



## WOLF RÜDIGER

# THE BALL ARTIST

From cook to manager to entrepreneur – the exciting career of Wolf Rüdiger shows that this native of Munich was able to recognize a chance and seize it over and over again in the course of his career. With his company Albene, which is celebrating its twentieth anniversary this year, he has made a name for himself as a manufacturer and importer of hand-sewn leather balls, sporting goods and promotional products.

**W**e meet Wolf Rüdiger in the Albene offices, located in an impressive building directly behind the Prince Regent Theatre in downtown Munich. Just walk through the door of the former store and you are already in the midst of the company. Everything seems lively, open, uncomplicated and friendly, and so does the head of the company as he welcomes us. He feels good in these rooms, where he has built up his company over the past twenty years, and that is why he never considered moving, not even to increase in size. “I am a positive person and also satisfied with what has been achieved: the

company is doing well, my family is healthy. I don’t always have to have more of everything; it’s not worth the risk. Here in Europe we like to bellyache whether we have reason to or not.” He realizes this whenever he is at his producers’ in Pakistan and takes a look at the country around him. “Sure, we started as a small company and have had our ups and downs, but to my mind those are not really problems.” This is a critical yet human attitude we hear rather infrequently from businesspeople. It reflects the experience Wolf Rüdiger has gained in the course of his career, which took him from Bavaria to Switzerland and

then to South Africa. “You should spend more time wondering about what is really needed, whether personally or on the market. Being greedy for more possessions or for new things will not really get us any further. It makes us dissatisfied and wastes resources making products we don’t really need.”

### FROM COOK TO MANAGER

When he had finished his schooling, this native of Munich actually wanted to be a hotel manager. He was advised to become an apprentice cook in order to have a solid foundation for his dream. He did so at a famous hotel in Bad Reichenhall. It was

a tough time for him, but a good experience, as well. Above all, it gave him one of his hobbies, cooking, which he still cultivates along with sailing. Hardly had he started to delve further into his chosen field in St. Moritz in Switzerland when military service called him away. But he made good use of this episode by furthering his education. Then he went to college, “with lots of enthusiasm and full speed ahead”, to study business administration, finishing his degree in a very short time. By now, a career in hotel management had ceased to interest him and, as so often in youth, a new goal took its place, which was to gain experience abroad. Suddenly an opportunity arose which he simply could not resist, and he travelled to Namibia and South Africa with a fellow student who had contacts there. This yielded the opportunity, as unexpected as it was interesting, to bundle the skills he had so far acquired and put them into practice, which he did in Cape Town.

**EXPERIENCE IN CAPE TOWN**

So Wolf Rüdiger took up his first job in South Africa, which at that time was still in the grip of apartheid, with its very specific demands and difficulties. He worked as food and beverage manager at a large catering company which supplied many institutions, including the university of Cape Town, and also operated clubs of its own. This was a challenge he enjoyed. So his wife, who at that time was still working for a food magazine, sold their apartment in Germany and the couple moved to the Cape, where they soon settled in. In 1988, though, the political situation in South Africa was becoming more and more instable and their friends were convinced that they would no longer be able to make it back in Europe after two years. This got Wolf Rüdiger thinking, and so he set his sights on getting back home again. Soon after, he took up an offer to run a catering company with around 120 employees. After four years of success managing the operation, he wanted a stake in the company whose future he could believe in, but the owner was not willing to give up any shares. This led him to make

a decision: “I turned my back on catering and became self-employed.” It was also clear to him that he wanted to keep his company at a manageable level so he would be able to run operations himself and no longer have to spend so much time and effort on organization and administration. He took his inspiration from an American businessman he had met at the hotel during his apprenticeship.

**SPECIALIST IN LEATHER BALLS**

To help him start up his own business, he made use of a former fellow student’s contacts in India and Pakistan, and so he began to import leather clothing from New Delhi and Madras (now Chennai) in 1991, and later from Karachi and Lahore. He made the acquaintance of various producers and familiarized himself with the market for leather fashion. One year later, business took him to Sialkot, the “World Capital of Ball Making”, as the German magazine

Spiegel wrote in 2010. The manufacture of hand-sewn leather balls was a tradition in this Pakistani town. The British had introduced this handicraft in the twenties, founding factories which are still producing balls for professional sports. In 1993 he broadened his product range to include leather gloves as well as high-quality, hand-sewn balls for all kinds of professional sports as well as leisure time activities. This is still the foundation of Albene’s business activities, whose competence in hand-sewn balls, gloves and promotional products has been growing steadily ever since. For the first few years, he sold the balls internationally from his warehouse through trade agents, some under his own brand name. His first website was online as early as 1997. Today he only produces on order.

**PERSONAL CUSTOMER CARE**

The first major customer was DF1, and the work related to these orders first caused



# WOLF RÜDIGER IN PERSON

## What was your first thought this morning?

Let's get to work. There's a lot to be done.

## When is your day a good one?

When I am happy with myself.

## What gets you in a good mood?

When I start to glide across the water in my sailboat at a speed of five Beaufort.

## And what drives you crazy?

Ignorance.

## What are you most likely to forgive yourself about?

An Italian meal late at night.

## When do you lose track of time?

In my Italian class.

## If you were forced to take a four-week holiday, where would you go?

I would go sailing in the South Seas.

## What do you like spending your money on?

On my Vespa scooter.

## Do you let yourself get seduced by advertisements?

Yes.

## When is a promotional product a good promotional product?

If it is useful and practical.

## What is the best promotional product you have ever received?

An alarm clock that wakes me up with Bavarian marching music.

## What do you find irritating in relation to promotional products?

If you have to pay lots of money for junk.

Wolf Rüdiger to take a closer look at the field of promotional products. As a result, he recognized that the promotional products market would be an interesting distribution channel for balls and other sports items. In 1997, Albene first exhibited at the PSI Trade Fair, and the company has been on hand in Düsseldorf every year since. "The PSI is important to us, because it gives us a chance to cultivate our customer contacts personally and display continuity on the market. The fair is also useful for new contacts, especially since we are a small company that cannot advertise and make acquisitions as much as larger ones. On the whole, taking part in the fair is a worthwhile investment." He also intends to keep Albene small and flexible, because this ensures its performance capability, service competence and independence. "Today I take care of my customers personally, large and small alike. If someone only needs 50 balls, they get the same quality of advice and service as large customers." A full service experiment with a large warehouse was put to rest after three years, for the extra time and trouble did not pay off as expected. "A good decision," he says today. While in his youth he enjoyed testing his limits, trying to find out "what can I do, how good am I?", he learned as the years passed to enjoy his accomplishments and secure what he already had.

### FOCUSING ON CONSULTANCY AND INFORMATION

This attitude is also reflected in the way he treats his customers. They can be absolutely certain that they are getting competent advice. That is why the first questions are "What do you need? For what purpose and target group? What do you want to achieve with your campaign (or whatever)? How large is the budget? How much time do we have?" The heart of his consultancy is to find out what customers really need and what would be sensible for them. But before this, of course, comes detailed information on the products and how they can be customized. "Distributors inquire again and again about leather balls. What they actually mean, though, is hand-sewn balls, because genuine leather has not been used for match-grade soccer balls since 1982. Balls nowadays are made largely of polyvinyl or polyurethane, and are then laminated with liquid latex, cotton and polyester. Real leather is usually only used for the 'retro' segment or for customers who insist on genuine leather. For this purpose, cheap split leather is on offer, which is generally of lower quality but is printed over its entire surface." The most important priority of Albene is to keep customers satisfied and coming back. This also includes absolute reliability, as well as admitting on occasion that a product cannot be offered. Customers greatly appreciate this sort of honesty. To finish off, here is one more quote from Wolf Rüdiger that testifies to his farsightedness: "In general, I think the promotional products market is big enough for everyone, and a bit more cooperation would make the business more humane so we could all have more fun."

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