

Clouds in the
**CRYSTAL
 BALL**

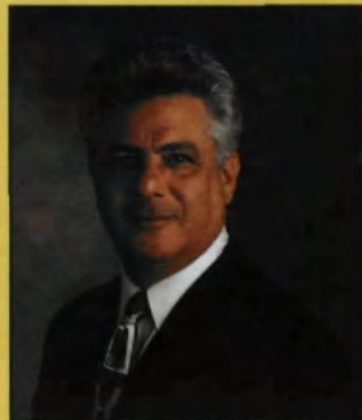
The carnival that is IMTS has come and gone. The aisles have been swept, and all the banners have been taken down. The fanfare of what some call the greatest machine tool show on earth has faded away.

We went to IMTS with the hopes of gaining insight into the health of both the economy and the gear manufacturing industry in America. Prior to the show, economy watchers around the world were getting skittish because of currency gyrations, political controversy and stock market fluctuations. Two months later, there is still much uncertainty. While America seems to be stable, we don't know how long it's going to last. We visited IMTS as much to have our fortune told as we did for the technological marvels of the show itself.

In many ways, IMTS lived up to its hype. It was the biggest IMTS ever. Attendance of 121,764 broke the previous high set in 1996. There were more exhibitors than ever before, filling the newly expanded McCormick Place's 1.4 million square feet to capacity. In addition, we saw the gear industry's latest technology, including 15 new gear machine models on display.

One of the most innovative machines was the new Liebherr-EMAG LCV 40 gear hobbing machine, which is built in a way that appears upside-down to someone who has spent his life around hobbing machines. The workpiece is driven from above, allowing for unobstructed chip removal below. The machine also uses a double work-spindle arrangement for automatic loading and unloading from a conveyor (one spindle is in cutting position while the other exchanges the cut gear for a new blank).

Gleason-Pfauter presented their first joint production line of machines. The GP series expands on the idea of modular machine building that has been used by other machinery manufacturers over the past several years and seems to be the direction of the future. The machines feature a common, modular base that can be equipped for hobbing, shaping or grinding, allowing the gear machine manufacturer a much faster delivery time, easier product planning and lessened inventory costs, which might translate to lower or fixed prices in the future.



CARNIVAL FORTUNE
TELLERS EARN
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BY MAKING
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TIONS SO GENERAL
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I REGRET TO SAY
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MORE ABLE
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CLEAR VISION
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THAN A
SIDESHOW
TAROT READER.

Below: The UG-coated cutting tools from National Broach were one of the many new technologies at IMTS.



We also were pleased to see several technological advancements in cutting tools. Both Pfauter-Maag Cutting Tools and Mitsubishi demonstrated dry cutting with high speed steel hobs rather than the brittle, expensive carbide hobs normally used. Both companies have worked to develop new steel alloys and proprietary coatings to enable dry cutting.

National Broach has come up with a way to save money on tool coating by developing a process that allows the tools to be resharpened without recoating. The new line of UG coated hobs and shaper cutters are coated with multiple layers of titanium nitride and titanium carbide as well as their new proprietary UG coating.

I'm sure you'll see and hear more about these products from our advertisers, for those of you who were unable to attend IMTS.

Despite all the positives that came out of the show, there was still a persistent feeling of uncertainty among the exhibitors. Many were less than enthusiastic about the quality and quantity of the traffic they saw at the show. In fact, the final attendance numbers surprised some who thought numbers might have been down by as much as 20-25%. All the exhibitors went home with a handful of sales leads, but nearly everyone's attitude was "let's wait and see if any of these pan out."

Immediate sales at a show like IMTS are hard to come by. But one success story we heard came from Star Cutter Co., who sold a CNC sharpening machine right off the show floor and who is currently negotiating the sale of a CNC automatic broach sharpener as a direct result of a contact made at the show.

Carnival fortune tellers earn their livings by making predictions that are bound to come true. The good ones make their predictions so general that any number of eventualities could prove them right. I regret to say that after visiting the show, I'm no more able to give you a clear vision of the future than a sideshow tarot reader.

We saw and heard much at IMTS to give us an optimistic outlook on our industry's chances for the next couple of years. But at the same time, the caution evident before the show doesn't seem to have gone away.

Caution isn't necessarily bad. When things are going well, we have more to look out for. The stakes are higher. In economic times like these, it's hard to ignore the headlines. But we know from our sources that sales of gear cutting tools are still very strong. We also know that at least one gear machine tool manufacturer has already sold nearly to capacity for 1999, and another company is raising its build forecast for '99 by 20%. This tells me that a lot of teeth are still being cut in America and that, for at least the near future, the American gear industry seems solid.

Michael Goldstein,
Publisher and Editor-in-Chief