

# This unique golf partnership a 'sign' of times

BY RICK DRENNAN



Waiting patiently for the beginning of golf season at the offices of premier sign maker Fusioncast are (L-R) Paul Cheerie president Golf Supply House, Dan Woolford manager-Golf Division Fusioncast, and Randy Shermet the new general manager FusionCast, located on the Mississauga-Oakville border.

Photo by Stephen Uhraney

The business world gets noisier by the day. The influx of new products, new technology, new marketing strategies, and social media, makes it near impossible for a new company to make itself heard – even if the company has a fantastic product to offer.

That was the dilemma facing Fusioncast, a premium sign making company located on the Mississauga-Oakville border.

The firm's technology was unique, even a game-changer in the golf industry.

By making signs with the look and feel of metal, but a whole lot cheaper, with more flexibility for the customer, it looked to have a bright future.

But it's hard to make yourself heard in a tradition-bound industry.

Fusioncast owner Randy Pilon realized rather quickly that he needed to install a business plan that had both breadth, and an ability to push his product into the huge U.S. market.

He couldn't afford to hire a large sales team, so he began to look for alternatives.

He needed a partner that was already making big noise in the golf industry.

He didn't have to look too far.

Mississauga's Golf Supply House (GSH) is a company on the ascendency, supplying the industry with everything from bag tags to pencils, netting to umbrellas, and range ball baskets and bags, etc. etc.

It's literally located just up the road from Fusioncast and led by Paul Cheerie, a former executive with companies like General Mills.

Cheerie was the dynamo that turned this moribund supplier into an industry powerhouse during the depths of the recent recession. With offices in Calgary and headquarters in Mississauga, Was Cheerie like Alexander the Great once the latter had finally conquered what was then the known world. With no new worlds to conquer, Alexander sat down and sulked.

Not Cheerie. He got busy and bought Eagle One, another moribund golf supply house that sold the same kind of goods across the United States. Located in southern California, its facility, its business plan, and its sales force were tired and in need of an infusion of energy.

Cheerie supplied it in heaping helpings.

Both GSH and Eagle One have gained a virtual lock on the golf industry supply business in Canada and the U.S.

With a large and talented team of sales reps already established across Canada and the U.S., Cheerie was on the lookout for other unique golf products his team could push here and down there.

The Cheerie-Pilon partnership was struck. Although it has yet to reap big rewards for Fusioncast, both Pilon and Cheerie are bullish about the possibilities.

Last month I had the opportunity to chat with Cheerie at the Fusioncast offices. He was, of course, on his way to catching a flight west to help continue the momentum he has created for his golf supply business.

Eagle One manufactures key product segments including recycled plastic golf course furnishings, golf course signage and golf flags. The company employs 107 people at its 49,000 square foot manufacturing facility, and has, like players in the golf industry in the U.S., fallen on hard times. It's become what Cheerie calls a "dusty" business. He felt the same way about GSH before its turnaround.

He's eloquent in his praise for Fusioncast's technology, and says it can be applied to a

number of non-golf markets as well.

The fact Pilon has entrusted him to plump up the sales in Canada and the U.S., means Cheerie can add even more game-changing products to his already impressive list.

While Cheerie burns up the airspace between Mississauga and California, I had a chance to talk exclusively with Pilon about Fusioncast's product, and its future prospects.

In a Q&A session, the Business Times asked the Mississauga resident, graduate of Sheridan College's business program, and CEO of Virox Technologies, a leading edge cleaning supply firm that engineers revolutionary disinfectants for the war against microbes, when and how his partnership with GSH came about?

A: In the fall of 2012, Fusioncast was not one full year into its new facility and the production process was perfected to a point where we were moving to the second stage of what was now a 3-year-old journey. That second stage contemplated forming alliances in the three core markets we identified in our business plan - golf, architectural and memorial. We had a competency in golf that was known in Canada and evolving. As such, there was a loose or informal relationship with NNG (Nearly New Golf, the name of the company prior to the acquisition trail that led to what is today Golf Supply House). I decided that I would step up personally to lead the company into this critical



*"The key is to distinguish between novel and inventive."*

Randy Pilon

phase until we could find a leader that could execute the plan we envisioned. We found that leader in February 2013 in new GM, Randy Shermet. This is how and why I met Paul Cheerie and Dan Harrison. It was at their office, at my request, and after several hours, intuitively I knew these guys were driven, going somewhere and I wanted our company to be part of that.

Q: Working smarter, being more strategic (not sending hundreds of sales reps to fan out in search of business) seems to be the mantra you both have encouraged over the years. Explain why you think this cross-pollination or convergence works in what you're trying to accomplish?

A: The lifeblood of any company, whether you make your own products or distribute for others, is innovations. Clients want what is new, and sales representatives need something new. The key is to distinguish between novel and inventive, like the iPhone phenomena and improvements to existing and accepted products that can give you that edge. Most important is to stick to what you know and what customers will understand. People embraced the new McDonald's coffee and deli lunch sandwiches as evidenced by their soaring profits, but many years ago they attempted late night pizza and lost a billion dollars and a lot of respect! Even the best companies lose when they don't stick to what they know. Fusioncast assembled a team of polymer experts and process experts to take a good idea that was 10 years in the making and turn it into a brilliant marketable idea within three years. Now we needed to get it to market. An alliance with an established and respected golf industry company like GSH would give instant credibility to Fusioncast and give their network of reps and customers that "something new" to talk about edge. This proven model is one I employed in the 1998 business plan for my other company, Virox Technologies. It is Open Innovation (sharing of concepts and combining efforts on technology improvements and market strategies) based and has been tremendously successful.

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# Bubba loves his Canadian Club

BY RICK DRENNAN

Augusta National Golf Club in Georgia. Bushwood Golf Club in Markham, Ontario.

One a playpen for elites, and host to the most prestigious golf tournament on the planet, the Masters.

The other, a restrictions-free club named after the fictional course in the quirky Hollywood comedy, Caddyshack.

When Watson's walk of fame resulted in his first Masters win last spring, it brought into sharp focus the unique relationship between the charismatic, long-hitting lefty, and Bushwood, a family-run 27-hole facility, that has operated in virtual anonymity for the past 50-plus years.

Mary Evelyn, its managing director, is still a little stagestruck by the outpouring of press coverage for Bushwood – a result of Watson's improbable, sudden death win over Louis Oosthuizen in 2012.

If the Watson-Oosthuizen matchup was serendipitous drama writ large, the winner's relationship with Bushwood is an equally compelling narrative.

Mary Evelyn recalls her first encounter with Watson, a 19-year-old kid with a funny first name, and Georgia Bulldog golf bag hanging on his shoulder.

He'd wandered into the clubhouse about 14 years ago and shyly showed her his scorecard.

"Just wanted to know what the course record is?" she recalls him asking. She was struck by his disposition ("sweet"), his manners ("please and thank you"), and his score ("61"). He beat by two shots the record held by her older brother, Jay.

But how about the coincidence? Both Mary and Jay were former Bulldogs, members of the Georgia golf team.

Watson found Bushwood because his girlfriend (now wife), Angie Ball, a member of Georgia's women's basketball team, lived nearby. He needed a place to play and practice and the Bushwood sign intrigued him. He was a huge Caddyshack fan. The Bulldog connection sealed the deal. It became

his Canadian club.

That connection grew by gradations. The club's gopher mascot was named Li'l Bubba. When he qualified for the Tour, he invited tour mates there during Canadian Open week. When he won the Travellers Championship (2010) he sent a signed picture and course flag to mount on Bushwood's clubhouse wall. Mary remembers Watson calling her one summer's day while she was vacationing in cottage country. Would she open the course for him and his in-laws, now



Bubba Watson

closed because of flooding? She drove home and welcomed them with open arms. It further cemented their friendship.

While playing in the Travellers, Mary tweeted Watson, and to her surprise, he tweeted her back – in the middle of his round! Watson sent personalized gifts to present to staff at Bushwood's annual Christmas party. The club's coffee shop has a "Bubba Wall," replete with his memorabilia. "If the average person can't relate to his win at the Masters, then something's wrong," says

Mary Evelyn.

Bushwood is an "average person's" club, and Watson's win was particularly poignant, and extremely emotional for its members, especially the Evelyns.

They've always respected Watson's right to privacy, and it's a bond that won't be exploited, says Mary.

"We would never market our club on his back," she adds.

Bubba Golf and the Bubba Legend have grown exponentially since his dramatic Masters win in 2012, but it's business as usual at Bushwood. It remains his home-away-from-home.

## Partnership is a paradigm shift in how golf industry operates

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Q: Both of you have talked about the 'silo mentality' prevalent in the business world, especially golf. How does your working model set a new standard for the golf sector?

A: I suppose this is better commented on by Paul but this is my take. I think that typical business mentality is to define your market based on your competency and that tends to lead to the obvious. When you focus on the obvious, you can certainly expect a lot of competition there. I tend to believe that you need to expand your thinking to the layers that are not obvious. For example, at Virox, the initial inventor developed a peroxide based, environmentally favourable surface disinfectant. The obvious thing to do is to bottle it and start selling it to disinfect surfaces. The unobvious thing to do was take a step back, and consider this invention as a "peroxide technology platform that could destroy pathogens", now we have over 7 global patents and 6 pending with 17 formulations that disinfect surfaces, devices, equipment, and hands! So focus on the unobvious.

Q: Both you and Paul Cheerie have talked about the spinoff business that can be derived from your partnership. Can you give me a couple of examples?

A: Clearly Fusioncast has applications beyond the golf course. As representatives get familiar with the technology and our design and

output capabilities, the leveraging of adjacencies (simply stated, getting business that is readily accessible and related to the core) presents tremendous growth opportunity for everyone in the value chain. The GSH reps are already at the golf course, why not sell upgraded signage for the clubhouse, way finding systems like parking etc? Also, for public courses, those relationships with government can create opportunities beyond the course. Again, the unobvious can be very profitable.

Q: You've talked about bringing 'energy' to new business ventures, blowing off the dust of moribund businesses.

A: Fusioncast, [under old management] had failed, this is why we came to the table as savvy investors and company builders. We took a half-baked yet innovative concept and made it reality with the right balance of financial and human resources deployed.

Q: Where do you want this partnership to go?

A: I believe that once you find the right partner, and we believe we have, you need to work at it much like any relationship that evolves. The real beauty of this particular one, unlike many of our global Virox alliances who are public companies like Bayer or Steris, we are the owners of our respective companies. We make the decisions; the players won't change from year to year as they so often do in corporate. Fusioncast is committed to making this North American alliance with GSH its leading business unit showcasing our technology capabilities on some of the most beautiful landscapes ever – golf courses.



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