



## A HELPING



## hand

BY MARCUS WOOLF



**in** THE 1990s, THE U.S. GOVERNMENT conducted a study to see if it needed to base the sizing of military uniforms on ethnicity. As far out as this sounds, the study did reveal something useful—glove designs needed to change dramatically to more closely fit the structure of women’s hands.

About five years ago, Manzella used this study and its own field tests to overhaul the way it designed women’s gloves and, “The sales results were dramatic,” said Manzella COO Jeff Liebel. Not only did the company’s overall sales numbers increase, but the sales of women’s gloves quickly matched those of men’s models.

“When we introduced a new fit, (women) fell in love with them and started to buy more of them,” said Liebel.

Other glove manufacturers, such as Outdoor Research and Mountain Hardwear, also reported that the fit of women’s gloves has really improved over the past five years. Consumers are starting to take notice, and manufacturers say the most successful retail accounts

ing from a negative position.”

Manzella learned from the government study that the various parts of a woman’s hand—fingers, palm, wrist—have size ratios that differ from the parts of a man’s hand, Liebel said. For example, as you move from a smaller man’s hand to a larger one, the girth of the hand changes at a greater ratio than the length of the fingers. Women’s hands are just the opposite; the finger length changes more than girth.

“When we learned this, we trashed our women’s gloves and created an entirely new fit matrix,” said Liebel. “We took material out of the palms, made the fingers longer in comparison to the palms and tightened the wrists up a bit.”

While women’s gloves fit better these days, they don’t necessarily look much better. For the most part, you have a choice of black, black or black. But this is slowly changing too.

“You’ll see at this (Outdoor Retailer Winter Market) show we’re doing a lot of visually different things with color and accents,” said Todd Walton, public relations coordinator for Outdoor Research.

While that’s great to hear, it is clear that most companies are still only taking baby steps.

“Colors are evolving, and we’re working to create some pop

## DESIGNERS GO BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD TO FASHION BETTER GLOVES FOR WOMEN.

are dedicating more dollars to models made specifically for women.

There’s an argument that retailers don’t need women’s models in every type of handwear. Most companies don’t make an expedition-style mitt for women because not enough women buy that kind of product to justify its existence, and a small men’s mitt will work well enough. But the case is different with gloves.

“Gloves is one of the categories where women’s-specific product ought to exist,” said Ray Ferrand, a rep for Mountain Hardwear. “With gloves, there’s always this push and pull as you try to balance the amount of insulation with the level of dexterity. That’s hard to do, so if you don’t have a design made for a woman, you’re start-

and shelf appeal. But it’s a longer process to get people to buy into that,” Liebel told GearTrends®.

Marmot, a leader in the glove market, has been making women’s styles for a decade, but the company plays it conservative with colors. Like most glove manufacturers, 80 percent to 90 percent of Marmot gloves sold are black. And this makes sense. People want a neutral color to match a variety of coats. Still, Marmot rep Tim Coats said he hopes that a new geranium-colored Piste glove will sell well. “I’d like retailers to bring in some more colors, because out on the ski hill I see that people are wearing more colors.”

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While the outdoor market remains a bit color blind in general, it appears as if some retailers are just plain old blind, refusing to bring in gloves made specifically for women.

"There are still a lot of retailers that will try to sell men's smalls to women, and they say they don't have the space to carry a women's-specific glove," said Walton.

Erik Hammerschlag, glove product manager for Mountain Hardwear, said he sees the same trend. "There are shops not willing to put those dollars on the wall. It's an ongoing problem convincing retailers they should pay more attention to women customers," he said.

Those who shun women's styles tend to

be the less successful stores, said Walton, adding, "Stores with a good female contingent are far better off giving them something that fits."

He pointed out that in the past, "Women have had a real cynicism about buying gloves," and updated designs are finally helping stores regain their trust. So, it's a shame to frustrate women by putting them in men's gloves that don't fit—and you know what they say about a woman scorned. Well, how about a woman who's *cold* and scorned? Yeah, we don't wanna go there either. 🐼

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## SEW WHAT'S NEW?

### WELDING SPARKS GLOVE MAKERS TO TOSS THE NEEDLES AND THREAD



Ever since Arc'Teryx welded a chest pocket to a waterproof jacket, stitch-free welding technologies have become hot stuff. R&D gurus are bonding seams on everything from backpacks to shoes. And, guess what? Gloves may be next.

"I believe we can make a better glove using welding technology," said Erik Hammerschlag of Mountain Hardwear.

He and many other glove experts think welding technology could allow companies to make a waterproof/breathable glove that allows a closer fit and more dexterity. A glove without stitched seams would require fewer materials to make it waterproof, and less material means a glove that not only fits better, but breathes exceptionally well.

"Welding is the next step in having the external glove be the barrier," said Jim Wagner, a product developer for Manzella. "I've been working on a welded glove product for about five years," he told GearTrends®. "Without divulging too much, it's coming along pretty fast. We're going to be able to show some pretty interesting stuff in the near future."

The reason the market hasn't already seen a completely welded glove yet is the fact that manufacturing one is tricky. A welded seam needs tape (applied with an adhesive) to make it strong, and this adds stiffness. Traditionally, welded seams are too stiff to work effectively in the tight areas of a glove, such as the spaces between fingers. The type of machinery to do this detail work are still in development.

Tom Faile of Arc'Teryx's product design said, "We'd love to do a better glove—one that raises the bar—because gloves are a sea of sameness. But we're not there yet."

Gaston McMillan of Mountain Hardwear's R&D department said he's darn close to being there. "I'm gonna make 'em," he told GearTrends®. When asked if he has the machinery to do it, he replied, "Almost. I think I've figured out a method of doing it."

But even if he can do it, there's no guarantee that a welded glove will meet a reasonable price point. Experts say that producing a welded glove could be really expensive, and Hammerschlag noted, "You have to know you're going to sell a lot to make an investment in the molds to put that garment together." Still, he thinks companies will chase the idea.

Some believe that a higher-functioning glove might come from a very different kind of breakthrough. W.L. Gore is currently working on new glove inserts that promise to improve fit and performance, said Bill Foster, accessories business unit leader for W.L. Gore. "The excitement I'm seeing with these inserts...I've never seen it before with another product."

Though welding is the big buzzword right now, Wagner of Manzella said it may not provide the ultimate solution. "There will be a leap beyond the current welding technology," said Wagner. "In less than four years, you'll see a glove that has an outer component of waterproofness, but it may not be made with welding as we know it today."

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