

When the parking lot parties become budding businesses

By Jimmy Greenfield

Even though tailgaters do their thing just a few days out of the year, Luke and Mike Lincoln have turned their passion and knowledge for tailgating into a year-round business.

The Lincoln brothers, who grew up in Lake Forest, had their first taste of tailgating at Northwestern football games.

"It would be 41-0 at halftime, and we discovered the parking lot was a little more entertaining," said Luke Lincoln, 34. "So we'd sometimes spend almost the entire game grilling for family and friends."

While getting an MBA at Northwestern, Luke decided to do his market research project on tailgating, which revealed an enormous untapped market. In 1998, they started **American**

**Tailgater**, an Internet and mail-order retail company they now run out of their Lincoln Park offices.

They offer items such as grills, chairs, flags, blankets, coolers and other tailgating staples. Revenues have tripled every year, according to Luke Lincoln, who says that catering to NASCAR audiences helps when football is not in season. They find customers all over the country, but being in Chicago lets them focus on the hometown fans.

"Our bread and butter are Chicago Bear fans and Northwestern fans," Luke Lincoln said.

In Downstate Bloomington, 28-year-old Amanda Sheets is trying to catch up to the Lincolns. Sheets and her husband started mytailgate.com last year after she left her sales job.

"We've always been big tailgaters ourselves and just decided that we wanted to do something we enjoyed," Sheets said. "We were sitting at a tailgate one day and looked around and noticed 'Gosh, look at all of this stuff all these people have.' We really saw that there was a market out there."

They started by studying their purchases over the years, then went into business. Unlike **American Tailgater**, the Sheetses' company is entirely Internet-based. Their best-selling item is a flag and a pole, which Sheets says is essential.

"If you're tailgating in an area where there are tons of other people tailgating around there, most people tell their friends to find them by looking for a flag," Sheets said.



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