

# Up Close:

## Former NHLer Shawn Rivers on how he found ‘happiness after hockey’

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**Organizations:** Anish Branding, Gunn Media, NHL

**People:** Shawn Rivers

If anyone knows about skating through life’s obstacles, it’s former NHL defenceman Shawn Rivers.

After retiring from hockey at age 30, he bought a small signage company in his hometown of Ottawa. Rivers has since grown Gunn Media into an established brand management firm specializing in promotional products, corporate clothing, large-format printing, signage and display services.

It hasn’t been all fist bumps and high fives, however. In order to succeed, he’s had to bring his A-game, particularly during the high-tech bubble burst, 9/11 terrorist attacks, 2008 recession and throughout such infectious disease outbreaks as SARS and the woefully worse COVID pandemic. His business was impacted to various degrees as a result of each of these occurrences.

“As soon as you think things are going great, there’s that punch in the face that you’re not expecting,” said the 52-year-old entrepreneur during an interview at Gunn Media, located on Antares Drive in the Rideau Heights Industrial Park.

“I’m blown away by how many things come along that are totally out of your control. It doesn’t matter how good you are; you can’t do anything about it, except to quickly figure out how you’re doing to adapt and change.”

Fortunately, rebounds are something Gunn Media does well, said the former recipient of a Forty Under 40 business award and of a Young Entrepreneur of the Year award. “Every time there’s been struggles, it feels like something really great happens afterward (knock on wood). We’ve really done a good job of finding ways to stay competitive and still get very desirable contracts.”

Rivers is referring to work Gunn Media has done for three Grey Cup games, the World Junior Ice Hockey Championship, the NHL All-Star Game, as well as volleyball and basketball championships.

Later this month, Rivers will gather with his friends, family, clients and employees to celebrate Gunn Media’s 21 years. He waited one extra year to make sure the pandemic — which had him manufacturing hand sanitizers and face masks for a time — was in his rearview mirror.

While the milestone anniversary brings a sense of pride and accomplishment, Rivers said he can’t shake the feeling that time is speeding up on him.

“I feel old,” he said, smiling. “I do feel like it’s going quickly. For years it felt like an uphill push but, now, it’s like there’s so much I want to do, so many clients I want to take care of.”

Gunn Media is experiencing a period of exciting new growth related to its new presence in Tampa, Fla. Rivers played in the NHL during the 1992-1993 season for the Tampa Bay Lightning. Business has been going “really well” in the U.S. over the past 18 months, said Rivers, whose clients include retired boxer-turned cannabis entrepreneur Mike Tyson. Also gaining momentum is his other

brand management firm, Anish Branding. He launched it in 2006 with former NHLer John Chabot, an Anishinabeg Algonquin from Kitigan Zibi First Nation.

**“I didn’t wallow; I found something that I was passionate about and quickly jumped in. I feel super-lucky that way.”**

Growing up, Rivers earned extra money doing custom-shirt printing and embroidery. He was also exposed to the industry through his father, who worked in promotions. So when it did come time for him to hang up his skates for good, he wanted to work in apparel, promotional merchandise, signage and printing. He refocused his drive and determination, hard work and hustle, and his desire to win from the hockey world into his new business.

Rivers named Gunn Media after his young son Gunner, who’s now grown and working as a CIH Academy U16 AAA head coach and Blyth Academy teacher. All three of his kids, and even his mom, have had stints working at Gunn Media.

After spending so many years under a rigid coaching system, Rivers intentionally adopted a different leadership style with his staff. His employees number between 13 and 17 at any given time. “I feel like I run my team like a progressive dressing room. We’re all here to help one another. There’s a common goal. We try to pick each other up when we’re down. It’s a safe place.”

His first big break came when Jeff Hunt, then-owner of the Ottawa 67’s, hired Rivers to print the signage on the arena rink boards. It was Hunt who suggested Rivers deal directly with the individual sponsors, thinking it was

a good way for him to drum up additional contracts for his then-fledgling business.

Another well-known sports executive to help Gunn Media get its start was Cyril Leeder, then president of the Ottawa Senators. The hockey club remains a client, along with Minto Group, Osgoode Properties, HN Homes,



MD Financial, future Hard Rock Hotel and Casino Ottawa, FCI, and BMO.

“I do feel lucky in a sense. I feel like it takes a while to build a business in Ottawa but, once you make inroads and people trust you, they’re pretty loyal.”

Rivers also feels fortunate to have found a rewarding second career. “There are a lot of guys who can’t find happiness after hockey. A lot. They end up in jobs they don’t love or feel really unstimulated.

## FIVE THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT SHAWN RIVERS:

1. Among the business leaders who’ve inspired him is Roger Greenberg, executive chairman of Minto Group and OSEG (Ottawa Sports and Entertainment Group), for his ability to make time for others. He also looks up to his unofficial business coach, Mike Fleming (CEO Fleming Property) for repeatedly keeping him calm through rough waters.
2. He’s fluently bilingual thanks to his parents’ decision to send him to French-language schools. He graduated from École Secondaire Charlebois.
3. He’s on the executive board for the Ottawa Senators Alumni.
4. His brother, Jamie, played 11 seasons in the NHL and was recently named the new TV colour analyst for the St. Louis Blues.
5. He’s a young grandpa, not only because he has two granddaughters (with another two grandkids on the way) but he also runs half-marathons and competes in triathlons.