

CALIFORNIA | LEARNING CURVE / KAREN E. KLEIN

## Making Headliners

*Former Mattel Exec Finds Niche With Collectible Sports Figures*

June 24, 1997 | KAREN E. KLEIN

In 1987, Joe Morrison was executive vice president of marketing for Mattel Corp., overseeing 350 employees and an operating budget of \$250 million. On Aug. 1, he survived a white-water rafting accident that took the lives of five corporate executives with whom he was vacationing. A few months later, he was passed over for the top job at Mattel, and he left to form his own company. The small sports figurines his company markets are called Headliners.

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The rafting accident made me think about making the time to do the things I really wanted to do and not being particularly worried about what other people thought. Everybody dreams about going off on their own in business, and I decided to give it a try--not realizing at all how hard it could be.

I soon realized that with your own company, you don't have to deal with corporate politics anymore, but you develop a healthy fear of not eating.

John Weems, who had worked at Mattel, left a little later and came to work with me. We founded the Morrison Entertainment Group in 1991 to market a small collectible-toy line that was particularly successful in England.

I hooked up with Corinthian, an English toy producer that came up with the idea of a line of collectible European soccer figures. They asked if we would be interested in starting a U.S. company marketing a line of U.S. sports figures.

I had worked at Mattel 10 years, and at one point I ran the boys' toy division that introduced He-Man and Masters of the Universe. I learned a lot about hitting the right product at the right time.

The successful toys, the ones that really break through, have a unique look and a distinct personality. Barbie has a glamorous full figure. He-Man has big, bulky muscles. I knew that if we could achieve that with the sports figures, we could be successful.

So we started out with football figures, getting licenses with the NFL and eventually with all the major U.S. sports leagues and players associations.

But we knew it would not be enough to take a generic figure and stick a uniform on it. We had to give each figure a personality. So we came up with the idea of putting large heads on the figures--so each one would capture the player's likeness.

We do a lot of research and get good photos. We also have a terrific sculpting system and a very strong name.

As a small company, I knew we had to do something different to compete. We happened on to a real growth category because the Headliners appeal to two audiences: kids 8 to 12 years old and a hearty band of men and teens who are voracious sports collectors.

We also found a market where the traditional toy companies were not dominating. Not too many companies had really gone after the sports collectibles. But we are right there at the right time with a unique product.

### AT A GLANCE

Company: Corinthian Marketing Inc.

Owners: Morrison Entertainment Group and Britain-owned Corinthian Marketing

Nature of business: Toy and collectibles marketing

Location: El Segundo

Founded: 1996

Employees: 17

Projected revenue: \$18 million