

FOCUS



Ricardo Carranza uses a heated metal insert to shape the inside of the glove.

Chris Torres / Fort Worth Star-Telegram / TNS

Nation’s only maker of baseball gloves is in North Texas – *take a look*

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There’s a lot that goes into making Nokona baseball gloves stand out in the crowded sporting goods marketplace, but the thing that makes them most unique is the little tag on each one that says “Made in America.”

Being the last U.S.-made baseball glove company left standing is a nice claim to fame, though it does come with challenges at a time when every other glove maker is manufacturing overseas for a fraction of the cost. Still, after some tough times in decades past, Nokona’s business is strong as the company prepares to celebrate its 100th year of making leather goods in Nocona, Texas, a town of about 4,000 people 90 minutes north of Fort Worth.

The making of a mitt

The Nokona factory is smaller than you’d imagine, and that’s part of the charm. Half the building is filled with state-of-the-art machines to map and cut leather, and the other half is filled with about a dozen or so craftspeople who stitch and form each glove by hand, pretty much the way it’s been done for a century.

Sheets of leather come in through the back door, and their first stop is a big examination table. Steer hides are like any other hides, including yours, and they’re sometimes covered with the scratches and scars of a life lived. A Nokona employee looks each one over, marking imperfections with a laser wand.

The usable portion of the hide – usually 70 percent to 80 percent of it – is mapped using a computer program that overlays a template of all the glove parts that can be cut from that piece of leather. From there, each part – glove fingers, webbing pieces, etc. – is cut using a machine. And that, for the most part, concludes the mechanized portion of the process.

Each glove follows the same steps. First, the linings are stitched together. Since this is the part of the glove no one sees, this is where the newbies start at Nokona.

One of Nokona’s owners, Rob Storey, the great-grandson of the company’s founder, said it takes about four months to master sewing the linings. From there, employees graduate to sewing exterior portions of the gloves. Only the best craftspeople end up doing the final stitching and lacing.

Of the 340 million people in the U.S., Storey said, less than 10 are skilled enough to do that, and they all work at Nokona.

The last step is breaking the gloves in. This used to be done by hitting them with a wooden mallet, the way you probably broke in a ballglove when you were a kid. Today, it’s done with a pneumatic machine that pounds each glove into shape, softening them as it goes.

Along the way, logos are stitched into the leather, embossing is done using hot metal plates and flair is added to the custom-made gloves. The trend this season is wild colors, so you’ll find a lot of gloves with turquoise or Day-Glo orange laces and embellishments. With Nokona’s custom ordering process, you can be as conservative or as avant garde as you want to be in designing your glove.

And if steerhide isn’t your thing, you can select more exotic skins for your ballglove, too. Kangaroo hide is quite possibly the best leather for a baseball glove, said Storey. It’s strong and stretchy, with a rubbery sheen to it. The only downside is that it’s a bit thin, so you have to layer it.

Nokona also makes gloves using elephant, alligator and python skin, among others, all of which come from reputable and sustainable sources in the U.S., said Storey.

A storied history on the diamond

Nokona has specialized in baseball gloves since 1934. The company started in 1926 as Nocona Leather Goods manufacturing purses and wallets. Then the Great Depression hit.

“The only way you could sell a wallet for a buck in those days was if you stuffed a dollar bill inside it,” Storey joked.

Storey’s great-grandfather pivoted to sporting goods and the rest is history.

Despite the hard times of the 1930s and 1940s – or perhaps because of them, and the escape recreation offered – baseball was booming. Nokona caught the wave, and by the late 1940s the company was outfitting the Brooklyn Dodgers-affiliated Fort Worth Cats.

In those days, the players would travel to away games by bus up U.S. Route 81 and stop in Nocona to pick up new gloves or drop old ones off for repairs.

Two of those Cats players made the big club in Brooklyn, and in the 1953 World Series, legendary Dodgers pitcher Carl Erskine wore a Nokona glove on

the mound when he faced the New York Yankees.

Fast forward 70 years, and pitcher Ryan Pressly had on a Nokona gove when he recorded the final out for the Houston Astros in their World Series victory over the Philadelphia Phillies.

There’s a signed Erskine jersey hanging in Nokona’s headquarters, along with photos of Pressly and other big leaguers, like Nolan Ryan, who have used and endorsed Nokona products over the years.

Two of MLB’s biggest names, Pittsburgh Pirates phenom Paul Skenes and Royals star Bobby Witt wear Nokona belts on the diamond. The belts are a newer offering from Nokona, and they have proven popular with the pros. Recently, Nokona even provided special gold belts to several players in the 2025 MLB All-Star game.

Glove economics 101

“Made in America” is something of a rallying cry these days. The Trump administration has promised steep import tariffs to revive U.S. manufacturing. Some tariffs have gone into effect while others are on hold.

For now, Storey said, Nokona hasn’t seen a positive or negative impact. While all of their leather comes from U.S. sources, some is tanned in Japan and then reimported to the U.S. That product has had the same tariff for years, said Storey, and it hasn’t changed.

When asked about protective trade policies perhaps helping Nokona, Storey didn’t seem to think it would make a big difference. Nokona gloves are known and appreciated as a specialty product, with a price tag commensurate with their reputation.

You can walk into any sporting goods store and pick up a decent Rawlings or Wilson adult baseball glove for about \$80 on the low end up to around \$400 on the high end. Nokona gloves start at around that \$400 price point, and they go up from there.

If Wilson and Rawlings have to charge a little more for a glove made in China because of higher tariffs, it’s probably not going to be enough to drive your average American consumer to buy a Nokona glove.

It’s just a difference in business models. Nokona manufactures around 0.1 percent of all the baseball gloves made each year. Whereas Rawlings and Wilson are mass producing millions of gloves, Nokona makes about 500 a week.

Like with high-end cars or watches, loyal connoisseurs swear by the brand. Storey opens the factory a few times a week for tours, and he’s had guys come in with tears in their eyes, like they’re making a pilgrimage to a holy site.

That’s not to say it’s always been easy. There was a time in the 1970s when Nokona was in danger. The other glove companies had moved overseas, and with an energy crisis and inflation running rampant, people weren’t spending good money on ballgloves.

Storey’s grandfather, Bob Storey, said he’d “just as soon get a bucket of worms and go fishing” as move his factory out of Nocona, so the family stuck it out. The popularity of adult slow-pitch softball in the 1980s and 1990s helped pull Nokona from a period of decline.

Having weathered those difficult years, Storey is ready to go all out for the 100th anniversary. Nokona is going to begin offering centennial-themed products this fall. Next summer, Storey wants to host a big party in Nocona to celebrate the milestone. He’s a musician in his spare time, a drummer, so he’s thinking about something involving bands, good food and cold beer. Maybe even some sandlot baseball games.

The centerpiece for the 100th celebration is already in the works: A 72-inch baseball glove, constructed by hand with parts made to scale, to display in Nokona’s new retail space at the factory. Storey also wants to create a one-of-a-kind \$100,000 glove made from parts of Nokona gloves going back to the 1930s, with added diamond inlays, to auction for charity.

However Nokona ends up marking the centenary, Storey is happy with where the company is and where it’s going. In fact, he said he’s already thinking ahead to Nokona’s 200th anniversary.

It’s that kind of hope that has always coursed through the hearts and minds of baseball lovers. The hope that this’ll be the year your team wins it all. The hope that little leaguers harbor of one day making the big show.

When you’re the underdog, that kind of hope sustains you, and in the baseball glove game, Nokona is certainly an underdog. They’ve always been and always will be the small market team competing against the big boys with deeper pockets.

Except in movies, wealth and power usually win in the end. But sometimes, even in real life, the little guy comes out on top. And that, in a nutshell, is the story of Nokona.