

Derek Price

The owner of the UK's last tennis ball manufacturer on problem solving, the perils of retiring and bouncing back

On... why he is still hard at work

I started working for my dad in 1945, and although my daughter, Louise, is now managing director I still come into the office six days a week, but only for a couple of hours on Saturday. I'm a problem solver and thinking about new products, the technical challenges of developing them and whether they will sell keeps my brain working. I don't understand why people retire really – you spend most of your life learning and then you are just supposed to pack it all in. It seems to me that after a short period of time you get bored and vegetate; you slow down and, before you know it, it takes you an hour to make a cup of coffee. Even though I'm 92, that's not for me.

On... tennis ball innovation

Recycling rubber isn't new – look at what happens to old car tyres – but we are the first to do it with tennis balls. Our new Phoenix balls are made out of old tennis balls that would end up in landfill otherwise, so they are much more sustainable and our order books are full. Our forecast sales for 2023 are up 50 per cent. Working out how to make a recycled ball took a bit of doing. Formulating a rubber mix is like making a cake – there are lots of ingredients, and the balls you are recycling all vary slightly depending on who made them and how old they are. Getting approval from the

International Tennis Federation means we can sell them for tournament use, but it took two years and we had to make 1,114 test versions before we got it right.

On... helping out a billionaire

When James Dyson was working on his wheelbarrow design [the 70s Ballbarrow that first made his name] he lived locally and used to turn up at weekends and scrounge bits of rubber. He was struggling back then. I enjoyed chatting to him but I never thought he would be as successful as he has been.

On... his biggest regret

The biggest mistake I made was not taking the time to build up our own strong, independent brand. In our heyday we were a ball factory for lots of big brands – we were making 72,000 balls a week and employed around 200 people. But we were too busy to work on our own brand. Then in the 80s we lost most of that to factories in the Far East, because we couldn't compete with them on volume or price and we didn't have our own brand to fall back on.

On... surviving the lean times

When we lost all that business we went from 200 employees to 10 or 12. That was painful; it was a long time ago but I still remember it. You survive by finding something new to make – I developed rubber tiles for cladding submarines for

the MoD, and we made rubber parts for the car industry. But the old car brands are mostly gone now and how many submarines do we have these days? There's always something new though – one of the latest things is bicycles, and there are plenty of rubber bits on bicycles.

On... beating the competition

We're small and we can move fast and take on the jobs the big companies aren't interested in. If someone has an idea or a problem that needs solving, that is where we get our business from. There might be £50,000 in it for us but big companies only want jobs that they can see a big turnover coming from. I've had lots of offers to buy the business over the years, but I've always said no because I enjoy it too much. What would I do with the money anyway?

On... being a family business

One of the best things about being a family business is having my daughter working with me. The whole business is like an extended family; I've got people working with me whose parents and grandparents did too. My oldest employee was still coming to work aged 91, although sadly she died a couple of years ago. I'm completely self-taught and I try to learn from the people I have employed – you might say I've been an apprentice to them over the years.

Interview: Andrew Saunders Portrait: Julian Dodd



Smashing it

Derek Price has been working for Wiltshire-based Price of Bath, founded by his father in 1936, since he was a teenager. He developed the first solid golf balls and first balls for the junior game of mini tennis, and was the first person to print the union flag – a flat design – on to a spherical ball. The firm has just moved into a new factory to service growing demand for recycled tennis balls.