

ALUMNI PROFILE



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Joe Morrison: biomechanical entrepreneur

It's a long way from Feilding Agricultural High School to a position at the head of one of Dunedin's, and New Zealand's, most innovative hi-tech sports software companies, but Joe Morrison seems to have taken the journey in his stride. The 44-year-old physical education master's graduate, founder and director of Siliconcoach and CEO of Cymicon, also took in a few detours en route.

Straight out of school he fetched up at Canterbury University, by his own admission, not really knowing what he was doing there. He lasted three months and spent the rest of the year painting houses with his father. From there he joined the army, ending up as an infantry captain. Spells as a rifle platoon and reconnaissance platoon commander were followed by a desk job in Wellington.

But Morrison wasn't ready for that. "I was too young to be sitting at a desk. I wanted something that combined physical activity and people." He took a punt and applied to the University of Otago School of Physical Education and, initially, the Dunedin College of Education. "There was no great logical reason for it at all ... I'd just had enough of what I was doing.

"The idea was that I'd teach physical education, but after a year I decided teaching wasn't for me."

But he definitely took to the phys-ed side of the deal, in particular, biomechanics. At the end of the third year of his BPhEd, Morrison spoke to Dr Barry Wilson, head of the Biomechanics Department, about the possibility of doing a master's. And the basis of an idea that he has been developing ever since was born: "The Development of a Qualitative Video Analysis System" – the subject of his thesis.

"And that's what got me into computers," he says. "It was just a way to solve a problem."

That problem was building a video-capture software interface that allowed coaches and athletes to break down, study and correct or perfect biomechanical activity – a swimming stroke, the running stride, a cricket shot, a golf swing ...

But, as the quietly-spoken Morrison says, it is a long way from a piece of academic software to a commercially-viable application. Upon finishing University in 1995, he spent the next several years in a room in a Caversham villa, on and off, attempting to do just that.

"Having a dream and risking failure is one step, but then gathering world-class people around you to take that dream into a global market is the next."

The first challenge was to migrate the program from the Macintosh he'd based his master's program on, to a PC platform. And the next was to commit himself fully to the project.

"By the end of 1999 I had decided that I should be in business seriously or go out and get a proper job."

His involvement in a venture beginning in mid-1999, with his partner Dr Gill Thomas and Professor Derek Holton, made the decision easier. He provided technical assistance and computer back-up to their expertise in mathematics and maths education. Together, they formed a company called Maths Technology Limited, which was to provide online maths content and teacher resources on contract to the Ministry of Education.

Then, on his own account, he linked up with Stephen Goodlass – who had been at the School of Physical Education at a similar time – and another friend, Thor Besier, to form Siliconcoach.

"Steve rewrote a lot of the software; Thor, who was at the University of Western Australia, helped part-time with marketing, and I did everything else," says Morrison. Initially, they sold the software packages as a teaching aid to biomechanics and sports science departments in universities across Australasia.

Then there was a deal with the Hillary Commission through Ian Ansell, another Otago phys-ed graduate and former captain of the New Zealand water polo team. And, from there, the contracts snowballed.

"I had this chance meeting with a guy called John Doig, also an Otago phys-ed graduate – I think he had been president of the students' association in 1988 – who was with Sports Scotland.

"I told him what we were doing and he said he thought they could make use of it. So that became our first major overseas contract – providing the software-coaching package and some training to go with it."

By this time, Morrison's initial idea had developed into a suite of software products, designed to analyse motion and provide a basis for athletes, coaches, physical educators and sports scientists to discuss and improve athletic performance. The generic coaching tool provided by Siliconcoach is now used by the English Cricket Board, the Australian Institute of Sport, Nike and many other elite international sporting organisations.

Steve Stanley, ex-Otago School of Physical Education – no surprises there – joined up to become New Zealand salesman, developing the dialled-in-motion cycle-fit system that is now found in Avanti-Plus stores throughout New Zealand and Australia.

Other projects emerged, including, in collaboration with the New Zealand Rugby Union, Rugby Sportswizards – which uses the same sort of technology to model skills using All Blacks: goal-kicking with Dan Carter, for example.

But, like many entrepreneurs, Joe Morrison wasn't ready to rest on his laurels. He had in place around him a core of Otago alumni, a number of investors who were now working for the company and the basis for a pretty successful business. Graeme Burborough, who had initially come on board part-time, joined to become Siliconcoach's general manager in August 2006, leaving Morrison to pursue other related interests.

One of Morrison's first clients, way back when he was doing his master's, was New Zealand Golf, who bought software for coach Mal Tongue to use.

"I've known him for 15 years and soon after he split from New Zealand Golf, at the end of 2005, I was staying with him," recalls Morrison. "We sat down one night and asked ourselves whether the current video-analysis systems were the best approach for the golfing mass market. What was available and was it ideal?"

"I went to bed that night mulling it over, couldn't sleep, got up and wrote a draft business plan – how Mal and other coaches could structure a business out of the knowledge they had about golf. That was the beginning of Cymicon."

Cymicon's core product, explains Morrison, is a state-of-the-art self-directed coaching and analysis system designed for golf training and entertainment facilities worldwide. Golf driving ranges, which proliferate throughout Asia, will be a primary target and, by the end of 2007, having come through the product development stages, Morrison and Tongue had licensed the product to Singapore. Other Asian countries were set to follow with commercial operations due to begin in the autumn of 2008.

All of which keeps Morrison, former house painter, soldier, biomechanist, computer programmer and entrepreneur, a busy man. Not so busy that he can't make time to enjoy the company of his family and the odd game of golf. Nor to reflect on what it takes to stay ahead of the game.

"As an entrepreneur, you need to know when to step away and let other experts in to run the companies," he says. "Having a dream and risking failure is one step, but then gathering world-class people around you to take that dream into a global market is the next."

Simon Cunliffe