



GOING VERTICAL

Wool Textile Makers Find Success With Premium-Branded Apparel Made In USA

American Woolen Company recently introduced its first apparel line, which features 13 pieces of luxury menswear made in the USA from start to finish.

Apparel manufacturers are a scarce breed in today's U.S. textile landscape. Low-cost imports and high labor costs forced much of the domestic apparel manufacturing sector offshore in recent decades.

But in certain product areas, this trend can be reversed, as Kentwool Inc. and American Woolen Company have found by using a vertically-integrated business model. By controlling the production process from yarn spinning to finished product, Kentwool and American Woolen are finding success with premium apparel brands focused on wool, a natural fiber known for its thermal comfort, breathability and ability to be worn across seasons.

Kentwool and American Woolen both have histories going back more than a century. While their products and end markets may be very different, the commitment to quality, craftsmanship and

heritage are equally important to both forward-looking, modern manufacturers.

Kentwool is a family-owned and -operated company that more recently applied its expertise in wool yarn spinning to launch an apparel business known as Kentwool Performance Apparel. Established in 1843 in Pennsylvania by Thomas Kent and now headquartered in Greenville, South Carolina, Kentwool owns a 135,000-square-foot state-of-the-art wool-based yarn spinning facility in nearby Pickens, which houses approximately 20,000 spindles and produces yarn from 100-percent wool or wool/man-made blends. In addition to its generations-old, high-quality wool yarn operation, the company boasts a thriving consumer-facing, ultra-premium performance sock business.

American Woolen Company recently gained new life thanks to the dedication and vision of Jacob Harrison Long. Established in 1899, the company grew to

become the world's largest wool manufacturer in the early 20th century. But years after its heyday, the company had diminished and become primarily an importer and wholesaler of woolen blankets. Long purchased the brand in 2013, and later had the opportunity to invest in a manufacturing location in the form of historic Stafford Springs, Connecticut-based Warren Mill — a cashmere and camel hair woolen fabrics plant with more than 150 years of history. Under the leadership of CEO Long and President and COO Jennifer Knight, American Woolen Company is reestablishing itself as a premiere, luxury brand name, and is finding success once again as a fine worsted and woolen textile manufacturer.

KENTWOOL'S STORY

All Kentwool products are made in the United States, and the company prides itself on producing some of the highest-quality wool yarns in the world.

"We just achieved our 10th consecutive year of being Usterized," said Keith Horn, president, Kentwool. "Usterized is a certification that says what you get from us is going to be the same every time with continuous improvement in product. We are very pleased to be a part of that program, and it says a lot about the quality of Kentwool's employees and the Kentwool brand," Horn said.

Kentwool is one of only a select few companies worldwide to receive the Usterized Quality Certification from Switzerland-based Uster Technologies AG. The company also is very proud to be the only company in the United States to hold the certification, which states that the yarns Kentwool produces are of the highest quality.

BRANCHING OUT THROUGH BRANDING

In 2008, Mark Kent — the fifth-generation family member to lead Kentwool — participated in a charity golf pro-am. After three days of rainy, less-than-ideal golfing weather wearing under-performing socks, Kent found himself with badly blistered



Kentwool Inc. prides itself on producing some of the finest wool yarns in the world in Upstate South Carolina.

feet. The story goes that after complaining to his caddy about the lack of a performance golf sock, the caddy suggested that Mark, as someone who ran a wool yarn manufacturing company, should go make a great golf sock.

"That comment stuck with Mark, and he set out on an endeavor of about a year and a half of research and design to create a product that he felt met his requirements to go to market," said Lauren Hubbard, director, sales and marketing, Kentwool Performance Apparel. "It was an ultra-premium, super-performance sock, of course made using wool." The "World's Best Golf Sock" — which fittingly carries a Blister-Free Guarantee — has developed a following and is worn by more than 70 tour professionals and caddies. The socks feature a proprietary blend of super fine Merino wool and other premium and high-tech fibers to offer wicking ability, comfort, as well as reduced friction, abrasion and muscle fatigue.

"We positioned our launch into the market as a golf sock, and that remains a large and important piece of our business," Hubbard said. "But over the past decade, we have organically grown into being a versatile performance sock for our customer."

Customers now comprise people seeking comfort for luxury — such as the golfer and traveler — and those seeking comfort for necessity — such as manufacturing and food service industry employees who may be on their feet for long shifts each day.

According to Hubbard, much of the sock division's growth has been through word of mouth. She said the company has developed a very loyal customer base because "once people know the product, they love it!" The fact that the socks are made in the United States has helped build the reputation of the brand nationally, but especially in the Southeast. "Here in Upstate South Carolina, people are so proud to wear a product that originates

where they live. It makes the textile industry very tangible for customers that might otherwise not realize how close it is to them, or how much they are impacted by it, even though we all encounter textile products every day.”

“Some of our most loyal customers are actually our employees,” Horn added. “That’s how much the yarn manufacturing team believes in what they do and the finished product. That in itself is a testament to what kind of product is put out there.”

HERITAGE COMBINED WITH MODERN IDEAS

Hubbard said the company’s long, rich history provides a lot of credibility with its customers. “In the world of socks, our price point is on the higher end, and when we’re asking people to consider spending \$20 to \$40 on a pair of socks, Kentwool’s history gives us a great deal of validation,” she said. “I think it gives us instant trust with the customer that we do know wool and that we know it well. We are very

grateful for that as Kentwool’s youngest division because that trust is so important and valuable, but often takes significant time to build.

“It is really critical to us that we embrace our history and heritage, and that shapes our identity as a company,” Hubbard said. “Our heritage is built in to everything that we do every day, but we also need to give our customer the type of product they are looking for now. We constantly consider the marriage of heritage and innovation.”

“We have a strong tradition in regard to yarn, and the whole mindset of the sock business is really how do you marry the quality of what you have done for years in yarn manufacturing, and apply that to a new product based on the quality you’ve produced for years,” Horn said. “Mark built an incredible team here. We know how to make yarn. We know how to make really good yarn. Now, how do you apply that to a product and carry those characteristics into our own brand for the benefit of the customer?”

LEGACY

Mark Kent passed away unexpectedly in 2017. His significant contributions to Kentwool, the textile industry and his community will be greatly missed.

But Mark’s strong leadership of Kentwool and the growth and changes that occurred during his tenure set the company on a course for prosperity and longevity. “The Kent family, and especially Mark, believe in being on the cutting edge,” said Horn. “Mark believed in investing in the future and his people. We have some of the latest technology available in the world at our facility, but by far, our greatest asset is our people and the team Mark built. What sets Kentwool apart is our quality, our service, and our commitment to our customers. That’s something that we strive for on a daily basis.”

“Obviously where we sit today, we have a lot of discussions around the table about what the future looks like,” said Kim Kent, CEO. “What we can say for sure is that



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Mark, and those before him, successfully built this company on delivering a high-quality product, being innovative and responsive and nimble in the marketplace and that's what we'll continue to do. Both with yarn and with socks and whatever else is on the horizon for us."

"From the sock perspective, we see huge future opportunity," Hubbard said. "I think the appetite for fast fashion is waning. The same interest in craftsmanship people have in micro-brewed beer, locally-made furniture and other products, they're now seeking in apparel as well. Delivering a product that's made in America of the highest craftsmanship and quality will serve Kentwool well as consumer behavior trends more towards highly crafted items."

AMERICAN WOOLEN COMPANY'S STORY

True luxury goods are made in Paris, Milan and London — think Chanel, Ferragamo and Burberry — so why not in the United States? That was Jacob Long's thinking when he acquired the American Woolen Company brand. He had a background in investment banking and precision machining, but during a 23 year-stint working in Europe, Long developed an interest in the textile industry and apparel manufacturing.

"What I really learned in Europe was this aspect of craft manufacturing," said Long. "That focus that the Europeans have — they have the ability to run flexible operations, focusing really on the product — I felt if American Woolen could pull it off, we could pull it off because we had a mill that would adhere to those European standards."

HISTORY AND CRAFTSMANSHIP

After Long met Jennifer Knight, a businesswoman with a background and family history in the textile industry, the opportunity to own a textile factory appeared in the form of a Loro Piana mill in Stafford Springs. Warren Mill was acquired by Italy-based Loro Piana in



Kentwool leveraged its knowledge in wool yarn to launch Kentwool Performance Apparel, a consumer-facing ultra-premium performance sock business.

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Lauren Hubbard

Director, Sales and Marketing, Kentwool Performance Apparel

1988, who invested heavily in upgrades, added worsted capability and continued to train a talented workforce. After Loro Piana was acquired by Paris-based LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton SE (LVMH), LVMH decided to sell the Warren factory. "From their point of view, they were interested in the Loro Piana brand, and it was all about Made in Italy," Knight said. "They no longer needed this little mill in Connecticut. We think it's a really unique asset in the United States in terms of textiles."

With the 2014 acquisition of Warren Mill, American Woolen was in the business of manufacturing fine worsted and woolen cloth, and had the means necessary to control every aspect of production as Long had envisioned.

At Warren Mill, wool fiber enters the plant and goes through no less than 13 steps on its way to becoming a finished garment. Fiber is dyed, blended, carded and spun into yarn that is wound on cones ready for weaving. The yarns are dressed and warped, drawn-in and woven before the greige fabric goes through a mending process. The greige fabric is then finished, before fine mending and exhaustive inspection steps are performed to prepare the fabric for the cut-and-sew process. It's a meticulous process that takes highly-skilled technicians. The finishing stage alone comprises 12 different processes involving heat, steam, chemical and water treatments to add texture and body to the fabric and bring it to life. During fine mending, every inch of the fabric is examined to look for previously unnoticed



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Jennifer Knight

President and COO, American Woolen Company

flaws and impurities in the cloth. Every yard of fabric is then inspected four times before it is packaged for shipping.

"I think what's unique about American Woolen is we're really trying to turn out a fine product, and we're turning out that fine product in Stafford Springs, Connecticut," Long said. According to the company, they are defining a new American luxury by preserving centuries old craftsmanship and carving out an authentic American style. "I tell people we are not trying to go

head-to-head with the Italian fine worsted mills," Long continued. "We're actually trying to carve out a unique niche which we believe is more an American style of fabric and an American-style aesthetic — a different color palette, a different texture. We're trying to find the key attributes that will make a Made in America product different from Made in Italy."

"Our main customers are J. Crew, Hart Schaffner Marx, Timberland, The North Face, and Hickey Freeman," Knight noted. "We sell to higher-end men's suiting makers, and then we sell to more sportswear and fashion brands. I would say 85 to 90 percent of the fabrics we make here, our customers then use our label as cobranding in their garment."

American Woolen's second biggest market is Japan. "The reason Japan loves our brand is because Japan loves American

heritage brands," Knight said. "They wanted an alternative to high-end Italian fabrics. They are loving that they can make suits, open it up and see that it's American Woolen-made fabrics right from Connecticut."

CRAFTSMEN-MADE IN CONNECTICUT

Long and Knight were able to rehire many of Warren Mill's former employees and thus harness the skills and knowledge of third and fourth generation employees who have passed down their craft.

"Machines don't make fine textiles, the employees who operate those machines make fine textiles," Long said. "You can throw as much capital as you want at the problem, but it's not about throwing capital at the problem, it's about getting the operators to try to find the solution."



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Long and Knight want to engage the employees — give them more responsibility and make them feel like they are on the cutting-edge of making Made in America fashion.

“We don’t want our colleagues to feel like mill employees or mill workers — what would it feel like to be fashion technologists?” Long said. “I think for us, the big thing has been trying to engage our workforce and encourage them to think more about what they are doing, because at the end of the day, we’re really trying to turn out a fine product.”

LAUNCHING A GARMENT LINE

With Warren Mill up and running, the next step for Long and Knight was to develop American Woolen’s own line of apparel. The company recently introduced its first garment line, which features 13 pieces of luxury menswear. “Our idea was to position ourselves as a company making these garments on the level of a European luxury brand,” Knight said.

“We control what we do here even with our garment line. We’re making all of the fabrics; and all the garments are sewn in small factories all over New York City. We’re completely overseeing every aspect of production, and I think that’s true luxury,” Knight said. She hopes a womenswear line also will be developed in the future.

The company certainly gains respect from the legacy and heritage of the American Woolen and Warren Mill names. But Long and Knight have a clear focus on provenance. They believe consumers want to know more about where products, including clothing, are produced. Especially on the luxury end, there is a desire to know a skilled craftsman produced the fabric and the garment in the United States.

“It’s actually not so much the heritage, but the provenance, and it’s the expertise and craftsmanship,” Knight said. “And that’s not all about looking at the past, it’s also about preserving the craft in the

present and the future. We see ourselves as trying to be a true American luxury brand and the way we will do that is because we control the whole supply chain. It’s partly history, but it’s also provenance and craftsmanship and control over your supply chain.”

Knight was first introduced to Long through family friends. “Jacob said I’ve bought this trademark and now I want to back it into developing a supply chain, potentially owning our own means of production and ultimately want to launch a fashion brand,” Knight recalled. “And he said, ‘Do you think I’m crazy?’

“I think what we decided to do here was a little bit crazy, but in the greatest way,” Knight said. “I think we’ve got a great opportunity to build a good, solid textile business, which will be in the suiting, outdoor and sportswear markets at the higher end. We’re going to do some government and military business too. But I think our ultimate opportunity is to build a true American luxury brand.”

The majority of American Woolen Company’s fabric customers use cobranding and incorporate American Woolen’s label in their garments.

