball and other sports. They are found in 11,000 individual stores, including Sports Authority, Dick's Sporting Goods, Big 5, Walmart and Target. Their products are dispersed across 50 countries and have attracted such athletes as Albert Pujols and Warren Barton as ambassadors. In 2010, SKLZ reported \$41 million in revenue and \$60 million by 2011. A three-year growth of 186% led them to move their headquarters for a third time to Carlsbad, California – a 16,000 square foot modern facility that is roughly three times the size of their previous location. *Inc.* Magazine recognized SKLZ as one of the leaders in an emerging market in their "Inc. 500 | 5000" list of the fastest-growing private companies in America. "We've had up-years with revenue, growth of people and products every year. Overseas sales account for 10 percent of our business," Sarkisian says. "Our aggressive growth is fueled by the team working every day with the same passion and entrepreneurial drive that came with the launch of our very first product in 2002. Seeing the company grow means we are staying true to our DNA." ■