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- FAVORITES
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[Table of Contents](#)
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[Quotes](#)

Tools:
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September 25, 2000

Special Report - Breakaway: Focus on Small Business

From Basketball to Boxing

By **TODD W. CARTER**

During his 14 seasons playing professional basketball, when Bill Laimbeer Jr. made an impression on someone, it was usually with his elbows.

Now, as the president and chief executive officer of Laimbeer Packaging Co. in Melvindale, Mich., the former Detroit Pistons center is finding that patience -- not aggressiveness -- is a more effective virtue in business. It took him two years after his December 1993 retirement from the National Basketball Association to discover that.

"I operated at a high, world-championship level of intensity and urgency" during 12 years with the Pistons, says the 43-year-old Mr. Laimbeer. "In business, that tends to wear people down. It goes [at] a little slower pace." (He spent the first two years playing for the Cleveland Cavaliers.)

'Steady' Growth

After deciding in the fall of 1993 to retire from basketball, Mr. Laimbeer almost immediately looked ahead to his next career move.

In early 1994, his father and two sisters joined him in purchasing two

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corrugated-shipping-container facilities from Stone Container Corp., which has since changed its name to [Smurfit-Stone Container](#) Corp. (They were partners with Smurfit-Stone until last spring, when they bought out the Chicago-based company's interest.)

Mr. Laimbeer's father, William Laimbeer Sr., had been an executive in the forest-products division of Toledo, Ohio-based Owens-Illinois Inc. He taught his son everything he knew about the industry before retiring last December. "I would not have gotten into boxes without him being in boxes," Bill Laimbeer Jr. admits.

The company now has about 300 employees, two manufacturing plants and two distribution centers, all in southeastern Michigan. It generates annual revenue of about \$62 million -- about \$10 million more than when Mr. Laimbeer's family started the company. Mr. Laimbeer is projecting yearly growth of 5%, which he calls a "nice, slow, steady pace." The industry average is 2.5%, he says.

Laimbeer Packaging is highly dependent on Michigan's automotive industry, with 70% of revenue coming from automobile makers or their suppliers. Most of its 200 customers are located within 150 miles of Detroit.

"You can have all the best-laid plans in the whole world, saying how you may want to try to diversify out of, and not rely on, automotive," Mr. Laimbeer says. "This is an automotive town. Always will be. You just can't get away from it."

Baddest Bad Boy

Mr. Laimbeer seems to have mellowed since his NBA days. But he's quick to admonish an interviewer who refers to his company's product as "cardboard," rather than "corrugated" packaging. "Like I said before, your shirt comes in a cardboard box," he explains. "Corrugated is with the little squiggly stuff in the middle."



Jeffrey Kowalski

Bill Laimbeer, Jr. at Laimbeer Packaging Co.

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Blessed with one of basketball's most prized assets -- size -- Mr. Laimbeer was burdened by slowness and poor jumping ability during his NBA stint. Nevertheless, he was a fearless competitor who, unlike many big men, possessed a deadly accurate shot. At one time, he shared the league record for three-pointers in an NBA finals game.

NBA All-Star



Manny Millan

Detroit Piston Laimbeer

Although he was not in demand after graduating from Notre Dame and had to begin his basketball career in Italy, he returned to the U.S. and helped lead the Pistons to two championships, made the NBA all-star team four times and, at the time of his 1993 retirement, was one of only 19 players with 10,000 points and 10,000 rebounds.

But it is his physical -- many said dirty -- play that opponents and teammates will remember. A ferocious competitor who was often fined for being a roughneck, reveling in his role as the baddest of the Bad Boys (as the Pistons were then known), Mr. Laimbeer greeted boos throughout the league by putting his hand to his ear, as if to say, "I can't hear you!"

Instant Gratification

He retired 13 games into his final season, saying his desire was gone and that he was becoming the kind of player he always hated -- lacking desire and the ability to contribute. He also suffered from an aching back and knees.

Mr. Laimbeer has made it known that he wants to be an NBA coach someday. If a team, especially the Pistons, offers him the role, he'll gladly remain an investor in Laimbeer Packaging while handing over the ball to one of his executives.

Mr. Laimbeer explains that coaching offers something business rarely does. "It is a very highly competitive, instantly gratifying business." In pro basketball, "you know every night whether you won or you lost."

--Mr. Carter is a writer in Jenison, Mich.

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