

Style

# The Legend of the World's Greatest Sweatshirt

For decades, Camber's Barry Schwartz has devoted his life to making the highest-quality sweatshirts on the planet. Along the way he's endured fire and flood, heavyweight competition and the hollowing out of the American textile industry. Now the fashion world has taken notice, and demand is skyrocketing.

By Noah Johnson

Photography by Caroline Tompkins

October 13, 2022

*This story was featured in The Must Read, a newsletter in which our editors recommend one can't-miss GQ story every weekday. Sign up [here](#) to get it in your inbox.*

You've probably never heard of Camber, an apparel company founded in Philadelphia in 1982, though you likely know its garments, or ones that are inspired by them. Its knitwear—sweatshirts and tees, mostly—is distributed globally and often outsells the apparel of brands in New York, London, Toronto, Paris, and Tokyo with 10 times the hype. Camber's sweatshirts, in particular, have gotten very buzzy lately, but what makes the company remarkable transcends any trend. The company makes sweatshirts like Rolex makes watches, which is to say with a degree of care that borders on the mythic. And it defies all kinds of modern expectations about where and how clothes get made. Camber's story, which is largely untold, is the story of the greatest sweatshirt ever made. And the only way to fully understand it is to put one on, to feel its heft and quality, though that has become a hard thing to do.

Those sweatshirts—Camber's coveted Cross-Knit hoodies and crewnecks—are manufactured in an early-20th-century factory in Norristown, Pennsylvania, 20 miles northwest of Philadelphia. The three buildings form a U-shaped white-brick-and-stone colossus that sits on the bank of the Schuylkill River. The 5,000-square-foot Camber factory sits within an 80,000-square-foot industrial complex, but when I visit one Friday morning, I find most of the ground floor empty. A long, dim hallway leads me to a labyrinth of rooms that make up the main office, and there, through several panes of glass, I see Barry Schwartz, Camber's founder and CEO. Working at a large, municipal-style desk in a tidy office, he appears to be the only person in the entire place. It's about 9 a.m., and he tells me he's already been here for hours.

Schwartz, who is 71 but looks 50, is wearing a hunter green thermal-lined zip-up sweatshirt with a collar, no hood (model no. 130) over a navy blue mock neck long-sleeve tee (model no. 306). His beard is meticulously trimmed. He's got the unhurried, slightly on-edge demeanor of a guy who's used to getting a lot done before most people's workdays start. On the wall behind him there's a framed photo of his Camber-branded Diasio—what he says is a three-quarter-scale replica of a mid-'80s Porsche 962. Among Schwartz's many hobbies is race car driving. There are no family photos on his desk, because Schwartz is not married and has no children. Across the room from his desk there is a wall of filing cabinets. On top of those cabinets, there is a sprawling stack of clipboards. The clipboards are arranged three, four deep. "Each one represents multiple orders," Schwartz tells me.

The clipboards keep piling up because Camber's business is booming. Schwartz runs a wholesale-only operation, meaning these orders are not for individual customers but for brands, shops, and other businesses—his client roster spans a wide spectrum that includes high fashion retailers like Ssense as well as auto-parts manufacturers in Detroit. But in the past year, the typical wait time for a wholesale order to ship from the factory has grown from four to six weeks to something like eight months. Larger orders do not get bumped to the top of the pile. You can't pay Schwartz extra to expedite your order either. For the most part, he chips away at the clipboards in the exact sequence that the orders arrived, progress governed by the trickle of fabric coming in from his supplier and the moderate pace at which his team, which includes two cutters and about 30 sewers, can assemble the garments.

This system suits Camber for two reasons. The last thing any clothing manufacturer wants to see is the market flooded with products that end up steeply discounted or dumped into outlets because they were overproduced. That's wasteful and bad for business. But more important, to Schwartz, is that he's able to operate a morally sound business. "If I overdo it, and I take in too many orders, I'm just burning people," he tells me. "And they're not going to like that. I'm not going to like that."

So Schwartz moves at his own deliberate pace. He oversees every aspect of the business, from fabric sourcing to shipping. He runs one shift. There's no night crew coming on at the end of the day, and no deputy to step in to run the show when Schwartz leaves. If a customer gets burned, that's on him. When someone buys a Camber sweatshirt and proudly wears it for 20 or more years, that's on him too.

**For the enthusiasts** and aficionados who are willing to wait months for a sweatshirt, the desirability of Camber's comes down to two simple things: the quality of the fabric and the sturdiness of its construction.

Schwartz relies on many different textiles, but the material he uses to construct his most covetable garments is the Cross-Knit fabric, which he developed over 30 years ago with a Pennsylvania mill less than an hour away from the Camber factory and which is made using American cotton. It's heavy stuff: 90 percent cotton, 10 percent polyester, knit into a 12-ounce fleece (that's the weight of the material per square yard; the typical weight of T-shirt fabric, for example, is about five ounces). It feels soft and fuzzy on the underside, with an exterior that is dry and tough, like canvas, and nearly as rigid. Camber's Cross-Knit sweatshirts come in 11 colors, all of which were offered when the material was introduced over 30 years ago. The fit is roomy at first—inspired by Champion's Reverse Weave sweatshirt—but shrinks to fit nicely and softens with a wash (or a few hundred washes), like a pair of raw-denim jeans. By almost all accounts, the sweatshirts last for a very long time. Schwartz recently got a call from a customer who said that his sweatshirt was falling apart, so he offered to repair it. The customer had been wearing it for over two decades.

Today, a Camber Cross-Knit heavyweight pullover hooded sweatshirt will set you back \$88 (sizes above XL cost more, up to 6XL, which go for \$114). The company's heavyweight cotton T-shirts and thermal-lined sweatshirts are nearly as popular as the Cross-Knit pieces—and can be just as hard to get. Despite their popularity, the price of Camber goods has only ever nudged up incrementally, hardly keeping up with inflation and the rising cost to manufacture textile goods in America (on July 1 of this year the company did increase prices by 10 percent to offset the current inflationary situation). And since the brand remains relatively obscure to most consumers—especially compared with other big American workwear brands like Carhartt or Dickies, neither of which exclusively manufactures in the US anymore—the intense desirability of Camber still stems from the simple fact that the company makes a superior product. And that is where its products differ from a Rolex—a Camber hoodie comes with almost no status. Yet getting the one you want can be nearly as difficult, in its way, as tracking down a coveted watch.

If getting a Camber sweatshirt isn't easy, making them has been no simple task either. Indeed, the tribulations that Schwartz has endured to keep the business going have been numerous. An ever-present reminder of one such hardship—and one of the root causes of a current Camber backlog—flows past the row of windows in Schwartz's office.

As the Schuylkill rushes its way toward the Delaware River, it hurries, with roiling, frothy currents, right by the Camber factory—so close that it feels like it could reach the building. Occasionally it does, in fact, flooding the basement. A year ago, the rains brought on by Hurricane Ida swelled the river to the highest level ever recorded in Norristown and swamped portions of the building where much of Schwartz's inventory was kept. "We have a tendency to have the river visit us every so often," Schwartz says. "Last year, it visited the first floor, which had never happened in history."

The historic deluge destroyed over a million dollars' worth of merchandise and snarled a business already hit hard by enormous strains in the global supply chain. Suddenly, customers who had already been waiting months for their Camber orders were told they'd need to sit tight for several more months. And new orders were going to take about six times as long as they typically do to fulfill.

But inventory wasn't all that perished. Schwartz had kept meticulous records and an archive of garment samples going back to the company's beginning. Nearly all of it was lost in the flood.

The combined devastation of the flood and pandemic-related supply chain issues were a major setback for Camber. But Schwartz didn't miss a day of work. He dealt with the losses the way he had dealt with the myriad of other challenges he's faced over the years—the fire in his family's original Philadelphia factory, heavy competition from major workwear brands, NAFTA and the widespread kneecapping of American manufacturing. Through it all, Schwartz and Camber have endured simply by sticking to the values he started with—making a good product that he can stand behind, producing it at a humane scale, and never compromising his standards for profit.

These ideas have never been more important and more urgent than they are now. Over the past 40 years, Schwartz has figured out something that has eluded so many other American apparel manufacturers. He did it slowly, within his means, on his own terms, and with a clear sense of purpose. Put on a Camber sweatshirt and you feel that. If it costs a few bucks more, and you have to wait a while to get one, maybe that's the point.

**One night over** dinner, Barry Schwartz tells me he's never lost a customer. "Ever," he says. "In all the years." We're sitting in an Asian-fusion restaurant in a strip mall in King of Prussia, sipping green tea. I was told ahead of time that Schwartz is a strict vegetarian and that he prefers not to eat at a table with meat on it, so I'd agreed to get what he gets: thinly sliced tofu stir fried over brown rice with snap peas and broccoli. He's deeply committed to his particular version of wellness, abstaining from meat and alcohol.

I couldn't help but notice that Schwartz arrived driving a white Honda CR-V from the early 2000s. Odd choice, I thought, for a man who runs a multimillion-dollar clothing business and drives a race car on the weekends. Other curious details emerged as we chatted. Before dropping out of college, a classmate took him to an ashram class and persuaded him to take up kundalini yoga. It seemed like a better hobby than smoking pot, so he stuck with it (along with another kundalini tenet, vegetarianism). Schwartz, who had grown up in Philadelphia, had a background in martial arts—he practiced karate competitively—so the discipline that yoga required was familiar. These days, when he isn't driving race cars or meditating, he's on his road bike. He clocks upwards of 250 miles per week, starting most days watching the sun rise from his saddle.

The more I learned about Schwartz—the race-car-driving-yogi-cyclist-vegetarian who makes sweatshirts for power-line workers—the more I began to understand the singular venture that is Camber. As Schwartz tells me, "I had an unusual technique in the beginning." For instance, he's never hired a salesperson, opting instead to focus on sales himself. He would find a store that he thought should carry his product, usually located somewhere that's cold for a sizable part of the year, like the Northeast. The first and initially the most popular garment he pushed was a thermal-lined hoodie, which possessed all the qualities that have come to define Camber. It was heavy and sturdy and thick—a sweatshirt unlike anything you'd ever worn.

To understand its quality, it is helpful to understand the Schwartz family's lineage as garment makers. Schwartz's father, Leo—himself the son of a tailor—went into the business with his brother making high-end women's coats. In 1948 they opened a factory. As a youngster, Schwartz followed his uncle on sales calls—an eager kid pushing the garment rack down the Philadelphia sidewalks to Lord & Taylor. "We had a good reputation," Schwartz tells me. They manufactured and sold coats under several brand names and distributed them to department stores across the Northeast. Then, in 1977, tragedy upended everything they'd worked to build. A fire swept through their factory, bringing the first chapter of the family's clothing business to a close. Today the Pennsylvania Convention Center sits on the plot where the factory once stood.

One year later, in 1978, Barry, his father, his brother, his uncle, and a cousin bought a wholesale distribution company that sold apparel to sportswear and Army-Navy stores around the Northeast. But Barry found that working in sales and distribution wasn't a natural fit for him. "Because being a distributor," he says, "you're like every other distributor." One day in 1981, Schwartz decided to pivot. He'd caught wind that an apparel brand called Mayo Spruce was closing. Manufactured in a North Carolina mill, the company's clothing was sturdy and popular, particularly its thermal-lined hooded sweatshirt. *This is a great opportunity*, Schwartz thought when he heard the news. *Let's start manufacturing again, be unique.*

“It was just a really good product,” he recalls. But he had some ideas for how to improve it—and make it distinctive. He fiddled with the material to build a weightier sweatshirt and he raised the wholesale price from \$9 to \$12. “I wanted to make the Cadillac,” Schwartz says. “I wanted to make the best, heaviest sweatshirt. Make it better than Mayo Spruce, and people will appreciate it more.” Schwartz was confident that even if his price hike drove away a few customers, he’d succeed in the long run. He remembers thinking, I might lose market share: Instead of selling to 85 people out of a hundred, I’m only going to sell to 50 people out of a hundred. But heck, I’m starting out. What do I care?”

More important, he says, “It was something that I felt we could really focus on. Everything was starting to come in from overseas, and I’m thinking, You know what? I really don’t like selling stuff from overseas. I’d rather hang my hat on something that I make here. Little bit of pride, I guess.”

With that pride, Schwartz took his product to market. But it wasn’t easy. “It was pretty abysmal for that first year,” he says. “We made 10 dozen in total. They didn’t know me,” Schwartz says, referring to the retailers he was pitching. “They didn’t know who I was, and what I could do.”

Schwartz did manage to pick up one distributor during that first run, though, and that proved vital. “They’d give me the buyer, and I would introduce myself and at the same time throw it at them,” Schwartz says. “I’m like, ‘Here, feel this.’ And I say, ‘I’m making that in Philadelphia. What do you think?’ And nine times out of 10—actually, 10 times out of 10—they would like it enough to say, ‘Yes, I could try some.’ I knew as soon as they’d get the first dozen in, they would love it and they would be a customer.” That’s when he says it: “I never lost a customer, ever, in all the years. So, I guess I was making the right thing.”

In the mid-’80s, Schwartz added colors beyond the black, navy, gray, and green that Mayo Spruce made. He specialized in big and tall sizes, which many brands didn’t offer. But, as he hoped it might, the thing that made Schwartz’s thermal-lined zip-up hooded sweatshirt stand out was its weight. No one else in the market had figured out how to make them like he did—and he set a standard to which other brands could aspire. Schwartz still believes that other American workwear brands, like Carhartt, were influenced by his product. A representative from Carhartt said the company was unable to confirm whether Camber’s designs served as an inspiration for the brand’s thermal zip-up sweatshirts, which first appeared in 1987. Regardless, Schwartz says his competitors would be hard pressed to make sweatshirts quite like his, anyway.

They were a little more expensive, but people were willing to pay. Sales were good, and Schwartz saw a chance to replicate his success by producing athletic sweatshirts like the ones being made by Champion and Russell Athletic. He focused on Champion’s heavyweight Reverse Weave. “It really was a replica of their product,” he says. “Just upgraded.” He developed the fabric exclusively with the mill he still works with today. No one else uses it, although plenty try. Schwartz says he still receives the occasional call from big American fashion businesses looking to find out where he sources his fabrics or asking to buy material directly from him.

Like many domestic manufacturers, Schwartz cites the enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement, in 1994, as the moment his industry changed. “Back before NAFTA, it was almost like a free, even playing field,” he says. “Once NAFTA occurred, and all those companies like Carhartt and Champion and Woolrich, they started thinking about profits and that was the end of it. So, let’s take all the Levi’s and make them in Mexico. Let’s make all the T-shirts in the Dominican Republic. It goes on and on. So, I just said, ‘No way. I’m going to make it here.’”

But why not open a factory overseas like the rest of them? Surely he could replicate the quality of a Camber sweatshirt anywhere in the world. It’s not like making bagels in New York. “Then I’d be like everybody else,” Schwartz says. “Selling out. If I had an assembly line and I was making blueberry pies I could make 20,000 of them a day. Or I could make homemade pies, and sell them to several nice, high-end restaurants. That’s what I prefer to do.”

This strategy worked to his advantage in ways he might not have predicted. In the mid-’90s, Schwartz started noticing greater interest in his products at trade shows from Japanese retail buyers. He says one season he met with a single Japanese buyer. The next season there were 10, and the season after that there were 50. He hasn’t done a trade show in 15 years, but that period established his presence globally—at times, as much as 50 percent of Camber’s sales have been overseas. “The internet kind of blows things up,” says Schwartz. “We’re just doing whatever we can to take care of everybody.”

**Much of Camber’s** surging popularity stems from the increased demand for “Made in the USA” products—a demand that’s felt not just domestically but in Europe and especially Asia. In the late ’90s and early aughts the brands A Bathing Ape, Neighborhood, WTAPS, and Undercover established a new generation of streetwear in Japan, one dedicated to the kind of high-quality clothes their founders geeked out on—vintage American-made Champion, Levi’s, and Hanes. By the early 2000s, many of those Japanese brands were printing their logos on Camber sweatshirts.

American workwear carries a certain cachet in Europe too. Basile Khadiry, cofounder of Beige Habilleur, a haberdashery in Paris, sells Camber sweats to his high-end clientele. “Made in the USA is very much appreciated in France and Europe,” he tells me. “Products that have a specific or historic reason to be made in the US. They are perceived as made to last, with a functional beauty.” Khadiry says the first Camber order he got into the store five years ago sold out in two weeks. Now people come in regularly asking for its sweatshirts, but they’ll be lucky to find any. Khadiry says he’s been waiting a year for his restock.

Alex Dondero of LQQK Studio, a New York–based streetwear brand that produces a custom-designed hoodie with Camber, tells me that he owns 20 of the brand’s hoodies. “There’s just not a better fitting and feeling hoodie out there, really,” he says. “You could spend years developing your own custom pattern, find the mill that makes a similar weight and type of grain that his fleece has, but then at that point you’re just circling back to what Camber is.”

Dondero says that working with Camber hasn't always been the most expedient business decision for him—long wait times, large minimum-order requirements, and a higher price point make it a complicated proposition for small brands like his—but he sees beyond the bottom line. “Once you make a better item you can't go back,” he says. “You can't start selling something that's lesser quality, because you'll betray the trust that you built with your customer. When we decided to start doing more with Camber, we knew that trust would never be betrayed.”

For all the ways that Barry Schwartz shrewdly steered his business into the future, one development he could never have fully predicted is the essential role that hooded sweatshirts have come to play around the world. Plenty of factors have led to the hoodie becoming the bedrock of global fashion—the preeminence of streetwear, the advent of athleisure, and an acceptance of a more casual business wardrobe. But the pandemic created an unprecedented frenzy around sweats. Entireworld, the label launched in 2018 by fashion-industry darling Scott Sternberg, prompted a rash of articles with headlines like “Sweatpants Forever.” In March 2020, Sternberg's sales grew over 600 percent from the previous year. He was selling out sweats as fast as his e-comm site could restock them. But his company struggled to secure fundraising, and in October 2021, Sternberg announced that Entireworld was going out of business.

For many brands, selling what you make just isn't enough. Investors want to see scale. And the reality is that the American textile manufacturing system typically doesn't support the kind of scale that an ambitious business like Entireworld seeks. As of 2016, there were still nearly 6,200 apparel manufacturing firms in the US, but over half had fewer than five employees.

**“If a person were to purchase a Camber sweatshirt and work in it and wash it 35 times, he will never wear another sweatshirt.”**

— Mike McLaughlin

Their products must be tailored to people who have particular appreciation for certain attributes. American-made garments are considered to be more environmentally and socially responsible, less likely to have been made by workers earning low wages in dangerous conditions—and shoppers are willing to pay a premium for these goods. But a business with, say, a staff of four simply isn't able to produce and distribute on a mass scale. Over 96 percent of clothing purchased in the US is imported. Made in the USA is a niche market.

Over the years, Schwartz has been able to tack and jibe in the face of shifting winds to avoid a number of the challenges that have doomed other companies. He has scaled his business to a healthy size—about \$4 million in annual revenue—and resisted the kind of growth that would force him to move his operation overseas. He's partnered with one of the few remaining high-quality fabric suppliers. He's established healthy markets abroad while also specializing in a product that the US is known for, and that many American businesses might be inclined to support.

One of Schwartz's most loyal American clients is Greenfield Fence, out of Oceanside, California. The company's president, Mike McLaughlin, orders anywhere from \$60,000 to \$100,000 in apparel each year from Camber for his crew of 130 workers, including high-visibility safety shirts. Not just because Camber meets California's strict laws regarding the exact shades and brightness of fluorescent oranges and yellows required for job sites, but because for McLaughlin the quality of the product is worth the premium. Surely he could be saving thousands of dollars buying less expensive, likely imported, T-shirts and sweatshirts for his crew, but he gets something distinctive from Camber.

"The quality means something," he says. "The men wear it every day." He spent time installing fences himself, so he knows firsthand. "In the world of workwear clothing, Camber would be Ralph Lauren Purple Label," he tells me, referring to RL's super high-end, Italian-made fashion line. "The way it fits, the material—in general, it's a better product than anything else you'll find, especially the sweatshirts. If a person were to purchase a Camber sweatshirt and work in it and wash it 35 times, he will never wear another sweatshirt."

McLaughlin says that the patriotic element of supporting an American-made business is nice, but it's not the complete picture. "If there was something made in another country that was equal to the quality, I would entertain it," he says. "But there just isn't." Every three months, McLaughlin supplies his workers with five new shirts, always printed with the Greenfield logo. The old shirts, he says, are so good that they make their way to other job sites. "I see my Greenfield shirts everywhere," he says. "They have friends, cousins, uncles—whoever—stealing the shirts. I go ask where they got the shirt, and they just say, 'These are the best.'"

Schwartz has equally strong bonds to a devoted base of small, independent American retailers. People like Wayne Orr, who has been selling Camber in his shop on Main Street in Branchville, New Jersey, since the very beginning. Orr's Clothes for Country Living is the kind of mom-and-pop store that once could be found in any American town. When I visit one recent afternoon, I'm greeted by Orr himself, a man in his 70s with the frosted look and jolly demeanor of an off-duty Santa Claus. He bought the place and renamed it in 1976, and says people still come from all over the world to browse the flannel shirts, dungarees, and work boots in his little shop with creaky wood floors. And, of course, they come for Camber.

Orr met Barry and Leo Schwartz in the late '70s, before they had even turned their apparel wholesaling business into the brand Camber, and he was one of the first to place an order of thermal-lined sweatshirts. They turned out to be like-minded as businessmen. Just as Schwartz did all his own sales to retailers, Orr and his family members have personally sold every item in his store. That, he says, is how he's managed to keep his shop open all these years, through the explosion of malls and big-box stores, the rise of e-comm and free next-day shipping, and then through the pandemic. Orr doesn't even have a web store, and yet the past two years, he says, have been his best ever.

Although Camber is revered for its quality among certain customers, Orr tells me that most people who come into his shop looking for a sweatshirt have never heard of the brand. But, he says, "Once I get it on 'em, they never go back." In fact, during our chat a guy comes in looking to stock up on Carhartt T-shirts. I immediately recognize the navy crewneck sweatshirt that he's wearing as a Camber Cross-Knit. I ask him if it is. "I have no idea," he says. "What's Camber?" He pulls out the tag and sure enough, it's Camber. "I love it," he says. "Best sweatshirt I've ever owned." He works as a carpenter and has had the Camber sweatshirt for years—probably bought it at Orr's. "Now I know where to go when I need a new one," he says. Which raises one problem with making a sweatshirt that lasts for 20 years: They hardly ever need to be replaced.

**Despite the spike** in demand Schwartz has seen, he's done little to increase production. For decades, his operation has run steadily at full capacity, with 48 employees, including cutters, sewers, and packers, working regular shifts five days a week. In recent years, to boost production somewhat, Schwartz has added time to the weekday shifts and an additional half shift on Saturdays. But a radical change like creating another sewing room, or hiring a new crew to work a night shift, would require another Barry Schwartz to oversee it all. And the quality would take a hit, a possibility he's not willing to entertain. "That's what I've been working toward all these years," he says.

At the Camber factory, after chatting in Schwartz's office, I get curious to see the actual operation—the cutters and sewers and the sweatshirts themselves. So Schwartz takes me, along with Cary Heller of the Michigan-based [All USA Clothing](#), one of Camber's main American sales partners, on a tour of the factory. He points to stacks of boxes 15 feet tall, each packed with coveted Camber wares—a mere fraction of the inventory he had before the flood, he says.

Upstairs, we walk through the cutting room, where we watch the production manager, Jose Zayas—a 25-year veteran of Camber who worked with Leo Schwartz before the company moved to Norristown—cut through a stack of fabric as thick as a mattress with a 10-inch power saw that runs at 20,000 RPM. He does this by hand, tracing the lines on a paper stencil of the pattern pieces with precision. About 300 sweatshirts' worth of pattern pieces will be cut in a day. The panels of fabric—a sleeve, a hood, the front of the body—are numbered for color consistency and sent to the sewing room.

And it's in the sewing room where, over the course of an hour, you can see the entire process of how a Camber sweatshirt is made—how it goes from a pile of fabric to a bagged and tagged garment. How the pocket is attached to the body, how the sleeves are sewn on with the famous Camber double-needle coverstitch, then the side panels, which are attached with a six-needle machine.

Much of what Schwartz knows about running an apparel factory he learned from Leo, his father, who worked with him at Camber until 2013, the year before he died at the age of 92. “We used to joke that he could and would do everything,” Schwartz says. “So we had a hat that we would write down different job titles on. Hundreds of them.”

Longevity is part of the Camber story. Most employees stay with the company for years. And Schwartz makes it appealing to stay, sharing profits with his workers, giving them a percentage determined by their base pay, and paying time-and-a-half for overtime hours, which most employees happily earn. Workers aren't given incentives to be more productive, and they aren't being monitored by their productivity. “We have a really humanitarian concept here,” Schwartz tells me. “If you become really good at something, then we're going to give you a better job position, a better machine; that is important to us. People want to strive to move up.”

Heller, who speaks with Schwartz multiple times daily, tells me that Schwartz has a close bond with his employees. “It's not unusual for me to be on the phone with Barry and a family member of an employee calls him on the main Camber line to relate a message to someone in the sewing room because the employee forgot their cell phone,” Heller says. “That's the kind of place that Camber is.”

The pride Schwartz feels in his workers and the garments they make is particularly evident in the last stage of the manufacturing process. Every Camber piece says “Made in USA” in five different places and is individually bagged when it leaves the sewing rooms. Then it's stacked into inventory before being packed into a box along with the rest of an order and shipped out.

Almost all fashion is fast these days. Most brands release two to four new seasons each year, while some crank out new collections weekly, introducing entirely new styles and colors and fabrics and concepts for the masses to obsess over and buy and tire of all within a few months. For that cycle to continue at the pace the industry demands, clothes must be designed and made quickly, then they must be distributed, sold, and delivered with even greater speed. Is the fashion industry hustling to keep up with us? Or are we being forced to keep up with it? We've been promised that we won't have to wait to get what we want, but the question is, Do we even want what's being sold?

Camber's success proves a simple truth: If you make really good clothes, people will wait for them. It's even made me think that we should be skeptical of anything that doesn't take a little while to reach us.

At one point, I ask Schwartz how he balances two disparate facets of his business—the workwear supplier and the fashion brand that has some of the best boutiques around the world eagerly awaiting his next drop. “Well,” he says, “how do I measure fashion? Camber is a thing that people want. They feel comfortable in it, and whether they want to call it fashion or function? People have said to me, ‘So, what are you going to do for spring?’ And I go, ‘We just do what we do.’”

These ideas have never been more important and more urgent than they are now. Over the past 40 years, Schwartz has figured out something that has eluded so many other American apparel manufacturers. He did it slowly, within his means, on his own terms, and with a clear sense of purpose. Put on a Camber sweatshirt and you feel that. If it costs a few bucks more, and you have to wait a while to get one, maybe that's the point.

Noah Johnson is GQ's global style director.

*A version of this story originally appeared in the November 2022 issue of GQ with the title “The Legend of the World's Greatest Sweatshirt”*

**Subscribe to GQ. [Click here >>](#)**

---

#### PRODUCTION CREDITS:

*Photographs by Caroline Tompkins*

*Styled by Suzy Zietzmann*

---



Noah Johnson is GQ's Global Style Director. ... [Read more](#)







