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A cool way to sit

Watertown firm teams with ESPN host to create cooler

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WATERTOWN - Evo Design is working to help make ESPN's Mike Golic the George Foreman of tailgating.

Foreman is known as much for hawking his trademark grill as he is for being a two-time world heavyweight champion boxer. Golic, meanwhile, is a former NFL defensive lineman who co-hosts with Mike Greenberg the popular "Mike & Mike in the Morning" show, broadcast weekdays on ESPN Radio and simulcast on cable on ESPN2.

Evo Design, at 1369 Main St., is a product design consulting firm with a long client list resembling a who's who of national firms - including Cuisinart, Hasbro, Timex, and even the U.S. Army. The firm, which opened in 1997, is working with Golic and his 25-year-old son Jake to develop a line of innovative coolers for tailgating enthusiasts.

The Golics, along with designers at Evo, recently received a U.S. patent for the first Golic Cooler, which features two seats on the lid but still allows access to the contents chilling inside through side openings.

Aaron Szymanski, Evo Design's president, said Jake Golic - who played football and majored in graphic design at the University of Notre Dame, his father's alma mater - developed the idea a few years ago and built a prototype out of wood. He had input from his father and siblings - older brother Mike Jr., a Notre Dame grad and NFL offensive lineman, and younger sister Sydney, who is on the swim team at Notre Dame.

Jake and his dad brought the idea to the Hartford offices of Cantor Colburn, an intellectual property law firm with a national clientele that include IBM and Samsung.

Michael A. Cantor, co-managing partner of the firm, said he met with the Golics because he's a longtime fan of "Mike & Mike." "I myself was a little star-struck," he admitted.

Cantor agreed to work with them, but decided they "needed some professional help to fully flesh out the idea and come up with variations." So they initiated a search for a design firm.

"There was no need to go to New York or Boston; I felt we could use a more local firm," Cantor said. That had extra appeal for him because he also chairs the board of directors for Connecticut Innovations Inc., the state's quasi-public venture capital fund.

After interviewing "three or four" firms, they settled on Evo Design, he said.

"We were most impressed, quite frankly, in terms of value with Evo," Cantor said. "But like with anything else, the most important thing was the people you're dealing with. ... They were fantastic, all of them, from management to the designers themselves."

Szymanski said his firm is small, with just 13 employees, including six designers.

"Mike's son had done some ... concept work, and we built on that," he said. "We took it and ran with it in a bunch of different directions."

The result was not just one cooler, but the potential for a line of coolers. Cantor convened a focus group of 15 people who didn't know the Golics were involved to review the first design, and the result determined "the level of interest in the product was high," Szymanski said.

"We envision a Golic brand of tailgating products; not just coolers, but a stove, an awning ...," Cantor said.

BOTH SZYMANSKI AND CANTOR AGREE that the Golic family, which also includes Mike's wife Christine, has what it takes to succeed.

"The thing that made the Foreman grill so good is, it wasn't fake," Szymanski said of the boxer's sincerity. "You can tell with these kinds of products if it's integral to the personality. For the Golics, tailgating is a family thing for them. It's a way for them to connect."

It was also obvious, he said, that Mike Golic, who lives with his family in Avon, wasn't just looking to put his name on something to make a quick buck. Cantor agreed, saying the proof is that the Golics share the first patent with Evo designers.

"The fact that Mike and Jake are both listed as inventors is a significant issue," he said. "To list someone as an inventor is based on legal fact-finding. I watched as they participated in the brainstorming session, and they absolutely contributed."

"These guys really wanted to change the cooler so it was made to tailgate," Szymanski said. "They got into it the right way. They want to make a product that provides a better experience."

That will take some more time. Cantor arranged presentations to major cooler manufacturers - including Coleman, Igloo and Wal-mart - but said there are still issues to be ironed out, including finding money to invest in re-tooling the manufacturing process.

"One thing we found about a cooler is there is a large initial capitalization with the tooling," Cantor said. "It's not inexpensive to make a cooler."

He estimated it could be as much as two years before the Golic Cooler hits the market.

Szymanski said Evo Design won't get any royalties from Golic products that sell, but is all in on working with the ESPN radio host. "We want it to be a brand that becomes bigger than Coleman."

Becoming bigger than George Foreman would really be something.

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