



PRODUCT REVIEW

Warm to the touch

Gator Skins Thermal Underwear

Shirt: \$44.99 XS-2X, \$49.99 3X-4X

Leg thermals: \$34.99 XS-3X

Gloves: \$28.99 S M L

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Reviewed by Mike Staudt

Photos by Kim Staudt

Back in 1978, my life took two defining turns. I bought my first street bike and I got married. I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I would be a lifer when it came to riding. I was pretty sure that if I were lucky I would also be married to the same girl for the rest of my life. In 1979, I sold my first bike and traded a car to an Outlaw for a '65 Panhead. I knew from that first ride that I would forever ride Harleys.

From that time on, my world of apparel consisted of blue jeans, T-shirt, black boots and a black leather jacket. The jeans had to be Levis and the jacket had to be the basic zip-up, collared, belted style that all the bikers and police wore. Throw in some chaps, gloves and aviator headgear and I could ride year-round. Of course, all of the above had to be leather.

I have ridden down to 20 degrees through the years and riding gear has certainly changed, but I haven't. I still wear the same head-to-toe leather, but what I wear under the leather has changed immensely. I used to roll newspapers and line the sleeves and jeans for warmth as a lot of my friends did. Soon I tried using long underwear. Better, but still not the answer. I turned to more shirts, hooded jackets, and bib overalls, and it got to the point where I felt restricted because I couldn't move under all the clothes.

More and more companies began producing underwear-type gear to keep you warm. I have tried some and I can't say one beats another, or even anything I have ever come up with on my own. I don't like the silk ones at all. It just doesn't seem right for a man to be wearing silk. Electrics also

came onto the scene with gloves, vests, pants, socks—you name it. The idea behind that was invented in 1919. It's called a toaster and I ain't a slice of bread.

I learned about a line of products called Gator Skins, and the description made me wonder if the stuff is for real. "Best damn riding shirts made," according to company owner Fat Mike, and that's at 70 mph at 60 degrees! No jacket—just the Gator Skins shirt. This stuff had



to be put to the test and I wanted to be the test rider. Fat Mike's got 44 years riding on the road and my 30 years seemed to qualify me to review his claims.

Some tests can be confirmed with test equipment that documents the results. But testing clothing for warmth is quite subjective. I may think it keeps you warm while someone else might think it doesn't do the job. It comes down to opinion, and if you ever want a second opinion, just ask the wife! That's what I did. I tested them and so did Kim. She has 10 years riding solo under her butt and 20 behind me, so she's

certainly qualified to be a good test rider.

I wore the shirt, leg thermals and gloves on a 32-degree afternoon. My ride would take me to a parts store to pick up a gear for the garage door opener. Round trip would be 30 miles and the roads would range from residential to Interstate, and a local highway, too. Speeds ran from 30 to 70 mph if you follow the posted speed limit. Travel time was one hour, and I concluded that I love this stuff! Dressed with the three pieces against my skin and a short-sleeved T-shirt, jeans, leather vest, chaps, headgear and gauntlet gloves, I was warm. It felt like a 55-degree day rather than one in the low 30s. The lady at the parts store couldn't

believe I was riding on such a cold day. I had her run her hand up my sleeve to feel my skin. She was amazed at how warm I felt. When I arrived home, I had Kim do the same thing since it was the whole trip and not just half. She stated she felt warm skin, too, and not a bit of coolness. My hands were a little cool, but I wore my thinnest gloves. With my thicker pair, I would have been warm there, too.

Kim's test came on a 47-degree day. We rode to a little barbecue place we like to frequent for dinner. Round trip was 40 miles and again, we were on similar roads with the same speeds.

She dressed in jeans, T-shirt, leather jacket, chaps, gloves and a helmet with the same three pieces of Gator Skins underneath. She gets cold quite easily and was skeptical about whether it would work as well for her. I waited till we stopped to eat, and she said, "I am warm and my arms, legs and hands don't feel cold at all! The material is lightweight and isn't confining or itchy. The stuff really does work!" Kim normally doesn't like to ride below the 55-degree mark and she thought she could easily ride in comfort down to 35 degrees.

While some people will want the Gator Skins for these temperatures, others will want them for rid-

ing in higher temps with a varied degree of clothing. You can choose the weight of the jacket, whether you want chaps, extra gloves, etc. The choices can be matched to the conditions on the day of the ride.

The Gator Skins technology comes from DuPont researchers. The material, a silver-colored microfabric, is knitted from fibers that are smaller than a red blood cell. They hold a greater amount of warm air next to the skin when compared to traditional fabrics of equal or greater thickness. The material is breathable and the patented construction and fabric allow some air to pass through while some fibers warm and hold warmer air molecules in. Sounds technical to me, but hey, it works! They are proudly made in the U.S.A., just the way they should be.

For proper fitting, the shirt should be worn loose, like a T-shirt. If it's tight, it stretches apart and loses its warming ability. It only stretches horizontally and not vertically. It is also water-repellent, but only if worn loosely. If stretched too much, it opens up the material and water can get in. The leg thermals are to be worn to a snug fit since they are under your pants. Gator Skins' special weave will not fray even if you get a hole in them, which is very hard to do.

Cleaning Gator Skins is simple. Wash them in cold or warm water and hang them to dry, or throw them in the dryer on an air cycle. Drying in a hot dryer will cause the fibers to tighten up. If this happens, you can quickly fluff the item back to normal as it cools. They will not shrink, so you don't need to allow for shrinkage when ordering.

According to Fat Mike, the original intent for this product was sports teams. Testing revealed that some players got overheated wearing the garments. Cases of heat stroke and heat exhaustion dealt the final blow to this use. Fat Mike met with the manufacturers and proposed making them for the biking community. Long negotiations and revised plans finally made Gator Skins a reality.

Also available from Gator Skins is the one-size-fits-all fleece neck warmer at \$24.99, and the balaclava in medium and large at \$24.99. Now you have no more excuses not to ride in the cold! ▶