

# CORDURA®

CREATING DURABLE BONDS FOR 40 YEARS



CORDURA® + DANA GLEASON OF MYSTERY RANCH

The durable bonds that are built between a supplier and manufacturer run deep, and in the case of CORDURA® and Dana Gleason, Founder Kletterwerks, Dana Design and Mystery Ranch, we're talking almost 40 years deep. It is easy to forget that there was once a time when quality trumped quantity and brands built their products with premium materials because that was how things were done. Some manufacturers are still following that recipe, working closely with suppliers and mills to cook up groundbreaking designs that go against the grain of fast fashion and conspicuous consumption.

Dana Gleason's experiences are rooted in these values. With a passion for climbing and skiing, he started his career at a chain of regional outdoor stores in the Midwest selling gear, then learned to repair bags, and eventually in 1975, he started to build a line of packs out of his home in Bozeman, Montana. In those days, pack cloth was the fabric of choice for multi-use bags. However, it wasn't until Dana discovered CORDURA® brand fabric that his vision for these packs would really start to take shape. Throwing caution to the wind, he took a chance on this new material, which had been used to reinforce tires in its early development, and purchased a roll of rust-colored 1,000 denier CORDURA® nylon. Little did he know that this long-lasting fabric would help him set the standard for modern bags, and in turn usher in the innovations that would drive pack design within the outdoor, hunting and military markets for years to come.



~Q & A~

*How long have you been working with CORDURA® brand fabrics?*

I've been using CORDURA® fabrics to build backpacks since the '70s, but before that, I fixed packs for people who were using them harder than most manufacturers thought they would be used. Through that experience, I saw all the different ways packs would fail in the field. Fixing things gives you what could be regarded as an unhealthy manufacturing and design attitude because you are going to build things stronger than what most people need. That has been a continuing factor in everything we have done from Kletterwerks to Dana Design to Mystery Ranch.

**We build this stuff for your life, not for some set of uses, not till it's no longer fashionable. We're building tools here, not building toys or fashion.**

*How did you come across CORDURA® at that time?*

In 1975 when we first started building our packs called the Kletterwerks, which were for climbing and ultralight backpacking, we came across 1,000 denier CORDURA® nylon. I've always had a fixation on materials and liked figuring out where they came from. At the time, this material in particular was being used to line the inside of tires. The distributors didn't really know what they had. They just knew it looked like canvas instead of nylon, and it was tough, but they didn't know how tough.

We didn't know enough to be scared of a new material. We enthusiastically adopted it because it

*What makes the rust color of the pack so significant?*

The Flip was done in a color that we call rust. Rust was not considered a fashionable or useful color back in 1975, but our shop and all the shops that we were likely to be selling to were paneled with old barn wood because back then, that's what we hippies thought was cool. And we needed something that would actually show up in the rather poor lighting they used in the stores. The real problem was that we had to buy 1,500 yards to get this color and no one was silly enough to split it with us, so we had to commit to it. It turns out it was a great color.

*What kind of "durable bonds" have you been able to build with CORDURA®?*

We have continuously used CORDURA®, mostly classic CORDURA® fabric to build the toughest military packs we've ever been able to produce. We use also CORDURA® throughout the majority of our whole outdoor and hunting product line because this gives us the best mix of durability, waterproofness and just plain toughness. CORDURA® has been the backbone of everything we've built in the last 40 years. We came to it from the standpoint of the user, climber, skier, backpacker, hunter who had to have gear that wasn't going to fail in the field, even if the product had a guarantee. A guarantee means nothing when you're three days out.



**We didn't know enough to be scared of a new material. We enthusiastically adopted a new material because it worked well.**

**CORDURA® has been the backbone of everything we've built in the last 40 years.**

worked well. Other companies were more worried about if it was marketed well or if people were familiar with it. For us, being able to start something new was a challenge, but a fun one. It let us build packs that would stand up to being hauled on the walls of Yosemite and some of the great north faces in Europe back in the '70s when we were all "young." It was an excellent choice.

*What was one of the first packs you designed with CORDURA® fabric?*

One of the best-selling baseline designs was a pack called the Flip because it involved flipping the top of the whole pack open and being able to get everything out. The Flip was designed to be very narrow and close to the back so you could move over rock without disturbing your balance. We made it with 1,000 denier CORDURA® to help deal with the abrasion of the rock and climbing gear rubbing on the inside of the pack. This is also one of the first packs to use what we commonly call "compression straps." It was very minimalistic, had nothing that you wouldn't need for a full day of climbing, and had everything that you would need. Basically this was one of the earliest modern rock climbing packs.



*The Mystery Ranch factory is one of the few places in America that can go from concept to design to proto to production. Can you tell us a little bit about that?*

Something that seems to have gone out of style for many businesses is actually building it yourself. It has always been in our DNA to build some of the stuff ourselves here. In order to build packs, especially if you have a method that you work with, you have to have a presence and exercise editorial control. If you don't, someone else is doing all of that construction to their imperatives. We have a plant with over 100 people and do an awful lot of our own production right here, although this is probably only our fourth biggest production site. This gives us enough people so we are not just training people to sew, but as they gain experience, they can also become supervisors, represent us at our contractors offshore or here in the United States, and get it done our way. That's extremely important to a company that is totally based in the reliability of their products.

*After all these years, do you consider yourself a designer?*

I would never really call myself a designer. My experience in the outdoor industry happened because I started working in retail stores to get a deal and save money on gear I was going to buy anyway, and learned to sell gear while I was using it. In terms of founding Kletterwerks and Dana Design, it is hugely important to note that I was able to learn the business side of things as well. While there are many designers out there who are better than me, I was simply able to interact with people using my gear and figured out what was important to them as opposed to what I was trying to put into the gear as a designer. The auteur theory as applied to the design of outdoor gear can produce some really interesting things, but it rarely produces classic gear that will be used for years. You have to listen to your users, so while I design, I am not purely a designer.