[00:08.7]

Len Hoffman was a retired baker from Entenmann's Bakery. And the first thing he said, he goes, stop calling these recipes. He goes, these are formulas. And I was like, okay. He goes, this is scientific now, boys. So we get Len to start helping us with these products that we're working on.

[00:24.5]

And we're also starting to do some private label for a pretty large coffee chain here in Southern California. And they're like, well, hey, I wonder what else these guys do. So they asked us about doing some scones and we told them we made the best scones in the city. Which was not a total lie, which was not true, just completely.

[00:42.5]

He did not even make scones. The guy wouldn't even know what the hell a scone was.

[00:54.1]

Welcome to How I Built this. A show about innovators, entrepreneurs, idealists, and the stories behind the movements they built. I'm Guy Raz. And on the show today, how a former American gladiator found his true calling.

[01:11.6]

Lost it, and then found it again by building a top selling protein cookie brand. Lenny and Larry's.

[01:24.8]

If you follow food trends, protein right now is an exploding catego. Just to put it in perspective, in 2024, the global market size for protein fortified foods was around $27 billion.

[01:39.9]

But by the end of this decade, it's expected to reach close to $50 billion. Just take a look at the aisles of Whole Foods or even Costco, you will start to notice more and more products that tout their protein content, whether it's crackers or nut butter or even ice cream.

[01:57.6]

But back in the days when protein was kind of out of fashion in the 90s, two former bodybuilders entered the space with a pretty revolutionary product. It was a protein packed muffin. This was in 1993 when Barry Turner and his friend Benny Graham were out of work and struggling to make it in Hollywood.

[02:18.9]

A few months earlier, Barry finally caught a lucky break when he was cast on the TV show American Gladiators. But just a few episodes in, he got injured. And that was the end of his TV career as an American Gladiat. So one afternoon, Barry and Benny were talking about how boring their bodybuilding diets were, namely chicken breasts and egg whites.

[02:42.5]

And they wondered, could you take protein powder and just mix it into things that are more interesting, like muffins or brownies? A few days later, they started to experiment, literally dumping protein powder into muffin mixes. And eventually they found a recipe that worked.

[02:59.9]

They decided to start a small business selling their muffins to local coffee shops around Lo Angeles. The muffins did pretty well, but the business never really took off. So in 2001, they sold Lenny and Larry's for a small amount of money and moved on.

[03:16.8]

But Barry Turner would come to regret that decision almost immediately. And it would take him six years to buy most of the business back. And that's when he started to turn Lenny and Larry's into a national brand of cookies, brownies and other protein packed treats.

[03:34.2]

Today you'll find Lenny and Larry snacks at thousands of locations across the country. The brand was really a pioneer in protein fortified food. And Barry's path to building that brand was a windy one. He grew up in the 1960s and 70s in Hickory, North Carolina.

[03:52.0]

He was a pretty talented baseball player, but an injury on the field left him deaf in one year. So when he started college in Georgia, he set his sights on wrestling. I was living in a little town called Cartersville, Georg, and my mom had seen a guy had a wrestling ring in his backyard and she told me about it.

[04:13.1]

So I kept going to his house every day for two straight weeks, leaving notes knocking on his door. And I kept saying, I want you to train me. I want you to train me. And he doesn't respond. So finally he calls me one time and he just said, he goes, look dude, I've been traveling, I've been on the road wrestling, you know.

[04:30.2]

All I kept saying was just see me. I said, just see me and maybe you'd want to train me. So I show up and he sees me, he goes, you know, I think I could probably help you. So we trained for two weeks nonstop, seven days a week. We're just training. And I learned, I learned everything I can about professional wrestling.

[04:45.4]

You know, how to fall, how to, you know, how to do a sunset flip, how to come off the, you know, the top rope, flight, elbows, everything. And it was so much fun. And so within two weeks, he gets me a match. And you became a character or, or were you, were you Barry Turner?

[05:01.2]

And no. Well, when I showed up, I was Barry Turner. But when the promoter saw me, he goes, this guy's too pretty. We got to put a mask on him because I can't look better than the actual guy who's going to beat me. And the coolest thing about that is, man, when they put a mask on you, you just become someone else.

[05:18.1]

Yeah, so they put a mask on me. They called me Mr. Olympia and they gave me a manager. I got a guy's name's Diamond Dave. He's wearing a red tuxedo. With a red top hat. It was, it was full on, like a major production, and I, I was getting picked up by a.

[05:34.6]

A bigger group. They were going to send me on the road, like, immediately. And this was like nwa, WCW type wrestling at the time. And that's, that's where I was heading. And that's what I really thought my career was going to be. I was going to become a professional wrestler and be very successful at it. So what happened? My girlfriend at the time thought wrestling was beneath me.

[05:53.2]

I thought I could be. I could do better. So I chose a girlfriend and didn't work out, so. Right, but you did take her advice not to be a pro wrestler. Right. And I guess instead you. You decided to go back to school to Georgia State University, where you wound up meeting this guy, Benny Graham, who would, of course, factor into this story.

[06:14.5]

So who, who was Benny? What Benny was. I actually met him at a gym and he said, hey, I heard you. You. You're doing. You're used to a little bit of pro wrestling. Would you want to consider it again? Because I really want to get into it. And I said, yeah, I' start training together. And we just became instant friends.

[06:31.2]

We were just kind of goofballs and having fun. And he was a personal trainer, too, at the time. And so he said, I'm training this lady, and she's has this movie script written for two guys that would be you and I, and she'll move us to California. She'll pay for everything.

[06:46.7]

Do you want to go? And I go, sure, let me finish my schooling so I can get my degree. He goes, we got to go next month. And I was like, let's go for it. And so we packed up and we went to California. Wait, let's just unpack this.

[07:01.8]

Somebody was working on a movie script. Yeah, she had this lady, she was. She had a little bit of money. So when people find people with money at that time, everybody's pitching a movie script around the country. You know that guy. What was the premise of the movie? It was similar to the movie Warrior, if you remember the movie with Tom Hardy and Edgerton guy back then, it was about like, that was like UFC type fighting for that movie.

[07:28.5]

And so kind of similar to that. It was like, you know, two guys, we were going to be wrestling. And so the idea was that you and. And Benny might star in it. Like, you might be the warriors. Yeah, we might be the guys and be the main, main characters. And kicking some ass. And kicking some ass. And we're big. We're big guys, we, we're growing our hair really long.

[07:46.2]

So we just, we had it, we had a look. So yeah, it was just, it was just one of the things where you just go, you know what? It's, it's a once in a lifetime opportunity to move to California. I never in my heart believed a movie would ever get made, but I'd ever star in this movie. I just had an opportunity to go to California. And you were a semester away from graduating from getting your degree.

[08:05.2]

Yeah, because at that time I was like, it was one of those things. I'm still kind of young. I'm like 29 or something at that time. Yeah, I can, I can finish later. All right, so you get to LA 1991 and with the hopes and dreams of being in this film, what happens?

[08:24.4]

Well, obviously the film never gets made. So we're literally. Benny and I are just being paid by this person to just work out. We worked out twice a day. We ate. That's all we did was just get bigger and bigger and bigger. Wow. Yeah. Seriously, like, can you give me a sense of how big, like what's your height and, and what was your weight at the time?

[08:44.9]

Well, six feet. The biggest I ever got weight wise was 250. 250 pounds. Wow. That's insane. I mean, I mean, can I ask you. This is not a very polite question. No, it's okay, I'm honest. Were you using steroids to get that big at that, to get. Yes, yes.

[09:00.0]

You have to. You can't have to. You can't eat food and you can't protein powders without. Cannot. My natural body, My natural body, I could get to, I got to about 217, I think was the biggest I got to naturally and it's still alive, which is still big. I'm still a professional athlete.

[09:15.2]

Yeah. And most people will not tell you the truth when you ask questions like that, but I just believe in being honest about everything. And by the way, does it have long term consequences? I think it does for people who use it for a long time. I didn't like it. It would.

[09:30.3]

Mood swings galore. I mean you could be, you could be happy one day and you could just be, you know, throwing stuff at a wall the next. It just. Yeah, it's not, it's like, especially if you're a pretty high strung person anyway or just very aggressive. Volatile. Volatile, yeah.

[09:46.4]

So you, but that was your job is to get really jacked for this, this movie. How long, how long did it, did that last before it became clear that this movie was never going to pan out. I got paid for about a year. Wow.

[10:01.4]

Yeah, it's a pretty good deal. Not bad. Meantime. Okay, so once you kind of find out this is not gonna happen, you're already in la. You're this Jack dude, and you have long hair. Tell me about your hair. Yeah, I kept growing my hair to the point where it got down to my waist.

[10:18.9]

Who was that guy? Fabio. Fabio? Yeah. Were you like Fabio? Yeah, he had. He had cool hair. His hair was. His hair wasn't as wavy as mine. He was like, massive with long hair. Yeah. So you had this really long hair and that was your look.

[10:35.1]

Yeah, that was it. And meantime, Benny was also doing this, right? He was. And you guys were sort of on this parallel path of you're in la, so you might as well keep auditioning for parts, right? That's exactly right. I was. One thing I'll tell you is I'm not an actor.

[10:50.8]

And I never. I didn't want to become an actor. I just had a look. I was big with long hair. You could put me in things so I could audition for parts. I read that you were on Doogie Howser. I was a guy in a pool with a girl on my shoulders.

[11:06.5]

Benny and I both were on Dookie Howser. We did the Bodyguard with Kevin Costner, Whitney Houston. You were in the Bodyguard. What'd you play? We were kind of nightclub, kind of bouncers. There's a scene where they're coming in from the limousine coming to the Mayan theater downtown la, and we're kind of holding back the crowd because they're trying to get to them, whatever.

[11:27.6]

And then in the scene when she's performing, we're right there at the stage. Keep it. Yeah. So how many seconds do you get on screen during the Bodyguard? Honestly, it's maybe three, four seconds, five seconds backs. Yeah, I was in another movie, too, called Death Becomes her, and I still get residuals for that.

[11:43.3]

Is that with Meryl Streep? Meryl Streep, Bruce Willis. Yeah, it's like Bruce Willis, Barry Turner, Meryl Streep. We were. We were all featured actors, but if you had a look, they could. They could use you. So it's funny. A Death Becomes Her. Our titles were Beefy Guy.

[12:01.3]

I'm not kidding you. So I was Beefy. I think I was Beefy Guy Number eight. And we got. It was. It was such. I had so much fun because the other beefy guys in the movie, we were all just. Just big hams on the set. And we didn't have to work that much. It was a lot of hurry up and wait and we just, we hung out.

[12:19.1]

That's all we did. We hung out, we ate and we just messed around. It was a lot of fun. All right, so this is also the era of. And those of you under the age of 40 will have a harder time remembering this. But American Gladiators, this is a show on television where you had a bunch of really strong men and women and then you have contestants who'd have to battle them out in different scenarios, like trying to get a touchdown or trying to win a wrestling match or a jousting match.

[12:50.0]

This was a huge, massive show. You find out about an open casting call in 1992. Yeah. And when you found out about it, what did you think? Well, the first thing I thought was, I'm gonna go become an American Gladiator.

[13:05.1]

Prior to that, I auditioned for a show called Knights and Warriors. It was like a knockoff show. Yeah, knockoff show. A medieval setting. It lasted one year. And Benny and I both go and audition for. For Knights and Warriors.

[13:20.3]

Yeah. And they wanted both of us. And I said, no, thank you. I said, I'm gonna go become an American Gladiator. So what was it? Was it a one day audition and they were going to make a decision at the end of the day or was it a multi day thing? Well, it turned out to be a multi day and multi month process.

[13:37.9]

And we do all the events. We're doing Powerball, we're doing jousting. We ran two 40 yard dashes in front of these executives. Okay. But it wasn't. But gladiators wasn't like boxing and stuff. No, no, no, no. It was more like violent. It was like jousting with like padded jousts and wrestling.

[13:54.8]

But guy that, that is violence. Yeah, you're hitting somebody with a giant Q tip, we'll call it. And it doesn't matter if it's padded. It's like when you're hitting at that speed, very violent show. And so that day we went through all these different events and I could do them all. And so they narrowed it down to 10 people that day.

[14:11.7]

And I was one of the 10 people. And then we all kind of come back and do some things and they narrow. I expected to be in that top 10. But now when you get to like you're got a 33% chance of being on this show, your heart's racing a little bit and you're saying like, holy cow, dude.

[14:26.9]

I'M a Hickory, North Carolina guy. Just, you know, just this guy from the South. And I'm just thinking, like, I'm about to be on the. At that time, the hottest show on tv. I'm looking at a photo of you at the time you were selected. I think people are gonna make that assumption now.

[14:42.2]

And you became. You become a Cyclone. That's your character. They called me Cyclone. That's what they thought. I was very. I was big and I was very f. And that's just the name they came up with. You were like 31. About 31. 32. Yeah. Giant. You're just a giant. Like, your.

[14:57.5]

Your bicep is like the size of an adult head. I have some big arms. I still have big arms, guy. All right, so you get the job. Yeah. You're on this massive show, and you've got a serious career ahead of you.

[15:12.7]

That's exactly what I thought. I was like, this is it. This is the pinnacle of my sports career. I didn't make it baseball, football, whatever. But this, this was my pro sports. Everything had led me to that moment. Right. I felt like if anyone had earned it, it was me. Yeah.

[15:28.1]

And. But then God has a way of saying, let me. Let me deal you another blow. What. What happened on my. I did eight shows, and on the day that they called, they said, this is your coming out party, Cyclone. They were gonna. They were gonna make me a known.

[15:44.2]

I mean, I was gonna become. I felt like I was gonna become a star. And so they said, you're in every event today. That means they're gonna. They're putting you out there. But the best event was Powerball. People love Powerball. So that's basically the guys that. Contestants are sticking a ball into these little cylinders, and there's three of us trying to tackle two of them.

[16:01.0]

And so I die. If there's two guys, they come together, I die between them. I extend my arms and I wrap them up. And at that time. And my bicep popped when I did that. Yeah. And my bicep was just gone. It had rolled up in my arm.

[16:16.9]

Complete, complete, complete detachment. Started to be gory. But it's what. It's what happened. And I wanted to hide it from the. From the producers. It was like hanging meat off your arm. Well, it just. Guy. What it does is it rolls up like a. Like a shade. It just goes up into your.

[16:32.4]

Up into your body, towards your. Towards your shoulder. Weird. Yeah, Just complete. It attaches at your forearm and. Painful. Up to that point. One of the. The Most painful thing I'd ever gone through. It was just like burnt. Like somebody's taking a match and they're, they're lighting your arm on fire for 24 hours a day.

[16:47.9]

I could not stand, but I would not. I would not stop. I kept, I kept taping it and trying to shut off the pain. I didn't take pain pills or anything, but I was doing. Because I. You understand, this was my moment. Yeah. There's nothing that would. Ever kept me off except a liability issue with the actual producers of the show.

[17:05.7]

They said, you got to go, you got to go to the hospital. Wow. So they ended that into my career as a gladiator. So you were done? That was it. I was done. Which must have been crushing because you worked so hard to get that job. Yeah. If there's ever a.

[17:21.7]

If there's ever a time in my life being depressed, that was it. So here you are, 31. Yep. You kind of taste this, this moment of like stardom, like just the beginning of it. And, and, you know, you're probably thinking, okay, here we go.

[17:38.8]

And then it's over. Yeah. So what did you. I mean, obviously to rehabilitate your arm, that was priority. Yep. And when you say you are feeling like, down, like, what does that, what did that mean? Feeling like, feeling like a failure. I worked my, my whole life.

[17:55.5]

I felt like from the time, you know, being a kid, being an athlete to picking up the weights, you know, going through becoming a bouncer in nightclubs and wrestling, just everything I was just like leading towards, there was something, there was a pinnacle somewhere. And American Gladiators was my pinnacle. Yeah.

[18:10.6]

You could have cast me in a movie with Arnold Schwarzenegger. I wouldn't have taken that over being an American Gladiator. And I, it just, yeah, just depression is like, not even. It's funny. I'm talking about. I've never really, I've never really shared this with anyone, but when you're a proud person from the south, you don't talk about your feelings.

[18:29.2]

You just, you just swallow it and you go on with life and you pick yourself back up. But, man, behind the scenes, I just, I didn't know what I was going to do. I was like, how do I top that? Yeah, how do. Basically, how do I get that feeling of being, you know, being a success again?

[18:45.5]

All right, so you're, you're going through this and trying to figure out the next step, I guess. Yeah. And Benny, he was on Knights and Warriors, that sort of low budget spinoff of American Gladiators.

[19:00.9]

Also had a. An injury, like something that kept him from. Right, yeah, he tore. He tore his shoulder, his labrum or something. And you can't make this up. We're sitting. We're literally two guys on these two opposite shows. We both get injuries, and it's just that I'm like, are you serious?

[19:18.1]

How does this happen? Yeah. So you guys are. You and Betty are not sitting around trying to brainstorm ideas of, hey, what should we do together? You're just. You're two Jack guys trying to recover. Recover from your injuries and still eating probably insane amounts of protein and.

[19:35.7]

Yep. Right. Egg whites and chicken and rice and whatever you can just stuff in your body. That's it. And I guess one afternoon, you're just kind of eating all this food and having a conversation. Yeah, just having a conversation. We're at Coffee Roaster Cafe in Marina Del Rey.

[19:54.3]

It's our favorite little spot. And eating chicken breast and egg whites. And our thing was we always like to. Like before we'd work out, we'd always like. You'd have like, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with a cup of coffee, a muffin with a cup of coffee. Something sweet with the coffee. Just. That was just our thing. So we had a muffin sitting on the table, and we were going to split that muffin and have a cup of coffee.

[20:15.4]

It's just a regular muffin. Just. Just a regular muffin. Yeah, just kind of. Kind of a natural type muffin. Nothing. Nothing in it. And I'm eating chicken breast and egg whites, and I point to the chicken breast and egg whites, and I said, why can't we put that protein in that muffin?

[20:30.9]

And I looked up and it's like Bennett saw a ghost. And he just goes, oh, my God. He goes, we're doing this. And I was like, you damn right we are. And that's all we needed. That was it. Okay, this is the light bulb moment. And. And. And you're like, why can't we put that into that?

[20:46.8]

And now this is 1993. There were some. I mean, protein powders existed. Whey powder existed at the time. Yeah, there was. Metrics was big Metrics was kind of doing their thing. But it's funny, though. There was protein powder and there was protein bars, but there was nothing else.

[21:04.1]

Metrics is Met Rx, right? Met rx, correct. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. GNC existed. So you existed. You get protein powders. Yep. But there was no one putting protein in anything other than a. Other than a protein bar. You didn't have to. You just. If you wanted protein, you ate tuna, you ate chicken, you ate steak, you ate eggs, which is a pretty great way to get protein.

[21:25.0]

Let's be honest. The best way to get protein, it's just not convenient for everybody. Correct. You can't take a steak on the go with you. Just munch on it while you're driving like Fred Flintstone. Hang on, I got a steak in my pocket, I need to eat it, you know, so. But there then.

[21:41.4]

And there you guys are sitting there and both of you are like, this is it. And it's funny, you said light bulb moment. I always look back on it and I go, this was a giant halo. It was like, this is not your moment where you can maybe go make a little bit of money.

[21:56.6]

This, I think, is something bigger than that. I thought that from that very day, this is like a Renaissance painting. This is like Fra Angelico's ascension. It is the halo right there on the angel. That's was our moment.

[22:12.0]

Two Podunk guys from the south gonna go change the world when we come back. In just a moment. Barry and Benny build a business, but not a brand. And Barry makes a deal that he regrets almost as soon as he signs it.

[22:29.3]

Stay with us. I'm Guy Raz, and you're listening to How I Built this.

[22:49.4]

Hey, welcome back to How I Built this. I'm Guy raz. So it's 1993, and Barry and his friend Benny are sitting at a cafe in LA where they've just come up with the idea to start a business selling protein muffins. There was no turning back, Guy.

[23:05.7]

It was just, we're going to do this. We didn't know how we're going to do this. No consumer product, good experience. There's no marketing experience, there's no business experience, nothing. And we just, we knew that day that was it. And so we didn't leave that table until we drew out what we thought the logo was going to look.

[23:24.5]

Look like. And we left there and went straight to a little natural food store, Rainbow Acres, and picked up some protein powder. We bought some muffin mix, went back to my kitchen and started baking these muffins within two hours.

[23:41.0]

We opened up a bank account that day with fourteen hundred dollars. I don't know why it was fourteen hundred. Maybe that's all we had. And we did a DBA doing business as. So this all happened the very first day. And the business was going to be called what Lenny and Larry's. You decided that right then and there you're going to call it Lenny and Larry's.

[23:59.9]

Right, Right. Then even though you were Benny and Barry. Yep. We always called each other something different. It was again, something goofy. We just. Our names would change every day. It was just something stupid we did. And so we wanted to create these characters, and we said Benny and Barry sound like real people.

[24:17.1]

Lenny and Larry sounds like two characters. And that was it. I think people overthink things. Now that I look back on this, I think people overthink trying to get the perfect name or the, you know, with a perfect design or whatever, rather than just doing it. All right, so it's going to be Lenny and Larry's.

[24:33.3]

Yeah. And what. When you guys were talking about this in that initial, did you say a snack food brand or did you say, let's just make baked goods or what did. What do you remember? Yeah, we were thinking, we're gonna put protein in everything.

[24:50.0]

That's what I was thinking. Just protein powder, like whey powder. Whey powder is going to go in cookies, muffins, brownies. We started crazy ideas of popcorns and granolas. We're just. We're thinking of everything. We can put this. Put protein in. What did you guys do?

[25:05.1]

Just got, like, muffin mix and, like, from the grocery store. That's all we did. Apple cinnamon muffin mix and some whey protein. Seems like. Seems simple enough. Seems simple. Okay. You take out some of the flour and you replace it with protein. And it's got to work, right? Of course.

[25:20.7]

Yeah. And. And it did not. They. The muffins actually baked, but they were hard as a rock. And. And we weren't discouraged. We go, we can find somebody that can do this. That's what we kept saying. We knew it was. It wasn't out there, but we said, we can. We can do this.

[25:35.9]

Yeah. So we find a bakery in Santa Monica called Montana Bakery, small little bakery, and said, hey, here's what we're going to do. Can you guys help us? We said, we just need help putting these recipes together. Did you know the owners of the bakery? We did. And we just. We met them and they were.

[25:52.0]

It's just two brothers. So we just struck up a friendship, and they. They started baking muffins for us. So they agreed to help you figure this out. And what you said to them, look, we want. What did you say to them? Well, we just said, we're trying to get a certain amount of protein in these muffins.

[26:07.4]

We didn't want to really use refined sugars. We wanted to use something healthier. We're now already thinking about how healthy these things can be. Yeah. So we're thinking we wanted to use, like, a fruit juice concentrate in place of sugar. So we're just, you know, we're thinking even further down the road than just making protein muffins.

[26:25.2]

And by the way, in those early days, what. What were you using for protein in the muffins? We started with whey. And that was our. That was our protein source initially. And what happened? The muffins tasted great. They just wouldn't have a crazy good shelf life.

[26:41.0]

And they started to bind up. They started to get a little harder over, like, just too soon. But we did. We did, actually. We launched with whey protein muffins. Okay. So this bakery did make. They came up with a formulation. Yep. And the plan was, you guys bake these muffins for us, and then we're going to take them off your hands.

[26:58.2]

And do what with them? We're going to go sell them. We had no idea who we're going to sell them to, but we. We knew. We. We knew we could sell these. And our first. It's funny, our first account was the coffee shop. We dreamed up the idea that coffee shop in Orlando, right?

[27:13.5]

Yeah, yeah. She said, joanie. And Joanie goes, yeah, I'll give you a shot. And I can remember, guy. Our first invoice, we were selling these muffins for, like, $1.20 apiece. And our first invoice for our business was $13.20. That was the first invoice we ever issued.

[27:29.3]

And so they would just sell them, like, in their display case. Yeah, they put. Or either put them right by the register. We were big. I don't know why. We were always big about, hey, if. Well, if you could put these by the register, that'd be great. And always would. Yeah. And how many. And then presumably also going to some other coffee places or did you try gyms?

[27:48.7]

We did. We did Rainbow Acres Natural Food store here locally, and we did Gold's Gym in Venice. And we did a local health food store called Mrs. Gooch's before. Oh, yeah. Which was eventually bought by Whole Foods. And so how long was the shelf life for the muffins?

[28:06.1]

Probably like four days or something like that. And it wasn't sold? It wasn't packaged. Was it packaged? Yeah, it was packaged. We had them in, like, a plastic wrapper. And then we had a sticker. We had a label, like a label sticker put on top of it. So you would hand package them yourselves. You'd Get. We would hand package them ourselves. Correct. We had a machine. Muffins from the bakery.

[28:21.6]

Muffins from the bakery. We'd sit there at night with our little crimping thing, and we would crimp. You basically put the. The package into the crimping machine. Crimp it, it would seal it, and then you'd slap a sticker on it. Slap a sticker on it, Yep. And how. And. And what was the flavor of the muffin? We did apple cinnamon, we did blueberry, and we did a lemon raspberry.

[28:40.3]

Those were our three flavors. And how much protein in each muffin? I think back then, around 15 grams. Wow. Yeah. So this is early 90s. This is like really before the protein revolution, which is. We're going to get to it because it's, I would argue, just starting now and only now are you really seeing an explosion in protein, protein, protein everywhere.

[29:02.0]

At the time, who did you think was going to buy these? I'm assuming you thought it was going to be like, bodybuilder types. We did, but to be honest with you, we. We really were developing these. We said for the average consumer, we thought if we could make a.

[29:17.8]

We coined a term later called better bad. But. But at that time, we thought if we could get them to stop eating, you know, Little Debbie's or Chips Ahoy and come to this, because we. We thought bodybuilders would enjoy it as, like, a little cheat treat. But we were really targeting the average consumer.

[29:34.8]

So the idea that you were trying. You were thinking was, hey, maybe we could. We could, if we pitch this as a healthier for you muffin, because there's protein and. But there's still this sugar in it. There was still carbs in it, but people didn't care about it that much at the same time. But you thought, okay, if we can get people to think, okay, protein, fiber.

[29:51.8]

Was fiber something? It was. Yeah, we started. We had. We added fiber already into that product. Yeah. And they tasted as. They tasted fantastic. People talk about to this day, they go, that's still the best product you guys ever made. Was your. Was your protein muffin. Wow.

[30:06.9]

Yeah. All right. But now this is a. This is a small business. I mean, this is like a tiny business. You're going. I mean, you were selling 15, 20, 30, $50 worth of muffins at this coffee shop and that coffee shop and trying to collect. I mean, that's a tough business.

[30:21.9]

No, we were. Listen, we weren't even small. We would. We'd have taken small. We were smaller Than small. It was just a crazy little idea that we were so determined to make it successful. So tell me a little bit about what a typical day was like, was the.

[30:39.2]

Okay, you were not baking the muffins you had this bakery make baking the muffins Initially, Yep. So I had to bring in some money. So I was doing some personal training at Gold's Gym in Venice. I had clients. My wife was a personal trainer. I met her at Gold's Gym in Venice.

[30:54.6]

Okay, you were married. This is your. This is my second wife, the one I've been with now for over 30 years. Cheryl, Sandy. She was a personal trainer. I was a personal trainer. And we had just had one son at a time and we would just trade off. Like, she'd go to the gym, I'd watch my son, she'd come home, we'd swap off, I'd run to the gym, they go to the bakery and, you know, package muffins or whatever had to be done.

[31:17.9]

And were you presumably driving the muffins to every little location? That was absolutely. We delivered. We'd get up at 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning, go deliver them around town just so I could be back to the gym by seven maybe to train a client. I mean, it was crazy. It was just like. It was like, I don't know, I never.

[31:34.4]

You're driving around a car at 4 o'clock in the morning in LA, or even down, sometimes down to Anaheim just to deliver a bunch of muffins. And it was just you and Benny. Just me and Benny. So I would think in like that first year, maybe you do $10,000, $15,000, maybe.

[31:53.5]

But it's exciting. It felt exciting. Yes. To know that you're spending X amount of dollars, you're bringing in Y amount of dollars. At the end of the day, you're like, hey, we've got money left over every freaking week. This is incredible. We're making money.

[32:08.9]

Okay. But the formulation still is a challenge, right? It's a challenge. You're not getting a lot of shelf life. And I guess this starts to change when you meet a guy who is a retired baker, a guy named Len Hoffman. Who's Hoffman?

[32:23.9]

Len Hoffman was a retired baker from Entenmann's Bakery. And our business had started growing. We started. So we. We outgrew the little baker in Montana and we ended up baking at a bakery in the Valley Greens Bakery. It was a little bit bigger and green in the San Fernando Valley.

[32:39.2]

Correct. But Lynn Hoffman was friends with the owner of that. And we told Len what we were doing, and the first thing he said, he goes, stop calling these recip recipes. He goes, these are formulas. And I was like, okay. He goes, this is scientific now, boys. So we're like, okay. So we get Len to start helping us with these products that we're working on.

[32:57.3]

And we're also starting to do some private label for a pretty large coffee chain here in Southern California. Private label meaning that they were not Lenny Larry's. They were just selling it as their protein muffins. Yep. They. It's called the Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf.

[33:12.8]

Sure. And how many Coffee Bean and Tea leaves were there at that time? There were over 100. Wow. And you were servicing all of them? All of them through their distribution center. So you got a contract with them? Correct. We were selling our products to some of their independent stores, and they're like, well, hey, I wonder what else these guys do.

[33:32.9]

So they asked us about doing some scones, and we told them we made the best scones in the city, which was not a total lie. Which was not true. You did not even make scones. The guy. We didn't even know what the hell a scone was or a scone, if you're in certain parts of the world.

[33:47.9]

So somebody said, hey, listen, for you two rednecks, that's a biscuit with fruit in it. And we said, okay, we can. We can make that. And so that was one of the first products that Lynn Hoffman actually helped us with. It was reduced fat. I don't know why at that time they were doing these reduced fat scones, but that's what they wanted.

[34:04.2]

Not protein scones. Not protein. Just reduced fat. Reduced fat. So we saw an opportunity and we made these amazing scones, and it quickly became their number one selling product. Wow. And because they. The scones are such a success at Coffee Bean, they. What do you think? They said, what else do you guys do?

[34:20.2]

Yes. And you said, what do you need? Because now we saw opportunity there. We're like, okay, we can. If we get this private label business going, we can use that money and help to grow our brand. So they wanted some new cheesecakes, so we started doing that for them.

[34:36.5]

And then they. They asked us about if we could do things like bundt cakes. And we're. And the answer was always, yes, we can do this. We can do this. But again, not protein. These are not protein products. These aren't. These aren't protein products for them. But then when we started, like, showing them protein products like high protein cinnamon rolls, they, they were like, okay, this is interesting.

[34:55.2]

So we started selling them some of our, our newest protein inventions. But this is not Lenny and Larry's. This is. No, this is, this is their product. This was, this was a chance to actually, we're actually making money now. And it got the point where we ended up, we were delivering pallets of product to their distribution center.

[35:13.9]

So much. The business was booming. So much on the private label side, we had to go buy a big truck to deliver it seven days a week. We were dropping off product. Wow. So this is. You guys are bringing in like 400, 500,000 a year now. It's starting to make some good money.

[35:29.6]

But you're not building your brand. Not there. But still, still, still working it behind the scenes. And don't get me wrong, we did not give up on it. Our day was spent like, we just kept opening up more and more accounts locally. Started Getting some independent 7 11s that could actually take product without the approval of the corporate office.

[35:46.2]

Just the muffins though. Just, just the muffins. Yeah, yeah. And then we started developing more products. We started, we came up with a, a brownie, high protein brownie at the time. We came up with a high protein cookie. And we still know we're onto something. Then things, things change.

[36:02.3]

One afternoon. So which was, which was Benny was delivering product to Coffee Bean and I got a call that he got rushed to the hospital. He had a deviated septum. So he had a surgery done and they had lance and arteries.

[36:19.2]

He didn't know it at the time. So he bent over, was picking up something and blood just starts gushing. Oh, Jesus. So he gets rushed to hospital, almost dies. Wow. He realizes he wants to leave California and go back to Georgia and be around his family.

[36:36.6]

So we tried to manage this, we'll call it as an east coast, west coast business, but 99% of our business was on the west coast. Let me just pause for a sec because I know, I know that I guess this is around 2000 when he moves, but I think, you know, most of your business, probably 95% of your business was Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf, right?

[36:56.2]

Yeah. Yeah. And Benny has this kind of life changing experience. He decides he wants to go to Georgia and you're going to run the business bicoastal. But that's hard, especially in the sort of the pre Internet, pre zoom era.

[37:11.7]

Yeah. And that meant that you were probably delivering all the product and dealing with all the, you know, the, you know, billing and collection and all that stuff. And he probably wasn't able to do that much at that point. No, at that time, we were.

[37:27.6]

It wasn't big enough to do east coast, west coast. So basically doing 99% of the work for half the money. Yeah. And it does take anyone long to figure that out. That's not. That's not a good model. And so you want to change. So what do you do? You say, either I buy you out or we sell the business.

[37:47.9]

So we put the business up for sale in 2001. 2001. And who was the buyer? Don Crouch and Jim Felder. They were two friends who were. They were two friends. They were just two local guys, lived in the Valley, and they saw potential in this business as a white label.

[38:06.9]

As a white label, yeah. They like the brand, but they really. They thought the white label business, they could turn it into something. Yeah. And what, roughly, what did they pay for it in 2000? They paid $480,000. So not.

[38:22.7]

Not ideal, but not bad. Yeah, not bad. At least we created. We made money along the way. We created something that had value, and it was kind of cool that you could sell a business for, you know, almost a half a million dollars that you created from just an idea.

[38:37.8]

Yeah. And they got those accounts, though, they were going to continue. They got everything. Yeah, they got everything. How'd you feel about. About that? Was it. Did it feel like a relief? You know, Benny's gone and. No, it's just a. Again, regret that I should have just bought him out. And then Don and I were sent in the parking lot talking after we had done our deal, and Don said, you and I should have just partnered on this.

[39:01.7]

I said, I 100% agree. And so Don and I remained friends as he. As he owned the business. They actually paid me to really kind of manage the Coffee Bean account because they knew how valuable it was. And I had a great relationship with Coffee Bean.

[39:17.7]

Do you remember feeling similarly to how you felt when you were out of American Gladiator, when you injured yourself? Yeah, like that. Yeah. Yeah. Like. Like something ended that you just didn't want it wanted to end. I still had the passion for my brand, and it was like.

[39:34.5]

It was just kind of like giving it away and never watching it, never giving it a chance to grow up. It was six and a half years. Six and a half years, yeah. Somebody asked me one time, what did you. What did that six and a half years cost you? I said, it just cost me time because it came down to being very scattered and not having what I call a hero Product.

[39:57.7]

We had all these products that we could make, but none of them were the one where you just went to. Yeah, this is. This is our calling card. This is what we're going to be known for. You never focused on, like, this is the thing that only we make and only we can make it great. Yeah, we made too much stuff to really focus on one that could be a winner.

[40:17.2]

Now, we still had our brand, but like I said, it was. The majority of our business was Coffee Bean and nobody knew your. Nobody knew the brand. No. Locally you did. Like we would. You would have. Yeah. Magic Johnson was a big fan of our brand back in the day when he was still playing with the Lakers. And he would see our product, you know, and he'd always buy it at Gold's Gym and somebody say, hey, Magic, that's.

[40:35.8]

That's Lenny. Hilarious. He'd always. He would stop and say, oh, man, I really love your product. So we had those types of things where we had. We had people that newest in LA, but nowhere else. Yeah. So when that ends, you're 40? Yeah, 2001. Yeah. And kid.

[40:51.6]

One kid or two? Yeah, two, from our previous marriage. Two daughters and then my two sons. So I had four kids at that time. Right. So there's a lot on your plate. I mean, that's no joke. Yeah, true. So, all right, so you. You are out of Lenny and Larry's.

[41:08.8]

And then I guess over the next few years, you do a bunch of different things. Like you go to real estate. I think you even made some money, right? You got out before the bust. Yeah, I did. Well, actually, yeah. And then I read that like, you did some work, like you went to work for a software company for a while.

[41:29.8]

Well, that's an interesting story there. So one of my good friends, Michael Vinnie, he was working with these guys in the software business and they wanted to meet me. I meet these guys and they've got this little software company they're doing, and it's kind of computer monitoring software. And so they asked me one day if I would like to join them.

[41:48.6]

And I was like, well, in what capacity? What do I know about software, right? And they said, we don't know. We said, we just think that you could. Maybe you'll run our company one day. And I was like, okay. So I hung out with these guys, I call it hanging out with. And they were paying me to hang out with them. And it's just, you know, I'm learning. I'm learning about the software business, but I'm also learning how to market online, direct to consumer.

[42:09.6]

And so after a year of being there, they said, we'd like to make you president of our company and let you run our company. And so I'm running the software company called Awareness Technologies, and we're selling computer monitoring software. Now, this is at the height of, like, the NBC shows Catch a Predator.

[42:27.7]

So we're working with, you know, law enforcement agencies, schools, you know, parents, et cetera, because the software captured everything. Every keystroke, every email, every website visited. And we were doing great. I mean, it was. This thing was catching fire.

[42:43.4]

But I was looking at this. I'm just like, well, if I could do this with software, imagine what I could do with if I have my old company back. Doc itself directed consumer snacks. And it was just, you know, kind of putting it out there in the universe. And that's when Don Crouch reach out to me and said, I need help.

[43:01.8]

I'm about to shut this thing down. He calls you, says, I'm going to shut this thing down that I bought from you. He had. Because he said, I don't. I don't know what I can do with this. I don't. I don't know where I can go with this anymore. Was he still supplying coffee beans? Still supplying coffee bean. And. And he had a little bit of other, like.

[43:17.6]

Like private label stuff he may have. He was doing locally. And he said, I'm about to shut this thing down. Would you ever consider coming back? So we did some quick negotiations. And I said, yeah, just a throw caution to the wind here.

[43:33.7]

I'm in. Let's. He said, you want to come back? You want to come back? Be a 50, 50 partner with me. 5050 partner? Yep. And did you have to buy. Buy some of it back? Yeah, it was very. It was very cheap. Low. It was a low. Okay, so. So you were able to buy 50% of the company back and basically be the partner again.

[43:53.2]

Yep. What was. I mean, I'm just. It's gonna sound like a sort of a dumb question, but teeing you up for it. But I'm curious in your mind, what was exciting about that prospect? I mean, you would. You left six years earlier. You'd not been involved for six years. Yeah. What was exciting about coming.

[44:09.3]

Coming back to this thing? Now I got to do what I wanted to do from the very beginning, which was build this brand. Money didn't excite me. Building my brand excited me. I wasn't scared at all. I.

[44:24.8]

I got my baby back.

[44:30.1]

When we come back in just a moment, Barry has The second worst day of his life. Stay with us. I'm Guy Raz, and you're listening to How I Built this.

[44:57.4]

Hey, welcome back to How I Built this. I'm Guy raz. So it's 2007, and Barry's bought back half of Lenny and Larry's from its current owner, Don Crouch. I wasn't scared at all. I loved going back into the unknown.

[45:13.1]

But I was so confident that I could turn this into what I originally thought Lenny and Larry's could be, which was a brand. And funny story, I walked in the office the first day. We had a small little office on Instagram, Encino on Ventura Boulevard.

[45:29.3]

And jokingly to Don, I just said, okay. I said, sit down, shut up and watch what I'm about to do. And we had a big laugh about that. Right. But I, coming from my experience working in the software company and working with these guys, who are very brilliant guys, by the way, in terms of marketing, I felt like I could launch the first direct consumer snack food company that was, you know, kind of a protein fiber, all natural.

[45:56.8]

I felt like that's what I was going to do. And so the first product I wanted to launch was a high protein brownie because everyone was doing protein bars at the time and no one had done a brownie. Let's talk about building the brand. First of all, you didn't have a. You needed a logo.

[46:12.7]

Yeah. You needed packaging. You needed to just, you needed to get it into shops. I mean, you had the muffins in some. A few places. So let's talk about first, first of all, the logo. Okay. Because I don't know if everybody knows what this looks like, but today it looks like two crazy dudes with like clown hair.

[46:30.8]

Yep. On this. That's the logo. Yeah, that's the logo. Lenny and Larry's. Yeah. And our original logo was mine and Benny's actual faces or hair. That was original. It was like a real photo. But when I came back, the first thing I said I'm going to do is I want to create a caricature.

[46:45.9]

It can't, it can't be a photo anymore. So we, so, so we create a character of the logo. It's basically a giant afro with two heads. That's. That's what it became stuck in it. Two heads. And always say one head of hair and one head of hair. Yeah. And you're going to come out with your own product.

[47:02.1]

Lenny and Larry's in shops. And it's going to be a brownie. Going to be a brownie and so we. I find someone to manufacture the brownie. We designed the film, everything. We ordered 72,000 brownies, 36,000 of two flavors.

[47:21.4]

Had those shipped to a warehouse that we were. That we rented. And we're sitting there with 72,000 brownies and said, now we have to go sell these. You do not have any? Nope. Not a single commitment? Nope, Not a single commitment. And how long would these brownies last? Oh, they would last, yeah.

[47:37.0]

15 months easily. Okay. Yeah. These have a really, really good shelf life. Yeah. So how did you sell them? First thing, we walked into the Whole Foods office in Sherman Oaks. Did you have a connection there? I. Well, we did. I didn't know who was working there. We just showed up at the office one day and see one of the.

[47:53.1]

One of my former buyers, she walks in, she goes, I remember you. And I said, I remember you. She said, what do you have? And I showed her. She goes, I love this. Let's put it in. Wow. That's it. That's it. How much, by the way? How much protein in each brownie? 20. 20 grams. 20 grams. And to be clear, you did not.

[48:08.8]

Sugar was not an issue. You weren't worried about sugar and carbs, right? Nope. I felt like, again, I'm still. Still catering to the. To the masses and not the bodybuilder fitness people. Yeah. I always said if I could be in two retailers at a time, it would be 711 at Walmart.

[48:25.5]

That's the only groups I wanted to sell to. And not to minimize the. What this product was and how innovative it was. But basically it was a sweet, sugary brownie but with a lot of protein. Correct. It was basically a protein bar, but tastes like a brownie in the shape of a kind of a square.

[48:40.7]

So I had to be different there, too. All right. But 2008, I mean, this is super innovative. Nobody's making a protein brownie. Nobody's making a protein brownie. So you get into a few Whole Foods in the LA area. Yeah, actually. Yeah, the LA area. And then it just snowballed from there.

[48:55.8]

GNC accepted it. Vitamin Shop accepted it. Then we said, okay, now we're onto something. And all the while, though, we had. We had a little product. I don't want to jump ahead, but there was a little product. It was a cookie. It had a. Had a label on it, and it had a little, like a sheet in the back that you could print our nutritionals on.

[49:12.0]

And we sold that locally to Seven Elevens and a lot of office buildings, stuff like that. But it's a protein cookie. Correct. But it didn't have a. It didn't have a great shelf life. And because that clear package, you can see the package and light oxygen can destroy it. But it had a couple weeks shelf life.

[49:28.1]

And we remember a call we had with Vitamin Shop and Vitamin Shop said if you could get a shelf life on your cookie, we would take that also. And I went, okay, because how long did the cookie last? Couple of weeks. And that was because. Because of the packaging.

[49:43.9]

Yeah, because of the packaging. Yeah, because of the packaging. And so I had the light bulb moment again. It's like, I gotta, I gotta design a film for that cookie. And we did. Then I would say the rest is history. But the, the cookie just became.

[50:00.6]

Just became an absolute monster. I wanted, like, again, I was creating. I wasn't creating a low sugar, you know, low carb product. I was trading a freaky cookie. It had flour, it had sugar, it had everything. 400 calories.

[50:15.7]

It became popular with college kids, construction workers, teachers, people that could say for a buck 99, I get this giant cookie. It's very filling. I can grab. I'll grab my Red Bull and I'll grab a linear cookie. I mean, one cookie I'm looking at today.

[50:32.2]

I think it's probably similar. 10 grams of fiber. Yeah. 16 grams of protein, but, you know, 26 grams of sugar. Yeah, but. But I guess you just were like, maybe people can choose this. It's marginally better than a, an Oreo or.

[50:47.2]

That was Twinkie. That was, that was it. That was. That was everything. I want to create a better bad. I want people to make a better choice. And nobody's going to go from eating a, you know, a little Debbie to eating some sort of protein bar. It just. There, there's not.

[51:02.4]

There has to be something. Has to be a stop in the middle. Yeah. What do the cookie retail for? Retail from anywhere from like A$99 to 249. That range. And how much did it cost to make? Less than 50 cents. Around about 40 cents. That's like a LVMH bag.

[51:18.0]

Yeah, it's like making a Gucci bag. It cost them like 160 bucks. They sell it for like 30,000. Yeah, we weren't, we weren't shy about making, making a profit. What we liked about it is that we never had to raise money. We never had investors, never had debt. So.

[51:33.3]

Okay, so by 2014, are you still primarily in California only? No, we're everywhere at that time. We're really starting to take off 2014, we're about doing about 11 million in revenue. So you hit $11 million 2014 purely or mainly on the strength of the cookies, not the muscle brownies.

[51:56.1]

No, the muscle brownie was still there, but the cookie is the one that just. It just literally caught fire. Why? Why do you think that is? I mean, I. I think the answer is just because cookies are a much bigger, more popular snack than brownies. That. Well, that's it. And a brownie is considered a decadent treat.

[52:14.0]

It's not something you would eat every day. You'd eat it. You'd eat a cookie every day? Every day. Even though, like, nutritionally they're pretty similar. Yes, exactly. But it's funny, guy, when we talk about, like, we talk about sugar and carbs and, you know, all this nutrition stuff, you and I are in still in the minority of that world.

[52:32.5]

Rest of the country is still trying to make a better choice, but they're not going to make an extreme choice. So people still want to have their no, you know, cake and eat it too. They'll sacrifice something in order to eat a. Something that's just a little bit less bad, that has some nutritional benefits to them.

[52:51.4]

I completely agree with that. I think that's exactly right. I think that just as a tiny number of people care about sugar and carbs, I think most people, you're right. If they see protein, fiber, they're good. They're not worried about the carbs or the sugar. Okay. So you're just growing like a hockey stick.

[53:08.7]

Hockey sticking. So, all right, I guess around 2015 you are at a trade show. Yep. And you guys are hot ticket there, right? Hot. Yep. We just finished. I think it's 2014 at 11 million.

[53:26.4]

And we're gonna have. We're gonna grow probably to, you know, 18 million or something the next year. Whatever, 2015. But I got introduced to a gentleman named Nick Gianuzzi. And Nick is an incredible attorney. It represents pretty much every CPG brand that's been sold.

[53:42.7]

He's always represented them. Nick pulled me aside and just said, I love your brand. He goes, jokingly, he just said, stop effing around and start doubling your revenue and you're going to get noticed. And I was like, okay. It inspired me to want to really turbocharged my sales.

[54:02.7]

So we went from 11 to 27 million in one year by opening up accounts and actually managing, servicing the accounts we already had. How many employees did you have? 2014, 2015, we may have had seven. God. With 27 million coming in.

[54:19.5]

Yeah, that's an efficient business and that's the only way we knew how to, knew how to do it. I never, and I never believed in hiring when you didn't have to hire. I believe in paying your people more money that are there. Yeah. And we had a great, we had a great small little ragtag team.

[54:35.3]

And from there 27 million turned into 94 million in revenue the next year. By 2016. By 2016. And what percentage of that do you think was the cookies? Probably, probably 90%. Were you worried at all that you know, this was not going to last, that you would have competitors coming in?

[54:55.1]

I mean that in other words, did you think like we better really make a bunch of snacks because otherwise we're just going to get General Mills or whoever Nabisco is going to come in and do this. I'll be 100% honest with you. I have never in my life worried about a competitor, a so called competitor. And that's not, that's not being cocky.

[55:11.6]

It's just like if I'm worried about what someone else is doing, then I'm not worried about what I'm doing. So I didn't care what you were doing doing. I was building a brand. But I fought a bunch of other things along, along that journey that could have destroyed my business.

[55:26.9]

Like what? Well, one was a, an issue with one of our manufacturers got a call from one of our retailers in Florida said hey, we're starting to see these little, we'll call them little bugs. They're in a cookie. No kidding. Like, like a little. And they're, they're called meal moths.

[55:44.4]

So they get in flour like flowers. Been sitting for a long time, whatever. Oh yes, I've seen that. I've had that. Okay, so, so have that happened with a, like a, a retailer for. And now, now social media is out there and the first thing people do is they want to start posting. You're just. Oh yeah, yeah. And I had to take that one on myself.

[56:02.7]

I literally post. I was doing our own social media at the time and I actually posted my own phone number and just said anyone who gets. I said I'll trust me. I said I'm handled this. I'm going to, you know, I apologize to everyone or whatever. And it was real quick. We were able to isolate it real quick because it was one flavor and we knew the actual group that actually made it.

[56:20.2]

So we're able to isolate and pull all that product. But anything to damage your reputation, it just makes you, you don't sleep at night. Yeah, for sure. I mean, but, but still, I mean, even with all that, like, as, as you mentioned, I think by 2016, I mean, you guys are doing like almost $100 million in revenue.

[56:41.6]

Yep. And, and then I think that same year, you decide you're going to find you're going to sell it. You're going to sell the brand again. Yeah. Well, it's only because people start. That's when people start coming for you. And you're just, you're fielding call after call after call. A lot of the General.

[56:57.0]

Not General Mills, but General Mills type companies. Yeah, big companies. Yeah, big companies are coming for you. They're asking about you. They're. They want to buy your company. And we had 28 interested parties right out of the gate. And then I'm like, shit, pardon my French. But the.

[57:12.1]

We had just moved in this beautiful warehouse office. I was just, just, just starting to enjoy this. I didn't really want to sell. And then you're starting to field like some big offers for your business and you accept an offer from a group called Lion Capital.

[57:29.9]

Correct. First of all, I'm curious, was there an option to go to get acquired by a big food brand? There were a couple at the table and had made offers. And I'm just being honest with you. If I was going to sell it, I was going to sell it for. To the highest bid. Highest bidder. Highest bidder.

[57:45.8]

All right, so they had, they were the highest bidder and they acquired you for. I think it was a mixture of cash and equity, right? Yeah. So they bought. Ended up buying 75% of the business. And we at the time. Now you understand this is seven years ago.

[58:02.2]

So if you're equating it to the value of today, so at the time, we were valued at $250 million. Not bad. And so we sold 75% of the business. And it was just because how, how our business was structured, we were an S corp. It had some, had some value to them.

[58:17.5]

And so Nick Gianuzzi, who I mentioned earlier as he represented us, he was our attorney and he told us point blank, he said, don't expect to get the second bite of the apple. You mean they were going to just hold on to it forever? Exactly. And exactly what they've done. All right, so this begins a period of what you are still in today.

[58:34.8]

And they're not on this in this interview. So I want to be careful and mindful and respectful of them. So I'm going to play the part of defending them a little Bit here. But you are still in this situation where you own still a chunk of the business. Business. Correct. And technically you're on the board, right?

[58:50.7]

I'm on the board, yeah. Okay. But when you left or when, when they bought you out. Yep. They replaced you with a new CEO, right? Correct. I. You said that the first time you sold it. 2001 was the worst day of your life. Terrible. When you sold it for the second time, you say it was the second worst day of my life.

[59:08.9]

Yep. I still live by that. I miss my people more than. More than anything. These are my team members. These are people that helped me grow this business. So, yeah, I, I, to this day, I wish I never would have sold my company. Okay. So while you're the company.

[59:25.8]

Okay. They take it over there. You're out as the CEO, but you're still an advisor. Ostensibly. Y. But. And look, I see Lenny and Larry's everywhere. Every time I go to Whole Foods, I see it everywhere. So it's a, it's a. That logo just pops.

[59:42.1]

I see those, that, that afro. So I'm under the impression that things are, are swimming, are great, going great. You have a different view here. You are not happy with how it, how it shook out. You're not happy with the current owners of the brand. Not at all.

[59:57.8]

I have no problem saying that. We're just. We're not each other's cup of tea. And it's just bad decision after bad decision. Bad hire. A bad hire they hired. This is no lie. Within six months of selling the company to them, we went from 17 employees to 59 employees.

[60:13.3]

The business didn't triple. They only grow the business about 6 to 8% a year. If that. They destroyed profitability. I felt like I handed them a Ferrari and they turned it into a Ford Taurus. But what would the. I mean, listen, I'm looking at their portfolio. This is clearly a sophisticated group.

[60:29.8]

I mean, they own kettle chips. That's just in food, but they own beverage and hospitality and jewelry and licensing, personal care. I mean, they're clearly. They've made a bunch of cash in different. In different places. Like, there's no question. I think you're being nice by saying sophisticated.

[60:45.7]

Okay. They would never have had me stayed in that chair because they used a term one time, it always rubbed me the wrong way. After they bought the company, they said, we need to professionalize the management in this company. And that means we weren't professional enough in their eyes. Then you fast forward about, you know, four or five years later, they go we got to go back to being an entrepreneurial brand.

[61:06.3]

Well, that's what we were. That's what we always were, was an entrepreneur brand. And they never really embraced it because they had to come in. They had to show we know what we're doing, and they just don't. Okay, now here's the thing, because, again, you know, we don't do this. Not a documentary show.

[61:21.9]

Yeah. We have you on here. So I've got to be respectful of lion Catalan. And there's, you know, there's emotional. It's like a house. It's like a business. It's like anything that somebody creates where I'm emotionally attached to how I built this. Yeah. Right.

[61:37.2]

The reality is that you can just let it go if you want to and just say, you know what? I'm just gonna let it go. And I. Whatever it is worth is. Oh, I. And I. And I have. I don't. Okay, good.

[61:52.5]

The fact that we're talking about it is fine. Like I said, I don't. That's healthy. That's healthier. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I don't. I don't think about them ever. I do a. Do a board call every now and then, whatever. But I don't. I don't even. I don't comment on the call. I go on the screen. I'm just on mute, and I'm listening.

[62:09.0]

But, yeah, then there's always two sides to every story. And I. I 100 agree with that. Here's the thing, right. And this is like a fear that I think a lot of people have. Okay. Especially as they get into their 50s, which is you've had some success in your professional life, whether it's a business or you're working for a company or whatever.

[62:30.5]

And for a variety of reasons, that ends. And you can live for the rest of your life. Yeah. Like, right. You can be. You can live off what you made and live a good life, but you lose that purpose, that sense of purpose, which is really scary.

[62:46.6]

100%, guy. That's. It's so important. And no one. You're never going to understand it unless you've lived it. Yeah. But I did care about my brand a lot. When you look back on this whole journey and you think about where you got to.

[63:02.1]

Because you did really did really well. Here I am. How much of where you got to do Tribute to the work you put in the grind and how much you think has to do with getting lucky. I think 100% to the work in the grind. I don't. I know, a lot of people out there have gotten lucky. Yeah, I don't use words like hope, luck, wish, and try.

[63:20.1]

Yeah, I just don't like the word luck. My thing was always said luck wins you the lottery. I created my own lottery. That's Barry Turner, co founder of Lenny and Larry's.

[63:35.3]

By the way, I think there's something you're not telling me that you. I think you're concealing from me here, which is. I'm looking at the cast of that. That movie you were in. Death becomes her and Fabio was in that movie. You know what? You're hunt. You are right.

[63:50.4]

You did not tell me that. I forgot about that. Fabio was your co star. Well, you were Fabio were in a movie together. Yeah, there's Fabio. I wonder what he's doing these days. He seems like a nice guy. I think he's done some, like, self parody stuff. Yeah, that's my.

[64:05.9]

That's my buddy.

[64:10.3]

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