Italy-based Steltronic has a warehouse in California to serve its North American customers. The company is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year. Page 26.

Sequoia Pro Bowl in Columbus, Ohio, completed construction of a new outdoor patio space during Ohio's mandated closure of public meeting places. Business News, page 8.

A Stellar Milestone

In 2020, Steltronic is marking 40 years of providing automatic scoring systems.

By Gianmarc Manzione

Brescia in northern Italy's Lombardy region is no stranger to technological innovation. The area's abundance of spruce and maple trees helped give rise to a generation of master luthiers renowned for their masterful violin making as the instrument's popularity soared during the Renaissance.

If there is any particular song ringing in the ears of Steltronic President Roberto Simeone 500 years later, it may well be Kool & The Gang's "Celebration." The Brescia-based company Simeone founded with brothers Claudio and Mario in 1980 is observing its 40th anniversary in 2020.

The brothers Simeone got the company off the ground four decades ago with just a single employee at the time, Claudia Ghidini. You can still find her working for Steltronic today, holding down the warehouse where she handles goods logistics and production lots. Can you say "employee loyalty"?

Steltronic, a name invented by Roberto from a combination of the words "Simeone Technology Electronic," has been owned solely by Roberto since 2000. Over the entirety of his 40 years of ownership in the company, Steltronic's evolution has been dramatic.

Known today for its core business, which is automatic scoring systems for bowling centers, Steltronic's earliest endeavors included cash controls in bowling centers and making the chassis for 82-70 pinsetters. But

Roberto says that, "It has always been my decision to stay out of bowling pinsetters and machinery, other than electronically controlling the pinsetters' cycle through microprocessor-controlled devices."

By 1985, Steltronic made its first splash in the automatic scoring market and has not looked back. The

Roberto Simeone founded Steltronic with his brothers Claudio and Mario 40 years ago, and continues to focus on just one product: automatic scoring systems.

Disk Operating System (DOS)-based Steltronic Automatic Scoring, or SAS, offered a remarkably complete plate of functionalities for the time, including statistics, reporting, time games, tournament functionality, magnetic cards, and a dynamic spare-maker animation function that demon-

strated for bowlers how to pick up the spare they'd left. Commonplace now; virtually unheard of then.

Sure, the graphics were, compared to today's automatic scoring market, primitive, offering fixed-image documentation of strikes, spares, fouls and gutters. But the product's popularity was proven when its sales enabled Steltronic to add 10 new technicians to its staff and grow its market share in Europe by 50 percent in fewer than five years. Clearly, Steltronic was on to something — something that would keep it in the game for decades to come.

That system also proved pioneering in at least one other regard: the use of cameras and digitalizing equipment to detect pins.

"It was not an easy task for that time, believe me," Roberto explains. "It was a real camera — one designed for industrial use rather than for the consumer — which was placed in front of each individual lane's pinsetter. We were using an 8088 PC with a digitalizing board loaded with old RAM, which we were purchasing at a crazy price, along with other I/O (input-output) boards we designed ourselves, for synchronizing the cycle signals.

"We could actually grab various pictures of the pin status, compare them, and, with the aid of sophisticated software designed by Claudio, detect every pin around its nominal position."

Roberto says "nominal position" because this enterprise had to take into account some pesky variables,

such as pinsetters not always placing the pins precisely, pins that might be dirty or scratched, and inconsistent lighting at the pindeck.

Also, Roberto explains, "The pins can swing for seconds and then, randomly, stay up or fall."

Here's one more testament to the success of the SAS: Out of the 22,000 scoring systems Steltronic currently has installed around the world, about 1,000 of them are the old SAS.

"This year, for example, we will be upgrading three centers in Italy and two others in European countries, all of which still are using the SAS," Roberto says. "One is a pretty nice 20-laner."

A lot has been added to the range of offerings in Steltronic's automatic scoring systems between then and now. Touch screens. Compatibility with graphically sophisticated flat-screen overhead monitors. Credit-card integration. Even a handy way of tracking rental-shoe stats that essentially enables the scoring system to conduct a little espionage.

"Our ShoeVision system detects shoe rental out on the actual bowling lanes so that the proprietors can track shoe rental," says Jim Osdale, who has owned Steltronic's North American arm since 2014 and had been working for Steltronic since 2000 prior to that. "One of the biggest concerns for proprietors is the theft of shoe-rental money. So, the system was designed to let the proprietor know, 'Hey, I saw 200 shoe rentals out on the lanes last night; how come I only have 120 of them rung up in the system?'"

The broadening of Steltronic's technological capabilities since the days of DOS enabled the company to establish fruitful partnerships with the United States Bowling Congress, whose events Steltronic equipped with its automatic scoring systems between 2008 and 2017, and US Bowling, with whom Steltronic partnered for five years from 2006 through 2010.

Jim Osdale, who has owned Steltronic's North American arm since 2014, says the company gets virtually all of its ideas by listening to proprietors.

For Osdale, the credit for Steltronic's innovation over the decades goes largely to the proprietors the company's products serve. Proprietors, it has turned out, are the company's idea bank.

"The proprietors and the people who have used our system are the ones who have developed this system," Osdale says. "They are the ones who said, 'Hey, I'd like it to do this and that, and how about this and how about that?' So, all of the tips that they have given us have truly made this system what it is today."

One thing Osdale has learned as he has fine-tuned and sold Steltronic scoring systems throughout the U.S.

is that one size does not fit all — at least, not in the USA.

"The way you do it in New York or Connecticut certainly is not the way you do it in Kansas," Osdale explains. "There are so many different ways to sell bowling in different parts of the country. We have adapted and made all of our software work in all of these different environments, because I have gone out and done many training sessions, and sometimes the customer will say, 'Why would you do it like that?'"

In some parts of the country, for instance, Osdale encountered different attitudes about when to take payment for bowling and how to charge for it. In some areas it was customary to prepay for bowling; in others, the mere suggestion of such a thing was a shock. Some parts of the country charged per person for lanes rented by the hour, others a flat fee for a group per hour regardless of the number of people involved. Steltronic's systems therefore endeavored to accommodate a range of state and region-specific scenarios based on Osdale's interactions with customers.

That, Osdale says, has been the Steltronic way for years. It is a big reason why the company is celebrating 40 years of existence in 2020 — an ability to be nimble and adaptive thanks to never trying to broaden their enterprise beyond what it does best.

"We only do automatic scoring," Osdale says. "We don't sell bowling balls and pins and lanes and all that stuff, so we can focus squarely on the software that runs this system."

It may not be violin making, but Steltronic's legacy is one every bit as steeped in ingenuity as were those luthiers for which its Italian home base is famous.