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Eye on China SPECIAL REPORT

Badminton proves a lucrative game

By CNN's James MacDonald in Guangzhou
 Wednesday, May 18, 2005 Posted: 0529 GMT (1329 HKT)

(CNN) -- If you've ever played badminton, chances are you've used the product that made Anthony Chau a wealthy man -- the humble shuttlecock.

His company, DH (Double Happiness), is the world's largest maker of shuttlecocks, churning out about 45 million a year for brands such as Wilson, Prince and RSL.

Chau originally hadn't planned to enter into such a venture.

"I was working in a bank. After about three or four months, I found the work terribly tedious and boring, so I thought I must change my profession," Chau says.

In 1978 he did just that, finding his way into a business with very little competition.

Back then, most shuttlecocks were made in Europe, but from his Hong Kong home, Chau saw a potential goldmine beyond the border into China.

Equally important, China has feathers -- a standard ingredient for the production of shuttlecocks.

Goose is a popular dish in many parts of China, which gave DH access to a seemingly endless supply of the raw materials.

Quality control

But producing the perfect shuttlecock isn't easy.



DH is the world's largest maker of shuttlecocks.

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GDP GROWTH

- 2001: 7.3 percent
- 2002: 8.0 percent
- 2003: 9.3 percent
- 2004: 9.5 percent
- 2005: 8.0 percent (est.)

Source: IMF

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In DH's factory in the city of Guangzhou in Guangdong province, shuttlecocks fly around the room hour after hour, each flight path monitored carefully.

DH's marketing director Duncan Chau, who's Anthony's son, says quality control is critical to the company maintaining its reputation.

"That's why the company has to constantly improve its equipment, technology and process -- from selecting the feathers, to inserting them in the cork, to tying and glueing the shuttle," he says.

Ultimately, the completed shuttlecocks end up in the factory's testing room for final scrutiny. They're fired out of machines to see how far they'll fly, ensuring each one is game ready.

But no amount of testing or quality control can give a shuttlecock a limitless life. In a high intensity game, the shuttles take a pounding.

This is a bonus for DH, as shuttlecocks need to be continually replaced -- creating an on-going demand for the product.


Contributing to this demand is the fact that the sport of badminton is growing, especially in Asia.

"In my city Guangzhou, more and more people are playing badminton. And not just in the city. This sport has reached outside to the whole world," a player of the game enthuses.

To keep up with demand, DH is about to open a new feather processing plant, also in China.

"People always thought that the badminton shuttlecock business is very small, but actually it's a million-dollar business. They don't realize that," Chau says.

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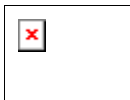
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