Everyone appreciates a “David & Goliath” story, where fearless David defies the odds and overcomes his more powerful opponent. Ultimately, there’s satisfaction in rooting for an long shot, especially when he prevails in the end.

Twenty year old Zechariah Taylor, a recent transplant from Oshawa to the Port Perry area, is facing similarly daunting headwinds with his hockey stick business, Swift Hockey, facing off with the well-established likes of Bauer and CCM. But biblical David and modern-day Zechariah share a trait which may prove a key ingredient for success: neither was intimidated by the enormity of the challenge.

Zechariah was seemingly born with an entrepreneurial spirit.

“I sold hats and bracelets at school,” he recalls, then adds with a wry smile: “Some teachers appreciated what I was doing, but others didn’t. I ended up getting suspended!”

That schoolyard enterprise didn’t make him rich, but it did teach him valuable lessons he wouldn’t have found in a formal classroom.

“I learned about turning a profit as a middle-man in the business supply chain. And the success I had with the hats and bracelets encouraged me to think bigger.”

“Bigger” meant expansion into toys, clothing, and teddy bears. He sourced the items, cultivated contacts, and ultimately supplied what his customers ordered.

“The technical term is ‘drop-shipping,’ and it’s common in online shopping. I sourced and shipped, but didn’t have to maintain an inventory and incur those up front costs. I got a great education in e-commerce."

The success of that more sophisticated business proved to be a means to an end. Bolstered by experience and generating a steady cash flow, Zechariah drew on one of his life’s passions as the next step in his entrepreneurial evolution.

“I grew up a hockey nut,” he says. “Every chance I got, I was on the ice. That path took me from house league to Triple-A in Oshawa, then to Quebec Major Junior, and finally to minor pro.”

Then the pandemic forced him to consider a life beyond playing hockey.

“I had to adapt. So I did tons of research, and applied it to something I’d seen as a player.”

Zechariah’s business focus became hockey sticks.

“A player’s stick is key to allowing him or her to compete. But the best sticks – from those big companies – can run $400. Lots of aspiring players can’t afford those, and if they do buy one and it breaks, they can’t always replace it. That’s where Swift Hockey comes in: a quality product at an affordable price.”

The venture’s branding, he relates, grew out of a brainstorming session with a group of friends. Some checking confirmed the name had not been previously registered, and in mid-2022, the company was officially born.

Zechariah learned the art of website design – “I graduated from the University of You Tube!” he jokes – and embraced his father’s suggestion to look beyond the middle-man role.

“He encouraged me to sell my own product. Sure, that came with challenges, especially in an industry dominated by giants. But I’d had marketing experience and had done my research.”

The next step in bringing his product to market required a more hands-on style of research.

“A good price point is important, of course, but you’ve got to offer a quality product. That was a long process with hundreds of tests, to engineer a stick with a low break-rate.”

He describes his strategy for generating demand as a “snowball effect.”

“You see another guy using a brand of stick, you’ll consider buying one too.”

Ideally, that means gaining exposure through star players.

“A lot of pros have contractual agreements with the big manufacturers,” he explains. “So we’re rolling into that territory slowly.”

NHL approval (to use Swift sticks in competition), ironically, was relatively easy.

“They let the players make their own decisions. But others, like the CHL [Canadian Hockey League], have existing partnerships with manufacturers which help to fund their league. Getting their approval is a long process, and we’re working on that.”

Demand, he says, has to date greatly exceeded supply.

“When we do have stock, it sells out in a couple days.”

With such positive early results, the time was right to take Swift Hockey to the next level. But that requires capital, and where to go for that injection?

Zechariah turned to another long-time passion.

“I grew up watching ‘Dragon’s Den,’” he said. “So I applied, never thinking it would actually happen."

In the three-month process, from application to on-set, Zechariah again defied towering odds.

“They told me that 100,000 people apply and only 250 make it. And among those, only 170 actually get their episode aired.

“Waiting to go on was surreal. I watched other people pitch the Dragons, and that made me nervous. I tried to make mine entertaining.”

That meant staging an impromptu hockey practice for the judges.

“They tried my sticks, aiming at targets with their faces on them.”

Ten percent of the business for $70,000 was the ask. Three of the Dragons responded with offers. Ultimately, Zechariah chose Wes Hall’s, though it was not the best of the three.

“Wes offered the seventy for twenty percent of the business, where Arlene offered the same dollar amount for fifteen percent. I chose Wes because he also said he’d mentor me. That was the turning point, the opportunity to learn from a seasoned professional.”

The money, he says, will be spent on increasing inventory and driving down his cost per unit.

“Greater supply will allow me to better keep pace with demand. And bulk buying lowers the unit-cost.”

Swift Hockey is poised for its next chapter. The Dragons Den appearance has already generated a significant bump in orders. The $70,000 capital injection, when it comes, will further drive sales. And surely approvals from the CHL and minor-pro leagues will follow in time.

One day, not long from now perhaps, a top prospect – the next Crosby, McDavid, or Bedard – may arrive in the big leagues carrying a Swift-branded stick. As Zechariah described, this level of endorsement can create its own snowball effect: the kind that could some day land his company on an equal footing with the Goliaths of the hockey stick industry.

As with any successful underdog, that will be a victory worth cheering.