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Sher-Wood follows rivals to China, closes Quebec hockey stick plant

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Intense global competition is laying low an industry dear to the heart of every Canadian who ever grabbed a hockey stick and laced up a pair of skates, or scrambled off the road when a buddy yelled "car."

Sher-Wood Hockey Inc., Canada's storied hockey stick manufacturer, is leaving home ice for good at the end of this year, moving the last of its stick production to China to slash costs.

Thursday's decision by Sher-Wood is the latest blow to what little is left of Canada's once-thriving hockey stick manufacturing industry and it underlines how vulnerable manufacturers are to global competition.

The shift is the culmination of years of tough slogging for Sherbrooke, Que.-based Sher-Wood, the legendary 62-year-old company that built its reputation turning out highly regarded wooden models loved by pros and amateurs alike but that now turns out mostly composites.

The company said it has no choice but to ship out the remaining part of its production of composite sticks to China, where it has over the years steadily been moving its facilities. "This is a difficult decision. We have had a presence [in Quebec's Eastern Townships] for more than 60 years," Sher-Wood's marketing and product development director Eric Rodrigue said.

Sher-Wood said it will phase out the 15 per cent of production still done in Quebec by the end of the year.

About 40 employees will lose their jobs as a result of the change. Sher-Wood also makes hockey equipment, the official National Hockey League puck and souvenirs and other hockey-related licensed products. Those activities will remain in Quebec, employing 110 people.

Mr. Rodrigue would not provide details of how much lower costs are in China, but he said there are other competitive advantages as well, such as the potential to develop new products in the region.

He cited competition from larger, more aggressive rivals in the consolidating hockey equipment industry as a key factor in the company's shift to Asia, which followed the lead of all the major players, including top dog Bauer Performance Sports Ltd. and rivals Easton and Reebok.

Sher-Wood's dwindling wooden-stick manufacturing was outsourced five years ago to a local company. Sher-Wood is believed to be the last company still making sticks domestically, on an industrial scale. A handful of companies making wood sticks remain on a

limited-run basis.

"It's a reflection of how composite stick making went offshore after manufacturers in Asia started producing much cheaper but good-quality product," aid Robin Burns, the founder of hockey equipment maker Itech who is now a Montreal-based housing developer.

"It's not something we as Canadians like to see happening, especially for a product that's so closely associated with Canada. The traditional Canadian-made hockey stick is certainly becoming a thing of the past."

Bob Stellick, who runs a Toronto sports marketing company, says the move is a sad comment on the demise of a Canadian icon.

"As hewers of wood and drawers of water it was natural for us to make wooden sticks for our game," he said. The high Canadian dollar doesn't help, he said.

At the same time, the industry is now very much a marketing- and brand-name driven industry, Mr. Stellick said. Where the product is made no longer carries much weight.

Ben Logan, manager and equipment buyer at the Fontaine Source for Sports store in Peterborough, Ont., said Sher-Wood has had a tough time making the transition from its famous wood sticks - Hockey Hall of Famer Guy Lafleur once lauded the firm's P.M.P. 5030 model as "the best stick in the world" - to composites.

"It hasn't been easy to pull off," he said.

Not that the company hasn't innovated. In 2009, it launched a line of carbon composites that have high-density foam-core blades to reduce vibrations.

Still, Sher-Wood also faced elimination three years ago, when it was known as Sherwood-Drolet.

It filed a proposal with its creditors under bankruptcy protection laws.

It was scooped up by Carpe Diem Growth Capital of Richmond Hill, Ont.

THE SHER-WOOD LEGEND

The news that Sher-Wood, the Stradivarius of wooden hockey sticks, is sending its business offshore completes the arc of a Canadian legend.

The stick's cycle from artisanal treasure to mass-produced factory object to hollowed out R&D gizmo serves as a suitable metaphor for the progress of this nation's industry.

The legend of the hockey stick started - like so much in Canadian history - with the first nations Mi'Kmaq carving their sticks from the roots of the hornbeam and white ash of the endless eastern forest of the Maritimes, Quebec and Ontario.

The individual properties of these sticks made them the perfect accompaniment to the newly minted sport and stars such as Cyclone Taylor.

In time, the country morphed from primary industry to mass production of the objects needed for a growing nation.

The vast Carolinian forests of white ash covering Eastern Canada serendipitously proved the ideal wood to craft hockey sticks. In his Sherbrooke, Que., factory, Leo Drolet transformed the individual stick to production-line object.

The legendary Sher-Wood PMP 5030, beloved of Guy Lafleur, was known for decades as the pinnacle of sticks. In towns such as

Hespeler, St. Mary's, Dresden and Wallaceburg, Ont., the process was repeated to serve what had become the national past time.

But technology rarely stands still, and the experiments with graphite composites in golf and tennis in the late 20th century made their way to hockey as well.

With chemists and engineers applying their craft, the focus of the perfect stick moved from forest floor in Canada to laboratory floor in the United States and Europe.

The shock of the new featherweight sticks left wooden sticks as a quaint footnote for the game's top players. Leaving the great Sher-Wood brand as an afterthought - and hockey fans to wonder if the hollowed-out composites were not an apt mirror of postmodern Canada.

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