

Crafted From the Crease

THE SECOND



Cooper, Heaton, Vaughn, Brian's; despite what you may think, this article is not a deep dive into goaltending equipment but rather a trip to Grand Rapids, Michigan where two hockey buddies had an idea which led to a concept of taking old hockey equipment and repurposing it into one of a kind leather goods and accessories for your everyday lifestyle.

Their concept and craftsmanship has quickly gained notoriety from some of the biggest names in hockey and has recently reached the highest stage, the NHL.

“When we first met, I kind of brushed him off,” Second String co-founder Zac Smith recalled of his earliest meetings with partner Joe Messina. “Joe owns Masked Marvel Goalie Helmets and was pushing me to wear one during the summer months. A little while later, when I went to (Davenport) University, he was my goalie coach. It was then that we really became friends.”

After Smith's D-II career ended, the two stayed connected and would frequently share ideas about how to create something unique for the hockey world they

both love so much.

On Instagram, they were introduced to the concept of someone having taken used baseball gloves and repurposing them into wallets, keychains and accessories. “We pondered whether we could have that concept translate into goalie gear but wanted to make sure it wasn't like anything found on Etsy. We wanted it to be more upscale. For months, we went back and forth without ever really doing anything about it for over a year.

“One night, I was laying in bed having a restless sleep. I was thinking about the stories we could tell and how we could foster a relationship from one pair of goalie pads so that it could have meaning for dozens – maybe even hundreds – of clients. By 2am, I had enough, and I called Joe. I was full of energy, and I told him we had to take the dive and do this,” Smith recalled.



STRING LEATHER COMPANY



Within a few days, the duo found a leather craftsman who ended up being the perfect fit.

“We went into this incredible leather boutique shop in our hometown of Grand Rapids, Michigan, and met Jacob (Vroon). He was not a hockey guy at all, but his talents and meticulous attention to detail were exactly what we were after. Jacob took great pride in his work, and he quickly wrapped his head around what we were trying to do,” recalled Messina.



King Henrik worked with the team at Second String to develop a line which helped raise money for his foundation.

After doing some experimenting, the trio quickly realized there was potential. The next hurdle was to create a line and release it to the public to see how the market would react.

“In May 2019, we launched our first collection of roughly 300 wallets, keychains and bathroom



bags. We sold out within two weeks and had to spend the spring and much of the summer months getting another collection up by the end of August. When the second collection launched late that month, we sold out again in just a few short weeks. We then knew we had something special,” Smith said.

Messina and Smith credit their team with providing the right mix of talents and perspectives to make things tick. Almost in stereo, Zac praised Joe for his work as the high-

energy go-getter with a passion for sales, while Joe complimented Zac on his focus for making sure all the aspects needed to build the brand got the attention they deserved.

Both partners share an unyielding commitment to the concept of repurposing old equipment into items that can be appreciated and enjoyed on a daily basis.



“When people buy a piece from us, they’re buying a moment in history. They could have a wallet made of Grant Fuhr’s pads and they would have to wonder how many of those black marks came from Wayne Gretzky in practice. No two pieces are alike. Each one is its own Mona Lisa, of sorts. If someone were to be spending a few hundred dollars on a wallet like that, we had to up our packaging game. Zac made that happen.



“In our early days, we did the best we could with the box and wrapping because we didn’t know any better. As we grew, we dialed in our packaging with a really cool waffle board box design and custom-themed packaging that gave those receiving an item from us a completely new experience,” Messina confirmed.

The owners also have no shortage of praise for their master craftsman.

“Jacob has the talent to not only make the finest leather products available, but he also has brought forth other ideas for us to grow the offering. When we started, things like belts, duffle bags, coasters and totes never crossed our mind. He’s really done wonderful things to contribute not only his talent as a craftsman, but also opening the door to us with ideas for other products to dangle out there,” Smith explained.

In both sport and the free market, the results speak for themselves. Their catalog of expertly hand-crafted, American-made products have catapulted them beyond their minor-league beginnings, so that they are now working with some of the most

recognizable names in the game.

“We started to offer services that were akin to commissioned art and called it our Custom Signature Series. We’d invite people to send us their equipment and we would do a line specifically for them that was not available to the public. We



worked with names like Henrik Lundqvist and made a collection for his foundation. We worked with Vaughn Goalie Equipment and made pieces for Jimmy Howard commemorating his 500th NHL game. Famed television host Darren Pang came our way with some of his equipment from his days with the Blackhawks and for the True goalie lover, we did a collection with the Lefebvre family after they completed

their deal with True.

“Having Patrick (Lefebvre) approach us to make gifts for their family, loved ones and closest employees meant a lot. The Lefebvre family has always represented the highest standard of goalie equipment design. To be chosen to bring a vintage set of their equipment to life in a new way was a very special moment for our company,” Messina proudly shared.

Noting that the same process can be made available to any interested party, Messina and Smith also shared the emotional impact their Custom Signature Series can provide.

“An avid hockey fan who recently graduated high school got a custom wallet and keychain from us before moving on to college, and his parents got very emotional. Last Christmas, we did a collection of goods for a lady who wanted to surprise her father, who had played pro hockey back in the 1970s. His equipment meant enough to keep, but it never left their attic or cellar. He was brought

to tears with the gift. All of a sudden, he could carry his memories with him. That’s what we’re all about, the special memories and stories with each piece,” said Smith.

While many companies struggled and may have even been forced to close during the pandemic, demand for Second String’s one-of-a-kind offerings only continues to grow.



clubs to grant access to their equipment and for a presence in their gift stores. Fans will be able to buy Second String pieces featuring authentic DNA from equipment worn by their favorite goalies or players. “The reaction and response have been amazing, to the point where we have developed items made

each one crafted to the standard that got us to where we are today. Our quality of craftsmanship has consistently produced breathtaking pieces that you cannot find on Amazon or your local mall. And we want to keep it that way as we continue to grow,” Smith concluded. As for what’s next, the boys are focused on conquering the

“It was important to us to keep moving, pushing forward, and keeping people in business. We kept Jacob’s shop busy, and we came out of Christmas with our biggest numbers ever. It was very special to see the response and support we got for the promotion we launched right before Thanksgiving. Our name really got out there,” recalled Messina.

Brand recognition and the quality of their products have recently paved the way for NHL



from hockey sticks and skate blades,” Messina confirmed.

Although the hunt for gear is half the fun, managing the steep demand curve has been challenging at times.

“When we started, we’d need to have several dozen or maybe a hundred pieces to launch a collection. Now, we need thousands and

hockey market and believe there is a lot more to accomplish before tackling other dreams and ideas. Could we someday see them open their own gallery, or obtain licenses from the MLB, NBA, NFL, or collegiate sports? Perhaps, but for now, their top priority remains turning The Second String Leather Company into a first-string hockey nostalgia brand. 🏒

Vintage Tendency Magazine would like to thank Joe Messina and Zac Smith for their time and innovative concepts for vintage hockey collectors. Readers are encouraged to visit their website: secondstringleather.com



Zac (left) and Joe (right) took a vision from humble beginnings and have responded to market demand putting them where we all wanted to be – the NHL.

Photo Credit: All images courtesy of the Second String Leather Company