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## Shops That Fan The Ardor Of The Fans

Tony Imbimbo

A baseball autographed by all the members of the 1971 world champion [Pittsburgh Pirates](#) lies in a glass display case. Alongside it are jerseys once worn by [Henry Aaron](#) and [Marcus Allen](#). Green bleacher seats removed from [Yankee Stadium](#) during its 1974-75 renovation sit off in a corner.

No, the place is not a museum, a Hall of Fame or a sports exhibit. It's a store, one of many nestled along the cobblestone walkways of [New York City](#)'s South Street Seaport. This particular store, The Complete Athlete, is for sports fans, and on its racks and shelves are the vestments and baubles of fandom: uniform jerseys, caps, jackets, T-shirts, pennants, posters, even telephones shaped like football helmets—each bearing the logo of a major pro or college team.

But this mecca of sports mania is only one of many similar stores that can be found in or near almost every major league town in the land. Called fan shops, they have become one of the hottest business ventures in the country.

Merle Harmon, a 61-year-old sports-caster now living in [Arlington, Texas](#), opened one of the first fan shops, Merle Harmon's Fan Fair, at a suburban [Milwaukee](#) shopping mall in 1977, when he was a radio and TV broadcaster for the [Brewers](#). Harmon's store was designed to resemble a ballpark—green carpeting, red railings, gray interior, even a small bleacher section—which was appropriate because, at the time, the only other fan shops were concession stands located in or near sports arenas and stadiums.

"The mall managers thought I was nuts," Harmon says. "They had no idea what I was trying to do." But from opening day on, Harmon's shop was a hit with [Milwaukee](#) fans. Over the next three years he introduced two more Fan Fairs in [Milwaukee](#). And as the stores grew in popularity, he began to sell the concept and the use of the Fan Fair name in exchange for a one-time fee and a percentage of sales. Thus the first fan shop franchise was born.

While Harmon was building his small Midwestern chain, entrepreneurs in other parts of the country were opening similar retail outlets. During the next few years, dozens popped up.

Then the boom really hit. From 1985 to '87 more than 200 fan shops were opened, most of them in suburban shopping malls. In 1986 Gary Adler, owner of The Complete Athlete, teamed up with Ed Snyder, owner of the [Philadelphia Flyers](#), to set up a \$25 million, 65-store chain called SpectAthlete. Harmon, meanwhile, had increased the number of Fan Fair stores to 90.

Kevin Olson, then an \$11-an-hour Amtrak clerk, opened a tiny kiosk in a shopping mall in [Salt Lake City](#) in June 1985. It took him only four months to realize he was onto a good idea. He and his brother, [Chad](#), founded The Pro Image Inc., which is now a 90-store, 33-state franchise chain with estimated annual sales of \$34 million. This year he expects 100 more Pro Images to open.


For interested sports moguls, the start-up cost for a franchise store ranges from \$70,000 to \$150,000—depending on such variables as size, location, type of shopping mall—including a one-time payment of \$12,500 to \$25,000 to the parent company. Store owners also relinquish 4% to 5% of their sales to the franchisor. In exchange, they receive a store that the parent company predicts will average \$200,000 to \$300,000 yearly in sales, access to the best-selling licensed products in sports and retailing expertise. "We've made the mistakes already," says Harmon, "so our franchisees won't have to."

The concept certainly seems to be working. After all, every day a new fan is born. "Everyone in **America** is a sports fan or knows one," says Dan Heard, advertising and promotion director of Sports Fantasy, a chain of 22 stores in the South. "Our stores are the sports fan's dream shop."

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