Freestyle skiing star Kari Traa retired from competitive sport after the Turin Winter Olympics last year. Now she's concentrating on making a name for herself in activewear, launching a new line of specialist underwear and outer garments – exclusively for women – at the ispo Winter 07 event in Munich in February.

Norway's golden girl goes back to her roots

For years, former Olympic skiing champion Kari Traa suffered ill-fitting clothes supplied by sponsors, and designed and put together by manufacturers who seemed to her to pay little regard to the measurements of women. "Designs were too heavy and complicated," she told *WSA*, "with pockets in places they didn't need to be, and so on."

You only win the full range of Olympic medals – gold in Salt Lake City in 2002, silver in Turin in 2006, bronze in Nagano in 1998, all in the women's freestyle competition – if you tackle challenges head on, so it's no surprise that Ms. Traa has been addressing the shortcomings of women's ski and activewear directly since 2002.

Following her gold medal success at the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics in February that year, she returned to her home town of Voss in the west of Norway and began producing a collection of hats and headbands. This was really no more than the extension of a hobby of many years' standing: to pass away the time on long journeys to competitions, or between events, Kari Traa took to knitting hats, headbands and even ponchos, and distributed her handiwork among her colleagues on the Norwegian Olympic team. Launching her first line of products locally, fuelled by her huge popularity as a sports star, was a commercial success.

The Kari Traa activewear brand built up from there, adding a specialist underwear collection in 2004 and launching internationally in 2006. The company now has representatives in a



Kari Traa in action.
Kari Traa AG



No men allowed

Kari Traa, pictured below (right) modelling her own design of specialist underwear. She is committed to producing activewear exclusively for women. Streetwear (main picture) is now becoming an increasingly important part of the range too.

Kari Traa AG

dozen countries including Norway, plus agreements to supply one specialist outlet in the Deer Valley resort in Utah, USA, and one in Japan. It also opened its first 'concept shop' on home soil in Voss in January, and has entered into a new licensing agreement with local firm Skigutane, which will now take charge of producing and branding Kari Traa products.

Traditional wool

A further innovation this year is a new range of sports underwear in natural fibres, with the emphasis on wool. The items – shorties-style briefs, as well as protective long pants and long- and short-sleeved vests, all in ten colour combinations – are made in Norway from a mix of 78% Merino wool, 19% polyamide and 3% elastane. The company has found a manufacturing partner, Janus, an hour from its Voss base. Norway has a long tradition of using wool to manufacture underwear and Janus has been making woollen undergarments for the Norwegian army for many years; it was happy to take on the new task of diverting its expertise into products with a feminine design.

The Kari Traa ski-wear range has a high level of breathability and waterproofing: all the ski pants and jackets – cerise, luminous green, black and white are the main colours for the autumn-winter 2007-2008 lines, which the company launched at the ispo Winter 07 event – are made of Gelanots, a Japanese laminated waterproof fabric. Gelanots, a brand name owned by Tomen (acquired by the Toyota Tshusho company in 2005), is a polyester fibre that has a specially designed 'W' shape. The manufacturer argues that overlapping these 'Ws' over the surface area of the fabric speeds up its ability to carry water away from the skin, making garments faster-drying.

At the moment, the Kari Traa range uses Gelanots with a high specification (20,000 millimetres), and Sissel Himle, export manager for the products, insists this level of waterproofing is necessary. "We're all outdoor people in the company," she says, "we all go skiing and snowboarding, and we believe this is the level of protection we need in Norway. In future, it's possible we'll bring out some products with a lower specification, maybe 5,000 millimetres, to offer an alternative, with a lower price-point, to the market."

Streetwear is also an increasingly important part of the range with the same designs and colours (plus olive, pink, violet, purple and grey) appearing on T-shirts and tops to go with baggy



Champion

Kari Traa specialised in mogul skiing (see image), winning gold (2002), silver (2006) and bronze medals (1998) in three separate Winter Olympics competitions. She also has four gold and three silver World Championship medals to her name.

Kari Traa AG

jeans. This reflects Kari Traa's personal philosophy that life should be fun on and off the slopes. She is becoming more and more involved in the work of her design team – led by Karine Lund (who has worked on skate wear in the past for Element and SceneC) – but she admits that it's tough for a recently retired professional skier to make the adjustment to normal working hours.

Women only

One thing she refuses to change is her commitment to designing and producing clothing exclusively for women. Sissel Himle explains: "Most other brands offering a range for women also produce menswear. We feel it's important for us to be a brand that is only for women, and this is unlikely to change, certainly in the near future."

She says the priority now is to concentrate on winning orders for the items in the new catalogue from activewear retail outlets in all its chosen markets, and on setting up an effective manufacturing and logistics operation to fulfil those orders. In other words, the company knows it has to get the basics right before it can tackle the business equivalent of hurtling down a mountain studded with moguls.

Freestyle skiing

Freestyle skiers are the adventurous athletes of the Winter Olympics. The freestyle aerialists fly into the air from specially designed ski ramps. There they perform acrobatics 20 metres in the air. Freestyle mogul skiers seek speed and style while they race between, and over, moguls (mounds of snow).

Freestyle skiing, or 'slopestyle,' began in the 1930s, when Norwegian skiers began using ski acrobatics in alpine and cross country training. While not considered a competitive sport, professional skiing exhibitions in the United States featured performances of what would later be called freestyle.

It began to develop further throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s. The free-form sport had few rules, and wasn't without danger.

The International Ski Federation (ISF) recognised freestyle as a sport in 1979 and brought in new regulations regarding the certification of athletes and jump techniques in an effort to curb the dangerous elements of the competitions.

The first World Cup series was staged in 1980 and was followed by the first World Championships which took place six years later in Tignes, France.

It was a demonstration event at the Calgary Games in 1988. Mogul skiing was added to the official programme of the Albertville Games in 1992 and aerials to the programme of the Lillehammer Games in 1994.