

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2005

BUSINESS & FINANCE

THE NEW YORK PORTFOLIO: DIANA RUDMAN

■ RUPALI ARORA

Children learn best when they are having fun. Diana Rudman, a former professional tennis player, is telling that to the world through her fashionable children's boutique called DiDi's on Madison Avenue.

Says Ms. Rudman: "I want to make learning fun. That is why I choose toys that inspire a child's imagination rather than the electronic games that place children in a passive role. Learning is an active process."

Collecting toys has been her passion since she was little. So Ms. Rudman quit tennis in 2003 to start something more fun. Inspired by all the wonderful classic toys she found while traveling through Europe, Ms. Rudman set her sights on creating a one-stop children's boutique that specializes in entertaining and educational toys as well

as well-made classic children's clothing.

"Well-made toys and appropriate activities are very effective in boosting a child's self-esteem and confidence," she told The New York Sun yesterday. "This is something you learn when you teach children tennis. You have to teach them new things in a fun way and at just the right time. Otherwise, you run the risk of frustrating them." A native of Bulgaria, Ms. Rudman was 8 years old when her athletic talent was identified by Bulgaria's then-communist leaders who invited her to begin intensive tennis training. At 13, she joined the professional circuit. By 19, she was ranked among the top 100 players in the world.

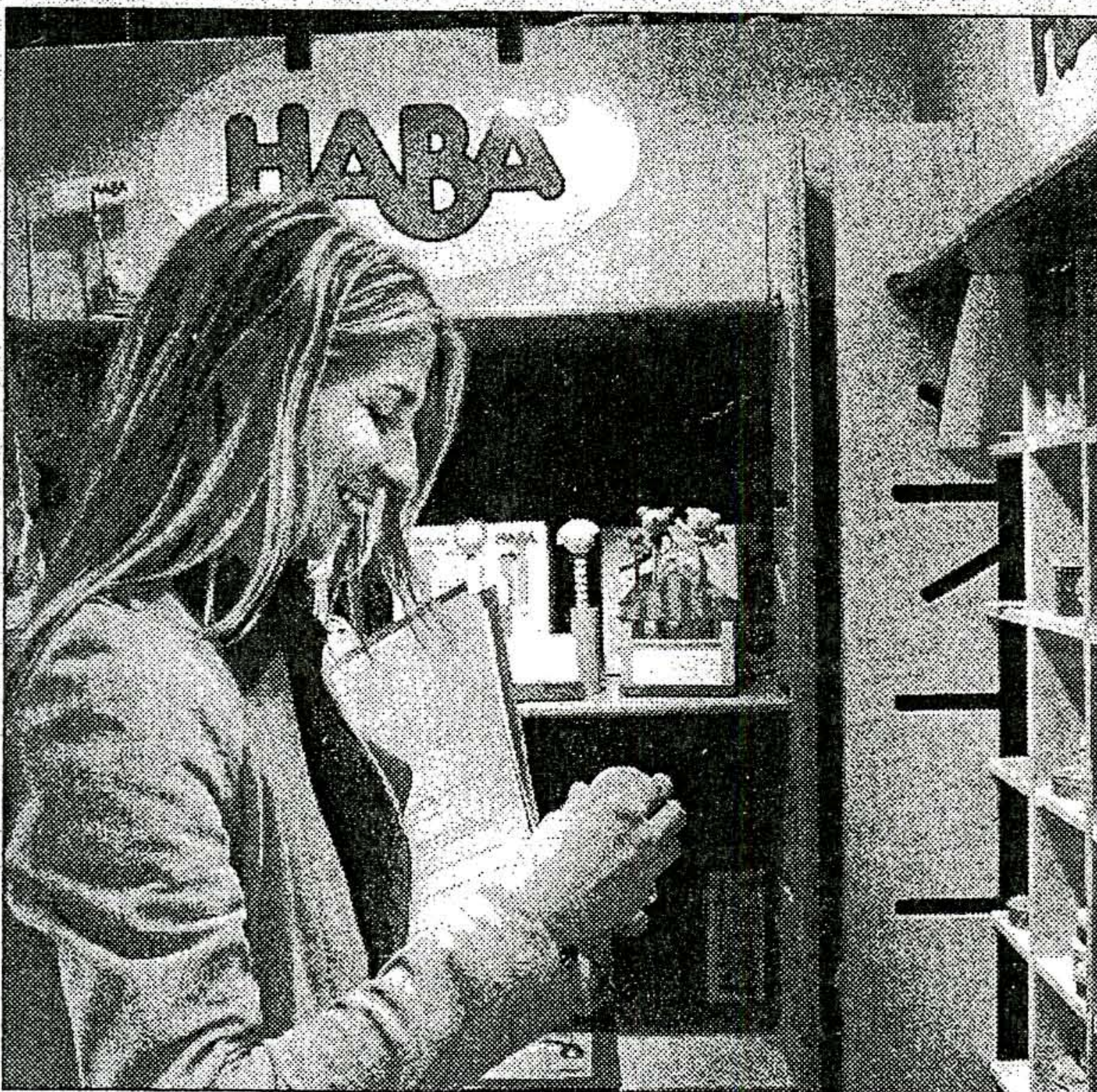
In 1991, Ms. Rudman came to America to study business at North Carolina's Campbell University, where she earned an MBA in international business. After graduation, she moved to New York City, where she lives with her husband and their four children.

Since its opening in 2003, DiDi's has already developed a loyal following of New Yorkers who love Ms. Rudman's philosophy about toys and activities for children.

The location and design of the store are perfect for busy parents interested in finding safe toys and classic clothing for their children. Sales at DiDi's were up by 60% in December 2004.

"Most busy parents don't want that circus-like environment you find in big chain stores," Ms. Rudman said. "That's why I hired a modern architect and put a lot more capital into designing the boutique. I want it to be easy for busy parents to zip in with their children, get what they need, and then get out again easily."

Now exploiting the Internet with a chic new Web site, www.didis.com, Ms. Rudman has certainly created a niche market for herself here in New York while the bigger toy giants clash to rule the mass market. And it is the exclusive toys that are creating the buzz at this year's 103rd American International Toy Fair at the Javits Center. The number of buyers is up 26%, thanks to innovative toy ideas from brands like HABA. One of the largest buyers and sellers of HABA toys in New York is, of course, Diana Rudman.



RUDMAN From a tennis star to a toy store.