Will the fashion fixation force the sport out of sportswear?

When the PPR Group acquired Puma earlier this year, the global sportswear industry sat up and took notice. The close alliance between fashion and sporting goods is not in itself a new phenomenon, but a world-renowned French luxury name teaming up with a giant German sports apparel and footwear company does not happen every day.

Such an event could be seen to have significant repercussions for the sporting goods industry as a whole. The move seems a natural and obvious one as far as PPR is concerned, as "fashion and sportlifestyle are becoming more closely related, and a brand like Puma has worldwide appeal to fashion-conscious people," according to company spokesperson Charlotte Judet.

Nevertheless, the takeover of Puma by PPR—which owns high-end fashion brands such as Gucci and Yves St Laurent—took the sportswear sector rather by surprise, as many pundits had been speculating about a possible acquisition proposal from a global sports brand, potentially Nike or adidas.

"The line differentiating sportswear and lifestyle is blurring," confirms the managing director of Reebok India, Subhinder Singh. As both fashion and sportswear evolve, the blending of the two sectors is becoming increasingly apparent, and this progression is emerging across many different brands.

Worrying trend

The gradual shift towards 'sports chic' is worrying some people in the sportswear sector who fear that modern sporting goods are becoming more like fashion accessories than functional apparatus for serious athletes. This does not appear to be the case so far with the PPR/Puma partnership. "Puma, like most sports brands, focuses on technical performance first and then style. The magic dust is created when you can marry the two perfectly," comments Puma spokesperson Teresa Havvas. However, some have also speculated as to whether the general trend towards style and status in the



Portuguese golf star José-Filipe Lima in action.
Puma

sports arena could actually compromise the performance quality of these goods, leaving those involved in professional and amateur sport vulnerable to injury.

The company's chief executive and chairman, Jochen Zeitz, clearly defines the complementary roles of the two firms, which are to continue as separate entities in spite of their newly defined partnership. "PPR, as one of the world's top fashion and retail firms, will be the perfect partner for Puma, one of the world's leading sport lifestyle companies. Both companies have a European background and ideally complement each other with regard to their global perspective," he said on announcing the deal.

While the sports brand will now be more readily available to the global fashion community, it will not be forced into the mode mould. And, on a practical level, Charlotte Judet says of the partnership: "There are clearly mutual benefits—operational, strategic, and financial." She adds that, from PPR's point of view: "Qualitative growth and a long-term strengthening of brand appeal will be given priority."

So, although PPR will be responsible for enhancing Puma's position on an international scale, it will not be looking to amalgamate the sports brand with any of its existing haute-couture brands. PPR's chief executive, François-Henri Pinault, has guaranteed its status as a stand-alone, "autonomous" brand. Indeed, "the synergies with PPR only enhance the ability to make Puma desirable on and off the field," explains Ms Havvas. Therefore, Puma can continue to produce sports apparel and footwear to a standard worthy of the FIFA World Cup winning Italian national football team and former number-one women's tennis player, Serena Williams.

There's an irony in mentioning Serena Williams, of course. Her sister, Venus—the current women's Wimbledon champion, a title the sisters have shared for all but two years of this decade so far, even playing against one another in the final in 2002 and 2003—launched a new 160-piece activewear apparel and footwear collection in partnership with US retail chain Steve & Barry's in November.

Fashion appeal

As well as top athletes, Puma hopes it will continue to appeal to fashion-conscious individuals who take part in sport recreationally, not to mention those who are simply looking for sports-inspired everyday wear. Its collaboration with celebrities such as American supermodel Christy Turlington—which led to the Maha-Nuala range of yoga-inspired lifestyle products—reveals the bridge it is trying to build between the glamour world and the sporting goods segment. It also shows that those involved in the fashion sector can actually help to raise the profile and improve the image of functional sports apparel across a broader demographic.



Puma on the catwalk. Supermodel Irina Lazareanu sports Puma apparel from the new Rudolf Dassler collection at the first Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week in Berlin earlier this year.

Puma

In a similar vein, Reebok has co-created a range of athletic-inspired footwear and apparel, Scarlett 'Hearts' Rbk, with award-winning Hollywood actress Scarlett Johansson. Again, this has helped the brand strengthen the public's association of beauty, fashion and success with sports lifestyle products. These positive connections between athletic garb and the clothes that appear on the covers of magazines and on television can help to facilitate the "marrying" of technical performance and style to which Ms Havvas alludes. Reebok also recently produced a lifestyle shoe and clothing collection with Puerto Rican reggaeton musician Daddy Yankee (Raymond Ayala) in order to promote links between the brand and popular culture.

The overlap between the sportswear and fashion spheres is also apparent in the golfing arena. Hideto Tanihara, who has won tournaments on the Japan Golf Tour, describes the Puma brand as "the perfect mix of sport and lifestyle". Meanwhile, Swedish golfer Johan Edfors says of the camouflage shoe and hat set exclusively designed for him by the company:

"It's what Puma does best—bring style to sports."

With five major wins under his belt, including the TCL Classic and Scottish Open in 2006, performance is obviously important to the player, who is known for being a big hitter, averaging over 300 yards with his driver. However, he also recognises that clothing can bring a new element of "fun and liveliness" to the course.

Players of the sport have not always traditionally been associated with cutting-edge style. However, the company's newest signing in the golfing sector, 25-year-old Portuguese professional José-Filipe Lima, could be the one to turn this around. "I'm really excited to sign with one of the biggest sport brands in the world, but even more because it's the most fashionable," he says.

"Puma Golf is a good example of how Puma changes the rules," says Ms Havvas. "The apparel and footwear has high technical performance on the course and looks stylish off it." An injection of sports chic into the golfing arena can only help to positively reinvent the image of the sport, making it more appealing to those who may currently feel excluded from the golf course, particularly members of the younger generation.

Footwear focus

Although it sells an array of sports apparel and accessories, footwear is the brand's biggest seller, accounting for almost 60 per cent of its sales. Athletic footwear—reportedly the fastest growing segment in the sporting goods sector—has been in the limelight repeatedly in the last year, with a particular emphasis on football (soccer) boots.

High profile foot injuries, such as those experienced by Manchester United's Wayne Rooney, Newcastle United's Michael Owen and Liverpool captain, Steven Gerrard—to pick three players from only one national team, England—have raised questions over the performance benefits of modern, lightweight and 'designer' footwear.

However, Ms Havvas indicates that, if anything, sports shoes are improving technically. "None of the sports brands have compromised on quality in recent years; in fact most of the modern footwear has higher technical performance today than at any other time in history," she says. "There has been an assumption that as sports brands make their boots more stylish, technical performance is lost. This is not the case: you can have both."

Another accusation from the sporting goods industry is that the high level media attention focused on modern sportspeople is often more concerned with fashion and status than with technical quality and ability. Many modern day professional sports men and women are now widely perceived as fashion icons, with some reportedly earning more from brand sponsorship and advertising deals than from their chosen sport. This is not, according to Ms Havvas, why those in the sporting community choose her company's brand. "We have several athletes from Michael Carrick, David Bentley and Dean Ashton in football to England (Rugby) World Cup finalists such as Jason Robinson, Matthew Tait, Olly Barkley and Paul Sackey. They choose Puma over other brands because they believe the brand helps them perform better and because they look better," she says.

Large companies such as Puma and Reebok obviously operate at the highest level of the performance goods industry, providing kit for top athletes across a number of sports. Moreover, it is clear that collaborations with supermodels, musicians and actresses, as well as top athletes, can help extend the influence of sports apparel and footwear into the public arena. Therefore, the style-conscious gym-goer and even those simply looking for comfortable high-street fashion can wear sports-inspired gear without feeling any sense of compromise in terms of appearance.

However, it is important that the link between fashion and sporting goods is only ever used to improve the product at a technical level and to enhance the image of those involved in sporting activity. Fashion is fine but functionality should always be pre-eminent.

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Puma

