



## Business is booming for sporting goods retailer

Play It Again Sports hits home run with new, used equipment

By STEVE SINOVIC  
NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

For South Coast consumers who are in the market for sports equipment that's "gently used but not used up," Greg Vance is your go-to guy.

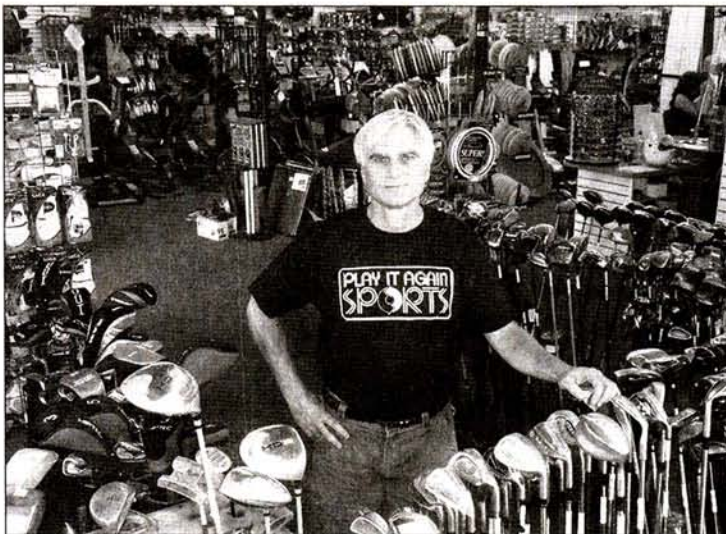
The co-owner of Play It Again Sports, 4850 Hollister Ave., Goleta, said sales on the sports and fitness crazy South Coast have been steady in a troubled economy, thanks to the value customers are getting from used sports gear priced to sell for about half as much as it costs new. The store, which also has new merchandise priced competitively with big-box retailers, gives customers cash, trade in or consignment on their used equipment.

"I think we have a recession-proof business here," said Mr. Vance, who launched the franchise in 1995 following a career as a building contractor. Mr. Vance's franchise was recently singled out by the parent company, Winmark Corp., as one of the 10 top performing outlets (it has about 500 stores nationwide) for sales in the chain, according to a company spokeswoman.

"Clearly, you have to have a passion for sports to do really well," said the trim and fit-looking Mr. Vance, who once surfed competitively and played baseball when he attended UCSB. This background is also a good fit with customers who want to talk about their Little League, soccer or swimming champ.

"It was a perfect way to connect our passion with a great business opportunity," added Mr. Vance, who funded the \$150,000 startup with savings and a bank loan.

The 3,000-square-foot outlet in the Turnpike Shopping Center sells all sorts of sporting and recreational equipment — about 60 percent of it new like the equipment found at Big 5 and the Sports Authority. The other 40 percent consists of equipment once used by golfers, surfers, gym and



MICHAEL MORIATIS / NEWS-PRESS

Play It Again Sports owner Greg Vance is surrounded by new and used golf clubs for sale at his store in Goleta, where customers can sell their used sporting equipment.

fitness fans, cycling, soccer and tennis players, snowboarders and skateboarders.

Mr. Vance said people undergoing rehab for sports injuries like the option of renting the equipment. One of the store's eight employees will also deliver and assemble treadmills and elliptical machines for a fee.

In general, "People new to a sport don't want to spend a ton of money," said Mr. Vance, taking a swing with a golf club. "If you're golfing, it's such an evolutionary sport, and you probably want to work up to a certain level with less expensive equipment rather than going all out with a top-of-the-line Taylor Made or Calloway driver."

Because of Santa Barbara's beach communities, about 30 percent of sales are water-related, especially surfboards and wet suits. "This time of the year is great for these sales," said Mr. Vance, adding he frequently gets wet suits in trade that still have the tags on them, a testimony to adolescent fickleness. At other times of the year, parents are frequent customers, looking for an "inexpensive but brand-name option for kids" wanting skis or snowboards to take on vacation.

"Parents are thrilled to be able to unload

## Second-hand sports gear scores points

some of this never or slightly used merchandise," said Mr. Vance, an environmental sciences graduate who takes pride in the fact that he's working in a recycling-related business.

Brian Coleman, a retired Santa Barbara accountant, said he comes to Play It Again Sports frequently to upgrade his golf equipment. "I've gotten all my woods and wedges here," said Mr. Coleman. "Also, it's easy on the pocketbook." However, his golf game "is still a work in progress," he added with a chuckle.

A good number of customers come from Montecito. "They're looking for bargains, too," said Mr. Vance, who also owns a second retail outlet in Pasadena with his partner, Dan Buxton, who opened this store in 2007. "We've got our hands full with both stores at the present time."

Mr. Vance said he might consider expansion on the Central Coast, such as to San Luis Obispo. The 50 other Play It Again Sports franchise owners in California are a cooperative bunch, occasionally doing an inven-

tory exchange to accommodate a customer's request.

Still, a customer will sometimes have an inflated sense of the value of a golf club, tennis racquet or other piece of sporting equipment, a task that Mr. Vance handles with diplomacy. "Many times I'll have to say, 'Sir, these have served you well, but they're probably ready for Goodwill or the Salvation Army donation bins.'"