



An American Success Story Keep it Simple: The Wiffle® Ball, Inc.

Eldon Bernstein and Fred Carstensen

In an industry where the average toy has a life cycle measured in months, Wiffle® ball has thrived for more than fifty years. The Mullany family, creators and long-time managers of Wiffle®, explain their strategy: Keep it simple. The Mullanys have stressed this approach, together with an uncompromising dedication to high quality, low prices, and putting the customer first. While prices of most products and services have increased several hundred percent since the first balls came to market in 1953, priced at 39¢, suggested retail for the baseball size Wiffle® had risen only to \$1.39 by 2008. The Mullanys avoid complications in operations, management, finance, and marketing. The company achieved and maintains a strong competitive advantage living by a credo of not taking advantage of their suppliers or their customers. They also refuse to have customers take advantage of them: those who demand special concessions do not continue to be customers.

One hundred percent made in the United States. No moving parts. No batteries. No chips or circuits. Just a simple plastic ball with some odd holes cut in half of the sphere (see Figure 1). No television advertising. No product placement in movies. No licensing agreements. In an industry where the average toy has a life cycle measured in months, Wiffle® ball has thrived for more than fifty years. Given the description of the product, that seems improbable.

The history of the company provides a clear answer to its success, illustrated by a commitment to two basic principles: the uncompromising ethical standards the owners set and maintained, and their strategy to

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<http://www.thebhc.org/publications/BEHonline/2009/bernsteinandcarstensen.pdf>

defend against foreign rivals.¹ Their ethical principles always put the distributors, retailers, and customers first. No advantage was given nor was it taken. To counter the lower-priced foreign products, they constantly worked to keep quality high and prices low, thus providing a barrier to entry for foreign producers.

FIGURE 1
The Wiffle® Ball



With one solid side and one side with eight oblong slots carved into it, this ball solved the problem of broken backyard windows and became an American icon.

Source: <http://www.wiffle.com>.

Entering “Wiffle®” in the Google Internet search engine nets more than one million results. Hundreds of sites offer to sell balls, bats, and combinations. Companies offer special bats, nets to catch missed pitched balls, and other ancillary products. Those interested in improving their skills can find automatic pitching machines for prices ranging from \$39.00 to \$249.98 and a variety of aids to help hit the ball farther and more often. There are whole industries built around this simple product.

Virtually every one of the fifty states hosts Wiffle® tournaments, including several versions of a Wiffle® World Series. Encino, California, has Strawberry Fields, a Wiffle® ballpark. Two Wiffle® ballparks, Little Fenway and Little Wrigley, host tournaments in Vermont. New England alone is home to more than 150 organized Wiffle® leagues, with more than 600 participating teams. Wiffle® tournaments across the country raise money for a variety of charities. Municipalities have invested in lighted fields for play. In the summer of 2008, when some neighbors protested a Wiffle® field constructed by local youths on a vacant town-owned lot in

¹ Material for this history was gathered in a series of interviews with David A., David J., and Steven Mullany at the Wiffle Manufacturing Company plant in Shelton, Conn., in August 2007.

Greenwich, Connecticut, they ignited a local political firestorm.² Public sentiment reached high enough to merit an editorial in the *New York Times* supporting the youth of Greenwich.³

The Mullany family, creators and long-time managers of Wiffle®, explain their strategy: keep it simple. From the company's beginning, the Mullanys have stressed this approach, together with an uncompromising dedication to high quality, low prices, and putting the customer first. While prices of most products and services have increased several hundred percent since the first balls came to market in 1953 priced at 39¢, suggested retail for the baseball size Wiffle® rose only to \$1.39 by 2008. Despite increasing costs for raw materials, freight, and labor, the Mullanys have constantly striven to increase efficiency, sustain their standards, and keep prices low.

Their operation is straightforward. Pricing and sales policies are simple. The Mullanys avoid complications in operations, management, finance, and marketing. There are no secrets, no tricks. The company achieved and maintains a strong competitive advantage living by a credo of not taking advantage of suppliers or customers. They also refuse to allow customers to take advantage of them: those who demand special prices or concessions unavailable to the general trade do not continue to be customers.

Wiffle® makes the ball from low-density polyethylene, a plastic derived from natural gas. The company has faced constant competition. Its long success and visibility guarantee that others think they can offer a competing product. Using material 0.06 inches thick makes a better ball; generally, competing products (typically made offshore) use a third less material, with a thickness of 0.04 inches. Because the Wiffle® is 50 percent thicker, it lasts much longer and keeps its shape, despite constant pounding. The extra thickness provides a critical advantage: it offers more surfaces for sealing, resulting in a stronger and truer sphere. People at the factory are quick to show that imported balls crush easily, something that does not happen to a genuine Wiffle® ball. When asked how they continue to compete with so many trying to copy their product, the Mullanys simply explain: "We make them faster, we make them better." Insight into the operations at Wiffle Manufacturing is available by accessing a video on the *Wall Street Journal* website.⁴

² Peter Applebome, "Build a Wiffle Ball Field and Lawyers Will Come," *New York Times*, 10 July 2008.

³ The Editorial Board, "A Crisis So Big, Even Greenwich Connecticut is Humbled," *New York Times*, 26 Sept. 2008.

⁴ URL: <http://online.wsj.com/video/wiffle-ball-55-and-still-going-strong/A3096CB6-E33F-4DA1-8EFD-42F8D86136A7.html>.

The byword at Wiffle® is integrity. Forming the foundation of that culture at Wiffle® is the importance of personal relationships. As a family business, those values largely explain the success of Wiffle®. Whether with suppliers, sales representatives, customers, or employees, three generations of Mullanys have stressed the importance of honesty, trust, and reliability in their relationships.

The Mullanys have always recognized the importance of the Wiffle® brand and have taken great care to protect their federally registered trademark: Wiffle®. A plastic ball with holes in it is referred to as a perforated plastic ball. Only those manufactured and distributed by Wiffle Ball, Inc., can carry the Wiffle® brand. A search for “Wiffle” in many English-language dictionaries will confirm that Wiffle® is, indeed, a federally registered trademark. The Mullanys diligently monitor the marketplace to protect the name. Consistent with the culture of the Mullany family, consider their notice on the Internet, which is polite but uncompromising:

As with any business, there are legal issues that we'd rather not have to address, however, they cannot be ignored. Please be advised that "WIFFLE" and all images contained herein are either copyrights or trademarks of The Wiffle Ball, Inc. Their use, for any purpose, is forbidden unless you've obtained express written consent from The Wiffle Ball, Inc. to do so. Additionally, all content, particularly The Rules of the Game, is copyrighted material.⁵

Successful products are often easily imitated, but the Wiffle® is unique in some ways. First, it spans different markets. Positioned as a toy, it is equally prominent in sporting goods stores. Small children play with it; so do adults. It can be used indoors as well as outdoors. A dozen kids can have a game for an investment of less than \$4.00. Billionaire Mark Cuban, owner of the Dallas Mavericks, devoted a room in his mansion, large enough to host state dinners, to an indoor Wiffle® field.

How three generations have made Wiffle® famous starts with the founder, David A. Mullany, and continues through his son David N. Mullany, and his grandsons, David J. and Steven. Grandfather David A. was an aspiring baseball player, but as a young man during the Depression, he needed a reliable source of income. He moved to Bridgeport, Connecticut, home of several manufacturing firms, hoping to find a job and still play baseball whenever he could. No job materialized, but he did meet a member of a baseball team sponsored by a drug wholesaler, McKesson and Robbins. The team needed a pitcher; they had seen David A. Mullany and wanted him. To be eligible to play on a sponsored team, the player had to be an employee, so Mullany was hired

⁵ Company website. URL: <http://www.wiffle.com>.

as a part-time warehouse man. He eventually became a buyer at McKesson, but had the urge to start a business, so when an interesting opportunity presented itself, he left the company in the late 1940s.

According to his son David N., Zeke Westerson, one of his dad's business friends, knew a woman whose husband was a chemist working for General Electric during World War II on a project to create a synthetic rubber. David A. and Zeke negotiated the rights to use the product as the base for automobile polish. They began to manufacture the world's first wipe-on, wipe-off auto polish. It was a revolutionary product; sales grew quickly.

David N. added that as a young boy he often spent time on weekends in the facility in nearby Woodbridge where the polish was made. Intrigued by the drums of silicone, he began to pick up handfuls of the silicone and use it to transfer pictures from the Sunday comics, toss it around, and stretch it. While the original inventor, James Wright, noted its peculiar qualities, he was discouraged that it had no practical application to his research. The item later became known as Silly Putty, although David A. did not have any part in that venture.

The auto polish was a success, with particularly high sales coming from a sales agent in the southwestern United States. He sold carloads of auto polish. Unfortunately, he neglected to tell the principals that he was guaranteeing the sale of the polish to all of his buyers. When many started returning their overstocks for credit, the guarantees forced the company into bankruptcy.

David A. was now out of a job and work was impossible to find. A proud man, he cashed in his life insurance policy and every morning set out for "work" while looking for a job. No one in the family knew that he did not have a job, and life in the backyard went on as usual. Usually David N. would be out with his buddies playing ball in neighborhood yards. To keep from doing too much damage, the boys played with a tennis ball. But the pounding against houses caused great concern among parents. David N. searched his father's golf equipment and found a plastic practice ball; he "borrowed" the ball for the backyard game. Because the boys could easily swat this plastic golf ball with a baseball bat, they changed the equipment rules to limit the bat to a broomstick.

Seeing the boys playing with the plastic golf ball ignited the elder Mullany's baseball instincts. He was particularly concerned that the boys were trying to make the plastic ball curve when they pitched. Twisting the elbow, the motion necessary to throw a conventional curve ball, can damage young arms. Experienced from his days as a buyer at McKesson and Robbins, David A. remembered a plastic Coty Perfume outer package whose two halves could be joined to make a hollow ball almost the size of a regulation baseball. To make the ball curve or to flutter with an ordinary overhand motion, David A. tried perforating the ball to alter the airflow. The first few designs did not work, but after a series of trials he found the solution by cutting oblong grooves into one side of the ball. The other side

he left uncut, and then glued the two pieces together. When pitched, the ball fluttered in unpredictable ways, making it difficult to hit. In baseball parlance, when a baseball player swings and misses, it's said that he "whiffed." Dropping the "h" created the name for the Wiffle® ball.

David A. named that first ball, somewhat smaller than a baseball, the Little League Ball. Shortly thereafter, the Little League asked him not to use their registered name; David A. renamed it the Wiffle® Junior ball, still a staple item in the company line almost sixty years later.

An important early step for the company was selection of a patent attorney. The patent attorney who did the original registration was from nearby Bridgeport, Connecticut. He handled David A. Mullany's legal work for more than twenty years. When the attorney went through an expensive divorce, he turned to David A. Mullany for help; David A. lent him the money he needed. In exchange, he agreed to do Wiffle® manufacturing's legal work in lieu of paying interest on the loan. At about the same time, he became a principal in a Park Avenue, New York City, firm. He died before he made much of a dent on the principal. After he died, the New York firm accepted no responsibility to continue the pro bono agreement; it began to charge extremely high legal fees. Outraged at the charges, David A. contacted a local firm. Wiffle® has been with that firm ever since.

One of the first decisions was how to package the ball. Because regulation major league balls came in cardboard boxes, David A. decided to package his ball the same way, including using the same color combination as regulation major league balls. The original cartons, trademarked in 1954, proclaimed "Inshoot, Straight and Outshoot." Soon after, the company modernized the terms to "curved, straight and slider." Several old friends from McKesson helped with artwork and with contacts with the Warner Folding Box Company in Bridgeport, which made the cartons. They packed twelve boxed balls in a counter display, gave it the catalog number 2B, and suggested a retail price of 49¢. The next question was where to sell them.

At Exit 59 on the Wilbur Cross Parkway, then the primary route between Boston and New York, there was a popular restaurant called The Three Judges. David A. often stopped there for his morning coffee, so he had become friendly with the owner. The owner agreed to put a display on the counter next to his checkout register. The sales astonished everyone; they sold many Wiffle® balls, all the more impressive because they were not advertised and were sitting in a restaurant rather than in a toy or sporting goods store.

Efforts by David A. to place the item with the big chains that dominated the 1950s met with limited success (see Figure 2 for a sales sheet from this era). He did, however, make a trip to New York City to the Toy Building at 200 Fifth Avenue, which houses showrooms and selling offices for virtually all of the world's major toy manufacturers. There he met Saul Mondschein. Mondschein had a modest manufacturing business and, in addition, he served as a manufacturer's representative for several

FIGURE 2
Selling Sheet from 1956

Featuring
WHITEY FORD • EDDIE MATHEWS • JACKIE JENSEN

Tough, pliable plastic ball. SLAM IT -- BOUNCE IT -- BAT IT. Rugged but safe. Will not break glass or damage property. Indoors or Outdoors -- Hit it Hard--it can't go far. Excellent for use around the Home--School Yard--City Streets--Gyms--Beach.

Rules for Wiffle Ball Game enclosed with every ball.

The baseball game that can be played anywhere. No base running. No ball chasing. Can be played by from 2 to 10 players in small areas. Excellent for group gatherings.

AVAILABLE IN 2 DIFFERENT ATTRACTIVE DISPLAY PACKS.
Big League Ball Players Picture and Autograph on Every Carton

1956



#1A Display card in 3 colors holds 1 doz. Wiffle Balls



#2B Counter display holds 1 doz. Wiffle Balls.

Wiffle Ball Pack	Quantity and Weight Per Shipper	Retail Value
#1A	1 Doz. -- 2 lbs.	\$.49 each
#2B	12 Doz. -- 12 lbs.	\$.49 each

TERMS: 2% 10 days -- Net 30 days -- F.O.B. Factory
Freight allowed on 100 lbs. or more.

This price schedule effective October 15, 1956 and supersedes all previous lists.

Featuring
WHITEY FORD • EDDIE MATHEWS • JACKIE JENSEN

The official Wiffle Bat made of hard wood — 32" long — taped handle — lacquered. Designed especially for use with the Wiffle Ball. Attractively packaged in sturdy transparent plastic bubble with the Wiffle Ball and rules of the game Wiffle Ball that are printed on the reverse side of the Wiffle Bat and Ball set label.

#200 WIFFLE BAT AND BALL SET



RETAIL PRICE \$2.00 PER SET

Packing: 1 Dozen to Corrugated Shipper

Weight: 10# per Dozen

Terms: 2% 10 days. Net 30, F.O.B., New Haven

Freight allowed on 100 lbs. or more.

This type of page was distributed to the trade and used by sales personnel to book orders. The #2B display was later renamed the #629-C.

toy lines. Manufacturers' representatives were commissioned agents who represented several non-competing toy lines to wholesalers and chain stores. Mondschein agreed to include Wiffle® in his offerings. Because he worked on commission based on sales, he had no investment and little risk. Mondschein had about a dozen sub-representatives working for him, and, critically, his organization had access to the major distributors and retailers. Mondschein was able to get an order from the F. W. Woolworth buyer when he wound up and threw the ball against a window; much to the amazement of the buyer, the window did not break. In the early twenty-first century, Wiffle® was still selling through approximately twelve manufacturers' representatives, several of whom were later generations of the original Wiffle® representatives.

There was one rule that for David A. was sacrosanct: no rewards (kickbacks) for orders. The toy industry had a history of buyers who insisted on being rewarded with cash for orders. David N. remembers that his father insisted Wiffle® would never get into a pay-off situation. "We were morally against it as well as we were cheap. We would not do that. We would not give people money."

Sales of Wiffle® increased significantly when they began to use baseball players to endorse the product. Saul Mondschein knew Frank Scott, who worked in the front office of the New York Yankees. He had David A. contact Scott, who knew several players' agents. Scott helped secure the endorsement of one of the greatest hitters in baseball history, Ted Williams. The endorsement fee paid Ted Williams—the first athlete to appear on a Wiffle® carton—for one year was less than \$1,000. Then Wiffle® switched to Pete Rose for the next few years at a slightly higher price, \$2,000. In 1973, Rose earned the National League's Most Valuable Player award; his lawyer notified Mullany that the price would now be \$50,000. David A. said no deal, and instead contracted with the New York Yankees catcher Thurman Munson. That worked until 1976, when Munson was named the American League's Most Valuable Player; his lawyer then demanded \$60,000. Tragedy hit the baseball world when Munson, piloting his own plane, crashed and died. Wiffle® had several thousand boxes with his image on it; they still have them in their warehouse out of respect for Munson. David A. no longer uses endorsements, only partly because of the high fees players now demand; he is also concerned that occasionally athletes do things that might cast a shadow on products that they endorse; he does not want to take that risk.

With Wiffle® setting the endorsement fee limit at \$2,000, endorsements seemed to be history, but a contact at the Yankees helped broker a deal with Lou Piniella to do an endorsement for the \$2,000 fee. Other players who provided endorsements included Whitey Ford, Jackie Jensen, Roger Maris, and Vernon Law.

Naturally, numerous attempts have been, and continue to be, made to copy the Wiffle®. David A. noted that patents are difficult to enforce; slight changes in the design of the ball can compromise their patent. He often

goes to retailers to check the quality of non-Wiffle® products. At one retailer, he found that squeezing them caused them to collapse, something a real Wiffle® will not do.

The Mullanys are quick to caution rival manufacturers not to call any competing ball a Wiffle® Ball. Mindful of the manner in which trade names such as aspirin, escalator, and thermos became generic, the preferred language for their product is “a perforated ball made by the Wiffle® Company.”

In 1956, David N. introduced a combination plastic ball and wooden bat, packaged on a blister card. The original wooden bats were made from hickory by the Beamon Handle Company in Missouri, a firm that made a variety of handles for tools and household products. However, by the late 1960s, it was increasingly difficult for Wiffle® to get the proper quality wood (32-inch lengths of hardwood) at a reasonable price. Making bats in-house was out of the question. Wood turning on a lathe would have been difficult, time-consuming, and dangerous. It would also have put a company gifted in the manufacture of a plastic item into an industry where they had limited capabilities and experience. As a result, Wiffle® designed a plastic bat that they could produce in much the same way as the ball: two pieces that would later be joined. But management discovered it was difficult to manufacture the bat components to tolerances that would permit joining the two halves seamlessly. The solution was to contract the job out to a blow molder in Hartford, Connecticut. The extrusion blow molding process involves inserting a length of tubular plastic into a mold, heating it, and then blowing in compressed air. The tube of plastic expands to the shape of the mold. Sealing the ends produces a one-piece, seamless product.

The Mullanys have used the same blow molder in Connecticut for about forty years, even through changing ownership. The Mullanys continue to negotiate a series of one-year contracts for the bats. Shipments of Wiffle® bats arrive regularly at the home location in Shelton, Connecticut, and, in keeping with the emphasis on low costs, the shipping cartons are broken down, stacked up, and returned to the Hartford facility to be used over and over.

Wiffle® had an important jobber who did a lot of importing and exporting. From the beginning, they handled the product and had good sales. But they wanted more. They said, if “Wiffleball’s doing so well, and it’s such an easy product to make, why don’t we make our own bat and ball set?” They arranged to have molds for the balls made in Eastern Europe. Then, for the bat, they took a sample of the Wiffle® 32-inch wood bat, sent it to Yugoslavia, and had the bats manufactured there. They duplicated the Wiffle® product right down to the wood burning that says “Wiffle Bat;” and they bought 150,000 bats. Citing copyright infringement, Wiffle® got a court order barring their sale.

The court ordered the company to store the bats in a locked warehouse, ensuring that they could not be sold on the open market. The

offenders soon offered to sell the lot to David N., but he refused to buy them. After three or four years, the area where the bats were stored was scheduled for redevelopment, and the building that held the bats was slated for demolition. The company had to get rid of the bats. So David N. traded a modest amount of merchandise for 150,000 fine wood bats. According to David N., “I made out like a bandit on them. Beautiful bat, too. Beautiful.”

Today, all three Mullanys agree that it is critical to their company that they maintain rigid pricing schedules. As a result, genuine Wiffle® merchandise cannot be found in some of the country’s leading retail stores because of their demand for price concessions. Other outlets, such as warehouse clubs and television shopping venues, do not carry Wiffle® because the low price cannot generate the dollar volume they require of their merchandise.

Unwavering commitment to delivering the highest quality, fairest price, and responsive service has made Wiffle® a favorite of their customers. At the same time, however, the Mullantys refuse to have their principles compromised by any customer. In their early days, David N. was appalled by the demands that some buying agents made of his sales force. While some manufacturers acceded to those requests to ensure their orders, he found them reprehensible and refused to sell to such buyers; Wiffle® sells only to those who agree to pay the same prices and terms as others.

Wiffle® readily admits that it offers volume discount prices to some customers, but stresses that the discounts are available only if the size or timing of the order does, in fact, result in a decreased cost of production that they can pass along. Consistent with trade law, such discounts are available to any buyer who meets those requirements. As a result of that policy, Wiffle® products are found in thousands of mom and pop stores across the country, stores that are happy to display the product, knowing that they will not have customers complaining that they can buy it for less elsewhere.

The Mullanys are willing to sacrifice volume for integrity. Faced with losing a large account because Wiffle® insisted on holding the price, they chose not to supply that account. David N. relates with relish the story from several years ago of a price-chasing customer. Planning to order perforated golf balls as a premium for their product, a major food company contacted Wiffle®. The manager for the promotion called and told David N. that his buyers had contacted some rivals, but he would still give David N. a chance to bid. David N. came up with his best offer for the promotion—consistent with the published pricing schedule—but was apparently a penny or so too high. When David N. reminded the manager that Wiffle® would always be ready in case the balls were needed, the manager assured him, “Nothing could go wrong with the alternative supplier his buyers had found.” A few months went by and Wiffle® was in the middle of its busy season. The premium buyer called, asking, “Do you

have any balls that I could buy off you?” He continued, “They met the delivery schedules, but the products are coming in and we take them out of the containers that they shipped them in and they’re falling apart in our hands even before they’re being used. I’m ready to kill somebody down here. I’m in a hell of a mess.” David N. asked, “What do you need?” He said, “50,000 balls.” David N. asked, “When do you need them?” He said, “Like today.” “Don’t worry,” David N. replied. The buyer apprehensively asked, “How much are they going to cost me?”—knowing that he was in no position to bargain, and that failure to fulfill the premium order would be deeply embarrassing to him and to his company. David N. quoted the very same price he had offered months earlier. The buyer tentatively upped his request to 100,000 balls. Wiffle® shipped the order the following day. Shipments to that company have now surpassed 700,000 balls.

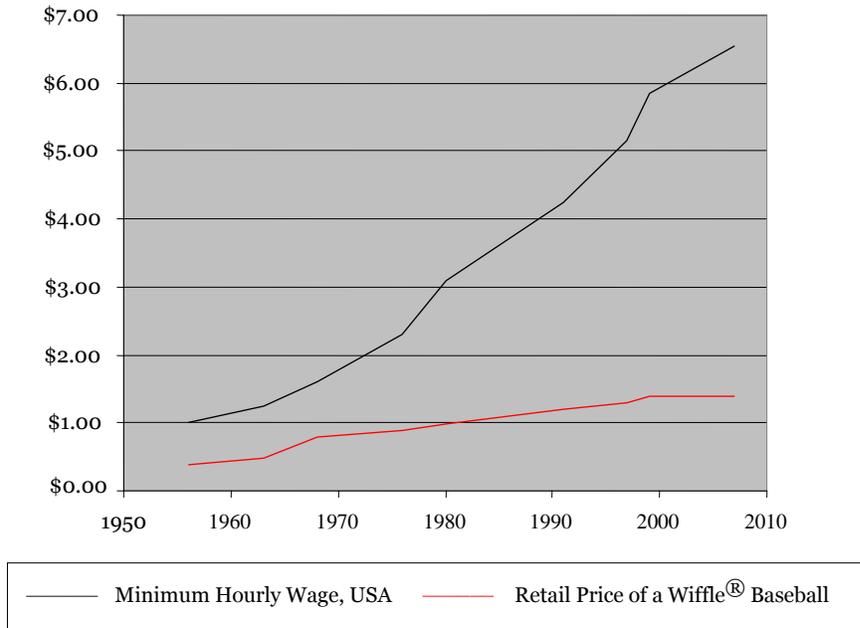
David J. describes his company’s mission as manufacturing at the lowest unit cost, shipping on time, and eliminating any problems with the product so that the jobber or retailer has confidence that it is going to sell. Wiffle® products are not perishable; they are good year after year; they are always the same. A grandfather can teach his grandchild how to play baseball in the same way he showed his son, with the same product.

The result is a product so well made that it is nearly indestructible, a description often reserved for premium-priced goods. At the same time, Wiffle® is the classic low-cost producer, competing successfully with lower-priced, lower-quality goods. To accomplish this, Wiffle® needs to control costs as carefully as possible. The cost of electricity has doubled over the last decade. The cost of the folding boxes has tripled. Despite a six-fold increase in the cost of raw materials, the retail price has remained far below the adjusted inflation figures. Wiffle® says that as costs rise, they just become more efficient (see Figure 3).

To remain highly efficient, Wiffle® operates from a modest facility. Headquarters consists of a factory with two loading docks and the forming machines on the ground level. Packaging and inventory storage occupy a second floor above the production facilities. Adjacent to that area are the offices, an area about 20 x 40 feet decorated in 1969 style, with five desks, no partitions, and no corner offices. There is a desk for each of the three Mullanys, one for Jerry Kennedy, the traffic manager, who also handles the packaging schedule, and one for Aimee Wong, the bookkeeper/receptionist. LaVerne Miller, the long time bookkeeper, retired in December 2007. David J., Steven, and Jerry Kennedy have computers on their desks; David A. steadfastly refuses to use one, relying on his memory and notes, some dating to the earliest days of Wiffle®.

There is a bank of files on one wall and a variety of artifacts and old company records along another. Laminated plaques of publications about the product, the company, and the Mullany family cover the four walls. Several customers have sent pictures of vanity license plates with Wiffle®, WiflBal, or similar wording.

FIGURE 3
U.S. Minimum Hourly Wage Compared with Price of a Wiffle® Baseball



The production area has three lines: one machine each for golf balls, baseballs, and softballs. The equipment—high-speed injection molding machines—is substantially the same as those with which Wiffle® began, but upgraded to achieve the speed necessary to produce their current volume. Wiffle® management is proud to say that they can get almost any order, regardless of size, shipped within 24 hours at any time of the year.

Wiffle® has periodically invested in customized software to fit their needs. They have computerized the machinery that forms and seals the balls. Their rejection rate is minuscule, so if a ball does not meet specifications, it can be tossed back in with the pellets and used again. They have about ten full-time factory employees, with almost no turnover. In the 1980s, before computer-aided manufacturing, Wiffle® needed about twenty-five people to produce fewer balls. Occasionally they hire some temporary help if they get very busy; August to December are the slow months, with business increasing again near the end of the year.

A product such as the Wiffle® ball—high volume, low weight—will always be subject to the highest freight classification, sometimes creating an onerous charge. Wiffle® has always had a F.O.B. (free on board) destination freight policy, although the dollar requirements for a prepaid shipment have risen gradually over the years, from \$100 for a freight paid

shipment in 1954, to \$1,500 in 2009. In the early production years, Connecticut manufacturers with very heavy products, such as the brass companies in nearby Waterbury, and Remington Arms in Bridgeport, would load a trailer nearly to weight capacity, but the cargo would only be 2 feet high, leaving 8 feet of open space. One way to take advantage of such a situation is called top freight. Wiffle® could load its product atop the dense product, adding negligible weight. As marginal revenue to the truckers, the Wiffle® products would go at a very low rate.

That strategy became impractical when the firms that had the heavy (but not tall) shipments left the area. To control costs, the freight manager offers selected truckers enough volume to consolidate shipments so they secure favorable rates. High freight rates on low-density products help defend against imports because the cost of shipping perforated balls from the Far East is prohibitive.

The Mullanys have a constant stream of suitors and offers to buy the company. No offer has interested them. David N. considers the business a matter of family pride. So do his sons. The Mullanys have been true to their credo: keep it simple (see Figure 4). That philosophy has delivered remarkable success for more than fifty years, and the Mullanys continue to run what is in many ways a model of American family enterprise.

FIGURE 4
Wiffle® Ball Logo



Image source: <http://www.wiffle.com>.