

# Duluthian

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2025

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE DULUTH AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

## CHANGING THE GAME

YEAR-ROUND TRAINING AT ELITE SPORTS COMPLEX

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# LOCAL ENTREPRENEUR UPS THE GAME WITH ELITE SPORTS COMPLEX

By Patrick Lapinski

In athletics, the vast majority of the work is done behind the scenes, endless hours of training at all hours of the day, in all weather conditions, making the process more grueling than the game, or a tournament itself. No matter where you live, weather is always a factor in outdoor sports training. Duluth has its unique challenges, but so does everyone.

To maximize an athlete's training efforts, indoor facilities that provide a consistent climate-controlled experience enable the athletes to focus

on mechanics, or footwork, training on a turf surface with equipment that is safe and state-of-the-art. Having an indoor environment designed for athletic training is a game changer in the Twin Ports with the opening of the Elite Sports Complex at 4510 West First St. in West Duluth.

Aaron Larson, owner and managing partner, has reached the moment where, like a young bird falling from the nest, he is experiencing the terrifying thrill of the first few seconds of free-falling before catching up to the reality that his destiny is in his hands

and it's coming fast. Small business start-ups can be scary and exciting all at the same time. The Elite Sports Complex is no exception but Larson is confident they will soon be soaring.

While the concept and business plan are not unique, it was surprising to Larson that no one had attempted to open this type of venture in Duluth until now. As a lacrosse coach, Larson was always battling the elements when training outdoors. The idea of an indoor facility dedicated to the needs of coaches and athletes seemed a no-brainer.

***"We want to make it a very welcoming environment, and give the athletes a place to play indoors nine months out of the year where they usually can't play."***

- AARON LARSON, OWNER AND MANAGING PARTNER - ELITE SPORTS COMPLEX







"Everybody talks about it. Everybody says, 'Oh, I was going to do one of those.' It just kind of took somebody, I think, to take the risk and go all in, and that's what I did," says Larson. "I put all my savings in. This is a project that I truly believe that the city of Duluth, Superior, Hermantown, Proctor, all of them, need something like this, and this was perfectly located in the middle."

Larson sees the Elite Sports Complex as an investment in the broader Duluth community, not just the West End where they are located. It is needed across multiple levels of sports and athletics in the Twin Ports.

"I was looking for a place for my club team, the Northern Vortex lacrosse team, about 100 kids,



to have an indoor turf facility. I also had a card shop in the mall. I kind of wanted to put the two together. And then I also owned a Dr. Juice USA, which is a hunting and fishing company, so I was kind of looking for one

place to run all my businesses out of." The proverbial basket to put all his eggs in.

As Larson toured an empty Essentia warehouse across from the Duluth Adventure Zone in the west





end, he thought it held promise for a training facility. "This would just be a perfect sports complex," Larson thought. "It's something that every parent talks about on the sidelines of a lacrosse game or a basketball game. I talked to the realtor, and thought maybe we can make this happen."

It should be noted that Larson has several business partners who asked at this time to remain anonymous.

## INSIDE THE ELITE SPORTS COMPLEX

Larson's Elite Sports Complex currently has 40,000 square feet of floor space, roughly the size of an acre of land or about 80 percent of a football field, according to AI-generated data. There is another 9,000 square feet of retail space for their Pro Shop and Larson's sports card trading business.

For the "pickleheads," there are currently five pickleball courts, with two more expected to open in September. School-age athletes have

access to four turf quadrants, six batting cages, pitching mounds, and a full gym for strength and conditioning, speed and agility exercises, and a recovery lab that is partnered with Essentia health; more to come from Essentia on that at a later date.

For those unfamiliar with the sports world, turf is the surface you train on. Inside the Elite Sports Complex they use a high-quality multi-sport padded turf. "It's free floating, doesn't wrinkle, doesn't roll, doesn't tear and it's padded underneath," explains Larson. "You can fall on it and not feel like you're falling on concrete. It's good turf." Elite Sports' turf quadrants are all popular with the schools.

As the demand for indoor training space increases, Elite Sports is diligent about providing equal time so everyone has a chance to book some indoor space. "We could have just sold all the turf to soccer, for instance, all of it. They would take every minute of it, but we're holding it back

and giving everybody a chance to get in, to get in some indoor time," says Larson. "We want all the clubs, all the different associations, to have an ability to have some indoor turf time and compete with some of the city's teams and get that extra training."

Among the training opportunities that come with Elite Sports Complex are their sports clinics. Throughout the year they run baseball clinics, lacrosse clinics, soccer clinics and pickleball clinics where, if just one individual wants to come in, there are 10 slots they can sign up for, and there'll be a coach anywhere from beginning level all the way up to professional level."

Attracting some of the best coaches, the "elite" of the community, is a goal of Larson. So far, they have an impressive roster of coaches to help athletes, young and old, to develop their skills in the sport of their passion.

For instance, Eli Tindor, one of their baseball coaches, played in







the Minnesota Twins minor league system for nine years. "Our lacrosse coaches are just really, really high-end coaches, and we have coaches that help out at the beginner level, too," says Larson.

When it comes to the world of competitive pickleball, there is no one more qualified to train under or learn from than Jenny Johnson. Her bio page on the Elite Sports website says her "competitive spirit is matched by her impressive pickleball resume: she's a five-time US Open 5.0 medalist and has landed on the podium at various major PPA and APP tournaments around the country. But for Jenny, it's not just about winning. As a PPR Pro-certified instructor with a Master's in education, she's passionate about helping players of all backgrounds discover

the fun and community that pickleball offers. Her teaching style is all about blending technical skills with strategy, and she never loses sight of the joy and playfulness that make the sport special." View the website at [www.elitesportscomplexmn.com/instructors](http://www.elitesportscomplexmn.com/instructors) to see the profiles of some of the other instructors or coaches.

Including the coaches, Elite Sports employs 14, and is proud to introduce Jamie Hazelton, to the team. Jamie is a performance, health and wellness coach. "She's board certified, and works to help increase that mental aspect of the game," states Larson. "We also have a couple different lacrosse coaches, a basketball coach. In total, we have five or six coaches plus have two full-timers who work over in the card shop, and two full-timers who work on the business side."

In the summer Larson says you can expect to see some part-time youth athletes that hang out to help when they are out of school. It isn't unusual for a number of athletes to look ahead to coaching when their playing days are over.

You won't find a full basketball court inside the Elite Sports Complex, but it doesn't mean you won't find some intense training going on at one of the modified half-courts. "We practice on fundamentals and skills; how to shoot properly, how to dribble properly, how to drive to the basket properly," Larson explains. "We're not looking to host games. Here we have tools like shooting machines that kick the ball back, track your stats, compile your analytics, all on the machine."



It is this type of training that helps athletes develop their techniques and skills to raise their game to a higher level. You'll have to ask Larson about the many ways they use data analytics to monitor an individual's performance. Interpreting this data is one of the services provided by the Elite coaches.

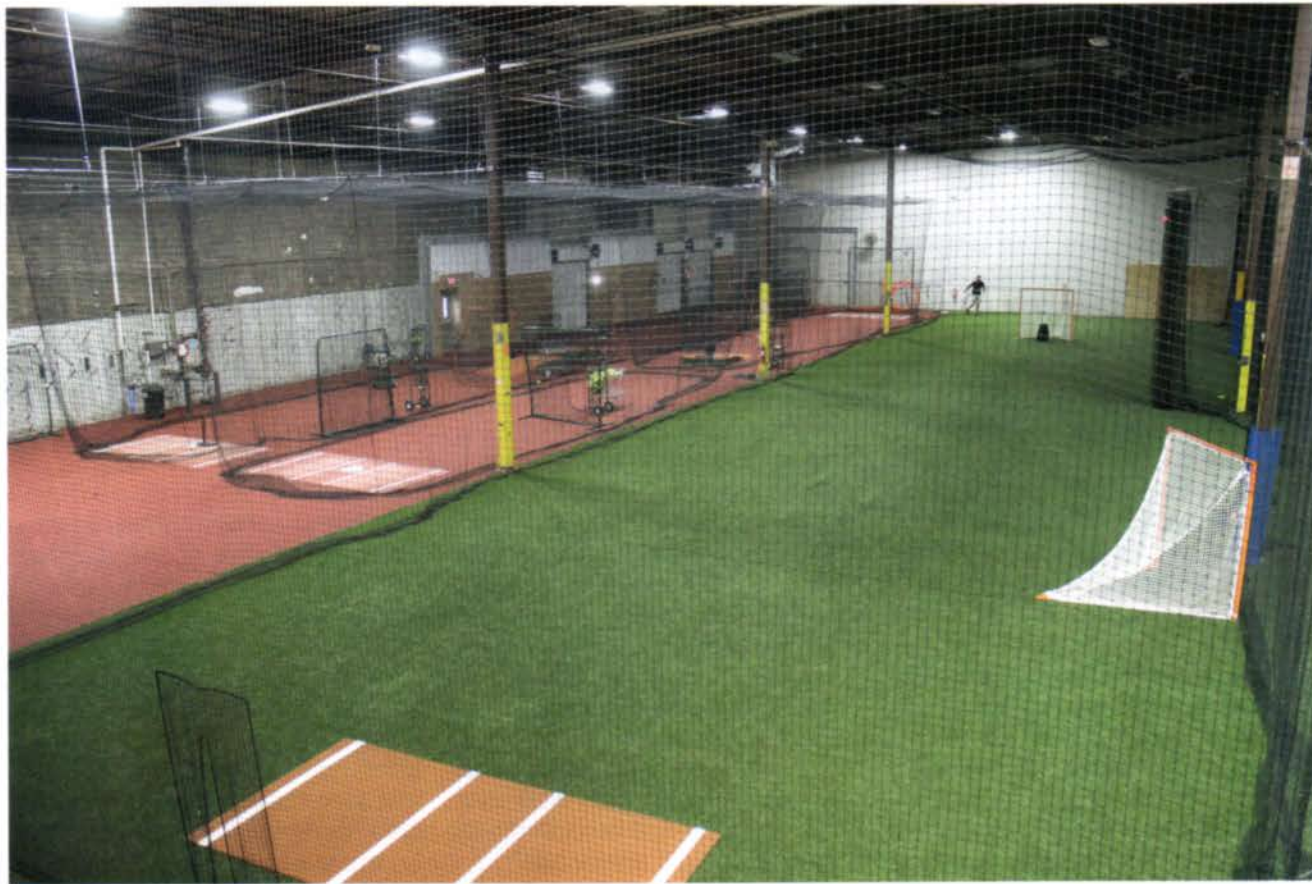
Not all athletes are young, but it doesn't mean they're any less competitive. For many retirees, the game of pickleball is wildly popular. Larson wants readers to know that Elite Sports is both One Pass and Silver Sneaker approved. For most seniors that means participation is usually covered through Medicare, Medicaid.

"You can also have it through private health insurance, like Blue Cross, Blue Shield, but it basically is the same exact program as Silver Sneakers; it's wellness. Insurance companies are willing to pay \$40 a month for any of their members to come into a wellness facility, and we are wellness," says Larson.

That means there are more than 28,000 Twin Ports residents eligible to join a team or just show up and learn how to play, for free!

Looking forward, Larson envisions a larger area that will promote community and gathering, a place for additional games and activities.

"We are going to have an entertainment center where we'll have bingo, bridge, cribbage, even as far as a karaoke night, all kinds of fun stuff for seniors to do. Even coming in, socializing, that's considered wellness. We have the walking track on the turf during the days, what's not being used after schools so they can





come in and walk. They can come in and help themselves to refreshment. We'll have free coffee, and we do have a restaurant (spoiler alert!) that is coming in, we just haven't made that announcement yet."

Right now, Larson says "there's a lot of that 55-plus age that play pickleball. They're very active. It's very good for the hand-eye coordination. They even say it's good for your memory once you start playing because you must remember your opponent's name, and the score. It's a big thing to call everybody by their first name in pickleball," explained Larson, sharing a little social insider pickleball knowledge.

## SETTLING IN TO THEIR NEW HOME

As they get their business off the ground, Larson talks about some short-term goals that he knows will improve the customer experience.



Two important services at Elite Sports Complex are the pro shop, and the collectible sports card shop, a part of the origin story of his current venture.

"Elite Sports and Collectibles used to be in the Miller Hill mall. Now we're here. It's kind of a passion of mine, since I was kid. Then I got into it with my children, and

from there it's just been blowing up. It's a very big, big business; a big hobby. A lot of people are into it, so we're just keeping that going."

A key feature that Larson hopes will be added this fall to the Elite Sports Complex will be an in-house bar and the previously noted restaurant. He believes it will go a long way







toward attracting more business while providing a much-needed amenity for their customers. The Pro Shop is still a work in progress and Larson talks enthusiastically about being the go-to shop to find sports wear for your favorite local high school teams. Elite Sports is all about supporting and promoting local youth sports development and community.

As the fall high school season approaches, the pace of the training increases inside the sports complex. Aside from his ownership/management role, Larson still coaches lacrosse, and his outdoor training woes of years past have been replaced with consistent, indoor training results.




"We used to only be able to train nine months out of the year. As a result, our lacrosse team has struggled, in the past," admitted Larson. "This year, we were training inside much earlier. We took second place in the highest division, and our club team actually won some very good tournaments."

Success in business translates to success on the field for Larson.

This is for the community, that's the biggest thing, concludes Larson. "We can't stress that enough. If you come into our pro shop, you'll see apparel from every different school, and that was done for a reason – we want this facility to be for everybody. We want to make it a very welcoming environment, and give the athletes a place to play indoors nine months out of the year where they usually can't play."



If you're a youngster looking to solve that curve ball, or a budding pitcher learning to throw one, you can train right alongside elite pickleball players who are as highly competitive as any athlete on the floor.

Looking to improve your game, prepare for the next level? The coaches at Elite Sports can tailor your training and work with you to maximize your effort. You can find it all at the Elite Sports Complex. Stop in, check it out, feel the energy, and join the spirit of the sporting world. 

Patrick Lapinski is a freelance writer who grew up in Superior.

