If the shoe fits!

Taking on the role of chief executive of canmaking equipment manufacturer Stolle Machinery, Michael Larson is dedicated to building on the achievements of the company. ***James Cook*** *hears his story*

When Michael Larson stepped up from global operations chief to succeed Gus Reall as chief executive of Stolle Machinery in October 2024, he was well aware of the challenge facing him. He tells *The Canmaker*: "They're tough shoes to fill, for sure. I'm not sure anyone can fill them."

Making a huge impact, Reall had been with the US-based manufacturer of two-piece can and end-making machinery for 36 years, joining from Sequa Can Machinery – where he was chief executive – when it merged with Stolle in 2004, and leading the firm since 2011 when it was acquired by Japanese packaging manufacturer Toyo Seikan. He'd overseen major growth at Stolle, including the launch of a service centre in Foshan, China, in 2018 and the opening of a 2,800 sqm R&D facility near Stolle's Colorado headquarters in 2021.

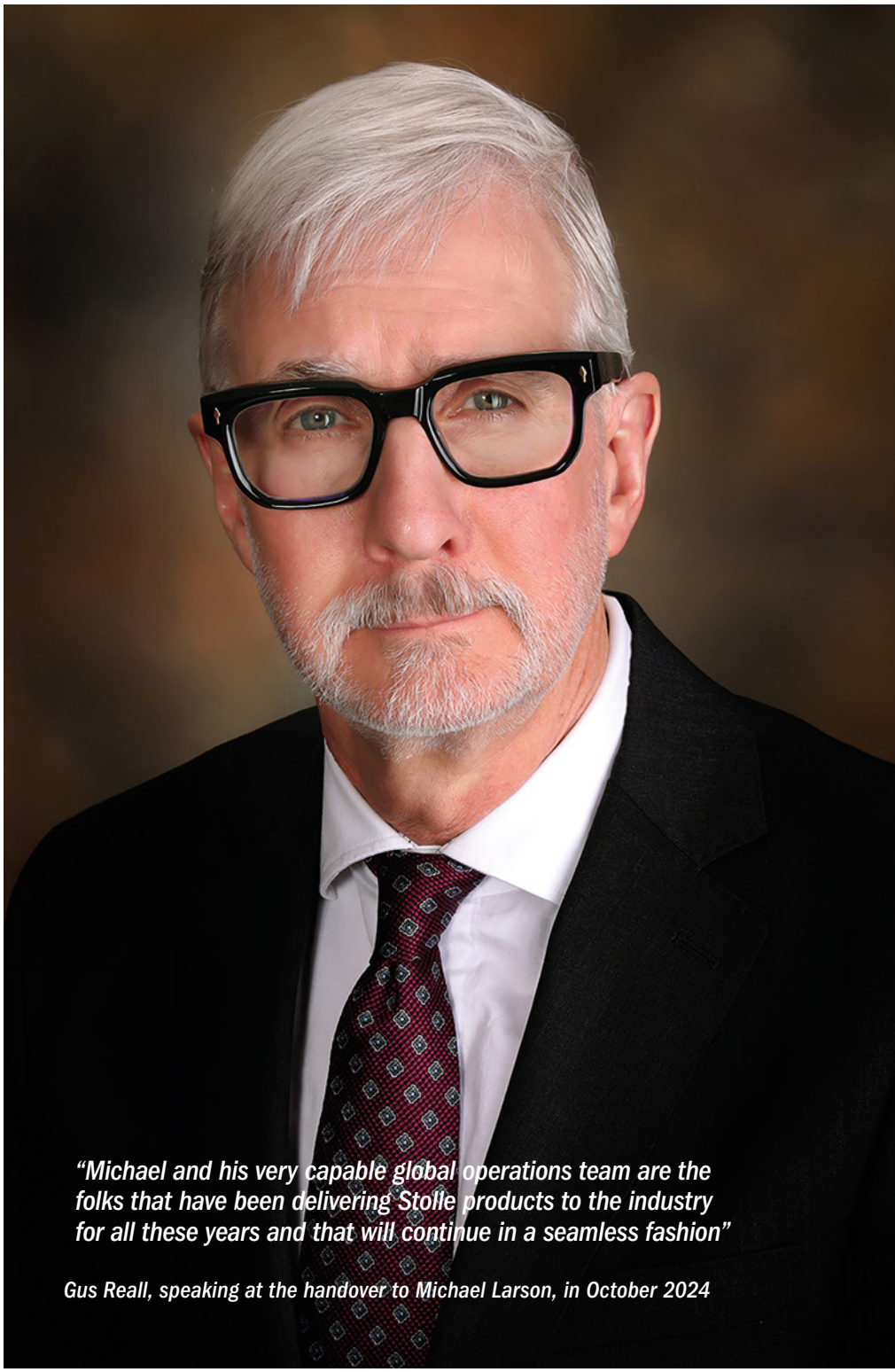
However, Reall was very confident about passing the baton onto his colleague, stating in October: "Stolle Machinery is in good hands.

"Michael and his very capable global operations team are the folks that have been delivering Stolle products to the industry for all these years and that will continue in a seamless fashion," he said at the time of the handover.

Larson has been building on that legacy and intends to stick to the core of what Stolle is about.

"We don't plan on changing much," he assures. "Naturally, there will be some tweaks because of the course of the business, but what Mr. Reall and Toyo Seikan have given us will remain."

Larson adds: "The same great people are here today. So, not much has changed since Gus' departure because it's always the people that create [our customer]



"Michael and his very capable global operations team are the folks that have been delivering Stolle products to the industry for all these years and that will continue in a seamless fashion"

Gus Reall, speaking at the handover to Michael Larson, in October 2024

relationships and make Stolle strong."

Playing his own part in the company's success, Larson has been at the company for 18 years. He started out as general manager of the conversion equipment facility in Sidney, Ohio, before moving from plant to plant across several global business segments, including systems, original equipment (OE), vertical integration of tooling, and global parts and service (GPS).

Before joining Stolle, Larson's engineering background was primarily focused in engineer-to-order manufacturing across many disciplines. He had acquired a degree in Industrial Engineering, an MBA and Executive MBA, and certifications in Lean Manufacturing. So when a recruiter called him, it was clear canmaking was a great fit. "Just the unique nature of this business is exciting," recalls Larson. "I like the speed, precision and global reach, so it's been a wonderful experience the last 18 years."

Changing times

Larson has enjoyed his time in the industry, but admits recent times have been more challenging for Stolle. He tells *The Canmaker* 2022 and 2023 were great years for the company – and the wider market – but 2024 was difficult. So, the main challenge in 2025 and forward is reaching out to end users to learn their expectations and planning for when growth will return.

"The downturn really occurred in 2022," explains Larson. "We've been able to do well throughout 2022 and 2023, but 2024 has been a little tough."

However, he anticipates some growth in 2025, and projects 2026 and 2027 will be good years for Stolle and the industry.

"We see growth in systems integration in far-reaching areas of the global economy, including growing economies in Africa, some areas in India and some of our traditional space. There are green shoots in other areas of the market showing promise, and we see some growth in what we call metal converters, but most growth is in systems integration," he adds.

Global team

Larson is also looking forward to "taking care of customers and keeping the great global team that we have in place". Stolle serves customers in 16 locations spread across four continents, so neither task will be easy. However, the company is highly astute at managing a global workforce.

"The strength of Stolle is that we respect the regions and cultures, and we allow individual entities to manage their particular regions," explains its chief executive. "We have manufacturing facilities worldwide and the ability to cross-manufacture our parts and pieces, from OE to global parts, that's a significant strength.

"Plus, all customers are important, even though there's different dynamics. The objective is to see that growth and do what our customers expect us to do and take care of them," he adds.

Changing perceptions

Larson has witnessed considerable change, none more so than changing customer perceptions of metal packaging and the beverage can.

"How our global customer base views the metal package in terms of size, sustainability and recyclability, and how we go to market in the industry from a Stolle standpoint", are the biggest changes, says Larson. "The global customer base is always changing and is very fluid, and we must adapt to those requirements. Things flow from metal changes to increased speed, to change in packages, with expectations of a singular alloy and 100% recyclable content.

"There's been a constant change of what our end users and the consumers want, which makes it exciting because there's different equipment, packages and tooling. That's what makes the industry fun," he adds.

Despite working his way up to chief executive over this period, Larson remains humble and generous regarding his biggest achievement.

"I only achieve big things when the people around me are successful, so the assignment of the seat [chief executive] was only because of everybody else that supported me and did an amazing job growing the company," he says. "So, I can't say I have one large achievement. For me, life is like a race. It's one lap at a time and you adjust. You're constantly adjusting to the market, the customers, the employees, and all the rest, until you win.

"I don't think there's been any singular thing that I've done. I've just been fortunate enough to be in the right spot at the right time to work with some really great people in a very niche and famous industry, learn the business and contribute where I can," he smiles.