

## LOCAL NEWS

## Strong sales boost Ross profit 26% in quarter

Ross Stores said Tuesday that its profit jumped 26 percent in the latest quarter as sales climbed.

The Newark discount retailer reported earnings of \$73.7 million, or 48 cents a share, for the fiscal fourth quarter ended Jan. 31.

That compares with the previous year's \$58.7 million, or 37 cents a share.

The company had 568 stores at the end of the quarter, up from 507 stores a year earlier.

Ross expects to open 70 namesake stores in 2004 and the first 10 of its new chain of discount stores in the second half of the year. Those stores, called DD's Discounts, will target low-income families.

For the full 2003 fiscal year, Ross said its net income rose to \$228.1 million, or \$1.47 a share, from \$201.2 million, or \$1.26 a share, in 2002.

Shares of Ross closed Tuesday at \$28.90, up 55 cents, on Nasdaq.

## NATIONAL NEWS

## Residential building down for 2nd straight month

The number of housing projects commenced by builders declined for the second straight month in February as bad weather in some parts of the country forced construction delays.

The Commerce Department reported Tuesday that the number of residential buildings under way fell to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 1.86 million units in February, a 4 percent decrease from the previous month.

Although economists were forecasting a rise in residential construction in February, the level of housing projects in January turned out to be higher — a rate of 1.93 million units started — than first thought, according to revised figures. That made for a smaller decline in activity than reported a month ago.

## BancWest to acquire Community First

BancWest, a subsidiary of France's BNP Paribas, is acquir-

## Ideas & Innovations: Robotic legs Hero strength made here

### EXOSKELETON HELPS WEARER WITH HAULING

By Jon Fortt

Mercury News

It looks like a pair of spidery robot legs and a backpack, strapped to the body of the wearer.

Say hello to Berkeley Lower Extremities Exoskeleton, or BLEEX for short. Science-fiction fans will recognize the concept from movies like "The Matrix Revolutions" and "Transformers: The Movie." Humans climb inside a machine suit and can then perform superhuman feats.

So far, the robotic legs, developed at the University of California-Berkeley, help the wearer to haul about 70 pounds for about three hours, according to Homayoon Kazerooni, director of Berkeley's Robotics and Human Engineering Laboratory. So someone wearing a BLEEX could shoulder a 100-pound backpack and feel like it weighed just 30 pounds. Kazerooni hopes that in a year, BLEEX will handle 120 pounds.

Likely BLEEX-wearers include soldiers, firefighters and



## WHAT'S NEW

■ The Berkeley Lower Extremities Exoskeleton, or BLEEX, was developed by the University of California-Berkeley's Robotics and Human Engineering Laboratory.

■ BLEEX allows the wearer to carry a 70-pound pack for three hours.

■ Likely BLEEX-wearers are soldiers, firefighters and disaster relief workers.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

■ [www.me.berkeley.edu/hel/bleex.htm](http://www.me.berkeley.edu/hel/bleex.htm)

search at Salt Lake City-based Sarcos and Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee. But Kazerooni's team at Berkeley has been more visible since it made a show of its breakthroughs at a DARPA tech symposium last week in Anaheim.

Kazerooni wants to miniaturize parts of BLEEX, boost its weight-bearing capability and extend its endurance.

"Right now my exoskeleton is not fast enough to go with me on reflexes," Kazerooni said. "We can't run with this yet, we can't jump yet, just a regular walk."

But Kazerooni and his team

construction in February, the level of housing projects in January turned out to be higher — a rate of 1.93 million units started — than first thought, according to revised figures. That made for a smaller decline in activity than reported a month ago.

## BancWest to acquire Community First

BancWest, a subsidiary of France's BNP Paribas, is acquiring Community First Bankshares for about \$1.2 billion in cash in a deal that will expand BancWest's business in the Midwest.

Honolulu-based BancWest said Monday that it will pay \$32.25 a share to acquire the Fargo, N.D., parent company of Community First National Bank.

That represents a 15 percent premium over Community First's closing price of \$28 a share Monday in trading on the Nasdaq Stock Market.

All 155 Community First branches will become part of Bank of the West, one of BancWest's principal subsidiaries. This will give Bank of the West a total of 451 branches in 16 states.

## WORLDNEWS

### EU probes possible collusion at Otis subsidiary

United Technologies said Tuesday that some employees at its Otis Elevator subsidiary in Europe may have engaged in illegal anti-competitive conduct.

European Union regulators carried out surprise inspections last week in Belgium, Germany and Luxembourg as part of a probe of activities by elevator companies.

The European Commission said Tuesday that its investigation remains at a preliminary stage, and declined to give further details or to name the companies raided.

### Court appointee outlines Parmalat rescue plan

The court-appointed turnaround expert at Parmalat, the dairy giant engulfed in fraud scandal, outlined a plan Tuesday to rescue the Italian company, proposing slashing the number of brands from 120 to 30 and concentrating on "healthy lifestyle" foods.

The administrator, Enrico Bondi, of Parmalat Finanziaria SpA, presented highlights of the plan to a government-appointed surveillance committee.

The three-year plan envisions Parmalat as "centrally coordinated, a leaner, more competitive and more efficient business whose primary objective will be the creation of value for its shareholders," the company said on its Web site.

"The outline plan aims to position Parmalat as one of the world's leading players in the high added value foods sector, based on products with a strong nutritional and healthy lifestyle focus," the company said.

"Those activities considered non-core will be divested," the Parmalat statement said.

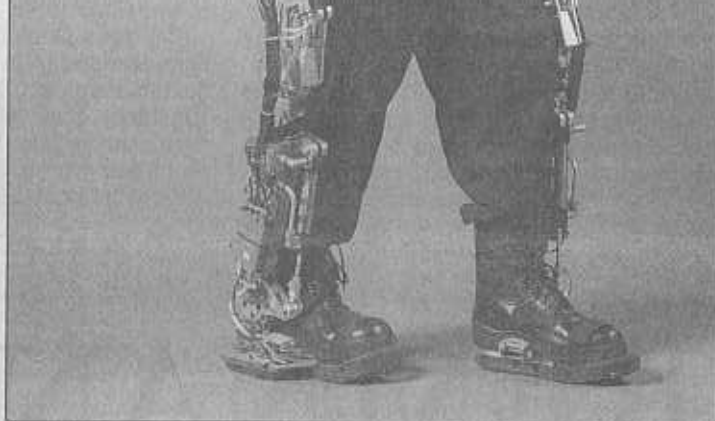
### Gillette to build in Poland, shut 2 British sites

Gillette on Tuesday said it plans to spend about \$148 million to build a plant in Poland as the Boston company shifts manufacturing and distribution jobs from Britain and Germany to

man Engineering Laboratory. So someone wearing a BLEEX could shoulder a 100-pound backpack and feel like it weighed just 30 pounds. Kazerooni hopes that in a year, BLEEX will handle 120 pounds.

Likely BLEEX-wearers include soldiers, firefighters and disaster relief workers — people who haul gear during life-threatening situations.

The project has been funded by Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, DARPA — the same federal agency that financed the early development of the Internet. DARPA also has funded similar re-



SPECIAL TO THE MERCURY NEWS

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charge parts of BLEEX, boost its weight-bearing capability and extend its endurance.

"Right now my exoskeleton is not fast enough to go with me on reflexes," Kazerooni said. "We can't run with this yet, we can't jump yet, just a regular walk."

But Kazerooni and his team are working on it. They have built a contraption they call Pogomatic, which is like a Pogo stick that allows people to bounce without jumping. It could be the beginning of a BLEEX that can run.

Contact Ideas & Innovations at [innovations@mercurynews.com](mailto:innovations@mercurynews.com).

# INDIAN | Final auction to offer office equipment, machines

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Mark Weitz, its president for wholesale and industrial services.

That includes huge robotic welding machines and paint booths that fill the side of an entire room in the factory. There are drill presses, double-end grinders, cold-cut saws and box bailers.

Some machines were never used and had to be unpacked from original boxes, said Phil McArdle, who is managing the auction for Great American.

"This was a quick and dirty way of making a new Indian that sort of didn't respect the heritage of the original company."

— DAVID EDWARDS,  
CYCLE WORLD

McArdle said the auction will appeal to machine-shop owners and tool dealers, but the gradual sale of the remnants of Indian has meant opportunity for others.

Robert Mitchell, a college student from

## FACTORY AUCTION

■ **Where:** 200 E. 10th St., Gilroy. Also, online at [www.greatamerican.com](http://www.greatamerican.com)

■ **When:** Thursday, starting at 10:30 a.m. Public viewing is 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. today and the morning of the sale.

■ **What:** Machines, tools, office equipment. Discounted apparel and some motorcycle parts are on sale on site, but not part of the auction.

■ **Information:** (818) 884-3737 or [www.greatamerican.com](http://www.greatamerican.com) (click current auctions)

the company's final auction "heart breaking." Now, she has a ring-side view as works as a cashier for the liquidators.

She can catch up with fellow ex-employees who drop by out of curiosity to see the sale.

For a few months after the closing, "all the workers were praying somebody would come in and take over and we'd all get our jobs back," she said. Eventually, though, they realized that wasn't going to happen.

Now, she said, some former factory workers have found jobs. Others haven't. Some have moved away from Gilroy.

"It's sad," she said, just before selling a

Indian, born in Springfield, Mass., in 1901, once was America's top motorcycle marque, and for much of its life (through 1953) it was Harley-Davidson's top rival.

The new company, which emerged out of bankruptcy court and started building bikes in 1999, "was a faulty premise to begin with," Edwards said. "And based on that faulty premise, people threw, what, \$145 million at it, which is amazing."

Executives, in announcing the shut-down, said they couldn't secure enough new capital to continue making motorcycles. Indian made and sold about 12,500 bikes between 1999 and 2003.

Critics have complained that Indian had quality problems and that its managers didn't have experience building and selling motorcycles.

The lesson learned, Edwards said, is "it's just a tough business to be in."

Still, he said, he wouldn't be surprised to see another attempt at making Indians "maybe 15, 20 years from now."

"There is magic in the Indian name, magic in the shape of those Indian fenders," he said.

Rider Ray Seidel of Temecula bought an Indian Spirit in 2002. He developed a close relationship with Indian's quality-assurance manager, and since the company closed, he has sent out frequent