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Prefinished Staining president Aaron Matuszewski stands near a photo of the floor his company worked on that will be used in this summer's Olympics in China. The floor is in a building where volleyball matches will be played. Signatures on the photo are from employees of Prefinished Staining. The Business News photo by J.A. Robb

Area company won the race on Olympic job

Prefinished Staining provided quick turnaround on sub floor shipped to Beijing

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It was a tight race to the finish as one local company rushed to complete a special assignment for the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing.

At Prefinished Staining, a factory finisher located just northwest of Green Bay, most of the jobs are pre-stained wood siding projects. But in late winter last year, the company received a phone call from Robbins Sport Surfaces of Whitelake, asking for some quick turnaround on a sub-floor job destined for the Olympics.

Robbins provides premium sport surfaces used in world-class stadiums around the world. It looked to Prefinished Staining to provide a specialty coating for the Olympic flooring sub-structure.

The company had about one week to coat and heat-treat about 40,000 square feet of lumber. The sleeper boards serve dual function — to provide the appropriate give on impact and to prevent moisture from seeping up from the concrete base or ice rink surfaces below.

Prefinished Staining regularly works with moisture-resistant coatings, and president Aaron Matuszewski knew they could meet Robbins' quality specifications and timeline.

Matuszewski set his crews on double shifts to keep the Robbins' job on track. A Robbins representative visited twice during the production week to ensure specifications were met.

The real test, however, came when

Matuszewski went to load the three transport containers that would be shipped to China. The project was stacked and wrapped and ready to go when Matuszewski discovered they had been given the wrong container dimensions. Their material units were a mere half inch too wide.

It was a Friday afternoon, but because the shop crew works four ten-hour days, few staff members were around to help. Matuszewski called everyone he could back to the shop to pitch in and restack the material by hand.

The loading job, which was supposed to take two people four hours to complete, took nine hours for the emergency crew. The truck pulled out in the wee hours of the morning and headed straight to Seattle where the transport ship was scheduled for departure.

Today, Matuszewski can smile at the memory, but he isn't likely to forget the "blood, sweat, and tears" that went into his own Olympic aspirations.

Matuszewski established Prefinished Staining in 1999 after getting some unconventional support in learning the business. He called Ken Ford, president of EA Allen Lumber Company in Illinois, and asked to speak with him about the business. Ford invited him for a visit, offering unpaid experience in his shop.

Matuszewski stayed two weeks. At the end of the visit, he asked Ford why he was so willing to help, knowing he could be an eventual competitor.

"I can still picture it," Matuszewski said. "He stopped writing and looked right up at me

and said, 'I knew from our phone conversation you were going to do it either way. Honestly, I didn't want you screwing up the market.'"

For his first couple of years in business, Matuszewski said he would call Ford regularly with questions, sometimes about finishing, sometimes about general business. He says he stills calls Ford a couple times a year to ask advice.

Despite such rare support, Prefinished Staining almost didn't get off the ground. Matuszewski struggled to find a bank that would fund his enterprise. He visited seven different lenders before a young loan representative at Baylake Bank agreed to give him a chance.

"I was sitting in the parking lot in the last bank going through my spiel on how I'm going to do this. I was thinking, 'If this doesn't work, I'm going back to work,'" Matuszewski said.

Matuszewski did get the loan, bought some staining equipment, and set up shop in a 7,000-square-foot warehouse in Green Bay.

The business quickly outgrew that space and moved into a 24,000-square-foot building in De Pere. That building was soon sold to make room for a condo development, but Matuszewski didn't mind because by 2002 they were already in need of more space.

Today, the business occupies nearly 40,000 square feet just northwest of Green Bay in the town of Pittsfield, but Matuszewski said he's looking to expand again. He estimates the company grew 30 to 40 percent annually, its first seven years in business.

Such rapid growth was "extremely tough" Matuszewski says. "We never had enough equipment or cash around to purchase what we needed to do."

Still, he was able to find some cost savings during all that growth, cutting staff from a peak of 20 to a team of nine, by purchasing some new equipment and providing better production management.

Today, the company is the largest factory finisher in the state, selling to every lumber yard and siding distributor in Wisconsin, upper Michigan, and Minnesota, Matuszewski said.

Each order is created on-demand and Matuszewski's team specializes in custom colors. Matuszewski said color accuracy isn't good enough with a machine, so every color match is finished by eye. Some projects take as little as five minutes, while more complicated tones can take days to get just right.

The company can (and has) color-matched just about anything including garbage can lids, tennis shoes, and rose petals.

One customer sent a green highlighter she wanted matched. They didn't get it on the first try. After Matuszewski sent her a sample, the customer called back and said she wanted something "more obnoxious."

"I was just praying she wasn't building in my neighborhood," Matuszewski said.

Prefinished Staining is a wholesale distributor, but will interact directly with the end consumer for critical color jobs. In addition to wood, the company also finishes alternative materials such as fiber cement, composites, and PVC.