

# Persevering Through Uncertainty

An Interview with Adam Blumenfeld, Chief Executive Officer, Varsity Brands, Inc.

**EDITORS' NOTE** Prior to his current role, Adam Blumenfeld served as the Chief Executive Officer of BSN SPORTS, Inc. Before BSN, he served in a number of roles at Sport Supply Group including as its President. Blumenfeld has been the Chairman of BSN since July 2007 and also its Director since January 2000. He has been a Director of Collegiate Pacific Inc. since January 2000. Blumenfeld holds a B.A. in English from Tulane University.



Adam Blumenfeld

**COMPANY BRIEF** Varsity Brands, Inc. ([varsitybrands.com](http://varsitybrands.com)) is an apparel company owned by Bain Capital that is focused on American academic apparel and memorabilia. Its operations are split between three major subsidiaries: BSN SPORTS, a distributor of sports uniforms and equipment; Varsity Spirit, which produces apparel, competitions and camps for cheer, dance and band; and Herff Jones, a manufacturer of products such as class rings, graduation caps and gowns, and yearbooks.

## Will you highlight the history and heritage of Varsity Brands and how the business has evolved?

While our three divisions - BSN SPORTS, Varsity Spirit & Herff Jones – officially came together as Varsity Brands in 2014, each division has rich history in their respective market. 2020 marks 100 years that Herff Jones has been celebrating student achievement. It was 1920 in an old firehouse in Indianapolis where the company started manufacturing class rings, medals, pins and other emblematic jewelry. As the years went by, the company has grown to include yearbooks, graduation announcements, diplomas, caps and gowns, and diploma frames. BSN SPORTS was founded by my father, actually, selling tennis nets out of the trunk of his car and they recently celebrated their 45-year Anniversary in 2017. It is quite remarkable that it has grown to be the nation's leading marketer, manufacturer and distributor of sporting goods apparel and equipment to the school and league markets. Celebrating their 45-Year Anniversary last year, Varsity Spirit is now the worldwide leader in all things spirit – including cheerleading, dance team and performing

arts apparel, educational camps and competitions. They impact more than a million athletes each year across their platforms.

## How has Varsity Brands adapted the way it works to address the challenges the business has faced due to the pandemic?

First, I want to recognize our incredible team working in the plants and factories that have been dedicated to keeping our company moving forward and delivering to our

customers despite the pandemic. We wouldn't be where we are today without our essential workers. Where business allowed, we did shift to have employees work from home to keep them safe. Our field sales teams immediately gained confidence in hosting virtual conference calls and uniform fittings to keep up with the new norm and support our customers. BSN SPORTS started manufacturing customized face masks and social distancing signage as well as sold PPE equipment. Their digital offers expanded to virtual e-cards, free coaching clinics and webinars and personalized backgrounds. Varsity Spirit created virtual tryouts for cheer and dance teams and then virtual consultations and fittings for their apparel. They shifted their summer camp program, traditionally training 350,000 athletes each summer, to virtual training camps and "home" camps where an instructor goes to the school for their training. They've launched a virtual competition series that allows programs to participate in a cheer or dance competition without having to travel. They held their first live, inperson competition events this Fall and have a total of 250 events planned through Spring 2021 with comprehensive safety protocols in place. Herff Jones' factories flipped on a dime and started manufacturing masks and supplied them to a number of companies across the U.S. To support schools early on, they were able to offer a virtual graduation option leading throughout that recognition season. Recently, there have been virtual learning sessions with yearbook staffs to help them navigate new coverage plans and they introduced QR code functionality for Herff Jones products that will allow customers to celebrate their achievements in a personal and digital way.

## What have been the keys to being successful offering virtual graduation ceremonies, virtual sports tryout platforms and virtual coaching clinics during this unprecedented time?

Three things: The innovation and grit of our people, turnkey programs and easy implementation. When COVID first hit, our team did a quick pivot and were dedicated to meeting our customers where they were – in their homes. We implemented turnkey programs and offered resources that provided step by step direction so that it could be easily implemented by the customer.

## How has Varsity Brands worked to help schools, teams and coaches adjust to the new normal?

In July 2020, we launched our IMPACT Now campaign which aimed to help unite and drive school spirit in communities in anticipation of the school year. We offered administrators, faculty and coaches a digital playbook and related resources that helped advance school health, safety, and emotional and physical needs of students in both physical and virtual classroom settings. Resources consisted of customizable face masks and wall and floor signage featuring schools' mascots and school colors, videos and student journals rooted in social and emotional competencies for grades 3-12 as well as virtual pep club creation, virtual spirit kits and E-Cards for staff to connect with students.

## How proud are you to see the way the Varsity Brands' workforce has adapted and adjusted the way they work to be effective during this uncertain time?

Incredibly proud. They've shown rugged persistence and inspiring fortitude over these last few months.

## What do you see as the keys to effective leadership?

Now more than ever, communication is key. When the pandemic hit, we leveraged Microsoft Teams to do weekly and now twice monthly town halls for our team members. We use it as an opportunity to inform, inspire and recognize our team as we continue to persevere through uncertainty.

## What advice do you offer young people beginning their careers during this challenging and unprecedented time?

Stay driven and motivated in our current landscape and be a team player. ●