



CNC machine operator Jimmy Spoto sets up a Ganesh CNC 610 gang tool lathe, Radflo's latest purchase.

## Absorbing Business Shocks

***A South African Shock Absorber Manufacturer  
Uses Ganesh Equipment to Help Overcome  
Obstacles in the U.S. Business World.***

*Story and photos by  
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**H**ere's the scenario. The year is 1990. Your brother is an off-road racing enthusiast. He invented better, tougher shock absorbers than the ones previously available for the sport. He formed a company, then sold it to another guy. Then he came to America, worked here for 18 months and returned to South Africa.

On his return, you ask, "What are you going to do now?"

He says, "Look, my old company has gone bang. They couldn't make a go of it."

You say, "Well, let's make shock absorbers then."

"That's how we originally got started," says Glenn Classen, owner-CEO of Fountain Valley, CA's 5-year-old Radflo Suspension Technology. "We started out in a garage preparing race cars and making shocks for off-road racers in South Africa. Things went pretty well, so I quit my day job, and we moved into a larger facility. Then we got a military contract to supply hydraulic steering dampers for armored vehicles. Things were going great."

But then the government put a freeze on spending.

"That left us in a fix," Classen says. "Here we were starting at a lot of idle floor space and severely reduced income. Fortunately, the building owners gave us a break and allowed us to sublet the space. We moved back into the garage and focused on making shocks again."

After that, the brothers worked hard and grew the company until they had to move out of the garage again.

"We had a couple of small manual machines by then, and we ran out of space. We moved into a small shop and stayed there for two years, building shocks and improving our

**Radflo Suspension owner Glenn Classen, left, and production manager Ron Reid discuss the company's production needs for the day. Machine behind them is a Ganesh GT-2050 CNC lathe.**

designs until my brother decided to immigrate to Australia," Classen says. "He sold his share of the business to my wife's cousin. That left me with a decision to make, what to do with the company. Do we close it or try to grow it?"

Classen chose what he considered to be the best alternative. He would move the business to the heart of off-road racing—the United States.

"I found a guy here in the California who knew my brother," he says, "so I asked him if he was interested in setting up the business for us. He was very interested, but after a while it became clear that he wasn't up to the task of getting it going. That left it up to me. In October 2004 I decided to come here and do the startup myself. Uprooting the whole family was a pretty tough sell to my wife, but she finally agreed. The plan was for us to be here about two years, and then my contact could run it after that. We arrived in California in March 2005, and have been here ever since."

## **Bumps in the Road**

As it turned out, things were not as easy as Classen had hoped.

"Our first problem was to show the government that we hadn't come just on a whim, that we were legitimate," he recalls. "We had to put money into the business and do a real startup, which was fine, since that was our goal. We looked at moving our equipment here, but that was too expensive, so we had to use outside vendors. A friend introduced me to Ron Reid, who is currently our production manager. Ron had just left his previous job, and was looking for new work. Finding Ron was my first real stroke of luck."

The next bump in the road for Classen was finding a way to buy materials in small quantities.

"There were lots of suppliers, of course," he says, "but they didn't seem to want to deal with a small business. They wanted us to buy everything in large quantities to get any kind of price break. The problem was we were just starting out, and I didn't know what my market was. It didn't make sense to buy a lot of material in advance."

Classen solved that one by going on line to a resource for finding people to do machining.

"I published all my requirements on the site and got a whole bunch of quotes," he says. "That solved the problem, because the vendors also furnished the materials."

## **Setting Up Shop**

On July 1, 2005 Classen and Reid moved into a small shop a mile from the current 5,000 sq ft facility.

"We had a manual mill, a manual lathe and three desks," he recalls. "That was it. But the worst of it was I didn't have any customers. We were sitting there with expenses and no customers."

**CNC operator Juan Jimenez at Radflo's Ganesh VMC 2818 mill, which features double-anchored ball screws, Fanuc servo motors and drives, automatic counter balance, and chip wash.**



## **Marketing, the Biggest Bump**

Determined to bring in customers, but tight on budget, Classen struggled to find a way to reach his customers.

"Frankly, in the beginning we sat around the whole day without the phone ringing," he says. "We were the new kids on the block, and no one had ever heard of us. No one wanted to be the guinea pig to try a new product. And besides, the off-road shock absorber market was really owned by two big companies. There wasn't any room for us, so I decided to try another aspect of off-road racing, which was rock crawling, and that has paid off."

Not having a budget for promotion, Radflo decided to go where his customers were.

"We started going to the forums people visited," he says. "We got our products on some of the vehicles and more and more people were beginning to see our product out there. People started to talk about them, telling others about our quality. Plus, I now go to five or six trade shows a year and we advertise in magazines when they feature our kinds of products. The result is that we think we'll break even, maybe even make a profit this year."

## **Going In-House**

In May 2007 Radflo moved to its current 5,000 sq ft location. Today the company has 6 employees and operates 5 Ganesh CNC machines.



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**Operator Ryan Evelo prepares to run parts on one of two Ganesh GT-2050 CNC lathes owned by Radflo Suspension Technology. In the background is a GT-2040 machine. Both machines feature Fagor 8040 conversational controls.**

“We finally grew to a point where it was more economical to build some of the more expensive parts ourselves,” Classen explains. “So I asked Ron Reid to write a specification for the kinds of equipment we should buy. He did that and we went looking for machines to fit his spec. That turned out to be Ganesh.”

What kinds of requirements did Reid specify?

“Price was a big one,” Classen says, “but we also needed equipment that could give us precision as well. We produce parts with tolerances in the range of  $\pm 0.001$ ”. We needed reliable equipment, plus, we needed a local supplier who could give us fast service if and when we needed it. In a nutshell, I guess you could say we were looking for a lot of bang for the buck.”

Classen says he found the Ganesh machines by turning again to the internet.

“When I found them, I showed them to Ron,” he says. “I asked him, ‘Have you ever heard of this company?’ He said, ‘No, never.’ Still, they sounded good, so I sent them an email asking for a quotes. They responded promptly, and in 2006 we bought the first one, a model VMC-2818 lathe, which has been a real workhorse for us ever since.”

Subsequently Radflo purchased four more Ganesh ma-

chines, one GT-2240 and two GT-2050 CNC lathes. The last purchase a year ago was a Ganesh gang tool CNC 610 lathe with an Anilam control. The other machines have Fagor conversational controls on them.

“At first Ron was uncertain about the Fagor controls,” Classen says, “but in no time he came to like them, because they are very easy to learn and they came with software that allowed connection from a PC to the machines via RS232. Actually, we’ve never really had a bump in the road with the Ganesh machines.”

### **Looking to the Future**

With his fledgling manufacturing company set to break even this year or perhaps show a profit, what’s next for Classen?

“We plan to stick with shocks,” he says, “including the off-road racing market. Right now, we’re doing quite well building shocks for rock crawlers and lifted truck applications. Our next step will be to expand into the motorcycle market, which is huge. But, that won’t be easy either. Still, once people find out how good our shocks are, they keep coming back. I expect that’s what will happen in the motorcycle market, as well.” ■