



# Unpacking an Underdog

PacBak is headed upstream  
to national markets

By Dan Kreilkamp

Not many startups can claim they outshone the likes of Garmin and YETI on one of the biggest stages in outdoor retail. Even fewer can say the original design for their award-winning product was first etched on the back of a urine test, now framed and hung proudly next to its patent.

The buzz that comes with winning “Best of Show” at the world’s largest sportfishing convention only highlights the already incredible story of PacBak and Brian McKinnon, which serves as inspiration for other underdog entrepreneurs looking to forge their path in Alaska.

When he isn’t developing products, the Wasilla native spends his time fishing, hunting, and exploring the rivers and lakes he calls home. The inspiration for this most recent invention, a top-of-the-line cooler and mobile kitchen equipped with a first-of-its-kind rechargeable battery-operated vacuum sealer, came to him like any other.

“All of my inventions and everything that I’ve brought to fruition have been out of necessity, never desperation,” says McKinnon. “It was always something like, ‘How does this not exist?’ or, ‘Why isn’t this better?’”

## Loves Fishing, Hates the Rest of It

The development of the P88-MK Cooler/ROAM 18-V Vacuum Sealer Combo has been nearly a decade in the making, first taking the shape of a backpack which incorporated an early prototype for his battery-operated vacuum sealer that McKinnon lugged during his fishing expeditions.

"My brother says he loves fishing; I say I love catching," McKinnon jokes.

As any angler knows, catching is only a small part of the experience. Most of fishing is the hours spent preparing or waiting and then—eventually, after a long day on the river and a long drive home—the processing.

"You're tired, you've been on the boat all day, your hand hurts from stripping line, retying hooks, and then you pull your boat in and it's like, 'Oh my god... I have to vacuum seal all of this fish," he says with a laugh.

Labor was only part of reason McKinnon knew the world needed a more functional cooler. The more important piece, McKinnon says, is the taste.

Growing up on the water, his family would often pluck a fish from the river, filet it on the spot, and plop it on the grill. "It was such a different taste that I realized not a lot of people were able to experience. Fish deteriorates every hour it's out of water," he says. "Salmon is actually sweet; it tastes sweet, it smells sweet when it first comes out. The taste is just incredible, and I've always wanted to trap that in."

Before the P-88 MK/ROAM Combo began stealing the show, McKinnon enjoyed varying degrees of success with a handful of other inventions inspired by and designed for the Alaska experience.

The world's first aluminum personal watercraft, AlumaSki, was McKinnon's way of navigating the state's shallow streams and creeks. A safer industrial fueling system for truckers was his first stab at product design, conceived during one of his stints as a laborer on the North Slope. Some designs were more successful than others, but with the P-88 MK and ROAM 18-V, McKinnon appears to have found his golden goose.

When he first heard about the International Convention of Allied Sportfishing Trades (ICAST)—the event in July that PacBak took by storm—the application window had already closed. He had to track down the event's vice president, Blake Swango.

"We pretty much begged them to let us in," McKinnon says, laughing. He stressed how difficult it was, as an Alaska-based company, to meet retailers.

"What am I going to do?" he recalls pleading with Swango. "Win the thing or something?"

Swango eventually caved, allowing McKinnon's team to set up a small booth "all the way in the back" at the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando, Florida.

And the rest is history.

After the longshot win at ICAST, discussions for lucrative contracts with major retailers began rolling in. Only moments before the interview for this article, McKinnon's team wrapped up a call with Walmart.

PacBak's first nationwide distribution contract places his award-winning



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PacBak's P88-MK Cooler/ROAM 18-V Vacuum Sealer Combo is a 60-pound box containing all the rugged features that designer Brian McKinnon always wanted while fishing around Wasilla.

PacBak



cooler in Army Air Force Exchange Stores, in gratitude to military veterans who invited McKinnon into their support group during his time of need.

### Peaks and Valleys

Over the last decade, McKinnon has endured a series of unexpected deaths—thirty-two friends by his count, eighteen of whom died in his presence.

The most traumatic, he recalls, was in October of 2017, while attending a concert in Las Vegas with his close friend Adrian Murfitt.

On the final night of the Route 91 Harvest music festival, a shooter in the Mandalay Bay hotel fired down on the crowd of 22,000, striking Murfitt in the neck. Murfitt was one of two Alaskans killed out of fifty-eight total fatalities that day.

The trip was supposed to serve as a sort of pick-me-up for McKinnon, but instead it proved a catalyst for a downward mental spiral.

"It just really flipped things over. I couldn't go out in public. I was seeing things, hearing things. It was really bad," he recalls. Although he refused to use the pharmaceuticals prescribed for his shoulder surgery—McKinnon sustained his own injuries during the shooting—he instead turned to alcohol.

"It got to a point where the sounds and visuals and episodes got so bad that I was just drinking vodka on the couch and sleeping for like three, four days at a time," he says. "And I was doing it just to not be awake, you know?"

Months of anxiety, substance abuse, and homelessness followed, until one day McKinnon decided he'd had enough. The morning of November 30, 2018, he washed those previously neglected painkillers down with some vodka.

Within a half hour, though, a magnitude 7.1 earthquake hit the Anchorage area. The owner of the building where McKinnon was sleeping checked for damage and found him in time to intervene.

The first thing he did after the episode, McKinnon says, was promise his children that he would make something of himself and that he wouldn't stop until he did.

A friend connected him with a trucking job on the Slope, one that he was probably overqualified for

but was in no position to turn down. He found success in the role and then again in another, steadily rebuilding his life and reputation.

McKinnon reignited his vision for PacBak during his downtime on the Slope, citing it as his reason to persevere. With a portion of each paycheck, he was able to fund his product development and eventually secure the necessary patent and molds.

While he enjoyed a great deal of emotional support from friends and family, the same can't quite be said financially.

"When I was starting out, no one wanted anything to do with me," he says of his struggle to attract investors. "We have a small community, and when you end up that low, people notice. I wasn't in a situation where I could speed this up. I had to pay for it paycheck to paycheck, and that's really how it had to go."

At one point, McKinnon offered a friend 30 percent equity in exchange for a \$30,000 investment. Fortunately that friend didn't bite, as PacBak's projected valuation grows each day,

having already exceeded an eight-figure sum.

The company's financial path didn't truly materialize until a different friend of McKinnon's, Randee Johnson, introduced him to her colleague from college. It didn't take long for Johnson's colleague, Jac Arbour, to recognize the potential in both McKinnon and his product—even going so far as to join the venture as PacBak's first investor and CEO.

### The Most Important Number

Before being mentored by renowned business coaches, before growing his financial management company in Maine and Arizona, Arbour was preparing for a career in medicine. This seems fitting, as surgical is an apt descriptor for PacBak's laser-focused CEO.

Borrowing a line from one of those coaches, Arbour says there are three factors that determine whether he would do business with someone:

The first is trust. The second is trust. And third (you guessed it) is trust.

McKinnon ticked those boxes.

"The way he carries himself, the way he speaks, his cadence, his patience—he's obviously been through a lot," Arbour says. "The fact that he's alive, the fact that he's as mentally strong as he is after having been through what he's been through... his heart is in the right place."

Of course, as someone who assesses dozens of business opportunities each week, there were other considerations as well.

"Because of the position that I'm in, you learn to say 'no' to a lot of potentially good ideas," Arbour continues. "You know that you could say 'no' for five years to a lot of deals that might do okay, and you just wait for one really great one to come along."

In McKinnon, Arbour also recognized someone with a complementary skill and similar goal set. The feeling was mutual, and this understanding was central to their early discussions regarding PacBak's division of labor.

"I said, 'Brian, in an ideal world, from everything I know about you, we should get everything off your plate except being the face of the company



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Jac Arbour  
CEO  
PacBak

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and chief innovation officer. You’re a creative mind, you want to work with your hands, you want to design product—we need to get everything else off your plate so that you can be the guy designing the next generation of PacBak products,” Arbour says.

The biggest risk when building a company from the ground up, Arbour explains, is execution risk. Finding the right people to help carry out their strategy was a step PacBak couldn’t afford to get wrong. “There are so many things to figure out, and you need to hire the right team,” says Arbour.

Those things include product design, developing a go-to-market strategy, overseas manufacturing, shipping, warehousing, distribution, logistics—the list goes on.

A core tenet practiced throughout the PacBak company is the MIND methodology, which doubles as a software platform and company philosophy.

Pioneered by Arbour’s strategic business coach, Lee Benson, the MIND methodology is concerned with a company’s most important number and drivers.

“The whole system is designed around three things,” Arbour says. “Number one is alignment. Is the work you’re doing in alignment with your most important number? Number two is drivers: are you doing the right work that drives that number? And three is accountability: is everybody on your team accountable and being held accountable for the work they’re supposed to do that drives the most important number?”

Arbour didn’t ever say what that number is for PacBak, but it would be fair to imagine it has a few zeros at the end of it.

### **The Last Cooler You’ll Ever Need (Seriously)**

Currently, the PacBak team sits at a small but mighty eleven. The team was hand-picked from some of the biggest names in outdoor retail. Arbour says each of them was hired with a specific goal in mind: to help PacBak scale.

“The scalability of PacBak is unlike anything I’ve ever seen,” says Arbour. “This product is extremely well made. You could define it as being over-engineered, which a lot of designers won’t do today because they want to

create something as cheap as possible to focus on profit margins.”

And it’s not just scalable in terms of sporting industries. Certain aspects of the P88-MK, like its ice retention and diverse utility, have piqued interest from military and medical sectors as well.

The 60-pound cooler combo features two major compartments for separating wet and dry products, plus a dedicated compartment for the vacuum sealer. It’s a big box, though it might not appear so big next to McKinnon, standing 6-foot-3 and nearly 300 pounds. McKinnon had to be instructed to stay out of pictures with the product so that customers aren’t shocked by its size when they see it in person.

Apart from its durability—which was certainly tested during its 24-hour stay with a 1,250-pound Kodiak brown bear named Izzy—another aspect of the cooler that supports its longevity is the vacuum sealer’s use of replaceable heat strips.

Despite merchandisers advising the company against this, Arbour says this feature was never a question.

“If we wanted to focus solely on corporate profits, we would not have replaceable heat strips,” Arbour states. This design feature saves customers from shelling out more than \$200 on a new vacuum sealer, instead spending \$15 for a replacement part.

By extending longevity, Arbour says the company is keeping less plastic from landfills, and less petroleum is needed for manufacture.

Eventually, McKinnon and Arbour would like to see 100 percent of PacBak’s sealers and coolers made in America with recycled plastic waste from the oceans. While an ambitious goal, PacBak might be able to walk the walk.

This a product that enables users to process fish on the spot, replenishing Alaska’s rivers with nutrients from carcasses that anglers might otherwise carry home and toss in the trash.

Everything the company does, from product design to placement, speaks to a sustainable business model. Reflecting on what PacBak customers’ purchasing decisions might say about them, Arbour says, “If you buy PacBak, it’s because you’re a badass outdoorsman who supports entrepreneurship and humanitarianism.” **AB**