

# Flash Sports Inc. (Flashed Climbing)

- Calgary, Alberta ■ **Walson Tai, President** ■ Founded company at age 22 (1994)
- Employees: 5 full time, 2 part time ■ Exporting since 1999 ■ Export sales: 31%
- Export markets: United States and Japan

**W**alson Tai's success in the export world is no real surprise. For Tai, exporting is like exploring – both require careful research before forging ahead into new territory. And exploring new territory is what this sport climber loves to do. Exploration, of course, can take you to places you weren't planning to go. In 2000, Tai went looking for U.S. distributors for his climbing gear company at North America's largest outdoor retailer trade show. He came away with a one-year exclusive contract with a Japanese distributor – and an unexpected new market that has substantially contributed to the quadrupling of Flash Sports Inc.'s revenues in the last year.

goes only to a height that would not produce injury if a fall were sustained. The bouldering mats, innovatively designed to double as a backpack, provide for safe landings. With its unique products, Flashed Climbing is creating a niche for itself in the fastest-growing segment of

## Flash Sports is ...

a manufacturer of clothing and equipment for sport climbing. Flash Sports – more commonly called Flashed Climbing – specializes in a quick-drying chalk and crash mats for bouldering, a form of rock climbing done without ropes, in which the climber

the sport climbing market.  
**Starting to Climb**  
 An avid rock climber since he was 15, Tai in his late teens developed and began selling an innovative chalk to fund the travel expenses for his climbing habit. As sport climbing grew in popularity, so did Tai's sales. In

Program for Export Market Development (PEMD) got Flashed Climbing to its second Outdoor Retailer trade show, in Salt Lake City, in summer 2001.

"When we went searching for government assistance to get into exports, we thought we were going to be dealing with a bureaucracy, but that wasn't the case at all. As soon as I walked into the International Trade Centre in Calgary, the commercial officers were all super keen to help us. PEMD opened up a lot of doors for us; we got three more Japanese distributors from the show. As a Canadian manufacturer with products that have great export potential, I realize we fit that program to a 'T.' We will most definitely apply for it again."

**"Exporting is like exploring a new climb. I research the guidebook, talk to other people who have done the route, find out as much as I can before I climb. Exporting is pretty much the same, which is why I enjoy my job so much."**

1995, Tai and his wife Rhonda incorporated the company, and Tai began door-to-door sales in western Canada. It was his development of the bouldering mat in 1998, and subsequent interest from U.S. retailers through his Web site, that opened Tai's eyes to his products' export potential. He left the Climbing Centre, which he and Rhonda also co-own and Rhonda still runs, and went to work full-time for Flashed Climbing.

## Exploration – with PEMD Help

Flashed Climbing's export strategy is to exhibit at trade shows in the U.S. – its target market – in order to find U.S. distributors and retailers. Assistance from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade's

## Surprise Destination: Japan

"Quite honestly," says Tai, of his surprise success with Japanese distributors, "we didn't know about Japan. We're finding that the Japanese distributors are always willing to bring that next new hip product from North America. We didn't realize there was that much potential." From the first Japanese order, that "potential" translated into 40% of Flashed Climbing's sales in 2000.

As for distribution, Tai now realizes that going from exclusive to open distribution, as he did, was not the best way to maximize exports in Japan. "We kind of did it backwards. Having open distribution gets your product across the country faster because, as we discovered,

certain distributors cover certain territories. Now that we're known in that market, now we're ready to go exclusive."

## Biggest Boulder

Tai's biggest challenge is finding the right distribution networks. "There are lots of distributors, but we want to find the ones that understand the bouldering market and our company's growth potential."

Obtaining financing is another big hurdle. Tai has so far been unsuccessful with the chartered banks. Flash Sports is financed one-third from the Tais' second company, the Climbing Centre, one-third from the couple's savings, and one-third from private investors.

## "Climbing" Strategy

Motivated as he is by love for both his hobby and his hobby-related business, Tai is not only finding his markets, he's creating them, encouraging others to take up the sport – something he calls 'educating' his potential market.

Flashed Climbing also sponsors a climbing team whose members act as an informal sales force for the company, wearing its gear, giving it exposure, and promoting it to retailers close to climbing competitions. "We call them our ambassadors."

## Motivating Advice

"The most important thing is motivation, and that is derived from loving what you do."

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# Cormier Brothers Fisheries Ltd.

- Cap-Pele, New Brunswick
- Ricky and Timmy Cormier, Co-owners

It isn't easy making a living in the east-coast fishing industry these days. But Ricky and Timmy Cormier have netted themselves a niche as fish processors in Cap-Pele, New Brunswick – a region that produces 95% of the world's smoked fish. The brothers established **Cormier Brothers Fisheries Ltd.** in 1999, when Ricky was 28 and Timmy 25. Exports are key to their success: 90% of Cormier Brothers' revenues come from exports of its smoked herring and salted mackerel to the United States, the Dominican Republic and the Republic of Haiti.

The brothers come from a fishing family, but they didn't know anything about fish processing – or exporting. Not that they let it stop them. They hired experienced workers to help them learn the ropes of fish processing. As for finding agents and distributors, other local companies and the federal and New Brunswick governments have been there to assist. The distributor for Haiti, for example, came from a list of local fish buyers provided by the Canadian Embassy in Port-au-Prince.

Exports, says Timmy, are the way to go. "We're still working on finding new markets through the Canadian embassies, and developing new products. To succeed you have to keep expanding and creating new products. And," he adds, "never give up."

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# Gladu Tools Inc.

- Marieville, Quebec ■ Jean Gladu Jr., President

Inheriting the family business might seem like having your career handed to you on a silver platter. But when you're just 22 years old, and the family business is Canada's leading manufacturer of custom-made tools for the woodworking industry, employing 144 people, and you find yourself in charge years before you're expecting to – well, then the challenges are perhaps even more daunting than those of most young entrepreneurs. Becoming the president of **Gladu Tools** after his father's sudden death in 1996, Jean Gladu Jr. knew that any decisions he made would be big mistakes that could kill the company – or take it to a new level of success.

His advice from the lessons he learned in his first few years at the helm of the Marieville, Quebec-based company, which exports 50% of its tools to the United States and now has almost triple the number of employees, are valuable for any young entrepreneur:

"Don't be shy to surround yourself with the best in their field, even if they're better than you are. The stronger your team is, the greater your success will be."

"If you have an idea or a project, make sure you're ready before you act. Don't rush your decisions. That's what I learned the most: to plan more."

"Adapt yourself to your market. The management you put in charge of an area should be local management. We have an office in Texas, and it's managed by Texans. They know what we want to achieve at Gladu, but they can also make sure it's going to work in that region."

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