

# This Todd gives socks a pair of pockets



By Debbie L. Sklar  
special writer

Hey, you men who are tired of carrying around prophylactics in your billfold, listen up!

Thanks to a West Bloomfield entrepreneur, safe sex is now as easy as pulling on your socks literally.

Todd Decker of the Decker Group Inc. in West Bloomfield has created SAFE SOX available through Midwest AIDS Prevention Project in Ferndale.

"SAFE SOX are socks with a Velcro pocket discreetly placed on the side," Decker said. "Inside the pocket is a condom."

The Velcro-flapped pocket also can hold money, jewelry, credit cards and other small necessities, according to Decker, 39, whose firm is credited with developing the forerunner to the SAFE SOX, the SO-CAROO, the sock with a pocket.

"I had been thinking about the idea for a long time," said Decker who grew up in Birmingham. "I guess you could say that it all started when I was an assistant manager in the sock department of a K mart store in the early 1980s — I've always loved socks."

A graduate of Birmingham Brother Rice High School, Decker majored in advertising at Michigan State University. In the sock department, he said he always "kept way ahead of what was new and different in the sock market."

"THROUGHOUT TIME, socks have been pretty basic — navy, red, black and brown," he said. "But I always tried to keep the shelves in my department filled with different types of socks in all sorts of colors, textures and styles."

After K mart, Decker took a job with the Hanes DSD/Leggs Corp., but later left to go into electrical lighting.

In 1984, during a business call in California, he stopped at a J.C. Penney store to check out . . . what else but . . . its sock inventory.

"I looked around and saw all these great socks with everything from sequins to charms," he said. "Then I started thinking and realized that socks had everything on them except a pocket for conveniences during leisure or athletic activities."

He checked with the salesperson about the store carrying a sock with a pocket. She didn't recall one, but "thought it was a great idea," Decker said.

"She wanted to go ask her manager, but I told her that was OK — I knew I had a great idea," he said.

During the next few years, Decker travelled throughout the country, trying to find someone to help him manufacture the sock and get the idea off the ground.

DECKER APPROACHED every firm from Reebok to L.A. Gear and Nike with samples of his pocket sock, but nobody was willing to take a risk. Although the idea was grand, trying to make the pocket would be the hardest part — and, needless to say, the most expensive.

In the meantime, he met with an attorney to apply for a patent, because "I knew sooner or later I was going to sell this thing," he said.

In 1990, Decker was able to find one company that would help him out. The man

could order the pockets from the Far East. But there was a few catches. He could only order a certain amount at a time and there would be long gaps between the orders' arrival in this country. Decker needed 10,000 every few weeks.

Because his demands couldn't be met, Decker was forced to find someone else. The solution was literally heaven sent.

"One day I went over to this church and, as I was walking around, I noticed about 50 old sewing machines just sitting there," Decker said. "I asked this guy what they were and he told me his brother made socks."

As it turned out, the man's brother owned a sock company in Warren, Enter Soyad Brothers Textile Corp.

"I COULDN'T believe my luck; it was amazing," Decker said. "The guy had been in the sock business for more than 10 years; I had him sign a confidentiality agreement and shared with him my idea. He was sold on it immediately."

Decker formed Decker Group Inc. to patent, register the trademark, manufacture and market SOCAROO, a sport sock with a pocket. The sock is manufactured under license by Decker Group and Soyad Brothers Textile.

"The sock has gone over really well," said Decker. "We've had tremendous interest from sports associations, corporations and theme parks," Decker said. "The Detroit Red Wings have purchased the sock and several other major organizations are expressing interest. We've already sold 15,000 socks."

Decker Group already is working on deals with Sea World, Disney World and Universal Studios. Locally, SOCAROOS are available at Dunham's Sporting Goods, Sherman Shoes, the Bloomfield Sports Shop and Toot N' Tennis in Birmingham.

Earlier this year, Decker launched the MAPP promotion of SAFE SOX, using the idea of putting a condom in the SO-CAROO to promote AIDS prevention and a safe sex message.

"AIDS IS A serious matter and we thought by combining that message with SAFE SOX, it was a classy way of getting a positive message out into the public," Decker said. "The socks are humorous to an extent, but they deliver a very strong message."

"Eventually, I want to have the socks available in all department of public health offices, high schools and universities."

The crew sock is made of thick Orlon, nylon or cotton/nylon and comes in stretch sizes 7-11 and 10-15. SAFE SOX are available in white, black or white with pink trim with cotton duck pockets. The lubricated latex condoms, one per pair, are supplied by a leading manufacturer.

SAFE SOX sell for \$6 each and can be ordered by calling 1-800-MAPP-SOX, by fax at 1-313-548-4652, or by writing to MAPP/SAFE SOX, 660 Livernois, Ferndale 48270.

"MAPP and other AIDS educators are always looking for different practical and creative approaches to convey the serious message of safe sex to the general public," said Craig Covey, MAPP president. "We felt the SAFE SOX concept was an excellent way to get the message across."

Todd Decker has plenty of reason to smile. With the help of Soyad Brothers Textile Co., he's been able to manufacture and market his SOCAROO, the sock with a pocket.

# And this Todd puts feet into customized shoes

By Debbie Sklar  
special writer

Run along Reeboks, Nike and Adidas. Make way because there's a new athletic shoe in town and it's called MVP — Most Valuable Player.

According to Todd Beyer, vice president of MVP Products, based in Novi, "our company has revolutionized the high quality footwear industry."

MVP has been in business for more than a year and has developed the capability of creating, manufacturing and marketing personalized athletic shoes. Its target market is high schools and colleges . . . and eventually professional teams.

It may sound farfetched, but sales has been increasing at a clip of 75 percent each month. Not bad, considering MVP athletic shoes are only available through phone orders.

"MVP has the technology to take a specific logo and/or color combination request and incorporate that into a high tech designed low or high top style shoe for both men and women," Beyer said.

Prices for both ladies and men's MVP athletic shoes range from \$61-74. And children's shoes are next on the agenda. Sizes range from 5 to 10 for women, including half sizes, and 7-13 for men (in half sizes as well).

THE COMPANY was founded by Harold Martin, 33, a former engineer and native Detroit who built his reputation as the builder of race cars and auto engines. In the early 1980s, he and his family sold their "Little Kim Race Cars," the only black professional race car design company in the country.

Now, he and 15 staffers are building an athletic shoe



Todd Beyer, vice president of MVP Products, shows off some of the many styles of customized athletic shoes available from the Novi firm.

manufacturing company from the ground up. They're willing to take on the big boys in the market with an idea that some business analysts say is sure to be imminent arch support and comfort.

● THE INNER lining with additional padding, covered by a new soft nylux material reduces the potential of ankle blistering and aids in overall soothing of the foot.

"Today, there are so many negatives in the athletic shoe industry and we want to change that around, we want to offer something really great and we are," Beyer said.

Beyer added that the goal of MVP is to provide local colleges and high schools with a great shoe, at a great cost, that represents the buyer's favorite institution.

"Personalizing athletic shoes for high schools and colleges statewide is the open niche in the sneaker industry that will enable us to cut into the business of other sneaker giants like Nike and Reebok," Beyer said. "Tying education into athletic shoes is a hot idea."

Since MVP began marketing school footwear last summer, the company has received more than 300 calls from interested individuals throughout the state.

"The competition in athletic shoes is extreme," he said, "but with our dynamic concept, quality product and competitive price, we're going to try and bring some of the athletic shoe business back to Michigan."

EARLIER THIS fall, MVP produced shoes with both the University of Michigan and Michigan State University logos.

The MSU shoe is a full grain leather athletic shoe in a base white color accented with gray and green trim and highlighted by the Spartan logo. U-M's shoe is all white full grain leather shoe that has the distinctive block M logo and the maize and blue colors incorporated throughout the shoe design.

Community involvement and a commitment to the educational system are two of MVP's important focuses. Beyer said. Cass Tech, Plymouth-Canton, Plymouth-Salem, Livonia-Stevenson, Redford, Wayne Memorial and Westland John Glenn are some of the local high schools that will be offered the opportunity to benefit the larger companies.

"Basically, what Martin has done is combine a light weight quality leather shoe that is durable and long lasting," Beyer said. "It's an all-purpose court shoe that can be worn for everything ranging from racquetball to running to wallball."

Consid this:

● MVP shoes have Improved padding and cushion to add performance without added impact on the feet.



Before the shoe is even built, an artist works up a detailed sketch of personalization for an MVP customer.

*"MVP has been listening to the requests of many local students. They're thrilled as we are. I think what they're really excited about is having the opportunity to show their school pride and spirit by wearing their own school shoe."*

— Todd Beyer

● The EVA (ethylene vinyl acetate) midsole provides extreme cushioning and has excellent shock absorbing qualities.

● The polyurethane (durable synthetic rubber) outsole increases traction and adds to stability.

● The contoured removable insole provides extra support and cushioning.

"MVP has been listening to the requests of many local students," Beyer said. "They're thrilled as we are. I think what they're really excited about is having the opportunity to show their school pride and spirit by wearing their own school shoe."

Northville seniors Karne Vogt and Shannon Price said their shoes with the Mustang logo are "awesome."

And companies like Ford Motor Co. are also entering one of the hottest ideas of the decade. Corporate customers are using athletic shoes as promotional items, employee incentives and for special events that are company sponsored.

Paul Przesmycki, MVP's operations manager, said that the shoes are a very dynamic new advertising tool that truly creates awareness.

"From the calls and orders that we've been receiving over the past few months, that statement couldn't be more accurate," Beyer said.

For more information on MVP Shoes, call (800) 432-MVP.