At the 10 law firms spotlighted here, it’s all about skill, not size. The lawyers at these litigation shops, all of which have fewer than 51 attorneys, are as clever at practicing on paper as they are at wooing a jury. Many of these lawyers have honed their craft at the biggest and best firms in the nation and have opted, once they’ve gained crucial work experience, for a small-firm career. We’ve highlighted the special strategies and creative approaches they used in 2013 to help set precedent, right wrongs and save the day for the client.

When the U.S. Marshals Service seized the booth of a Chinese tire maker at a Las Vegas trade show and confiscated its contents, it was an unambiguous message from Weisbrod Matteis & Copley: Pay up.

It’s just one example of how lawyers at the Washington D.C. boutique are willing to push the margins. The firm combines years of big-firm experience with a scrappy plaintiff’s perspective to deliver results.

In the tire case, firm lawyers in 2010 won a $26 million jury verdict in U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia—the largest in the state that year—on behalf of 76-year old inventor Jordan Fishman, who designed and sold custom underground mining tires. He alleged that the Chinese company, Shangdong Linglong Tire Co., as well as Dubai-based Al Dobowi Group, stole his designs and sold illegal knock-off tires around the world.

Weisbrod partners August Matteis Jr. and William Copley won at trial and on key points before the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit. The U.S. Supreme Court denied certiorari last year, but the
overseas companies refused to pay the judgment. Undeterred, the Weisbrod team relentlessly found pressure points to compel the defendants to pay.

The fall 2012 trade show seizure was “the first shot across the bow,” Copley said. The contents of Linglong’s booth, which were sold at a sheriff’s auction, weren’t worth much, but it was “hugely embarrassing” for the company, he said.

Over the next year, firm lawyers scoured U.S. Customs and Border Protection records to find distributors in the United States selling Linglong tires and filed multiple garnishment actions. In November, Linglong finally settled, agreeing to pay the majority of the judgment, Matteis said. Opposing counsel Jinshu “John” Zhang, a partner at Edwards Wildman Palmer, said in an email that Weisbrod Matteis & Copley lawyers fought hard. “Even though we were at each other’s throats, a kind of begrudging mutual respect developed over the course of tense negotiations.” Opposing counsel also included Ted Cruz, then a partner at Morgan, Lewis & Bockius and now a U.S. senator from Texas. Weisbrod Matteis & Copley’s clients include big names—Nestle USA Inc., the Carlyle Group and Wells Fargo Bank. Matteis, who started his career at Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom, said that Weisbrod can beat its opponents “on paper,”—and at trial. “We’re not just trying to build settlement pressure,” he said.

Matteis won a key jury verdict last year against State Farm Fire and Casualty Co. for two whistleblowers who alleged the insurer engaged in widespread fraud after Hurricane Katrina by attributing damage to flooding—covered by federal government-backed insurance policies—and not wind. Thousands of additional claims may follow, Matteis said.

—Jenna Greene

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TRIAL TIPS

- The key to winning trials is being yourself. Juries see through insincerity and posturing.
  — August Matteis Jr.
- Never overreach at trial. Always act reasonably and let your opponent do the overreaching.
  — Matteis
- Winning trials is not just about proving your case. You have to make the jury want your client to win.
  — William Copley
- Simple always is more persuasive than complicated.
  — Copley

FIRM FACTS


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