

# From the jump into cold water

## Two company founders, two generations: Rolf Beckers, 73 years old, and Afshin Doostdar, 26 years old, talking about opportunities, risks and challenges.

VONHERMANN-JOSEF DELONGE

A brief conversation at the foosball table. For a long time as an indispensable sign of a young and somehow cool company; every startup, so the saying goes, has one to relax the staff after a long day at work or just in between.

So, the question is obvious.

Mr. Doostdar, where is the Voltfang foosball table?

Afshin Doostdar smiles and replies: "In the kitchen."

Now you have to know that Voltfang, the company that Doostdar founded together with fellow students Roman Alberti and David Oudsandji in April 2020, do not yet have its own office space. The kitchen is shared with other startups; The Voltfang team (the three founders plus five interns at the moment) are working on the idea of converting used electric car batteries into energy storage devices in two co-working spaces in the city. The practical implementation of this tinkering, the development of pilot projects takes place in a warehouse, made available to the young founders by an exhibition stand builder in Aachen. There will be plenty of opportunity for playing foosball together, but they will probably not. That's it with the start-up clichés

this morning, When two generations of founders talk to our newspaper. AfshinDoostdar,

"There is no sprint ahead of us, but a marathon."

Voltfang co-founder AfshinDoostdar



Shaping the energy transition: Voltfang co-founder Afshin Doostdar.

PHOTO: LUCAS JONAS

26 years old, graduated from RWTH as an industrial engineer, specialization in mechanical engineering, has been an entrepreneur for over a year, and Rolf Beckers, 73 years old, a trained radio and television technician, founder and long-time managing director of Digatron, a company in Aachen that started out 53 years ago in a garage (Still another cliché, you immediately think of Bill Gates and Steve Jobs) and today it is the world market leader for test and formation systems for the battery industry. The topics: Can you compare a company founded in the late 1960s with a company founded in the early 2020s? What are the differences, what are the constants? Why do you throw yourself into this adventure and what do you have to bring with you to be successful?

To start with the last question: a helping of luck can't hurt. Says Rolf Beckers when he remembers the time when he dared to start his own business. He was 20 years old at the time and was working for a computer company. When one of the inquiries from the battery company Varta was turned down as it was not possible to develop an automated test procedure for the quality assurance and further development of batteries, Beckers took action and manufactured the desired device himself.

Beckers turned the garage of his parents' house in Aachen-Ver Lautenheide into a workshop and founded his own company.

Varta subsidiaries soon became aware of the concept, and further orders followed. Beckers seized the opportunity. Today he says he came to his company and specializes in systems for the battery industry "like a virgin to a child". "That was exactly the right product at the right time for the right customer." The recipe for success: Concentrate on one thing, but pursue it with all consistency and do it really well. Occupy a niche, don't get lost. And yet: "That could have gone wrong back then," says Becker. But it is not, on the contrary, Digatron "grew quickly" in the early 1970s. Today the company has around 300 employees at locations in Aachen, the USA, China, India and Italy.

is skeptical. "A company like Varta would not hire a lone fighter like I was back then." For him, a dream came true at the time: the dream of being able to work and shape independently and in a self-determined manner. The dream of entrepreneurship.

### INDEPENDENT AND SELF-DETERMINED

Being able to work independently and self-determined: Afshin Doostdar can well remember an internship at a large automotive company. "I quickly got fed up with the slow structures." He always had the idea of being his own master in the back of his mind, says the 26-year-old. This thought only solidified during his studies.

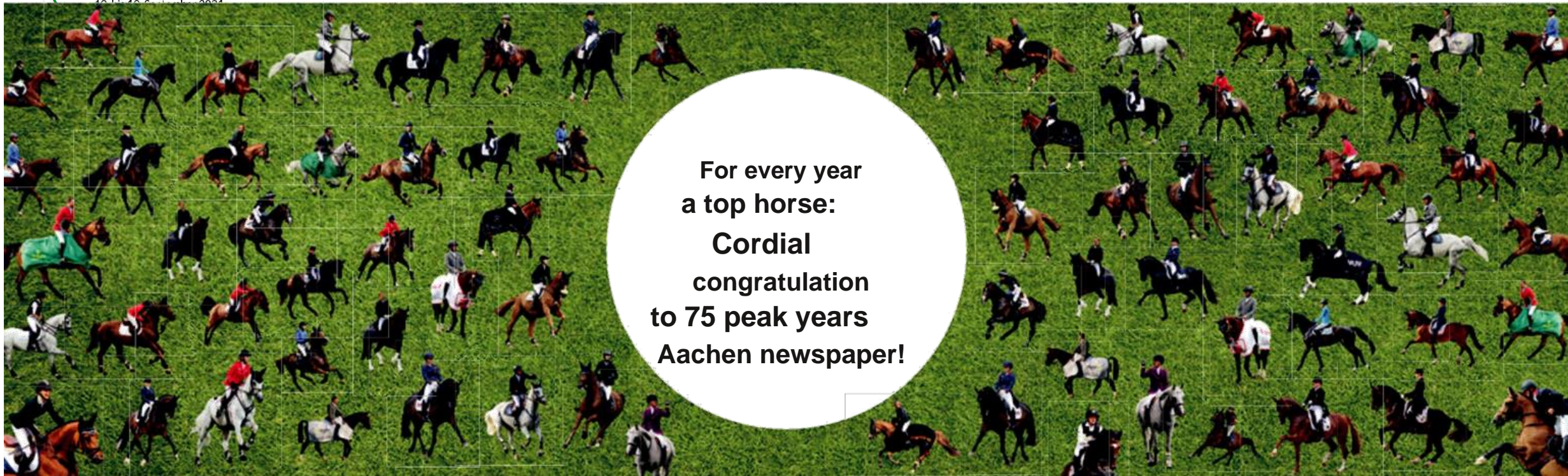
But how and with what? The brilliant idea came during a vacation. Three friends in a caravan who are looking for a way to top up their electrical appliances even when the engine was switched off.

Would such a founding and success story still be possible today? Beckers



A View of the Digatron Power Electronics production facility in Aachen.

PHOTO: DIGATRON



For every year a top horse: Cordial congratulation to 75 peak years Aachen newspaper!





The times were different, the goals similar: Digatron founder Rolf Beckers (right) and Voltfang co-founder Afshin Doostdar.

PHOTO: HARALD KRÖMER

The solar system on the roof was installed quickly. But how do you store electricity? In used car batteries!

**IT'S ABOUT THE BIG ISSUES.**

That is the concept of Voltfang, the start-up of the three young entrepreneurs. Who want to integrate used, discarded electric batteries into storage systems. The target groups: private households and industrial companies. Doostdar and his colleagues want a sustainable economy. Until now, batteries that no longer have enough power for use in a vehicle have simply been disposed of. The ecological footprint is devastating. Voltfang is committed to more than doubling the life of the batteries. In the long term, the concept is intended to support and drive the energy transition when all Voltfang units are networked together in a large, virtual power plant, from which energy is generated intelligently and on demand

can be fairly distributed.

So it's about big topics that are relevant right now: electromobility, sustainability, energy transition, climate protection. This is more than "just" a business idea; the three Voltfang founders are convinced. But what does it mean in detail? To put all this into practice as entrepreneurs is something they have to (had to) learn over in the past twelve months. Afshin Doostdar puts it this way: "Did we imagine it all too easy? Definitely! Would we still start a business with this experience? Definitely!"

**"The right product at the right time for the right customers."**

Digatron founder Rolf Beckers

Doostdar and Beckers agree not only here: What it actually means to found and build a company

and then to lead successfully can ultimately only be learned with practice. "We got very good set of tools in the university course," says Doostdar. "And later there are coaches and mentors. The region is very well positioned with its universities and advisory services. But at some point so many factors play a role, so many things come into play, the details of which were not even considered at the beginning. You can't prepare for that." "Financing, marketing, accounting, regulatory provisions, personnel management, working on the product, contact with potential customers, responsibility for employees." You get up in the morning and don't even notice how fast the evening time comes around. But that's what makes it so appealing." Beckers puts it this way: "You have to be passionate about your cause." 53 years ago, too, the water into which he jumped as the founder was ice cold. "I had a great entrepreneurial spirit back then. A sense of what

can be successful. That's always been too good for me." However, a good secretary and tax advisor couldn't hurt either. Plus, a teleprinter - for a young company that wanted to become internationally recognized and active, an expensive but ultimately indispensable investment.

**GROWN "COMPLETELY ORGANICALLY."**

Digatron then grew over the years, "very organically, piece by piece," as Beckers says. Of course, he also took a risk when financing his plans, but: "We always had sufficient liquidity to finance our own growth." That is what the Voltfang founders are currently doing too, of course in a much more modest way. There are also prize money and scholarships from local and national sponsors. At some point, however, investors should and must be brought on board. And

Customers are grown sustainably. These are the critical moments when it is decided whether a good idea can turn into good business. The 73-year-old Beckers himself has contact with many startups, he knows what makes the scene tick. He does not envy them. He knows how difficult it is as a young company to find investors, especially in Germany. "The willingness of investors to take risks here is rather low compared to the USA, for example. There is a security mentality here that sometimes slows down good ideas. Even a failure in the USA is not a blemish for a new start, whereas the barriers here are even greater," says Beckers, who also lives in the USA to some extent.

What can be done about it? In any case, perseverance and stamina. "We are not looking for a sprint, but a marathon," says Afshin Doostdar. A marathon that Rolf Beckers has already completed. Even if the conditions at the start were completely different.

We are pleased to have accompanied the successful Aachener Zeitung journey over the past few years. Best wishes for the 75th anniversary and good luck!



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