

Local manufacturer showcases Reds' Johnny Bench statue

Once a key supplier for Delphi, Global Foam finds niche in designs

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When the Cincinnati Reds unveiled a bronze statue of Hall of Fame catcher Johnny Bench last month, the team honored a great player – and showcased the work of a small Dayton manufacturer. Global Foam Co. makes shapes out of polystyrene and expanded polystyrene – a synthetic resin that provides the shapes for signs and murals, architectural flourishes, wedding cake forms, crown molding and almost anything an engineer can imagine.

The statue of Bench began its life as a precisely cut polystyrene form, which served as the “master” form or shape, which the statue maker then used to shape the poured bronze sculpture itself. The polystyrene begins its existence as small beads, but Global Foam purchases the material from suppliers in large blocks. From there, it’s on to the firm’s CNC (computer numeric control) machines. Special finishes, imparting flame-retardant or weather-resistant qualities, can be applied.

Bill Bankes, the company’s president, said the firm started 16 years ago as Global Manufacturing Solutions. Among its tools, the company invented an air bag inflator. Delphi was a key customer, and that company’s 2005 bankruptcy forced big changes, he said.

“This became the biggest part of our business that was sustainable,” Bankes said of foam. Today, the company’s markets include construction, signage, concrete molds, amusement parks, government and custom orders. Thousands of people have seen the company’s handiwork in the sign outside the Tomb Raider ride at King’s Island. Shoppers at Kenwood Mall will see it in the Egyptian statues the company is making for a nail salon there. A walk around the company’s shop off Kuntz Road shows a pile of what will be bodies for unmanned aerial vehicles.

“We’re engineers, not really artists,” Bankes said. “But we work with artists.”

It’s hard to find anyone else who does what Global Foam does.

“Not until you get to the West Coast,” said engineer Fred Seger.

During the depths of the recession, business was “way down,” but now it’s “coming back” – essentially to where the company was three years ago, Bankes said.

The lower cost and relative strength of foam make a difference, he said.

From the desk of Thomas Gnau