Holding on to the pot

Big waters; big boats; big money - and huge prestige for the winning team. At almost 150 years-old, ocean racing's America's Cup is reputedly the oldest sporting trophy in the world and, for the first time in its history, an American boat will be neither contesting nor defending this year's event. On Saturday, February 5, 2000, the Italian entry - Luna Rossa - sponsored by the fashion and sportswear house of Prada, took an unprecedented 49-second lead over AmericaOne - the last of five US teams to contend the Louis Vuitton Cup for the right to challenge New Zealand, the current holders of the America's Cup. The event itself, and the months-long international skirmishes beforehand to provide a challenger, have been used, within living memory, to promote the sales of tea, houses, telecommunications, fashion, soft luggage (Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy sponsor the current pre-Cup challenge series of races), pens, trainers and oil. Prada's successful involvement highlights the fashion group's current status in the sportswear and leisure sector - first reported in WSA Autumn 1997 - and its aggressive commercial activity in purchasing a number of other brands which are all capable of exploitation in context.

Market potential

There are no prizes for guessing which brand name appears on the clothing supplied to Luna Rossa's crew and obviously the potential promotional value to a clothing manufacturer in supplying the challenger and defender crews is immense - and more than sufficient to justify pulling out all the stops to meet design parameters.

A first for wool

Without fear of contradiction, America's Cup 2000 must surely be the first where the softness of merino wool has been promoted as the basis for a sustainable fabric for use in ocean racing.

As one of the world's leading woollen fabric producers, the Italian company Loro Piana has developed a variant of its Zelander merino wool weave and applied it to a complementary jacket and vest design for the defending crew. Team New Zealand, led by skipper Russell Coutts, will be appropriately kitted out in garments manufactured in the 100% New Zealand wool to which Loro Piana has added its exclusive Storm System treatment.

Zelander fabrics grew from the Italian company's long-term involvement with the use of merino woollen fibres below 18 microns. In the variant supplied to the crew the wool's natural heat-retaining abilities are boosted by spinning and weaving techniques. The result is a water- and wind-proof performance textile which is subjected to the exclusive Storm System treatment to render it highly water-repellent, but which retains all the breathability, comfort and thermal qualities of the basic yarn. Loro Piana says that it is perfect for active sportswear.

The garments have been given the series title Defender's, and carry a Line 7 brand label. Jacket and vest are both lined with Cashpima - a soft, and almost sybaritic blend of cashmere and cotton fibres. Cuffs, internal and external pockets, zips and drawstring fastenings have been designed to maximise comfort and protection in extreme conditions. Loro Piana suggests that this detailing makes the garments particularly versatile and an ideal solution for leisure and travel. The Team New Zealand uniforms were designed and tailored by Canterbury Clothing.

Musto's HPX Core Design smock using Gore-Tex Ocean Technology fabrics.



Left: Enhancing New Zealand's defence of the America's Cup is Loro Piana's woven merino wool in a jacket and vest tailored by Canterbury Clothing.

Challenging ways



As might be anticipated W L Gore's ptfe membranes figure prominently in the details of the weatherproof outer shell clothing supplied to the majority of the crews participating in America's Cup 2000. Technically the company's achievements on water have possibly been greater than those of its complementary products for land-based activities. The original Gore-Tex membranes were apparently not suited to water sports; allegations were levelled of salt contamination and reversed humidity gradients caused by the clothing being covered with an almost permanent film of water. Gore states most emphatically that this is not, and never has been, the truth of the matter and that the problems encountered between 1976 and 1985 were '...due to non-waterproof garment design, poor construction, and incomplete seam sealing'.

Research dealt with all those deficiencies and then in 1994 Gore launched its strongest membrane under the brand name Gore-Tex Ocean Technology. Laminated to a range of extremely abrasion-resistant face fabrics and geared to the heavier end of the business, this product is probably the most widely used in all forms of sail sports - many clothing manufacturers anchoring their top-o'-the-market ranges with an own-branded fabric and Gore-Tex OT.

A prime example of this is the Henri-Lloyd Offshore smock which is made up in the company's own Breathing Ultra laminate - a combination of a mid-weight nylon fabric and Gore-Tex OT. Both this fabric and the moderately heavier Breathing Original product have met with success in a number of ocean sailing events, including the Volvo Round the World Race, prior to the recent 'discussion' in the waters of the Hauraki Gulf.

The crew of Espana Brava have been using the Offshore smock as a training garment, reserving the lighter Henri-Lloyd Sport salopette and One Design Sprint smock for the more unreserved meetings with their rivals. Sprint is manufactured in TP 2000 fabric, a company-developed breathable product that has just completed two years of race testing.

Moving experiences

The available crew space on an America's Cup contender is sorely limited. Perhaps overstating the obvious, but what that really means is that protective clothing must protect without being bulky; must allow agile movement without hindrance; above all, it must not interfere with the wearer's concentration on the job in hand. When everything around you is moving in five directions simultaneously, the last thing one needs is a flapping sleeve or a knee-length hem.

Musto makes this point in its selection of weatherproofs supplied to the crews of the defender - Team New Zealand - and America One, which until February 5 had been the hot favourite for the final challenge for the Cup itself. The company's HPX One Design refers not only to the garments, but also to the very fabric from which they are made.

Again using Gore-Tex Ocean Technology membranes, HPX One Design fabrics are three layer in construction - polyester mesh, the membrane, and a rip-stop nylon outer face. Musto claims a 25% reduction in average weight against its standard HPX fabric, and says that the rip-stop provides all the strength and abrasion resistance required on these fast-moving ocean racers. Of course it is a certainty that Musto garments will be worn in the final of finals and the company expressed every possible confidence in the New Zealand crew's ability to maintain their superiority.



The Keelboat smock from Douglas Gill International using the company's own-brand O² breathable fabric.



Henri-Lloyd's TP2000 fabric was specified for the crew of Espana Brava.

DuPont Cordura 180 and 370 Dtex yarns, as opposed to the more usual 500 and 1000 Dtex, have been woven to provide a much softer hand to the fabric coated and supplied by Diffusion Textiles for the uniforms of the crew of Stars and Stripes, skippered by America's Cup veteran Dennis Conner. Impressed by the handling qualities and the fact that the softer yarns still retained the anti-abrasion and strength qualities of the original, brand leaders Canterbury selected the fabric and carried through the design and make-up. First-hand reports confirm an excellent reception by the team members.

Diffusion Textiles is based in north-eastern England, from where - among its other claims to fame - it supplied the fabrics for the uniform jackets worn by the staff of Britain's Millennium Dome after the original textiles proved to be inadequate.

Douglas Gill International can record a long involvement with ocean racing at the highest level - which also accounts for the company's success in catering to the less rarefied atmosphere in marinas and boat clubs throughout the world. The American crews on Abracadabra 2000 and America True both selected Gill as the main provider of race and training kit, but chose to diversify in their final choice of style and fabrics.

The USA's Abracadabra, entered by the Waikiki Yacht Club, went for Gill's Atlantic series jackets and trousers: Gore-Tex OT membrane again with a rugged face fabric and a specification that is race-proven. Taking the light-weight track, the experienced team on America True called for the Keelboat smock and Tradewinds trousers as a race uniform. Both are manufactured in Gill's own brand hydrophilic breathable fabrics known as O_2 - are very slimly profiled - and are free of bulky zips or other protrusions.

Both crews took delivery of Dinghy smocks for use in training - Abracadabra in Gore-Tex; America True in hydrophilic coating once again.

One to challenge

At the time of writing the duels for the Louis Vuitton Cup have drawn to a conclusion. The Prada-sponsored Luna Rossa has won the right to challenge Team New Zealand for the ultimate prize.

But it's fair to ask, 'just what is the ultimate prize?' A silver cup and four years of prestige? The justifiable satisfaction (and who would deny) of being the best team and ocean racing craft in the world? Or the commercial success that follows from designing and manufacturing equipment which has been proven not just once, but many, many times in one of ocean racing's toughest challenges?

And shall we see the Prada brand being proudly carried by the Italian team at the Sydney Olympics?

Derryck Draper



Smiles all round from the crew of Stars and Stripes.