

SHOPS

FIRST PERSON/OPINION:
By Sam Q. Fleming

Vanson Leathers Factory

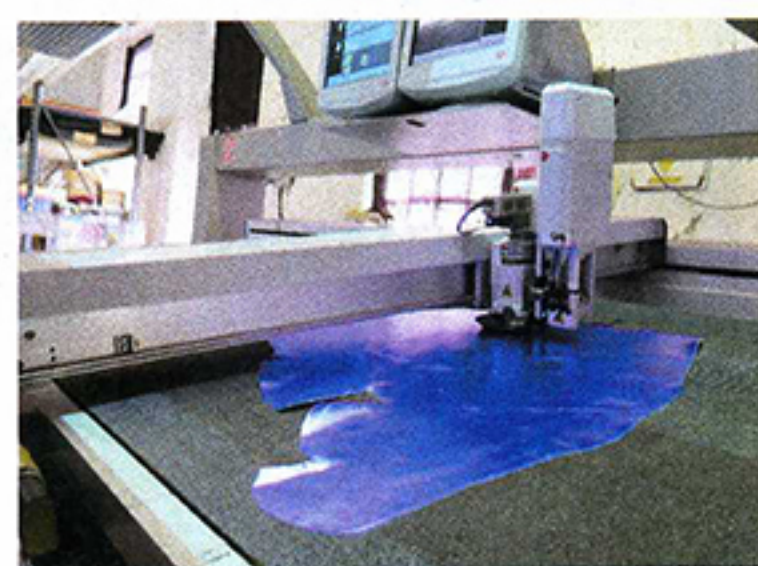
Vanson Leathers was founded in 1974 by hard-core motorcycle enthusiast and old-school Do It Yourself visionary Mike van der Sleen. Originally based in Boston before re-locating south to Fall River, Massachusetts, Vanson is a microcosm of both American manufacturing and the broader U.S. motorcycle economy, and the company makes some of the toughest leathers and highest-quality products in the world.

Vanson started in a Boston garment industry cluster of sewing machine manufacturers, leather tanners, thread suppliers, producers of cloth for jacket linings, and a well-paid motorcycle enthusiast market of riders who wanted top-quality motorcycle gear. As manufacturing and tanning were off-shored, it became harder to find thread suppliers and skilled seamstresses, to actually maintain production domestically. Industrial clusters are an ecosystem and if one aspect gets out of balance, it impacts the whole.

In the 1990s, road racing grids were filled with blue-collar racers. As the economy has changed, the pits themselves have remained full because the transporters have grown from vans to motorhomes, but the grids have shrunk to a fraction of their pre-2007-recession size.

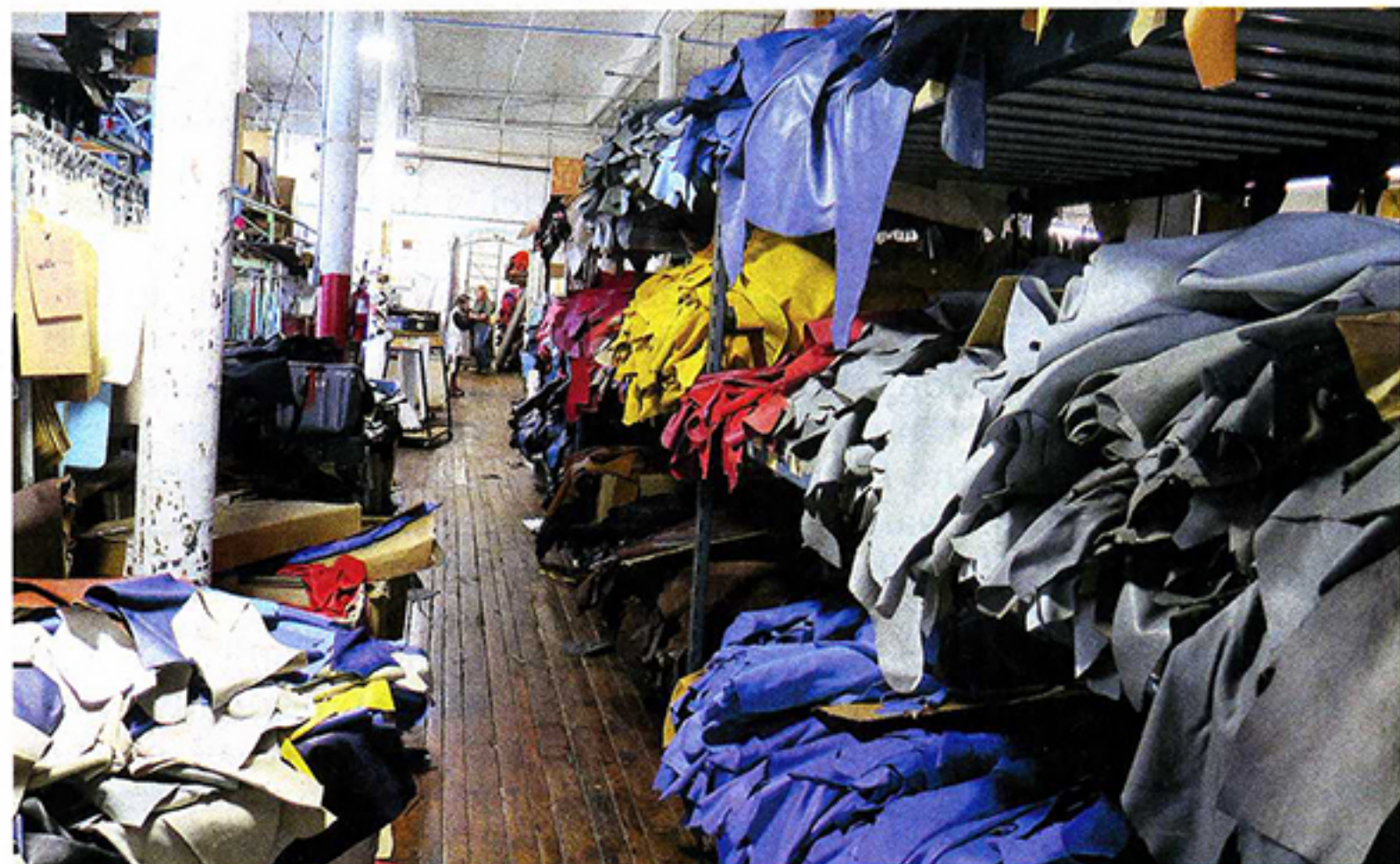
Van der Sleen has had to sail his company through decades of perilous economic waters by innovating his product line and vertically integrating some of the production process (like leather finishing) while always scrupulously maintaining the highest quality in snaps, leather, thread, and execution. This attention to detail has earned Vanson a rep-

(Above, Left) Vanson headquarters are located behind the yellow door in this 19th-century mill. (Above, Right) Mike and Kim van der Sleen are the proprietors of Vanson Leathers, where riders can walk in and be involved in the design, specification, and fitment of top-quality racing wear. (Below, Left) This is a heated leather roller iron that creates the ultra shiny leather for which Vanson is known. This used to be done at the tannery but Vanson is doing more leather finishing in-house, for more consistent results. (Bottom, Left) Monitors above the cutting table show the patterns while a ceiling-mounted projector allows the operator to place the leather for minimum waste. Since each leather hide is a unique shape, there's an art to laying out all the pieces.



utation for making the toughest race leathers on the planet.

While maintaining its Fall River manufacturing base, in 2008 Vanson dipped its toes in the offshore production game by setting up a Vanson factory in an El Salvador industrial free zone. After years of planning, equipment installation, labor training, and supply chain negotiation, the factory opened on the same day that Lehman Brothers failed. Shortly thereafter, some big Vanson customers like American Suzuki (bankrupt) and Buell (shuttered) canceled their orders. The unin-



At the Vanson mill, many cow hides await reincarnation as riding wear. Vanson is meticulous about hides because many variables contribute to the quality of the final piece. The diet of the cow, tick bites, or injuries all impact the hide. Then there is the curing and tanning and dyeing process which determines the durability, longevity, and strength of the final suit.

tended consequences of securitized mortgages and credit default swaps had cascaded through the global financial crisis, resulting in a tsunami that swamped the Vanson expansion plan. Vanson had to forgo competing for price sensitive customers and, prefacing the artisanal American-made product trend, closed the El Salvador operation but kept the entire production line operating in Fall River.

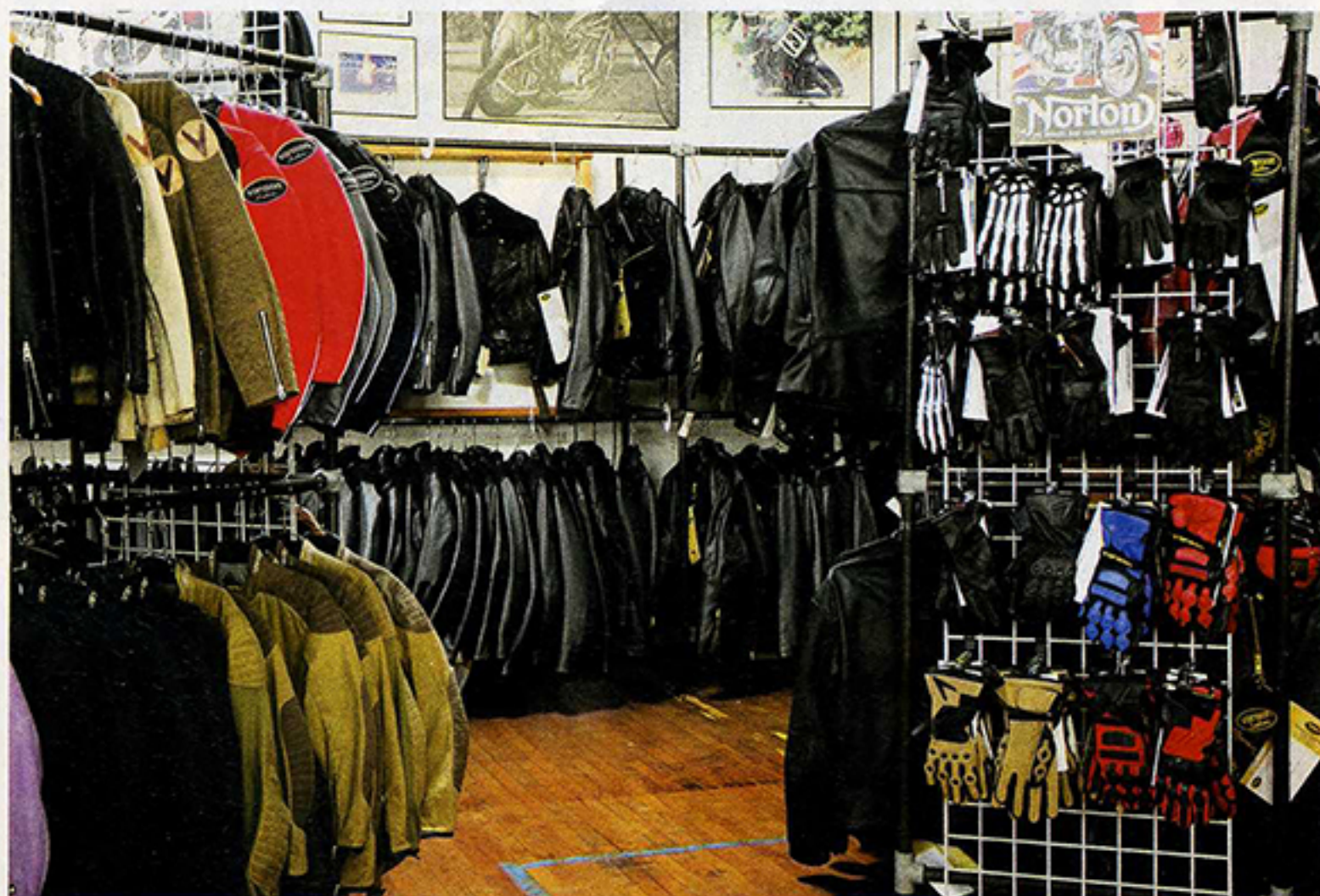
Finding and training skilled labor and supply chain issues is

an uphill battle which long predates the pandemic. Almost all the tanneries in the U.S. have closed due to a combination of USDA export credit policy and the complexities of U.S. environmental regulation. "There used to be more tanneries in Peabody, Massachusetts, than there are now nationwide," van der Sleen said. "We've got our leather iron fired up so we're going to be milling our own leathers. We're headed towards more in-house work for the finish-





(Above) A bird's eye view of the Vanson factory floor. (Below, Right) The shoulder logo on iconic ultra-tough Vanson black leather jackets hanging in the first floor showroom after being manufactured on the fifth floor of the factory in Fall River, Massachusetts. (Below, Left) Vanson has plenty of browsable ready-to-wear gear, but there isn't any replacement for custom made, tailored leather suits or jackets. Photos by Sam Fleming and Liz Lord.



ing and the making of the leather itself. Vertical integration gives us something different than what anyone else has.

"It's a difficult market. We've been buying our knit cuffs for years from an outfit called Minnesota Knitting Mills. We just got notice the cuffs that we buy, which are one-by-one rib military style, that the mill scrapped the machinery. We also have unexpected turmoil from the pandemic. A lot of American consumption switched from buying services to buying goods, which has had a lot of unanticipated consequences. And one of them is the massive number of containers showing up to U.S. ports. Even getting snaps, getting zippers. We got notice on Friday from our snap guys that they were having their third 15% pricing increase since October. The snap guys can't get the copper, they can't get the brass, they can't get nickel.

"We are being asked to forecast, 21 weeks ahead, what our needs are going to be. Are you going to need brass ones or silver ones? Or black ones, or 20 inches or 40 inches? And to keep our quality high that means we need to make sure that our suppliers aren't skimping on their materials.

"We try to keep the sourcing of the materials to domestic. For example, we are fortunate to have a local knitting mill that makes our Kevlar cloth. We've been using it in the stretch panels of our racing suits for years but we're looking at incorporating the Kevlar into our waxed cotton line of street-riding gear.

"The best protection remains leather in terms of functionality and protection in my view against abrasion and almost everything else. The younger generation is less committed to traditional materials. Leather is actually a sustainable material and is still the



(Above) Cutaway Vanson street jacket equipped with the Vanson CO² airbag system. Stretch panels make room for airbag inflation.

best for protection.

"We are always innovating with safety. We even think ventilation is a safety feature as making sure the rider is performing well is the first step to staying safe. We have three different options for armor in the leathers and we've incorporated airbag technology. We use a CO² technology for our airbag so it's a canister using a mechanical trigger, and it fills up a chamber and we control the shape and the direction of the chamber using a Spandex tube throughout the garment, which allows us to keep the ventilation factor going,

because the biggest problem with an airbag is that the suit won't let (cooling) air (in or) out.

"We chose a tether system for our airbag. It's about 60 pounds of pull strength so it won't go off if you walk away from your bike; you really need to be launched. Our system is actually serviceable at the track as well so you can crash, reset it, put in a new CO² cartridge and be back on the grid.

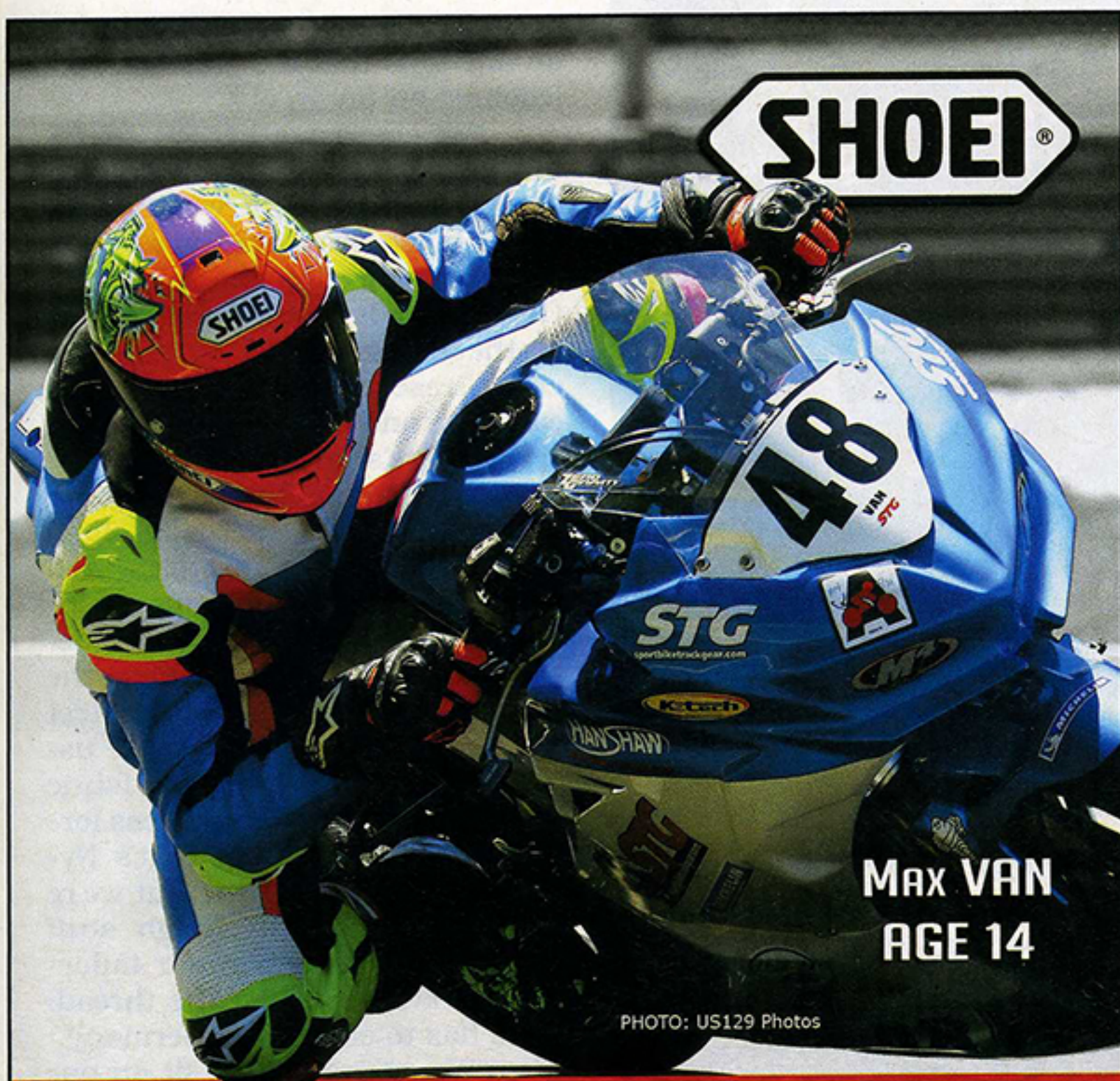
"There's always this battle between making things that are comfortable and actually having something that protects, and sometimes there's no happy middle. We're primarily in the protection business and that means the suit has to be designed to protect and hold together. So if you're using an Aramid-Kevlar-based fabric it's going to feel stiffer and less forgiving than something that's Nylon and Spandex fabric. But we're going to choose the tough stuff and handle comfort in our tailoring. We even consider the thread. Ours has to come from Germany.

"We guarantee the fit on our suits and we serial number each suit and offer after sales, repairs and alterations, both for the crash damage aspect and in refinishing. We say that Vanson is heirloom quality because, if the leather is maintained, the suits will last a lifetime. Folks can do it at home but for serious use we suggest they send them back to us where we put it into a reconditioning bath. It's a formula that uses the same oils and waxes that are used in the tanning. The leather goes into a washing machine with this bath and the idea is to pull the dirt and sweat out of the leather.

"Motorcycle racing is what we are all about, but there are a lot of people who want leather jackets for street riding or street wear. We do street wear and co-branding so we sell a lot in Japan with Comme des Garçons and worldwide in a collaboration with Supreme.

"I think we are seeing a bit of a Renaissance of the appreciation of artisanal, handmade high-quality American products. A lot of brands decide that calling up a factory in Pakistan or China is where it's at and they'll send off specs and tech books, and then the factories produce something that doesn't match and they go back and forth. And then at the end of X number of months the brands have to make a fundamental decision: Are they going to lose the season and argue over a half inch? Or are they just going to give up and tell the guy to make the stuff and hope that it sells on the racks? The product just isn't as good as when it's controlled from the beginning.

"At one point, in America,



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(Above) Spools of thread imported from Germany. (Below) Finishing details on a Supreme co-branded street jacket. (Bottom, Left) Sewing a suit. (Bottom Right) Knife-cutting a piece of leather using a pattern.



what we do here was common and was not considered particularly valuable. Now, we are considered at least interesting and maybe even valued. Our ability to actually make something. The fact that we can actually take a raw material and end up with a finished product, is now recognized as being a value."

Vanson makes off-the-shelf suits for road and drag racing but there really isn't any substitute for custom-tailored leathers. There are almost unlimited options for colors and graphics. The suit ordering can be a bit complicated even for the experienced Vanson customer so don't hesitate to just call the factory and ask for Matt Silva, or call him directly at (508) 678-2000 (extension 104) to steer your order.

Or better yet, go to Fall River, Massachusetts, and walk into a 19th century mill and see one of the last bastions of world-class American manufacturing.

If you want to see more of the Vanson factory, search on the YouTube channel "Army Of Darkness Motorcycles" for "Vanson Handbags" in which Van der Sleen offered Army of Darkness (AOD) members Melissa Berkoff and Luci Schelbert the opportunity to make their own handbags.

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