Four Seasons owner finds silver linings in the snow clouds overhead

The consensus is universal. Unless you are especially fond of building snowmen or ice fishing, this has been a long and miserable winter.

Taking exception to that outlook are the owners of local businesses who help folks with the tools needed to do battle with the ravages of winter — whether that is heavy-duty snowblowers or more maneuverable snow throwers.

After several recent mild winters, Ozaukee County businesses that deal with the sale and service of snow-removal equipment have been kept busy by a snow season that started early and just keeps piling up.

Aaron Gavin, owner of Four Seasons Outdoor Power, 123 N. Park St., Port Washington, has a simple philosophy when it comes to the meteorological challenges of the season.

“I am a big believer of ‘When it is winter, let the snow fly, and when it is summer, let the grass grow,’” Gavin said.

Not coincidentally, his business specializes in snow removal and lawn care equipment.

Four Seasons has a reputation as the go-to place to buy or fix Simplicity gear — which was once made in Port Washington — that dates to 1970.

After working as a repair technician, Gavin took over the business in 2010 and has added a full line of Snapper and Stihl equipment to the stock.

At age 33, he said, a lot of his customers say, “It must be nice to be your own boss.”

The comment always makes him laugh.

“When I was working in the shop I just had two bosses. Now that I own the business, every one who walks in the door is the boss — you have to make sure every customer is happy,” Gavin said.

 Keeping up with job orders has meant sometimes coming in before dawn and staying long after dark, he said, often with prospective customers knocking on the locked door outside of regular business hours.
“I’ve been here at 10:30 at night and had a customer stop in asking if I had a belt. Is someone really clearing their snow in the middle of the night?” Gavin asked.

Since the announced closing this winter of Lauer Equipment Sales in Grafton, Gavin said, he has seen a sudden surge in business.

“We gained 10 new customers last week, people who are looking for a shop they can have an ongoing relationship with,” he said.

A quick look around the Port shop is proof that winter has been demanding.

There are only a handful of new snow throwers left, and even fewer reconditioned machines.

“The difference from last year is that we have been able to keep up with repairs, getting machines out as quickly as they come in,” Gavin said.

“Last year, we fixed a lot of machines that had broken belts because the snow was so wet and heavy.

“This year, because the snow has been lighter and folks are using single-stage throwers, there are more machines that need their paddles replaced. You know you are having a paddle problem if the snow isn’t being thrown as far.”

Gavin said no matter how well cared-for a snow blower or thrower is, there is no way to protect the machines from all of winter’s woes.

Perhaps it is a reflection on how much the saturated snow last year, that Gavin said he hasn’t had to deal with one problem that was prevalent last winter.

“For whatever reason, we had to repair 15 to 20 snowblowers that had dog chains wrapped around their augers. This year, we haven’t had one. Maybe people are just being more careful,” he said.

Gavin said he is not the kind of person who has visions of dollar signs dancing in his head every time there is a forecast of snow, but he acknowledged bad news on the weather front can be good for his business.

“I never like to see a customer having problems, especially in winter when it is snowing and they need to clear their driveway. But if they need service, I always like to see them coming to me,” Gavin said.

Even in the waning days of winter, he said, he makes a point of keeping new snow equipment on hand.

“Every spring, when new homeowners come in to get a lawn mower, we often sell them a snowblower, too, as kind of a package deal,” Gavin said.
He said his business is very much dictated by the pages of the calendar.

“It can be pretty busy here after it snows for a few days and equipment starts breaking down, but it gets really crazy here in spring — especially when it is rainy like last year and the grass starts growing,” Gavin said.

Come spring, he said, several building projects at the shop are also planned, including the installation of a new furnace and expansion of the showroom.

Image Information: FOUR SEASONS OUTDOOR POWER owner Aaron Gavin had no trouble finding snow outside his Port Washington shop to test a Simplicity snowblower.