

A GREAT FOUNDATION FOR MANUFACTURERS



CAROLINAS GATEWAY PARTNERSHIP

AT GLENOIT FABRICS CORP, BIG LEAGUE PLANS TAKE SHAPE

By Lawrence Bivins

When temperatures drop at Charlotte's Bank of America Stadium, many of the 75,000+ Carolina Panther fans there proudly wrap themselves in branded all-weather blankets. The 50" x 60" throws are double-layered and water resistant. They come with the menacing image of "Sir Furr" that Panther fans love. They sell for \$130.

And they are made in Tarboro, North Carolina.

"We currently make officially-licensed stadium blankets for NFL teams all over the country exclusively for The Northwest Company based in Roslyn, New York," says Brent Birkhoff, chief operating officer at Glenoit Fabrics. The company, a division of Monterey Mills, serves teams and fans from its 285,000-sq.-ft. plant on Main Street.

Glenoit was founded more than half a century ago. It became part of Monterey Mills through an acquisition in 2013. Known for its flexibility and quick turnaround times, the company is a major global supplier of comfort and performance-pile fabrics such as all-weather blankets. "We manufacture for well over ten different industries," says Birkhoff, who divides his time between Tarboro and the company's headquarters in Janesville, Wisc. "We produce the highest quality product in the world," he adds.

Built in 1959, the Tarboro plant boomed with fabric production through most of its history. "When I first started here in 1993, we were on top of the world," recalls Brooke Newberry, technical director at the company. A few years later, globalization and inexpensive offshore labor markets hit the plant hard. "We lost customers to overseas producers," he says.

The plant downsized and changed hands several times before becoming part of Monterey Mills three years ago. The move has turned around the facility, with sales increasing by 71 percent in that time and its workforce growing from 50 to 79 employees. "It was a big deal," Newberry says. Morale also has risen. "I'm excited about the future," says Newberry, who leads the plant's research and development efforts. "Monterey Mills brings a lot of enthusiasm, and that enthusiasm spreads," he says.

Newberry, a Tarboro native, works with Glenoit Fabrics' buyers to create the plant's product. "We allow our customers to get involved with a project to get what they're looking for," he explains. "We incorporate their needs into what we make."

In addition to growing staff and production, the company is now replacing equipment and sharpening the skills of its workforce. "We invest in our people," Birkhoff says. Turnover at the plant is rock bottom. "We have people who have been here 40 to 50 years," he says. As the facility's older workers retire, Glenoit Fabrics is building a next-generation workforce.

In modernizing its production equipment and workforce skills, the company is turning to educational and community partners for assistance. With grants from Rocky Mount-based Turning Point Workforce

Development Board, for example, Glenoit Fabrics is able to offer on-the-job training to potential employees prior to their permanent hiring. Edgecombe Community College (ECC) conducts workforce screening, safety training, and computer literacy classes in support of Glenoit Fabrics' growth strategy.

"They're one of our customized training clients," says George Anderson with the Business and Industry Solutions Division at ECC. The college is about a year into its current program of support for Glenoit Fabrics. Training services come at no cost to the company or its employees. "They're a standout," Anderson says of the company.

As important, ECC also hooked up Glenoit Fabrics with specialized expertise offered by the Manufacturing Solutions Center, a unit of the N.C. Community College System that is a unique product development and testing resource for today's textile producers. "The center has been extremely helpful to us," says Birkhoff. "They're closely connected in the textile space." The College of Textiles at N.C. State University has also been a key partner, supplying the company with student interns and talented new-hires, as well as project direction. "We have a good relationship with everyone in that department," Birkhoff says.

Closer to home, Glenoit Fabrics enjoys support from local leaders. The Town of Tarboro has assisted in a number of electrical projects for the company to lower electricity costs. Assistance from the Carolina Gateways Partnership was central to the company as it made and maintained connections in the area. "With them, it's been more about networking and relationship-building," says Birkhoff, who stays in touch with CRP leaders as the company's growth plans call for additional physical plant, utility and human resource capacity.

As part of North America's largest sliver knitter, Glenoit Fabrics' Tarboro operations are poised for continued transformation as new markets, products and technologies yield exciting possibilities. Birkhoff is confident that the company can outperform Asian textile producers whose business models rely on cheap labor. "Chinese competitors can't match our reliability or quality," he says.



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