

# The perfect synergy between leather and technology

The leather industry is truly global, but on the supply side Africa is yet to become a major exporting region. It is, however, home to high-quality producers with state-of-the-art facilities. **Mossop Leather** CEO Gert Kruger talks about how his company is stepping up to the international market by combining its innovative products and rich heritage to meet the needs of footwear producers across the globe.

**A**mid the stunning scenery of the Western Cape province of South Africa lies Wellington, a small town just outside Cape Town. It is set in the heart of the country's Winelands, and among the sprawling vineyards you will find one of the largest tanneries in South Africa.

Operated by Mossop Leather, the facility supplies the country's footwear and leather goods industries with a wide variety of bovine leathers. In fact, it has supplied the leading footwear brands in South Africa since 1846, and for many decades has exported leather to Europe, the Indian subcontinent and the Far East. With a track record stretching back nearly 200 years, you might expect there to be an antique feel to the tannery – but that could not be further from reality.

Mossop Leather is currently undergoing a major rebranding process to reflect the

fact that it not only has more than 170 years of experience and know-how in the leather industry, but also a keen eye on the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. It is reimagining its brand, combining its heritage with forward-looking research and development capabilities to bring a new range of high-performance products to the global market.

*“Mossop is one of the oldest tanneries in the southern hemisphere and we want to rebrand globally to launch a new range of technical leathers.”*

“Mossop is a very old company – one of the oldest tanneries in the southern hemisphere – and we want to rebrand globally to launch a new range of technical leathers,” says CEO Gert Kruger. “We want to keep that history and the peace of mind it

brings to our customers. At the same time, we want to keep up-to-date and show the world that we are a modern tannery based in Africa, able to produce for the global market.

“The rebrand also comes at a time when leather is struggling to find traction, partly because of the changing views of customers, so we need to appeal to a younger demographic.

“The buyers at major shoe factories are changing and we need to connect with them. We have to show that we are relevant in the modern age. Leather is sometimes seen as a dirty, old industry, but actually it is modern and dynamic,” he adds.

The company, which employs 175 people on a permanent basis, currently has the capacity to produce 2,000,000ft<sup>2</sup> of shoe upper and upholstery leather and 600,000ft<sup>2</sup> of laminated split leather per month. Mossop is also the owner of the Tek-Tan brand, which is widely used as the preferred upper leather of the leading school shoe factories in South Africa. It is in the industrial footwear market, however, that the company sees its biggest opportunity for growth in its international exports.

## The future is high-tech and customisable

A key element in the company's efforts at rebranding is its Optimum Range of exclusive high-performance technical leathers, which gives footwear producers a huge array of options when creating

products for the industrial and safety markets respectively. Optimum has been designed with cutting-edge leather science and is intended to meet the most demanding standards for technical footwear produced in South Africa, Europe, the US and Asia.

Among the key products in the range is the abrasion-resistant leather Shield-Tan, which is designed to surpass the industry standard for high-contact abrasion and scuff areas. WalkDry is Mossop's water-repellent shoe-upper leather, which meets the most stringent global standards, while maintaining superior breathability.

Vlamprufe is the company's fire-retardant shoe-upper leather, while Bactroblok is designed to be resistant to microbes and significantly reduces foot odour for the wearer. Warrior is a military boot leather that incorporates high-performance, near-infrared absorbent technology and can be supplied in a UV-cured camouflage print, and WalkCool is a sun-reflecting leather that keeps the surface temperature of the shoe-upper material cooler than conventional leather.

Individually, all of these products have important applications, but a vital element of the Optimum range is that customers can combine a variety of different technologies to marry up these different qualities and create their own tailor-made material.

“We developed products with very specific qualities for specific markets in order to exploit what we do best,” Kruger explains. “Synthetic materials are our biggest competitor, but we do see a demand for leather in the technical footwear market.”

“Our ability to innovate is a result of having made significant investments in our infrastructure, with new equipment, more automation and increased capacity our main priorities. We continue to make that investment because we believe in the long-term future of leather.”

## Opening the door to new markets

Mossop Leather is a privately owned company with two local shareholders – the Bolton and Beier families from South Africa – and one shareholder from India, the Rahman family. As part of the multinational Rahman Group, which has manufacturing facilities in India, France, South Africa, the UAE and Tunisia, Mossop is now able to leverage its association with one of the most



Team members hard at work reviewing new leather advancements in the research and development facility.

respected leather and footwear manufacturers in the world.

Building on the group's foothold in key markets in Asia, Europe, China and India, the company hopes to bring its innovative technologies to a new audience.

“We believe that we have one of the most modern R&D capabilities anywhere in Africa, so we can meet the needs of the global market,” Kruger remarks.

*“We want to expand our exports from 30% of our business to 50%, and being part of an international group will help us to do that.”*

“Being part of an international group opens up new opportunities and gives us the credibility that goes with being part of a network of high-quality tanneries around the world.

“The group has a good reputation in the industry, and it specialises in safety footwear, so it is a big step up in terms of reaching out to technical footwear customers, and that is our key area of competition internationally due to the kind of raw materials we have here in South Africa.”

As well as building its own brand through innovation, expansion and investment, Mossop is boosting Africa's profile as a source of high-quality leather. South Africa has a highly developed cattle industry that uses feedlot and natural grazing, though the majority are reared using the feedlot system.

“Buying from South Africa is an interesting proposition,” says Kruger.

“There are cultural similarities with Europe, and there is not much difference in the time zone, but when it comes to price, performance and the quality of the material, we are a competitive option in markets across the world.

“South Africa may seem far away from the rest of the world, which some may see as an obstacle to doing business with Europe, Asia or the US.

“Most of the leather made here is sold locally, but we want to expand our exports from 30% of our business to 50%, and being part of an international group will help us to do that. After all, the feedlot system for rearing cattle here in South Africa means we get very good-quality hides, which are often bought by many European tanners.”

Mossop will be at the Asia Pacific Leather Fair (APLF) in Hong Kong in March (stand number 1B A02), where it will showcase its Optimum range of high-performance technical leathers – and show the world that it has the ability to seamlessly combine a rich history in leather production with a modern take on high-performance products. ●

## For further information

[www.mossop.co.za](http://www.mossop.co.za)



The brand new installed automated drying line from sams/setting to vacuum drying, one of the many technological improvements contributing to the tannery's strategic goals for expansion into the global market.