



Bates Footwear Freedom boots

By Wes Fleming #87301

UNLESS YOU'RE A U.S. MILITARY contractor, you've probably never heard of the Berry Amendment. If you are one but don't produce things that service members eat, wear or use as tools, you probably don't strive for Berry compliance, adherence to which means your "food, clothing, fabrics, fibers, yarns, other made-up textiles, and hand or measuring tools" are "grown, reprocessed, reused or produced" in the United States. Congress instituted the Berry Amendment in 1941 to bolster U.S. manufacturing during World War II; the amendment was carried in Department of Defense appropriations bills year-to-year until 1994, when it was made permanent during the Clinton administration. What it effectively means is that Berry-compliant materials are not only made in the USA, but their components are made or produced in the USA as well. If you're thinking a review of an amendment to a DoD spending bill that's probably older than at least half of the people reading this is a strange way to start a Member Tested product review, you might be right, but here

we are nonetheless.

Bates Footwear, which manufactures many of its offerings in Big Rapids, Michigan, has been making boots since 1885, and making those boots for members of the U.S. military, law enforcement and first responder professions for much of the time since then. A few years ago, Bates decided to get into making boots for motorcycle riders.

A quick spin through Bates' website shows that most of Bates' powersports boots don't look like stereotypical Power Ranger-style boots. They look like the boots you would see on the feet of soldiers, police, EMTs, hikers and hunters. Bates offers their fully American-made boots for motorcyclists in two models: Bomber (tall) and Freedom (short). They also offer three imported models: Crossover (tall), Adrenaline (short) and Beltline (short), and two imported riding shoes that look like high-top sneakers: Marauder and Taser.

The made-completely-in-the-USA-even-the-components aspect of Bates' boots attracted me, especially since all the rest of my gear is not made in the USA. My jackets, overpants and gloves are made in various Asian nations and my helmets are made in Germany and Japan. If I can buy something

that's made in the USA, I'm going to try to do so—provided it is high quality for the cost and protects me at a high level. I met the folks from Bates Footwear at the AIM-Expo in October, 2016, and had the chance to not only talk to them about their products, but to have a good amount of hands-on time with the boots on display.

While I'm perhaps pickiest about gloves, boots are tough for me to find and tougher for me to love. I wear a size 14 shoe, and my feet are on the wide side of medium width. I also have a mangled lower left leg from being on the losing end of a car vs. motorcycle collision in 1999, which more or less prevents me from comfortably wearing tall, traditional (sci-fi-looking) motorcycle boots. This combination of restrictions has seen me gravitate towards LEO-style boots, which don't always offer the complete protection of motorcycle boots but get pretty close in most respects.

The Freedom is a 6" boot with five sets of eyelets topped off by two sets of lace hooks, the uppermost of which is on a nylon collar. They are made of water-resistant leather and nylon, and use leather welt construction and a Vibram outsole. The outsole is replaceable, giving these boots life beyond most you might buy and improving their



economic value. The ankles are surrounded by an impact-absorbing foam called Poron XRD. This “extreme impact protection” material is made (in the USA) by Rogers Corporation (www.xrd.tech), and while I haven’t crash-tested the boots, the foam definitely protects the ankles well from everyday knocks and minor impacts.

From the first long day of riding and walking around, I found the footbeds (or insoles) to be lacking in support, so I replaced them with heat-moldable insoles that give more support and a customized fit. I can’t say this is a major downside of the Freedom boots, because most manufacturers skimp on the footbeds, and they’re usually just thin strips of foam.

Apart from replacing the footbeds, I found nothing comfort-wise to complain about with the boots. There’s plenty of space in the toe box and the medium width fit me just fine after a couple of weeks of break-in time. Though the boots are not vented, the tongue is fabric with a leather tab at the top; this gives a good measure of breathability to the top of the boot and makes the Freedom a boot suitable for summer wear. The little stretchy nylon collar at the very top of the boot helps with that as well, allowing for increased flexibility both on and off the bike, though the feel of the collar took some getting used to.

Along with the XRD foam around the ankles, the Freedom has nice, thick leather panels in likely impact zones around the heel and over the toes. While at first it might seem excessive to include a shifter pad on both boots, consider the shifter pad on the right boot to be an added layer of protection for your right foot.

The water-resistant notation is correct; caught in a decent rainstorm on the way home from a long ride one afternoon, my feet stayed dry for about 15 minutes before the boots became saturated and started letting the water in through the tongue. I mention this not as a complaint, but merely as a data point, because Bates offers no claim that the Freedoms are waterproof. I did not expect them to do more than hold off the rain for a short period of time.

While I am certainly not at Deb

“Motorcycle Fashionista” Gasque’s level of functional motorcycle fashion expertise, I will say that being able to buy the Freedom in any color other than black was a refreshing change from traditional motorcycle gear. Black may hide dirt, but it absorbs heat and, frankly, is boring! So much of our gear is only available in black that it’s nice to have choices, and while my brown Freedoms look a little gauche with my black overpants, they look great with anything else. Besides, nobody compliments how your boots look when you’re riding, so I want them to protect well on the bike and look great off the bike—and the Freedom boots do just that. I like that as I’ve ridden in them, they’ve started gaining a broken-in look to them.

The Freedoms have become my go-to short boots, and I anticipate they will enjoy a long stay in my gear locker. They are available in black camo or brown in men’s sizes 7-14 (no half sizes above 12) and have an MSRP of \$300. You can buy direct from Bates (batesfootwear.com) or find them at various online and brick-and-mortar locations.

PROS: comfortable, replaceable outsole, made entirely in the USA, sharp looking in brown

CONS: expensive, not waterproof; leather requires care, cleaning and attention for best life

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- Laces made in Cumberland, RI
- Lacing Hardware made in Stoughton, MA
- Thread made in Mt. Holly, NC
- Inside Lining made in Weymouth, MA
- Cushion Insert made in Wadsworth, OH
- Insole made in Hampton, NH
- Midsole and Outsole made in Concord, MA
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