

CIR - SECTION TWO

Timberjacks football squad exceeded expectations

■ Team had success on the field, at gate

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MENOMINEE — Shane King approached the Spies Field football field with mixed feelings when the M&M Timberjacks opened a new era in area football last August.

On the one hand, his adrenaline was pumping with excitement about the venture he and his brother Jason had sunk their money into. But a nagging thought kept interrupting his reverie.

"We were hoping 200 to 250 people would show up," said King. "We were afraid nobody would show up."

Jason King had a restless night before he suited up for his first game with the Timberjacks.

"The night before our home opener I didn't get any sleep," he recalled. "I thought the overall production would be a debacle and only 15 people would be there. But with (general manager) Mike Andre and the people in the booth, it turned out to be a very good performance."

The packed parking lots and long line at the Spies Field ticket booth chased away the thoughts of financial disaster for the King brothers.

More than 1,500 fans from throughout the area showed up at the first game to get a taste of M&M Timberjack football and the play of the local team in a victory over the Bay Area Vipers kept them coming back all season.

"It brought a tear to my eye," Shane said of the overflow crowd at the Timberjacks' first game. "They kept coming and coming. It was wonderful."

Jason noted that he had never

seen such a reception to a team while playing for three other WSFL teams.

"One team was excited about building up their fan base to about 500 people," he said. "A lot of teams hope to be where we're at in about five years."

While playing together on a Wisconsin State Football League semi-pro team, the King brothers came up with idea of owning their own team in the Marinette/Menominee area.

They knew football was king in a community where people grow up wearing their sports hearts on their sleeves while sporting their loyalty to the Maroons or Marines on their shirts.

"We felt the Marinette and Menominee area would love it, but we tempered our expectations," Shane recalled. "We saw other new teams in the league that didn't do too well."

The first-game turnout was not just a casual look-see by the fans. Loyalty to the team was already growing strong by the second home game and Timberjack fans became known around the league as the most vocal and supportive in the league.

In their first season in the Wisconsin Football League, the Timberjacks ranked third in attendance in their division.

"At the league meeting, it was brought up that for visiting teams coming to Menominee it was like a hostile environment," Jason said with a laugh. "So many of the fans are adamant about their team."

After investing in the new team, it soon became apparent that the price tag would be much higher than they had planned.

The cost of travel, footballs, uniforms and countless sideline merchandise kept raising the gamble the

Kings put on their team.

"If we would have known the cost, we probably wouldn't have done it," Shane admitted. "The only thing that made it worthwhile was the community support. If we would have just gotten 200 to 250 fans to our games, we couldn't have gone a second year."

Jason disagrees with his brother. "What would have happened is we would have put less money into the team," he explained. "We would have skidded by. I would have kept on plugging along. The community support has allowed us to put more into it."

Shane noted with relief that he and his brother almost broke even in their first year as the team owners — better than they had forecast.

"The local community kept it exciting. The sky is the limit," he explained.

Jason played for the Timberjacks in their debut season but will stick to his role as owner in the upcoming season.

"I didn't really play that much," he said with a laugh. "Being tied up on the sideline, it put more of a burden on other people. This way I can help more with the game-day management."

Andre stirred up financial support for the Timberjacks from area businesses and soon team apparel was a common sight at games and on the street.

Sponsors Airgas, Bay Area Med-

ical Center, Christensen Machinery and Supply, The Greater Marinette-Menominee YMCA, Robert and June King, Thomas and Linda King, Laurie's Wildflower Cafe and Bagel Shoppe, LeRoy's Cleaners, L.E. Jones, Mickey-Lu Bar-B-Q, McDonald's, Ogden Club, Schooner Pub & Grill, Schooby's Trophies and Apparel, Sylvan Industries, Sports Corner, Scoop's Cafe, Stateline Award, Mike and Angie Van Rens, Vojo's All Sports and Waupaca Foundry helped ease the financial strain on the first-year team.

Many players on the team enlisted sponsors to defray the cost of their uniforms and equipment.

On the field, the Timberjacks also shattered the dire precedent set by other first-year teams. With talent from cities throughout the area and even the Gladstone, Mich. area, the M&M beat the defending champion Oostburg Rebels (7-6) in their second home game, advanced to the playoffs and finished with a 7-4 record.

"Most new teams in this league start 0-10," said Shane. "They expect the new teams to go 0-10. The other new team in the league last year was 0-10."

Jason noted that the Timberjacks, under head coach Joe Plautz, had a much more professional approach to the game than the previous teams he played for.

"I was very impressed with the team, top to bottom," he said. "The

other teams I played on, there was a player-coach. They were not able to react to what was going on. They kept running into a brick wall and hoping it would work."

Jason also was impressed by the hard-nosed approach the Timberjacks brought to their games.

"The other teams I played for expected their teams to lose as soon as things didn't go their way," he explained. "This team expected to win every game. When things didn't go well, they didn't give up. The maturity of the guys to stick together was very impressive."

Last season was filled with question marks, high hopes and playoff excitement that far exceeded expectations.

At a team meeting last month, 30 new players signed up for the Timberjacks. Thirty-one players were members of the team in its first season.

"We pretty much expected a flood of new guys," Shane said. "Not everybody got the word in time last year. Some decided to wait and see. After the first couple of games, they wished they would have done it."

Jason wants to provide an even more fan-friendly experience at Timberjacks' home game in the upcoming season.

"I don't want us to grow too fast, but I would like us to increase the attendance and make it a better atmosphere for the fans. I want to make it more than a football game."

He is toying with the idea of having fan contests after the quarters, such as field goal kicking and punt catching.

The team needs coaching help in the defensive line and special teams for the 2008 season and game volunteers. Anyone interested should go to the team Web site: m&mtimberjacks.com

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Shane King
Timberjacks co-owner

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