

The Man Behind Ergoman

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Bernard Berry looks like a super hero.

If you were to picture what a super-human crime fighter might look like, Berry's 6-foot-7, 290 pound, 7 percent body fat frame might be exactly what pops into your mind.

That's not really a coincidence, though. Berry fell in love with working out because he fell in love with comic books. And the Global Production Center trainer for Toyota Motor Manufacturing, Alabama (TMMAL) has put both to good use.

Berry began drawing when he was 6 years old, right after he became obsessed with the Superman, Batman and Spider-Man comics he picked up in his hometown of Troy, Ala.

“I grew up skinny,” Berry says. “So I wanted to be like the guys in the comics. I would draw them, but then I wanted to model myself after them. That’s how I got into weight lifting.”

Berry turned that love of lifting into a spot on the football team at Alabama A&M, where he played defensive tackle for four years before a car accident cut his career short. But he stayed in the gym – he still works out 10 hours each week at age 43 – and he beams with pride when he tells you his personal record bench press is an astonishing 690 pounds.

In addition to all the working out, Berry kept drawing. And that works out fine for TMMAL team members.

Cast of Characters

In manufacturing, posture and movement are critical for worker health.

So in 2011, TMMAL came up with an idea to use comic book character posters to increase and retain knowledge of ergonomically correct techniques. They enlisted Berry, who presented TMMAL’s leaders with his creation: a tall, muscular super hero named Ergoman. Along with his pals in the Toyota Production Society (TPS, a play on the Toyota Production System), Ergoman battles the Ergomaniacs, a band of evil-doers who each represent one of 10 examples of bad posture noted by workforce improvement experts Humantech.

Ergoman and Berry don’t look much different. But the comic character can depend on cohorts such as Yoko 10, General Protector and General Safety.

It’s worked, too. In the year after posting Ergoman strips around the plant, TMMAL saw a 41 percent increase in ergonomic refresher training test scores and an 85 percent decrease in ergonomic-related first-aid incidents. Four years later, those numbers have held steady.

In the past, Ergoman has taken the form of a serialized story compilation, but now TMMAL is using the characters to create posters highlighting specific areas of concern outside of ergonomic practices, such as safety, quality and environmental practices.

“We tied it in with the training,” Berry says. “We learned that team members were more interested with these characters as opposed to us just trying to explain things.”

Ergoman’s cast of characters has surpassed 30 in the last few years, a testament to the popularity and effectiveness of the program. Ergoman has also made appearances at Bodine Aluminum and at Toyota Motor Manufacturing, Mississippi, and Berry would like to see them used in other Toyota manufacturing plants.

Happy to Help

Before becoming a trainer almost four years ago, Berry worked on the line at TMMAL for nine years. So he’s happy that his creativity can help his coworkers.

“I love doing it,” he says. “I’ve gotten a lot of recognition for it. And as long as people are enjoying it, I’ll do it. You hear people around the plant talking about how the comics helped them. If it can help someone out, that’s a great thing.”

But for a guy who grew up modeling himself after super heroes – and ultimately achieved the physical form of one – Berry insists he is but a mere mortal.

“People ask if I see myself as a super hero. No, but it’s flattering,” he says. “I just enjoy drawing, and if my drawing can keep someone safe, that’s enough for me.”