



Focus on: Footwear

Horween trusts its staff to uphold the standards that have guided the company for over a century.

CREDIT: HORWEEN



The quality control stage is key to ensuring Horween's finished leather is ready to be shipped to its customers.

CREDIT: HORWEEN



Timberland used Horween's Football leather in the limited edition version of its six-inch boot to celebrate the 50th Super Bowl.

CREDIT: TIMBERLAND



Keep it in the family

Family-run business Horween Leather Company has been tanning leather for over 100 years. It has developed strong relationships with several footwear brands who use its leather to add a touch of luxury to their products.

Nick Horween became the fifth generation of his family to work at Horween Leather Company when he took on the role of vice president in 2008 after a spell working as a professional chef. His father, Arnold "Skip" Horween, has been president of the business since 2003 and together they run one of the oldest tanneries still operating in the US. It was founded in 1905 by Isadore Horween, who emigrated to the US from his native Ukraine in 1893. After spending the intervening years working at various tanneries in the Chicago area, he decided to go it alone and established what is now the city's last remaining tannery.

It has survived a period in which there has been a staggering decrease in the number of tanneries in the US. From more than 250 operating in 1978, there are now less than a dozen. Horween is one of an even smaller number that process hides all the way from the raw state through to finished leather. It primarily processes bovine hide (which makes up 85% of its total production) and horsehide, as well as small quantities of bison and calf hide.

Whether it be because of its commitment to hands-on manufacturing or its refusal to cut corners when it comes to the raw materials and compounds it uses, Horween is a trusted source of leather for a number of brands. It has total faith that its staff (some of whom have been with the company for much of their working lives) can maintain the standards that have been upheld for over a century. Although its leathers are still finished by hand using traditional techniques passed down through the generations, it has adopted modern machinery and technology to keep pace with changes in the industry. Horween also has a fully-functioning effluent treatment plant on site, which is compliant with the standards set by the US Environmental Protection Agency.

Footwear favourite

Footwear is proving to be an increasingly important market for the company, with several athletic shoe brands choosing Horween leather when seeking to add a luxurious element to their designs. Among those to have done so in recent years are New Balance, Reebok and adidas.

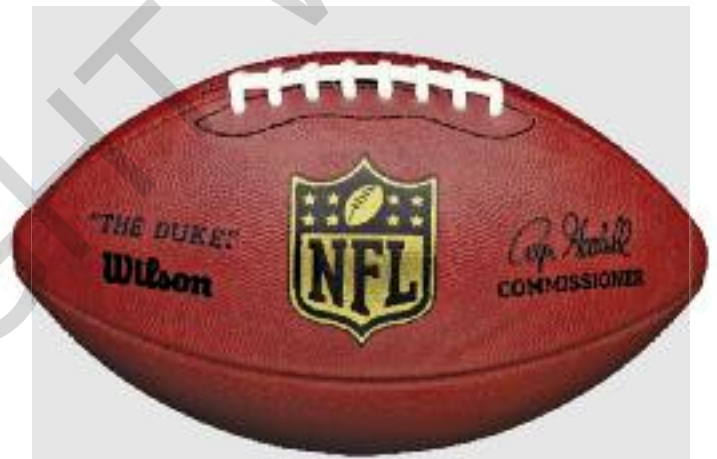
Nick Horween tells *World Leather* that the company has been working with New Balance for around five years, during which time the US brand has offered a leather option on a variety of its sneaker designs. He says New Balance uses a variety of Horween's leathers, depending on the colour and design of the shoe in question. It is made-to-order, allowing the brand to give details of the characteristics it requires from the material. Horween can then use its know-how to suggest "beneficial adjustments".

New Balance announced in August that its 1300 and 998 models will both be available in Horween leather. The 1300 features an upper in neutral shades of brown while the brand is offering its 998 in black leather. Both designs have embossed branding on the tongue and heel. Horween has also provided the

leather for the lining of both models.

Mr Horween says he appreciates "the time and effort New Balance has taken" to offer the designs. He believes that consumers view these products as having "high quality and thoughtful design".

Although unable to give *World Leather* exact details of the leather used due to its agreement with New Balance, he confirmed that the brand hasn't used the Cordovan leather for which Horween is best known.



Sporting pedigree

A significant proportion of the leather Horween produces goes into sporting goods. US manufacturer Wilson uses Horween leather to make the balls for the US National Football League (NFL). Despite the nickname commonly attributed to the American football, 'the pigskin', it is actually made from bovine hide. Horween began providing pebbled bovine leather for Wilson in 1941 before developing a specialist football leather that is used to this day. The leather is finished using a process known as "Tanned in Tack", which gives it extra stickiness so that players are able to grip it more easily.

To commemorate the 50th edition of the Super Bowl (the most important game in the NFL season) in February 2016, outdoor brand Timberland released a limited edition version of its classic 6-Inch Boot that featured Horween's Football leather. This gave NFL fans the chance to own a pair made from the same material as the ball being used in the game. It was available in burgundy and black with leather laces.

Horween also provides leather for the ball used in the National Basketball Association (NBA). Another of its specialist leathers, the Baseball Glove leather, is used in the gloves worn by players in Major League Baseball (MLB). It undergoes straight chrome tannage, a process which gives it good strength, durability and temper (hardness and elasticity) so that it can cope with repeated use.



There are only a few tanneries left in the world that still produce genuine Shell Cordovan, named after the Spanish region of Córdoba. Speaking to *World Leather* at a recent Lineapelle, the president of Argentinean tanner Rocinante, Norberto Lorenzo, said his was one of the last three or four in the world. As well as Horween, UK tannery Clayton and Shinki-Hikaku in Japan continue to produce it. It is made from the area covering the rump of a horse; each horse provides two 'shells', roughly enough to make one pair of shoes. The oval-shaped shells are tanned, stuffed, shaved and polished during a process that takes roughly six months. The result is a very durable leather.

Better with age

Discussing what leather can bring to an athletic shoe design, Nick Horween says it offers "aesthetic and durability improvements". He adds that unlike some athletic footwear, a sneaker made with leather "looks better the more you wear it".

Reebok recently announced it would use Horween leather in its Classic Leather Lux range. The designs are available with an upper in black or brown oiled leather with brogue detailing. It has a worn-in look and features embossed Reebok branding, a leather lining and tonal laces. Reebok has previously collaborated with the tannery for its Classic Leather 'Brogue' collection, which was available in a variety of colours including navy and burgundy.

Reebok's parent company, adidas, added Horween leather to its classic Stan Smith silhouette last year. It featured a single piece upper, which the brand said would develop a patina with age, echoing Mr Horween's comments. The upgrade of the Stan Smith design featured Horween's vegetable-tanned Essex leather, which the tannery says "ages beautifully over time".

Horween's Chromexcel leather, developed by the tannery more than 100 years ago, is another of its materials often used in footwear. Its natural creases give it a more rugged look and it can be heavily shined to give a high gloss or left for a subtler finish. During production it undergoes nearly 90 separate

Adidas added Horween's vegetable-tanned Essex leather to its classic Stan Smith design.

CREDIT: ADIDAS

processes over 28 days. It is first chrome tanned before being subjected to heavy vegetable retannage using a mix of bark extracts and natural agents. This dual tanning process results in soft but tough leather that retains its natural colour. Horween believes the added step of vegetable retanning gives Chromexcel its edge. It is very supple; the ease in moulding it makes it ideal for use in footwear.

Nick Horween describes footwear as an "important part" of Horween's business. The variety of leathers it produces makes it an attractive proposition for brands as it can offer them multiple options. Beyond its own ambitions, Horween now finds itself flying the flag for the small number of tanners that remain in the US. Mr Horween says the company is "always trying to improve and explore new opportunities", suggesting there could be further collaborations with footwear brands in the future. 🌱



Reebok has turned to Horween for various designs, including the Freestyle Hi.

CREDIT: REEBOK