

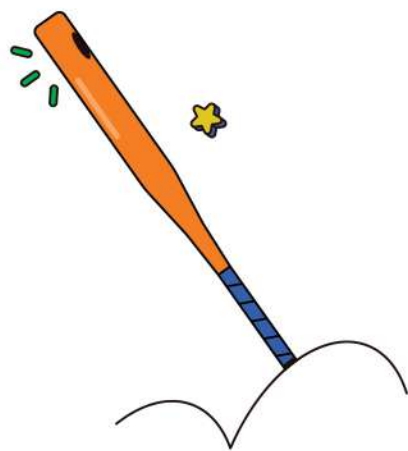


The Book of

Eastbay



**Two Friends and
the Catalog That Changed
the Sneaker Business Forever**



ART JUEDES & RICK GERING
with **Brandon Sneed**

Prologue

We Had No Idea

In early January 2022, a CEO stared out the window of a fourth-floor office in Midtown Manhattan, contemplating the most emotional decision of his career. In fact, circumstances had made the decision for him; it had been headed this way for years. But he knew he was the one who had to voice the decision, which meant that first, he had to accept it.

With New York City sprawled before him, full of noise and hustle and honking and ambition, the CEO of Foot Locker, our dear friend and former colleague Dick Johnson, reflected on just how high and how far this business had taken him—had taken all of us. Decades later and thousands of miles from where it all began, he stood for an extra moment, remembering, holding on to the gratitude. It eased the pain.

He sighed a heavy sigh, then strode to a conference room, where he said the words out loud to his team: “We’re shutting down Eastbay.”



For those of you who saw the Eastbay wordmark on the cover of this book and were immediately flooded with nostalgia for your youth, you know what that means. For those of you who don’t know Eastbay as well, it was the business we started in 1980 to sell sneakers to young athletes, which grew to become *Eastbay*, a catalog that turned out to be extraordinarily special, to us and to millions of kids. Perhaps you came to this book because you love smart, inspiring stories about entrepreneurs, or you’re

fascinated by the sneaker industry, or maybe you just want to bask a while in nostalgia for what life was like and what business was like in the '80s and '90s. In any case, welcome.

We are Art and Rick, by the way—although over the years we've used more colorful names for each other, too. A lot of good things have happened to us since we met, as babies in the hospital. Many of these things we chalk up to sheer luck, but the fact that we have stayed friends for more than seven decades is not one of them. For all we've managed to accomplish, this may be the thing we're most proud of. No matter how often we fought—and we've fought *a lot*—we always figured things out. We always stuck to our unspoken agreement: the business would go before the friendship would go. There's only one time we can think of when we both disagreed so strongly that we couldn't find a solution, so we decided to flip a coin. But we'll get to that.

Our story is actually three stories. The first is a story about friends who became accidental entrepreneurs, living some ninety miles west of the frozen tundra of Lambeau Field, in the cold, wintry land known as Wausau, Wisconsin. We sent a letter to thirty-five track coaches in the area, asking them if we could stop by their schools, show their athletes some shoes, help them find the right ones. We were just two guys trying to build something from nothing through hard work, a healthy dose of delusion, and, we hoped, plenty of dumb luck.

The second story is one about transformation, first of our business. Somehow the thirty-five letters to area coaches led us decades later to taking nearly 400,000 pictures of shoes and producing up to sixteen thick catalogs per year—each with the iconic Eastbay wordmark and some magical, zany, or deeply inspiring cover. At its peak, some forty to fifty million copies of *Eastbay* were sent all over the world every year, eagerly snatched from mailboxes everywhere, from the heart of New York, Detroit, Los Angeles, Tokyo, and every big city, to ranches in Wyoming, farms in Indiana, suburbs in Florida, and dusty towns in West Texas. Wherever they were, kids would pore over those pages, in awe of the sheer volume of sneakers, and the colors, and the sizes. They'd dog-ear pages, circle their favorites. Even if they couldn't get them, they could dream about getting them. Maybe they had to mow some lawns or babysit to save up. Eventually they'd call to place their order. And then, miraculously,

just a few days later—that was instantaneous in the 1980s—the shoes were at their doorstep.

It's hard to fathom how we got from the first story to the second. It certainly wasn't planned. We just *felt* that what we were doing was right, no matter what anyone else told us, and plenty told us we were crazy, or wrong, or unwelcome. And that's part of the second story, too: the role we played, often unwittingly, in the transformation of the shoe business more generally, and of the culture of young athletes, and of sneakers as fashion and as identity-shaping artifacts.

Polly James was a multisport high school athlete when we first hired her (then named Polly Weiland) to just do whatever needed doing. She stayed with us for a long time, in many, many roles. When we talked to her for this book, she told us, “Eastbay is kind of folklore to so many people. It's kind of a unicorn. It just doesn't happen every day. And we were in the middle of nowhere in people's minds. It wasn't an easy place to get to. Some salespeople would come through and then go back to their companies and tell these mythical stories about Eastbay in this little town. ‘You wouldn't believe these guys. There are people running all over the place in this office, in these warehouses, they're pushing all these packages out the door.’ It wasn't the most organized and highbrow kind of place. So, there was kind of this urban legend—this sneakerhead legend—that kind of grew about who we were and what we were doing.”

Journalist Bobbito Garcia, the author of *Where'd You Get Those?* and an icon of sneaker culture who was the first journalist ever to write about that culture, for hip-hop magazine *The Source* in 1990, later told us, “For sneakerheads, having something like *Eastbay* was equivalent to porn, basically . . . Because literally, it was insane to see . . . Sneakerhead culture had already formed . . . and the idea of trying to search high and low for sneakers that weren't available otherwise had already been established. What *Eastbay* did was create a cog in that ecosystem when they finally arrived. Once it got on my radar, it became dear. If you're in any other city [besides New York], basically, where sneaker culture wasn't bubbling just yet, then that's your bible. And for that, I think *Eastbay* really plays a role in the expansion of sneaker culture beyond New York.”

To us, there's something beautiful about what Polly and Bobbito say about the connection and access that *Eastbay* created—at a time,

remember, when culture and community didn't spread instantly. But we had no idea. Okay, maybe we had *some* idea. We had heard funny stories about kids getting *Eastbay* catalogs confiscated from their backpacks or right from their desks during class, and we had noticed multiple catalogs going to the same address. Now and again, a successful athlete would call on us. Shaq was a fan, as you'll find out.

But what we hadn't realized was just how deep the bond was that people formed with *Eastbay*. While we certainly tried to create something that was special to athletes, especially young athletes, we had no idea that the catalog meant so much to them, and how much it would come to mean to this other burgeoning community of sneaker enthusiasts who now are part of a worldwide, multibillion-dollar industry. Even today, we're still learning about the magical connection so many had to *Eastbay*.

How could you not know? People have asked since then.

Mostly because we were so busy working. That's the third story—the story of perseverance. There was not a single year at *Eastbay* without drama of one sort or another, much of it existential. Almost every year felt like it could very well be our last before we accidentally bankrupted ourselves. Even though *Eastbay* grew in giant leaps, we're not sure if we ever felt like we knew exactly what we were doing. We just loved helping athletes get the right shoes, and we set out to do it the best ways we knew how. Our strategy was simple: if we thought something might work, we threw everything we could at it until proven wrong (or until lawyers told us to stop—more on that, soon, too). And a lot of times, that meant botching it before we got it right. We broke so many rules because we didn't know the rules.

We always felt like these guys with this simple idea flailing about in the middle of nowhere, and often big industry players treated us that way, despite the fact that we were, in many ways, ahead of them. We were making bets—on inventory, on digitization, on customer service, on content strategy—that foretold how business would transform in general. We understood the customers in ways other industry players didn't seem to grasp.

We're not trying to brag. We weren't smarter than anyone else. Much of *Eastbay's* success was based on instinct, timing, luck, and, frankly,

stubbornness. We started the company on a simple idea, one that guys who wear suits to work (we never did) would probably call a *mission* or a *North Star*. We just called it the plan: Give young athletes access to good shoes they couldn't get anywhere else at prices they could afford. That's it. And, stubbornly, we never really stopped doing that.

That simple idea wasn't a strategy we dreamt up in some business session or based on advice from an entrepreneur's handbook. It came from our own experiences as kids and as athletes. We both played multiple sports. Rick was a track star, fast as wind on the prairie. Art's game was baseball, and could he hit. We had always loved the feeling of putting on the perfect new pair of shoes. There was some magic in tying up that track spike or baseball cleat or basketball shoe that made you feel faster, made you feel like you could jump higher, or just made you feel like what you had on your feet *looked cool*. Stepping into the right pair of new shoes can make you feel like a new person, a better athlete. That's what we wanted to give to people, because growing up, we knew how hard it could be to get that feeling, to find that right pair of shoes, and to afford them.

We believe—we know—our commitment to this one idea is the source of the deep and loyal connection athletes and, we'd find out later, sneakerheads felt toward the *Eastbay* catalog.

Eastbay was the proverbial lightning in a bottle, and we felt the heat and energy, the buzz from it every day for twenty years. It became a blessing beyond words, and a story that we now find hard to believe. It's a story about friendship and business, about failing and succeeding. It's about luck and smarts and always showing up. It's about what happens when you surround yourself with great people—and what happens when, no matter what you do, you know *why* you're doing it.

All good things must pass, and Eastbay did, too. That's part of our story as well. When Eastbay shut down just a couple of years ago, many people encouraged us to share our story. It was not an easy decision for us—we worried we'd forgotten more of it than we could remember. But then we enlisted the help of many of those who were there with us. We spent many hours interviewing them and amassing notes from their memories, and this gave us a newfound energy for telling the story. You will hear their voices throughout this book, and you'll hear from fans of the catalog, from sneakerheads and athletes, because we can't tell the

story of Eastbay without all of them. You'll meet an array of characters who colored in the years.

It was a lot of years, and it was a lot of years ago, too. Once we started this book, we realized that getting the timeline right and aligning events was trickier than we expected it would be. There were so many memories weaving together and overlapping, and not everyone remembered them the same way. Everything in this book happened, and all the people are real. We worked hard to verify and align events and dates, but please forgive us if we slightly misplaced an event in time. One more note: In order to tell our story together, sometimes we need to refer to ourselves in the third person so as not to confuse you. Thank you for understanding.

We hope you're inspired by our story. Maybe you'll learn from it. Mostly, we want you to enjoy it. We sure have.



We were on a walk with our wives down in Florida, when Art's phone rang. Dick Johnson, still holding on to the gratitude, called us the minute the news of Eastbay's closing was made public.

"I'm sorry," he told us. "I kept it going as long as I could."

We told him that there was no reason to be sorry, that it had all become more than we ever dreamed. Dick chuckled. "That is the truth," he said. "It's been a great ride."