

OUT & ABOUT

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INCREASE FONT SIZE

# Made in Maine: New Balance supports soles, souls

New Balance manufactures about seven million sneakers every year. Of its five factories in New England, three are in Maine.

BY ALEXANDRA HALL

You'll spot its name on the feet of athletes and celebrities all over the globe, but the multinational sports footwear and clothing corporation has roots right here. Of New Balance's five factories in New England, three are in Maine: Norway, Norridgewock and Skowhegan.

Meanwhile, scoring a pair of the brand's kicks at a discount is easy in these parts, given the company's smattering of outlet stores in the state — and that includes a hugely popular mega tent sale at the Factory Store in Oxford every summer, which this year runs from June 27-July 7.

## GO AND DO

**What:** New Balance Factory Store

**Where:** 19 Industrial Drive, Oxford

**Hours:** Monday-Saturday, 9 a.m.-7 p.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m.

**FMI:** 207-539-9022, newbalance.com

The company, founded in 1906 as the “[New Balance Arch Support Company](#),” made its first pair of running shoes in 1938. It has since become one of the world's best-known sportswear brands.

With profits totaling about \$69 billion since 1992, it makes around seven million pairs of sneakers every year. And while other major athletic companies have moved all of their factories to China to lower costs, New Balance maintains a manufacturing foothold in America. (It does have some production in China, as well as in the United Kingdom to serve the European market.)

Last year, the Department of Defense contracted with New Balance to provide athletic shoes for U.S. military personnel entering basic training. The \$17.3 million contract has helped keep 1,000 Maine workers busy.

Because New Balance continues to make its products in America, production costs — and therefore retail prices — tend to be slightly higher than its competitors' footwear. So the company focuses on compensating for those extra dollars with cool and unusual features like heel counters, gel inserts, and sizes that are hard to find in other brands.

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In its sales, it also emphasizes that producing domestically means better quality in the end, since tasks such as cutting leather and hand-stitching are overseen more closely. But when asked about keeping factories in the United States, directors of New Balance have said, “The major reason why we continue to make shoes in the United States is the commitments to the communities.”

In Maine, 25 percent of the company's employees have been with the company for more than 15 years — and many much longer. In each town it has set down roots in, New Balance has partnered with several volunteer programs, from community fundraiser walks and after-school programs to national family service nonprofits like “The Home for Little Wanderers.”

The company also donates funds to direct local needs; in Norway, for example, the company helped build Lake Penesseewassee Park in 2006, and has continued to donate money to the playground for children and its network of running and hiking trails since then.

Personal fitness, health and preventing childhood obesity in local communities and nationwide are all major causes taken up by the company's philanthropic branch. In 1981, New Balance owners Jim and Anne Davis kicked off the New Balance Foundation, which aims to tackle each of these issues by investing in scientific research, health programs and fitness initiatives to keep everyone moving.

*Alexandra Hall is a longtime New England lifestyle writer who recently moved to Maine.*



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