

He Loves Beating the Competition, in Business or Sports

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Mike Repole has had a pretty good winter. St. John's, his alma mater, is inching closer to a berth in the [N.C.A.A.](#) men's basketball tournament for the first time since 2002. His racehorse Uncle Mo is the early favorite to win the [Kentucky Derby](#). His beloved [Mets](#) have started spring training.



Courtesy of St. John's University

Over the past four years, Mike Repole has spent nearly \$7 million on more than 65 horses at North American auctions.

Repole, after all, is the latest in what has become a sort of New York tradition — the person who hits it big in business, then turns his attention to sports.

“Business and sports have always been my passions,” Repole, 42, said. “They have shaped who I am and how I do things.”

Life is just as he imagined for himself as a teenager growing up in Middle Village, Queens, paging through his twin bibles, Money magazine and Sports Illustrated. Even then he talked fast, moved faster and dreamed a little bigger than most.

Replacing the St. John’s legend Lou Carnesecca at the end on the Red Storm’s bench? Of course, he could. Working the winter baseball meetings as the Mets’ general manager? No problem.

When neither St. John’s nor the Mets came calling, however, Repole found a job in the beverage industry and remade himself into a coach of a different kind of team, a moneymaking marketing machine.

He has put up some significant victories. In 1999 he and Darius Bikoff took a bottled water company with \$100,000 in sales and transformed it into a multimillion-dollar enterprise behind the Vitaminwater and Smartwater brands by concentrating on the health conscious and employing en vogue spokesmen like the rapper [50 Cent](#) and Mets third baseman [David Wright](#).

In 2007 [Coca-Cola](#) bought their company, Glaceau, for \$4.1 billion. Repole, the coach, took care of his players. Glaceau’s 600 employees all had stock options: 50 of them cashed out with more than \$1 million, another 150 with \$500,000, and 200 with more than \$100,000.

Repole could have retired to a beach, an island or a bank vault. But that would mean no more 14-hour days. So he became the key investor in the health-food chain Energy Kitchen and the chairman and majority owner of Pirate Brands, maker of the snack food Pirate's Booty.

But he also cut out some time and money for St. John's, where he earned a degree in sports management. Repole took five years to graduate from St. John's with a 2.2 grade-point average, and he is grateful that the university patiently stood by him.

So much so that Repole is a member of the university's Founders' Club, the top tier of donors who have given, or committed to give, more than \$1 million. At home basketball games, he is never far from the St. John's bench, and last month when the Red Storm upset [Duke](#), Repole was courtside on the bench — a privilege he bought at a university fund-raiser.

“St. John's is important to him,” said Chris Monasch, the Red Storm's athletic director. “He grew up around here, and the university gave him an opportunity to get an education and he's gone on to have success. He's really a great role model for our students.”

He also has spent a few bucks chasing fast horses, a pastime Repole fell for as a 13-year-old along the rail at Aqueduct. Over the past four years, he has spent nearly \$7 million on more than 65 horses at North American auctions, according to [Equineline.com](#).

None, however, have paid more dividends than Uncle Mo, whom Repole bought for \$220,000 at the Keeneland September Yearling sale in 2009. Uncle Mo is undefeated in three starts, has earned nearly \$1.3 million, and was named last year's champion 2-year-old.

"He's my 4.1 billion-to-1 shot," said Repole, equating the thrills Uncle Mo has given him to selling his business to Coca-Cola. "But I'm a realist — 95 percent of the people in the horse business lose money, and the other 5 percent lie about it."

What Repole does best is build brands, and he is doing that in thoroughbred racing. He writes an Uncle Mo diary and produces podcasts for BloodHorse.com. He oversees Uncle Mo's [Facebook](#) page and [Twitter](#) account, and preaches the gospel of horse racing at every chance.

"Mike is used to competing at the highest level, and he understands what it takes to do that successfully in our game," said Greg Avioli, president of the Breeders' Cup. "It takes a combination of energy, passion, savvy and competitive spirit."

Then, there are the Mets. Repole can go off into a soliloquy on the virtues of [Mookie Wilson](#). He cherishes his season tickets behind third base. His racing silks are Mets Blue and Orange. He is exploring the possibility of buying into the team, whose owners, [Fred Wilpon](#) and Saul Katz, are embroiled in a lawsuit filed against them by the trustee representing the victims of [Bernard L. Madoff's](#) multibillion-dollar [Ponzi scheme](#).

“I’m interested under the right circumstances,” he said.

In the meantime, Repole has plenty on his plate. He shuttles between his home on Long Island, Pirate Booty’s office in Sea Cliff and Energy Kitchen’s headquarters in Manhattan, trying to build the next “billion-dollar brand.”

Pirate’s Booty has doubled its sales to \$100 million in the past two years, but Repole believes it can take on the snack giant Frito-Lay. Energy Kitchen has 12 stores in New York and has signed franchise deals for 78 more from Miami to Boston. By 2018, his goal is to have 1,000 of them.

Repole thinks St. John’s can make some noise in the N.C.A.A. tournament and Uncle Mo can sweep the **Triple Crown**. In other words, he is looking at having a pretty good spring.

“Think big,” he said, beginning one of his signature mantras. “Dream bigger.”