



**BUSINESS**

# Gretzky's hometown scores historic hockey stick maker

BY BRENT DAVIS

**A** CAMBRIDGE COMPANY THAT HAS been making ice hockey sticks for elite and amateur athletes for more than 100 years is moving to the hometown of Canada's most famous hockey player.

Heritage Hockey Sticks Inc., which landed a deal to be the exclusive supplier of wood hockey sticks for Canadian Tire Corporation, is opening an expanded, modernized facility in Wayne Gretzky's hometown of Brantford.

The decision was not an easy one, said company owner W. Graeme Roustan.

"The building we're in now in Cambridge is more than 100 years old. It's an inefficient building," Roustan said. "At some point in time in order to grow, in order to survive, in order to keep people employed and keep doing what you do best, you need to move on, so it is bittersweet."

The new 62,000 square feet Brantford location is twice the size of the existing plant and should allow for a production increase of 300 per cent, Roustan said. He is investing \$2 million in the new facility.

Heritage's lease at the Cambridge facility runs out at the end of 2021. The company will move gradually throughout 2021.

"To move a factory of this size takes a lot of time and co-ordination. It's not done in a week or a month," Roustan said. "We want to do it in such a way that it doesn't disrupt any production or deliveries."

Roustan expects his current workers to make the move to Brantford. "My existing employees are highly skilled people, many of which have spent their entire careers in this facility and for this business," he said.

He anticipates his workforce will grow to 100 people thanks to the new commitment from Canadian Tire.

Heritage Hockey Sticks can trace its roots in Waterloo Region back to the 1880s. It's a complex family tree, filled with amalgamations, name changes and different owners such as the Seagram family, Cooper and Nike Bauer. Production at the current Sheffield Street facility in Cambridge, dates from 1905.

When Nike Bauer got out of the wood hockey stick business in 2004, closure

loomed. A handful of employees and another investor stepped in and saved the plant, naming it Heritage Wood Specialties Inc.

The name changed again in 2019 when Roustan — owner of several hockey related businesses, including **The Hockey News**, and a former Bauer board chair — acquired Heritage.

The company has outlived its domestic competitors — it is the only mass-producer of wood, ABS, foam-core and hybrid composite sticks in Canada or the United States.

"They're certainly unique, becoming a bit of a unicorn," said Geoff Sarjeant, Canadian Tire Corporation's assistant vice-president, Sports & Pro Hockey Life.

Roustan said Brantford offered a welcoming business environment as well as a closer connection to Canadian hockey lineage as it is the birthplace of No. 99 Wayne Gretzky and home to his father/ambassador of the game, Walter Gretzky.

Walter was a frequent visitor to the Cambridge factory and would leave with sticks destined for his charitable projects.

"He is part of our family, and we anticipate that Walter will walk the factory floors once again, but this time just a little closer to home," said Roustan.

Heritage produces a wide range of sticks under different brands, from ball and street hockey sticks to foam-core goalie sticks. Its wood ice hockey sticks have long been a marquee product.

NHL teams purchase thousands of Heritage's wood sticks for promotional and autograph use. Game-ready wood sticks for the consumer market, such as the Sher-Wood 5030, are a popular seller at Canadian Tire. The Canadian retail icon is emphasizing that pedigree with a renewed focus on Made in Canada products.

This push to source Canadian products predates the pandemic shutdown, said Sarjeant, adding that overseas supply chain disruptions and rising shipping costs have strengthened that resolve.

"It certainly helps to have a domestic manufacturer who can control some of that flow a little bit easier," Sarjeant said.

By the end of next year, Canadian Tire hopes to purchase all of its wood hockey sticks from Heritage, a move that will see current annual orders of 20,000 to 25,000 Heritage sticks soar to about 150,000.

Roustan called Canadian Tire's decision a "patriotic" move. "It's brave, it's exciting and, to me, it's demonstrating to the world that supporting your local economy, your local jobs and your country has to be a priority in any organization."

And it's one that helps to ensure Heritage keeps its stick in the game.

"This is the last Canadian hockey stick manufacturer left," Roustan said. "It's iconic."