

The Aku Bellamont Plus boot has uppers made from Gruppo Dani's Zero Impact leather.

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Zero Impact

In the March/April issue of *World Footwear*, we published an article that considered the possible future for leather as a shoemaking material and saw how some brands have switched to synthetics as being cheaper, easier to process and offering better margins. The future for leather would therefore seem to lie in offering quality, value for money at every price level and as a natural product that does not impact on the environment in order to attract consumers.

Tanners also need to form close working relationships with shoemakers rather than treating them simply as 'customers'. A good example is Gruppo Dani based in Arzignano in northern Italy. It runs a full-service production tannery, making almost all of its finished leather from raw bovine hides sourced fresh whenever possible (salted when not) from Europe and Scandinavia. The company also prefers to buy its raw material directly from abattoirs rather than specialist traders in order to

shorten the leather value chain.

Being a full-service tannery enables it to control the full production cycle and to deliver consistent quality. Managing director Giancarlo Dani says: "It's certainly the case that if you have good tanning at the wet end you stand a better chance of producing good finished leather. So we want to manage the whole process."

FORGING PARTNERSHIPS

He believes it also leads to a stronger relationship with shoe manufacturers who use his leather. "We carry out a customer survey every year, asking people how satisfied they are with the quality of our leather, with delivery times and so on." The company also evaluates how interested customers and final consumers are in the concept of sustainability. "The results have been encouraging and showed us we are going in the right direction. Now we have to find the right way to communicate this to the wider

customer community. We want to avoid being considered as a commodity. We want to be much more than that."

Outdoor footwear brand Aku, based in Montebelluna, also in northern Italy, and a long-term partner of Gruppo Dani, was the first shoe producer to use the company's 'Zero Impact' leather as part of a wider drive to become more sustainable. Aku decided some time ago to make sustainability strategic to the future of its business and ever since has been working to improve everything it does, while at the same time finding ways to reduce its impact on the environment.

Product manager Giulio Piccin specifies three areas on which the brand has focused its work to make this become a reality: product, operations and community, both internal and external. He says sharing details with key suppliers has been an important element. When Aku began to share its ideas with Gruppo Dani, it was clear from the outset that the tanning group

was already on a similar path. "In fact, Gruppo Dani had decided long before us to be sustainable in order to be competitive, so it was a good thing to be able to share ideas."

ZERO IMPACT

Zero Impact is the result of more than ten years' of research aimed at reducing environmental impact at every stage in the production cycle. The project has involved detailed work to measure carbon emissions and allowed Gruppo Dani to reduce them by 5%.

The leather is chrome- and heavy metal-free, and complies with specification ISO15987 which requires that the sum of all the heavy metal contained in the leather must not exceed 0.1%. The company has developed new heavy metal-free tanning technology that uses enzymes and polysaccharides, and says the system produces leather with the same physical and mechanical characteristics as that processed using conventional methods. Another major technological innovation on the road to Zero Impact tanning is oxidative unhairing that uses hydrogen peroxide within a special polypropylene drum.

Taking this a stage further, the tannery offsets all of its carbon emissions by helping to fund a range of reforestation projects. Working with a specialist partner, AzzeroCO₂, Gruppo Dani is funding the planting of trees at different sites all over Italy. Marta Fumei, the leather producer's communications manager, says: "Zero Impact is just for certain partners. They are all companies that are as sustainable as Gruppo Dani. They have the same philosophy and the same mentality we have. We view this as a way of giving them a competitive advantage."

LOCAL SUPPLY

At Aku, Giulio Piccin says that his company's approach to becoming more sustainable began with looking at every component that goes into a typical Aku hiking, trekking or mountaineering boot; which materials were renewable or recyclable and in what ways could anything be done better. Part of the latter, it realised, was to try to work with local suppliers. And this, too, confirmed Gruppo Dani as an ideal partner; Montebelluna and Arzignano are only 80 kilometres apart.



Interior of the Gruppo Dani tannery.

CREDIT: WTP

He offers the Bellamont Plus as a good example of the use to which Aku has put Zero Impact leather. A low-cut or mid-cut boot suitable for urban and activewear, it features materials that are 99% European. The outsole contains recycled material from rubber processing and the midsole recycled double-density die-cut EVA. It has coconut and bamboo fibre in the footbed and the leather is of course Zero Impact.

"Its metal-free status attracted us. The upper has water-repellency treatment, but it too is chrome-free. Dani offered us Zero Impact leather for the Bellamont Plus and we decided quite quickly to use this leather in the whole Plus line of products, which encompasses six models at the moment. They're the ones that share this concept and, in terms of sales, the result has been very good. Not everywhere, but in important markets, such as Germany, where consumers are looking for new ideas, it's been strong."

He cites Hamburg-based outdoor retail group Globetrotter as having done a particularly good job to help consumers understand the difference that Zero Impact and other measures have made to the Plus line. "Globetrotter has been a great retail partner," he says. "It has allowed the customer to read about and learn about our values and what we have seen is that, for some consumers, values are more important than price."

Other benefits to have accrued from Aku's drive towards greater sustainability include improved use of

energy. The company monitored the energy consumption of every machine in its factory and learned about further ways to save. It has also gained from a number of quite simple ideas. For example, it decided that shipments to retailers in Italy needed less packaging than those to customers in other countries. It now uses cardboard cases that it can recycle instead of an energy-greedy machine that applied shrink-wrapped plastic to shoe-boxes.

A BREAK WITH TRADITION

Another change is the employees' traditional 90-minute lunch-break. This is now 30 minutes and they go home an hour earlier instead. "We held a vote," Giulio Piccin says, "and 51% voted for the shorter lunch-break. We thought that was a small percentage for such an important change so said we would try it for one month. At the end of that month, people voted again and this time 98% were in favour." This has meant a big saving in energy as it takes too long to warm up most machines if shut down at lunchtime. Doing so an hour earlier every day, on the other hand, has been valuable.

It just goes to show how the exchange of ideas when suppliers, customers and consumers form partnerships can result in better understandings, better products and a better environment. This is perhaps a route that the industry should try to follow more to secure a better future. 