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## A New Approach to Tennis Bags for Women

By: Amy Mulvihill

**With her athletic 5-foot, 3-inch frame and her bright blond hair, Litchfield County entrepreneur Sue Sheehy looks more like an energetic college coed than a 40-something wife and mother of two young boys who has spent the past two years nurturing her first start-up business—a line of fashionable, easy-to-carry women's tennis bags from Sushe Designs.**

Although Ms. Sheehy admits to having had her fair share of sleepless nights while developing the bags, she seemed quite energized by the process and enthusiastic about the results during a recent interview at her Candlewood Lake home.

With her two Tibetan mastiffs, Xena and Titan, slumbering nearby, Ms. Sheehy talked about the original impetus for her line, the trials and triumphs along the way and her plans for her line's future.

"This has all been a learning process for me," she said as she showed off prototypes of her bags, which come in two basic styles.

There is the Sushe Elite, a teardrop shaped shoulder or backpack with room for two rackets, a separate compartment to hold shoes, eight pockets and a detachable "wristlette," or mini clutch bag that can hold money, jewelry, credit cards and other valuables. And there is the Sushe Sport, which is a more streamlined version of the Sushe Elite. Prices are still being finalized. For this inaugural season, the Sushe Elite is only being offered in black French canvas with black croco- or faux crocodile-trim, but Ms. Sheehy expects the options to expand in the future as the line gets bigger.

The Sushe Sport will be offered in three different color combinations: black canvas with white trim, black canvas with red croco lining and black canvas with pink micro-suede lining.

Ms. Sheehy said the basic black motif might not be her personal favorite, but noted that, in business, the customer is always right—so, for this season at least, black is back.

"The black with the accents have been the hot sellers," she commented. "I like color, but not everyone likes color, and you have to go with what the people want, I'm learning."

As the line progresses and expands, Ms. Sheehy expects brighter hues to become more common, including her own personal favorite, pink.

"I've done a lot with pink," she said of her prototypes, which she took to her very first trade show last weekend. "It's one of my favorites and it's hot everywhere."

And helping women look hot, or at least hip and stylish, is the goal of Ms. Sheehy's business.

"[The bags] are very fashionable yet functional—that's the whole idea behind the line," she said. "The idea is for it to look more like a handbag and less like a sports bag," she continued, adding, "and hopefully people will buy one to go with every outfit."

All joking aside, Ms. Sheehy said that the bags were born out of her own frustration. A lifelong tennis player who still plays competitively from time to time, she was constantly in search of the perfect tennis bag that was functional, stylish and manageable for someone of her stature.

"I'm a very practical person, and I like things that I can use easily," she explained. "I wanted something I could hold in one hand and put on the front seat of my car that would hold all my tennis rackets, sneakers, everything, and I couldn't find anything like that."

Then, about two years ago, Ms. Sheehy mentioned her frustration to her friend Tina Wise, who just happened to work in the manufacturing field.

"She said, 'Well, sketch something and we'll make it,'" Ms. Sheehy recalled, adding, "That was two years ago."

Over the course of those two years, they went through numerous versions of the bags, trying out different colors and features, then discarding those and starting again.

"I had a lot of sleepless nights where I woke up at four in the morning with a million thoughts going through my head," she said, "but everybody from family and friends to strangers has been really great and supportive."

For instance, her two boys—Jake, 9 and Teddy, 8—have been spreading the word to all their teachers at school, while her neighbor, professional photographer Ray Crawford, offered to take photos of the bags for her promotional materials.

"I'm just so appreciative," she said.

And the results speak for themselves.

With almost 200 orders already in, Ms. Sheehy said business has already exceeded her expectations.

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"I was expecting to be knocking on peoples' doors," she said with a laugh. "I wasn't expecting to have people calling me." Ms. Sheehy attributes the bags' easy success to their uniqueness.

"I found a lot of bags that had features, but none of them had everything," the designer said. "This is the only bag that has everything and the beauty of it is, that because of that, people want it."

In fact, with sales representatives covering the East Coast, and many retail outlets in the tristate region planning to carry the bag, Ms. Sheehy said its popularity has already exceeded even her wildest expectations.

"I think I found a niche in this market where there is a definite need," she remarked when asked to explain the immediate success.

Also, instinctively knowing her clientele's mindset was a real advantage. As a women and an athlete herself, Ms. Sheehy didn't have to look far for inspiration for her designs.

"I think women know what they want, and I think it's important for women to design things for women," she commented. "I play tennis and I play with other women and they had a lot of input."

For instance, she added a little pocket to the interior of the bags that is a perfect hiding place for one's jewelry. The idea for the addition came to her because of her own experiences.

"I've gotten to the court so many times and realized I still had my jewelry on, so I added the pocket," she noted.

Women have responded to Ms. Sheehy's attention and thoughtfulness in kind, snatching up the bags-which do not officially go on sale until June-as fast as they hear about them.

"I think it's just something a little bit different," she offered, "and I think women were looking for something a little more sophisticated [to take to the gym with them]."

"Women are practical, but we like nice things," she concluded.

Sushe Tennis bags will be available at area retailers such as Back Country Outfitters in Kent, and The Sportsmen of Litchfield beginning in June. To order a bag now, Ms. Sheehy may be reached at 203-740-8188 ext. 252. The Web site is [www.sushedesigns.com](http://www.sushedesigns.com).



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