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Olympian makes new mark as manufacturer

Masley Enterprises supplies protective gear to U.S. military

By *LULADEY B. TADESSE, The News Journal*

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Frank Masley sees lots of similarities between running a small manufacturing plant and competing in the Olympics.

He should know.

The three-time Olympic luge athlete musters the same courage and competitive spirit required in the world championships to run his specialty-glove manufacturing business in Wilmington.

"Sports has opened my eyes on how fierce competition can be," said Masley, 47.

Every day, the owner of Masley Enterprises Inc. has to figure out better ways to market and sell his waterproof gloves designed to protect soldiers working with fuel tanks. He has small contracts with various parts of the U.S. military.

Earlier this week, Rep. Mike Castle, R-Del., and Wilmington Mayor James M. Baker visited Masley Enterprises' plant to stress the importance of small manufacturers and their contributions to the state's economy.

"There are few manufacturing jobs in the United States of America," said Castle. "We need to do everything we can to encourage them."

In Delaware, like the rest of the nation, the number of manufacturers has been shrinking. The largest number of layoffs of any industry in Delaware occurred in manufacturing, with 3,688 jobs lost between October 1999 and December 2006, according to the state Department of Labor.

Even large multinational manufacturer Chrysler plans to close its plant in Newark, where it employs more than 1,100 workers, because it is unable to compete in a cutthroat global market.

Yet manufacturing jobs remain an important part of the state's economy because they pay higher wages than many jobs in other sectors.

Masley pays his assembly workers \$8.50 to more than \$15 an hour, depending on skill and experience.

"Hiring people in the city and not exporting jobs is important," said Baker. "Frank and Donna Masley are great examples of the creative energy that is helping to bring prosperity to the Wilmington area."

Supplying the military

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have created opportunities for several local manufacturers, including the DuPont Co., which has several contracts with the military, including one for \$70 million to supply soldiers with fireproof outfits made out of DuPont Nomex fibers.

Last year, Global Secure Corp., a Washington-based firm with a plant in Bear, acquired a \$2 million contract with the Army to provide troops with a cooling vest known as a body-ventilation system.

Still, winning large, long-term contracts is a challenge for smaller companies like Masley Enterprises.

In 2005, Masley managed to win a contract with the Army that generated about \$1 million in sales. He expanded his work force to 20 people and sold 22,000 gloves.

Since then, Masley has struggled to compete against an estimated 19 other glove suppliers to the military -- some of which are larger companies with multiple manufacturing sites. Masley had to lay off more than half his workers.

Because Masley has a small operation and each glove has to be stitched by hand, his product is more expensive to make. Each glove costs about \$80, or about \$60 wholesale.

Meeting the challenge

After retiring from professional luge, or sledding, Masley worked at W.L. Gore & Associates for 11 years.

For years, Masley used his skills as a mechanical engineer at Gore to work with glove manufacturers using Gore products.

He often suggested techniques and designs that companies could use to improve the performance of their gloves, but he found them hesitant to take him up on his best ideas. That is why he decided to start his own business.

So far, it's as though he is preparing for yet another Olympic challenge -- taking his business to the next level.

He already has his troops rallying for him.

Sherreda Smith, 27, of Claymont, was laid off from Masley about four months last year, but is now back working again.

"It's hard with layoffs," said Smith, a mother of three children. "But I am expecting the company to go further. That's why I stay here with them. I do believe the company will expand."

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Former W.L. Gore & Associates mechanical engineer Frank Masley, a three-time Olympic luge competitor, shows off the protective gloves his Wilmington manufacturing plant makes for the U.S. military. [\(Buy photo\)](#)

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