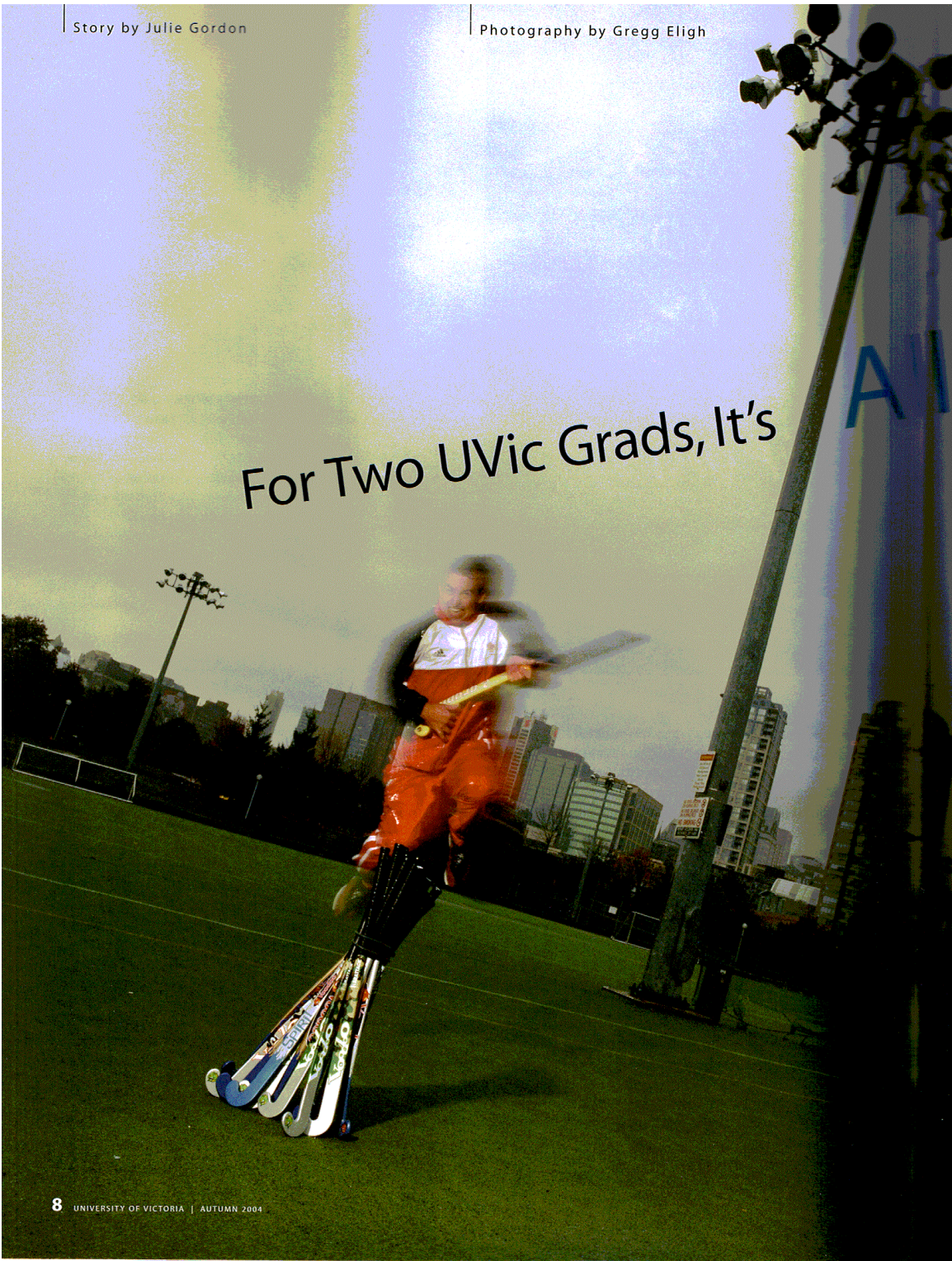


Story by Julie Gordon

Photography by Gregg Eligh

For Two UVic Grads, It's





Work + All Play

Most people dream about turning their passion into a profession and living a lifestyle where work and play successfully converge. For Steve Davis and Rob Short, that dream became a reality last year. Davis and Short launched Mantis Hockey in November 2003, and the fledgling company has quickly become one of North America's premier field hockey equipment suppliers. The partners also happen to be two of Canada's foremost field hockey players; Davis plays midfield defense for the national men's team, while Short is team captain.

The idea for Mantis was hatched over time while they were touring with the team and training for the 2003 Pan American Games. The two shared a room and had many long hours to exchange ideas. At one point, Davis explains, they began to notice an opportunity. "In Australia and New Zealand there were [field hockey equipment suppliers] providing a cohesive package, top-end gear, as well as advice and coaching from expert players. Nothing like that existed in North America. We saw a void to be filled and we knew we had the expertise and experience to fill it."

A 1-0 loss to Argentina in the Pan Am Games meant Canada failed to qualify for the 2004 Olympics. The loss was a disappointment, but it made way for their idea to become reality. The pair had already laid the groundwork, having approached one of the world's top stick manufacturers, while in training. Gryphon makes two of the world's four top lines of stick: the Voodoo and Gryphon lines. Based on Davis and Short's pitch, Gryphon agreed to give Mantis the Canadian rights to the Voodoo line, with a targeted \$25,000 of sales in the first year. Ten months later, Canadian sales of Voodoo have reached almost half-a-million dollars.

By March 2004, Gryphon was so impressed with Mantis' performance that they handed over exclusive distributorship of the Voodoo line for all of North America. Then in June Gryphon gave Mantis rights to distribute their figurehead line, which Davis calls "the Nike of field hockey," exclu-

sively in Canada. According to Davis, North American rights to Gryphon sticks are "only a matter of time. We're young. We play international field hockey. We're focused on the sport. When someone buys a stick from me they know it's the best stick for the player, because they're getting it from a professional."

As partners, Davis and Short have a symbiotic relationship based on distinct but complementary strengths. Davis, who graduated from the Bachelor of Commerce program in 2000, looks after the day-to-day operations of the company and develops new business. He credits his business acumen to his years at UVic, followed by a stint as director of sales & marketing for a Vancouver-based outdoor media company. There, working as a member of a small team, Davis was given free reign to set up supply chains, establish distribution networks, and help take the company public. A summer in the UVic Business Entrepreneurship Program had left him with a desire to

of Mantis' customers currently get to deal directly with Davis or Short, a huge asset given the pair's hockey knowledge and expertise. But as sales continue to grow, the co-owners know that they will have to make decisions about how to spend their time. Davis, who already works a 15-hour day, estimates that Short puts in the equivalent amount of time overseas. "A big challenge for us is recognizing when we need help. For example, is my next hour better spent trying to develop new business, or is it in answering an e-mail from some kid in Arkansas 'cause he needs a new stick?"

As Mantis prepares to take the Voodoo line into the United States, Davis knows he will need to consider the challenge of time management carefully. Field hockey is the second largest participation sport in the world, second only to soccer for both men and women. For Mantis, whose biggest customer is the teenaged girl, the sales potential in the U.S. is staggering. "Deal-

Ten months later, Canadian sales of Voodoo field hockey sticks have reached almost half-a-million dollars.

eventually do his own thing. When he left the media company to play field hockey he knew his next move would be a business of his own.

Short concentrates on the creative aspects of the business from his home in Rotterdam in the Netherlands. He returns to Canada for the summer months to run a series of coaching clinics offered by Mantis. Also a UVic grad with a degree in geography (1997), Short came to entrepreneurship via a more circuitous route. He taught a year of elementary school in Holland, and then worked with the United Nations Environment Program as a graphic and web designer.

While the partners' business skills are a solid match, their real strength lies in their level of field hockey participation. Being members of the national team means they are known within the sporting community around the world. "When we started doing this, we had instant credibility," Davis explains. "I've been coaching; I've been playing; everyone knows who I am. People looked at us and said, here are two guys on the national team, selling gear, running camps... [Mantis] was literally an overnight success."

And yet what makes Mantis strong is also one of the company's biggest challenges. Aside from a minimal amount of administrative support, Mantis is a two-person show. Davis and Short provide front-end support; they respond to customer questions, deal directly with retailers, coach Mantis summer clinics, and run a school program in Vancouver for under-privileged kids who might not otherwise be exposed to the sport. All

ing with the States is a totally different bag of worms," says Davis. "The cultural differences for the sport in the U.S. compared to Canada are amazing. In the States, parents will spend to the nth degree. In Canada, they won't."

With that in mind, Davis is concerned about ensuring that the Voodoo line, which is geared to teen girls, gets the brand recognition it deserves. The line is relatively unknown in North America as compared to the European market, where it's considered a status symbol. Given that the gold medal winning shot in Athens this summer was scored with Voodoo, however, Davis expects that to change. "I know I could easily flood the U.S. market, but I'm more focused on developing the brand properly." He intends to launch the line at a national field hockey tournament at the end of November. "Four thousand players, 3000 of which are high school girls, will be there. At the trade show: buyers, coaches, you name it. We're going to have a booth that will blow people away. And for us, that's just day one. After that tournament, it's going to be bananas."

For now, Davis and Short are flying high with Mantis. Running the business seems more like play than work, and both partners have the energy and enthusiasm to sustain it. Not content to continue riding on this success forever, Davis hints at loftier goals. He hopes Mantis will one day run without his full attention and dreams of sitting in the Caribbean at 35. Whether he'll get there is up in the air, but one thing's for certain, these UVic grads know how to combine work and play. **bc**