



Wolverine Worldwide brands are avid users of the pigskin material its in-house leather division supplies.

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Buyer's View

Wolverine Leathers and Interhides Public Company Ltd

Thailand-based tannery Interhides Public Company Limited (IHL) names its work with Wolverine Worldwide as a fine example of its ability to establish, grow and keep strong customer relationships. In a spirit of partnership and mutual benefit, the US-based footwear group's leather division, Wolverine Leathers, has long used IHL as a source of pigskins, processed to wet blue stage. After finishing, the leather is used in the footwear that a number of Wolverine brands produce, ranging from fashion shoes and safety footwear to boots for hiking and other outdoor activities.

IHL general manager Wasin (Chris) Thumrongsakunvong says that a well known figure in the leather industry, Chris Hansen, was the instigator of the relationship. Now based in India, Mr Hansen was Wolverine's vice-president for leather sourcing at the start of this decade. The original idea was that processing pigskins for Wolverine Leathers would help IHL establish a reputation as a service tannery and good outsource production partner, even though it would probably be tough at first. In return, the arrangement would give Wolverine Leathers good control of production costs; it was already buying the skins and this new set-up would make it easier to control the cost of tanning them. Recently, however, it's become more than that.

Long-term vision

Sylvain Bussiere, the current vice-president of Wolverine Leathers, is a seasoned leather professional, having been production manager at Tannerie d'Annonay in his native France for

For a customer's perspective of Tannery of the Year finalist Interhides Public Company Limited, we talk to the leather division of footwear group Wolverine Worldwide, a long-time partner, but one with new ideas that it is working on with the Thai leather manufacturer.

most of the 1990s, which he followed by taking up the position of director of footwear group Ecco's tannery in Indonesia, staying for the next decade or so. He moved to Wolverine in 2011.

His assessment of the partnership with IHL, which he inherited, is that it works well because the leather manufacturer is a serious and dedicated business partner. He explains: "We wanted to team up with a company that was ready to comply with the necessary standards and ready to challenge itself every day. We also wanted a partner with a long-term vision of what a tannery should be. IHL 100% meets all of these criteria. Its efforts in chrome-recovery, protein-recovery and in building its new wastewater treatment plant [see main Tannery of the Year report in this section] all go beyond expectations and we want to be part of what this tannery is doing."

Wolverine Leathers has specialised in pigskin since the 1950s



and was the company behind new technology that made it possible to remove the skin from a pig after slaughter faster and more easily (it used to take one worker an hour to remove the skin and at those rates, a workforce of 35,000 people would be required to remove the skins from the 2 million or more pigs that US meat companies now slaughter every week). The new technology made it economically viable to find non-food alternatives for using the skin. Gloves offered an immediate market for Wolverine Leathers to supply to, but greater availability of the material led to a move into footwear, especially after materials science company 3M had (accidentally) invented its Scotchgard stain-repellent product.

New destination

It has a network of partner tanneries in North America and Asia, including IHL's wet blue operation. In the near future (before the end of this year), the group could add a European tannery to this set-up owing to the trend among some of the brands to make a proportion of their shoes in Europe again. Mr Bussiere explains that the wet blue pigskins that IHL processes have typically had three possible destinations, two of which are finishing tanneries (one in China and one in Vietnam), producing the finished leather that Wolverine Worldwide brands use in their collections. He also sells wet blue pigskins to buyers, that's to say other tanneries, in China and Taiwan. Production is a total volume of 35 million square-feet per year, more than 70% of which, 25 million square-feet, is made into finished leather, with the other 10 million square-feet selling as wet blue. All of this material is destined for footwear uppers. Today, only 20% of the finished leather is for "internal brands" (13 different brands are part of Wolverine Worldwide at the moment), while the other 80% goes to footwear companies outside the group.

Selling finished pigskin to people he refers to as "colleagues at other brands" is a newer market for the material, Mr Bussiere explains, insisting that "all brands, internal or external, are treated equally as customers". This is something else that is indicative of the spirit of openness that infuses this project. It's a commercial move, too, of course: the material is available and Sylvain Bussiere is sure the demand exists in the wider footwear industry. External brands he is already dealing with include New Balance, adidas, Nike and Vans.

More than the material

Wolverine Leathers can meet this demand, but all the brands he is supplying leather to, Wolverine's own brands and those outside, want more than just the material. "They want leather that complies with all the regulations," he explains, "and, sadly, many pigskin tanneries are far from meeting those requirements." This is why the partnership his organisation has built up with IHL is so important. After years of working hard to make sure its environmental management, water use and energy consumption were efficient and responsible, the Thai tanning company achieved accreditation from multi-stakeholder body the Leather Working Group, silver in 2014, rising to gold in September 2016. This gives much sought-after reassurance to all customers of Wolverine Leathers. "It offers a guarantee," the division's vice-president says. "Tanneries that are not up to the level are not part of the Leather Working Group, and in our case we can use the in-



Pigskin leather in the frame at adidas. Price, performance and availability are making pigskin leather an attractive option for a number of top athletic footwear brands.

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house competencies we have to help our partner tanneries reach the level required."

For other customer expectations, IHL's commitment to long-term partnership and to innovation have been essential. Mr Bussiere offers this example: "We have been working on a project to make wet white pigskin and to make it competitive with the wet blue. All of the large shoe companies want to do less harm to the environment. Everyone wants that, but the challenge is price. How can we produce chrome-free skins at a competitive cost? For so long, the answer has been that we cannot, but now we believe we can do it."

Performance pigskin

He insists that, in terms of performance, it's an interesting material for footwear. It's a product that some consumers are reluctant to use, but that's for brands to deal with, rather than Wolverine Leathers. "We are not here to influence or judge anyone," he continues. "Some brands may prefer to avoid this material, but some customers have decided to put our pigskin nubuck into special collections. It's more expensive than suede from bovine hides, perhaps \$0.75 more per square-foot, but it's at least \$1 less expensive per square-foot than bovine nubuck, so we believe we are offering a good alternative."

Back at IHL, Mr Wasin's observation is that this is a fashion trend. He says fashion "always wants something new" and that Wolverine Leathers is correct to push this material now. Pigskin has dense fibres, so endowing it with nubuck properties can be very effective, producing a fine nap and bright colours. Another important benefit is that ensuring a larger quantity of pigskin that is compliant with the standards comes onto the footwear upper market and increases the exposure of materials such as pig nubuck to footwear brands and consumers, promoting growth for both partners. As in all good partnerships, everyone wins. 🌱