

Kendall Bennett

INSIDE AMAIN.COM PERFORMANCE SPORTS AND HOBBIES BY CARL HYNDMAN

With AMain.com Performance Sports and Hobbies, Kendall Bennett, along with his wife and partner Kelly, has carved out something that goes against traditional ways of thinking and doing business. AMain.com owns electric and nitro tracks, sponsors a factor team, sells online, holds big events, develops its own house brands, has retail stores and markets like no other company. It also has a foothold in drones, planes, electronics, toys and has expanded into cycling. All of this in Chico, CA, just a small college town that you can drive across in about ten minutes. We spoke with Kendall and Kelly to see what makes their company tick, and discover where it's going.

RC Car Action: Tell us about your background. What did you do before AMain.com?

Kendall: I'm a computer software guy. I grew up in Australia and I received my Computer Science degree at RMIT in Melbourne and graduated in 1992. Then I traveled around the USA in 1993 and met a man who I started a software company with. So that's what brought me over here in 1995 since everything the company sold was basically sold in the USA and that's why I ended up in Chico. I worked on device drivers for video game stuff. So when I started A Main, it was because I was interested in doing ecommerce software. We actually just started A Main Hobbies as an incubator project to learn about doing ecommerce software with the intent to sell the software to other people. The theory was that the best way to learn about the software was to

do a company. In 2007, I closed the software company, so its history now.

Kelly: Be honest, Kendall, it was also to get RC products for yourself at cost price.

Kendall: Well, that too (laughs).

RC Car Action: Because you were passionate about RC?

Kendall: I have to feed my addiction for RC. The company actually was formed and the website launched in 2004 and we were around before that for about a year on eBay, selling under the name RC Nation. We originally started by parting out kits on eBay. Back then when there were people parting out kits, there weren't many people doing it. I could literally go out and buy a Kyosho MP 7.5 Kanai 2 kit and part it out. I'd buy the kit for about \$600, then sell the parts on eBay and make about \$600 per kit. Pretty rapidly, it became a price war with

every Tom, Dick and Harry parting out kits on eBay. There were a zillion people doing it and by the time I quit, I was only making about \$200 a kit. It wasn't worth the effort any more. The whole point initially was that I was racing the Kyosho buggy and it was a great way for me to get parts. I'd take the arms, bearings, and take what I needed and sell the rest of it off. So that was the entire genesis of it. Then we went live with our website in 2004 and changed to name to AMain Hobbies.com.

Kelly: Then we placed our first order with HRP. \$15,000 first order.

RC Car Action: It's more typical to have online businesses, Mom and Pop retail shops and the chain stores. What do you think made your business so successful?

Kendall: There are a lot of things that contribute, but one of the important things we implemented

early on was to have accurate live inventory, handle customer orders in a timely fashion and give them what they needed. I think that was very different for the time and having an accurate inventory that was live was unusual. I was a customer at the time and try to buy products and the sites would e-mail me back as much as a week later telling me they didn't have the product and would I like to substitute. By that time I had a race the next day or... I was expecting the stuff to show up. I was having bad experiences myself and that was the start of trying to build it. To have accurate inventory and if it said it was in stock, it needed to be. So it includes decent prices, availability, accurate inventory, good customer service and good shipping.

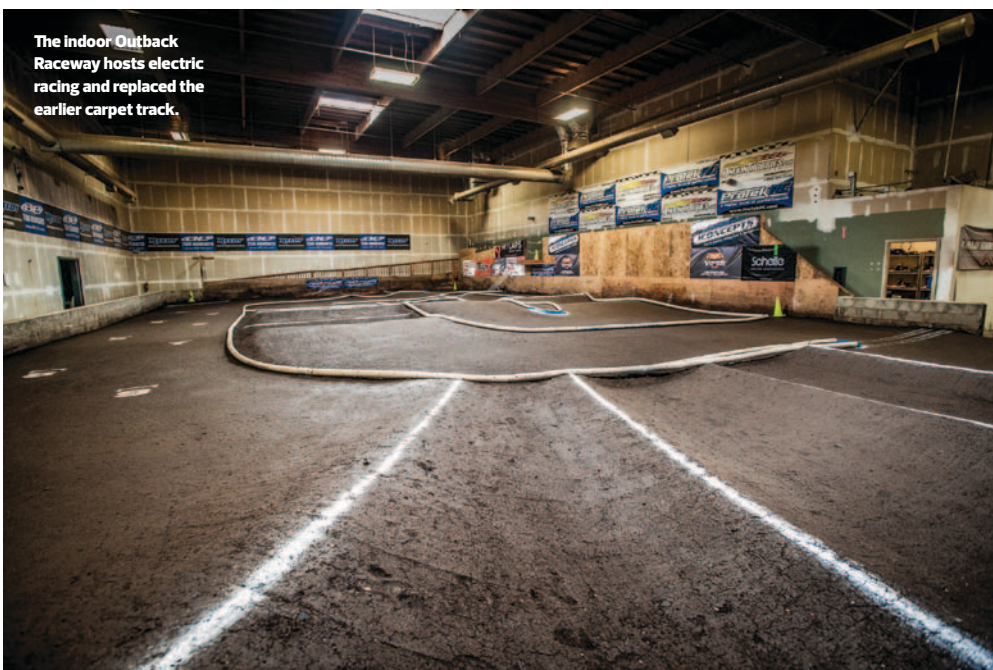
Kelly: Well, many online shops would normally have to hire someone, and we have Kendall back there creating this awesome back end of the website.

RC Car Action: Is the interaction with your website different then others too?

Kendall: Well, the checkout process isn't that much different than others apart from the live inventory, but we also take photography of everything. People may be planning out a build on their RC car or bike and they can see every little shim or wire in the entire package. This is important and leaves all the guessing behind. **Kelly:** Kendall is a racer and designed it to be about something he would want when shopping and that is what we were doing. The forums in the early days just lit up. A lot of it was word-of-mouth. That good experience just took off. That was our driving force and it was before we started marketing ourselves - it was huge. A lot of it was that we were approachable too. Kendall was at a lot of the big races and racers would talk to him. We'd be there listening and getting involved - putting up banners, donating product for the raffle, sponsoring.

RC Car Action: Is that how the whole team and the tracks come about?

Kendall: Yeah. I love racing, so I wanted a place where I could race. I always had a dream to have a big track and host races. So when we first moved in to these offices, we had the extra space. The owners of our previous building had an agreement with us, that if we grew out of it, they'd find us another space. Well that only lasted two years and was only about 9,000



The indoor Outback Raceway hosts electric racing and replaced the earlier carpet track.

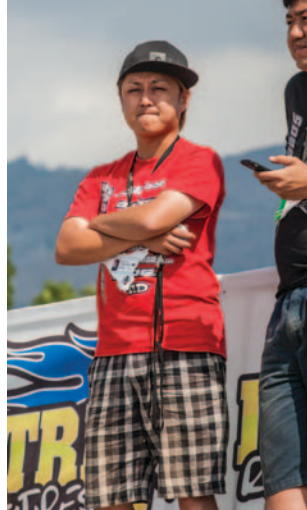


Kendall and Kelly Bennett are husband and wife and have teamed up to make AMain.com a unique option in the RC and sports industries.

square feet and now we are in this space. There is an area in the back that is separate and has its own air and we thought it could be a great spot for an indoor track. I love racing touring car as well as off-road and initially the dirt indoor track, Outback Raceway was a carpet track. I had done 1/8-scale nitro on-road and electric touring car as well as parking lot racing, but as you know the touring car racing scene is drying up and a significant reason for that is that there is no where to race. If you raced back in the 90s and early 2000s and raced touring car, you raced in the parking lots. But, over time shopping centers started staying open all weekend and now there are cars parked there when before they were empty on Sundays. And another thing that happened was that laws changed on how parking lots could be constructed. Especially in California where they now need to have an "X" number of trees per parking lot space. Before it was just big asphalt areas. But over time any improvements or maintenance and the companies would have to start planting trees. So unless you have a permanent facility there isn't anywhere to race. So since I enjoyed touring car, I built a carpet track and ordered carpet from Calandra Racing. We did that for about two years. It

was very popular initially. Then the whole issues with timing in speed controls happened and everyone was scrambling to have the fastest speed control every week. It basically killed our track. We literally went from 20-30 guys coming up to race here in Chico, to pretty much nothing. So we decided to rip out the carpet and throw some dirt down. Since then, the Outback Raceway has been a lot more popular. The dirt is clay and we get it locally and it's good stuff.

So when we got the outdoor Silver Dollar R/C Raceway, we got the same dirt. The initial concept was to have an outdoor track with really good traction throughout the entire track. We succeeded with doing that and I loved running on it. The stuff is great, but you have to keep that stuff wet and outdoors it's almost impossible to keep it wet. When it dried out it ate tires. So even though it was fun, it got too expensive. The dirt is also very hard to work with. So new layouts takes a lot of heavy machinery and expensive manpower. We brought Joey Christensen from "the Dirt," who is the master builder and he said we had to get rid of it. That was an expensive mistake—let's put it that way. So we brought in new dirt. Joey helped us select the dirt. It's about 150 truckloads



Multi-IFMAR World Champion Atsushi Hara was recently signed by AMain.com and runs their SWorkz line of cars.

RC Car Action: *There's has been a lot of buzz has been around your Factory Team and specifically multi-IFMAR World Champion Atsushi Hara who is representing AMain.com and running SWorkz cars that you exclusively distribute in the USA. How does that fit in to the picture?*

Kendall: It's definitely marketing. It started out as a team of drivers who could win races for us and provide a marketing opportunity for us. Part of it is also to have a presence at the track so we can engage with our customers. They can see us at the track and ask questions. We have tried to have a presence at the tracks since day one. We like to let them know that we are available and we are real people, not some faceless entity on the internet. So that was really a large part of it. And our team of other drivers including Marty Korn, Drew Moller, Chad Bradley and others tell us about the trends and what's hot. They tell us, "this is the engine to have." That helps us out with our products we sell.

RC Car Action: *It seems like your business has a lot of emphasis on racing. What would you say is your percentage of sales between racing and sport products?*

Kendall: We are definitely a heavy

of dirt. We sifted it down to about 1/4" and removed all the rocks out of it. When it was all said and done, it was very expensive for everything. We initially thought we could spend about \$150,000 and we ended up spending around \$800,000....It's done now.

Kelly: It hasn't paid for itself yet.

Kendall: Well, I wanted a great place to race and wanted to give back to the racing community. My plan for the Silver Dollar track was a 30-year payoff plan. If it was done for the numbers, we wouldn't have done it. So when the 2013 IFMAR Worlds were coming up, we put in a bid and managed to get it. It was a lot of fun, but a lot of work.



The recently acquired CycleSport bicycle shop will be a bit more typical to what is already in place with Kendall and Kelly's own style for business interjected.



AMAIN ON TWO WHEELS As the company grew, it became obvious that it was time to incorporate another big passion of Kendall's in to the business. For years, Kendall has been an avid cyclist and recently a decision was made to expand their offerings to include bicycles and bicycle products. Still only a small part of their overall sales, the company is looking at the similarities and differences in the way the two industries work and is formulating their plan. In addition, it was only logical that the company should change its slogan and rebrand their image to reflect this and future changes. They decided to go from AMainHobbies.com to AMain.com Performance Sports and Hobbies. This they felt was a better description and allows them be flexible with their goals. A retail bicycle shop and website redesign were just some of the big changes the company went through.



NOT JUST A DISTRIBUTOR

One of the big areas AMain.com takes pride in, is its own brands and its exclusive distribution rights. They have their own brand ProTek R/C, which is race-level batteries, chargers, servos and accessories. EcoPower is also a house brand but at a more budget conscious level along with drones, batteries and now a 17.5T brushless motor. They also exclusively distribute Yokomo and SWorkz in the USA.



Above: AMain.com does their own in-house testing on many of their own products. Far left: AMain.com is the exclusive distributor for SWorkz and is directly involved in product development. Left: You'll find AMain's ProTek gear on many racers' pit tables.

ready-to-run kinds of products. Unless you have a track and it services the racers at the track, it is going to be very difficult. So they need to go after the quad copters, the RTR cars, and other products

for the entry-level. That's really their bread and butter. We have a retail shop here and have been able to grow that, in spite of it being a small town. We've been told that the sales from that store would put us somewhere in the top ten hobby shops across the country - and we are in Chico - a tiny little town. So it just goes to show, that if you can focus on what you are good at, you can be successful.

percentage in the racing stuff for sure. I'd say as an industry as a whole, there is a lot of racing products. We sell more race-level product than ready-to-run style.

RC Car Action: That was a conscious decision to go after that market?

Kendall: Initially, sure. That was just our focus.

RC Car Action: And you plan to continue with that in to the future?

Kendall: Yes. I think it is a model that works really well.

RC Car Action: It seems that the way people shop is changing. You have both online and retail outlets, but people are more educated and look online for the things they need. Do you think the Mom and Pop shops and online shopping is changing?

Kendall: The way people shop is definitely changing. But, the retail shops need to understand the market they are targeting and what they should and shouldn't chase after. The retail shops can't stock the racing products like we can with online, so they need to stock more of the entry-level



FINAL WORD As you can see, describing AMain.com isn't an easy task. They are a manufacturer, a distributor, a marketing company, a retail shop, own tracks, an eCommerce site, event holder, and even a news outlet, but there's no denying their success and their willingness to chase their passions. They may have taken an unusual path, but this may just be the path many should be watching as we go in to the future. Maybe they'll rewrite how business is done in our industry. Time will tell, but in the meantime Kendall and Kelly will be working and thinking of ways to make their customers' experience a better one. 