

The fast-approaching Beijing Olympics (August 8–24) have been surrounded by controversy in recent months, but athletes continue to train for the biggest sporting event in the world, and sportswear giants continue to produce innovative products to boost these athletes' performance.

Battle of the big brands in Beijing

By Joy Tibbs

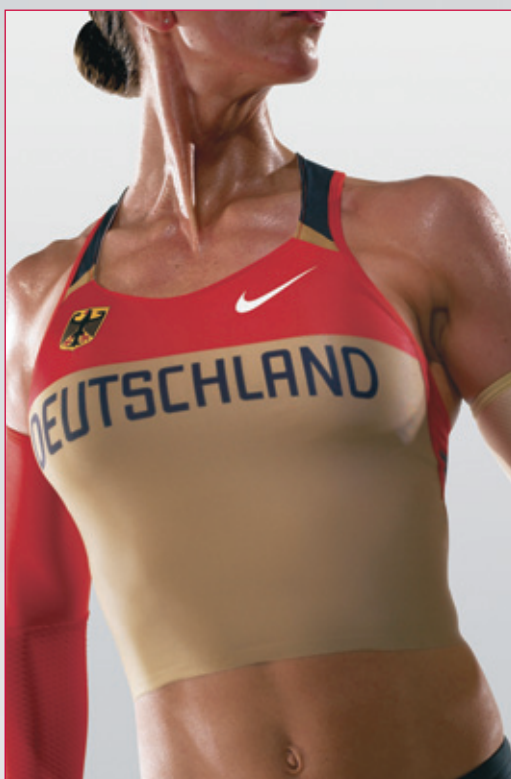
It remains to be seen which brands will hog the limelight in Beijing, with competition between the big names just as fierce as those between the world's best sports men and women on the track, in the pool and at each of the 37 Olympic venues.

Take Nike. It has spent a lot of time working on a range of apparel and footwear items to be used during the competition, including specific lines for Chinese and German athletes. It has catered for a wide range of sporting events in its Beijing offering, including boxing, basketball, fencing, track and field events, BMX and even wushu (China's national sport—the word means 'martial arts' in Mandarin—will not be an official, or even a demonstration, Olympic event, but the International Olympic Committee has allowed the Chinese authorities to run a wushu event at the time of the Games). Nike has also launched 25 styles of footwear to be used by athletes competing in 32 different sports in August.

The sportswear brand, which has approximately 3,000 retail outlets in China, recently introduced new uniforms for Chinese athletes in collaboration with 22 Chinese sports federations. Athletes showcasing their new kit at the launch included basketball player Yi Jianlian and 110-metre hurdler Liu Xiang. The new products are said to incorporate Chinese cultural elements as well as offering advanced technical properties. The line has taken four years to develop and has required the input of 54 designers.

Faster, stronger, lighter

One of Nike's public relations managers, Jo Taylor, says the aim has always been to help athletes improve their performance and to enable them to perform to the best of their ability. "This is our key focus for this Olympics too," she insists. "Scientific research involving



Nike and the German Athletics Federation have unveiled a new Beijing Olympic collection featuring Nike's Aerographics technology.



aeronautical engineers has brought us to this point. All of our research and personnel have gone into developing the fastest, strongest and lightest apparel and footwear for athletes to wear for the Games."

She explains that this is illustrated in products featuring new technology such as Aerographic, Flywire and LunarLite, details of which appear below.

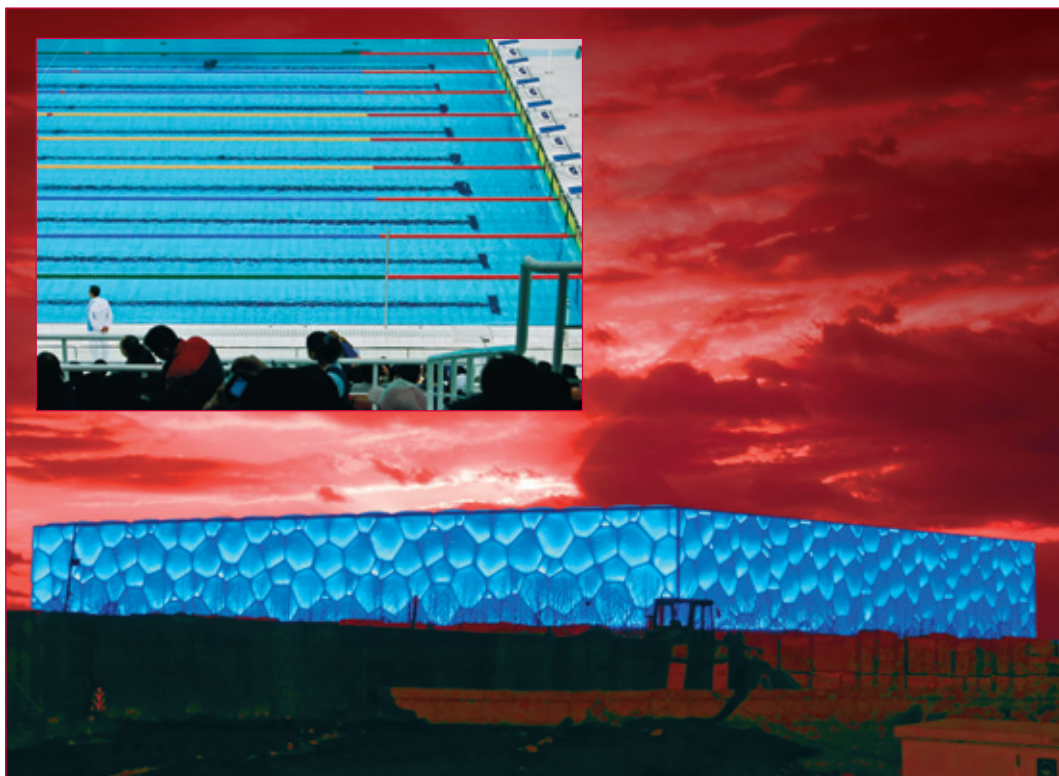
Nike and the German Athletics Federation (DLV) have also unveiled new apparel and footwear to be worn by the German team at the Games. Prominent athletes, including sprinters Tobias Unger and Kamghe Gaba, high jumper Ariane Friedrich, London Marathon winner Irina Mikitenko and hurdler Thomas Blaschek, have all modelled items from the new line, which incorporates the country's national colours:



The equipment line that Nike has put together for the Chinese Olympic squad has taken four years to develop and has required the input of 54 designers.

 Nike





National Swimming Center 'Water Cube' for 2008 Beijing Olympics.

black, red and gold. The range also features the company's Aerographics technology, an engineered mesh that can be incorporated directly into garments without using any extra materials. This helps to cut weight by reducing the amount of material used, while enhancing comfort and passive cooling.

Another of the latest Nike products released in time for the tournament is its Hyperdunk basketball shoe, the company's lightest (about 370 grammes) and strongest shoe ever for this sport. Incorporating Flywire technology—which uses strong nylon filaments to provide support—the shoe is designed to accommodate a 90-kilo basketball player landing on his feet with a pressure of almost 14 megapascals (2,000psi). It also features Lunarlite foam, a light cushioning in the forefoot of the shoe, and the more established Zoom Air technology in the heel.

Ms Taylor comments: "Athletes from the US and China described wanting to feel 'Superhuman' as they perform. The Flywire and Lunarlite technologies give athletes the technology to perform to the best of their ability. They ensure they have the best technology at their disposal to perform to the maximum."

BMX at the Olympics

Other innovations include a new uniform for BMX cycling (which becomes an Olympic sport for the first time in Beijing), which is said to be 35% lighter than previous versions and uses Dri-FIT and No Sew technology. There will also be more aerodynamic basketball uniforms with Sphere and Aerographics moisture management.

For athletes taking part in the boxing competition, there will be "motion-enabling" apparel made from the brand's Dri-FIT fabrics. And inside the new 'Bird's Nest' National Stadium some track-and-field athletes will wear the new Nike Swift Suit, which offers a 7% drag reduction compared with the version available at the time of the Athens Olympics in 2004, translating to a possible gain of 0.02 seconds over 100 metres.

The latest Nike footwear technologies, Flywire and Lunarlite, will be available to consumers in the Zoom Victory+, LunarTrainer, Hyperdunk and LunaRacer—a distance performance running shoe weighing around 150 grammes—from July.

The "insanely fast" swimsuit

However, Nike is certainly not the only company that will be on show at the big event; the Speedo LZR Racer swimsuit is also expected to make some serious waves. The suit is made from an ultra lightweight, water repellent, fast drying fabric that is ultrasonically welded and gives the effect of having no seams. Producer of the suit's fabric, Italian textile manufacturer Mectex S.p.A., claims it is "like a shark's skin" and that the suit is "the fastest in the world".

According to a spokesperson at the brand, athletes wearing the LZR Racer have set 37 world records since it was launched on February 12. "Speedo's mission is to help an athlete perform at his or her best and so the results speak for themselves," he says. The swimwear offers 10% less passive drag than Speedo's Fastskin FSII, launched in 2004, and 5% less

Unfair advantage?

In the build-up to the Beijing Olympics, the BBC Radio reported that the success of the Speedo LZR Racer swimsuit had thrown the Japanese swimming team, and the country's sports textiles industry, into disarray.

The Speedo suit "sucks the muscles into the perfect shape to swim", the report claimed, which is why it had already featured in so many world record times since its inception a few short months ago. It's lighter than other swimsuits and it repels water, thereby reducing drag.

Japanese brand Mizuno (the piece didn't name the Japanese brand at any point, but Mizuno is the team's current supplier) makes nothing like it and the country's swimming coaches are worried that the LZR Racer may be "unbeatable", according to the broadcaster, noted around the world for its objectivity, but perhaps allowing itself to be swayed just a little here by the fact that Speedo is based in Nottingham.

Or perhaps not. The Japanese team had hopes of at least five medals in Beijing, but the prospect of competing against the LZR Racer is forcing a downward revision. Two of its main contenders, Hanae Ito and Ai Shibata, spoke out about the disadvantage they feel they now face. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance for me and I don't want to be disadvantaged," Ms Ito said. "I want to do my best and I want to wear the best swimsuit around."

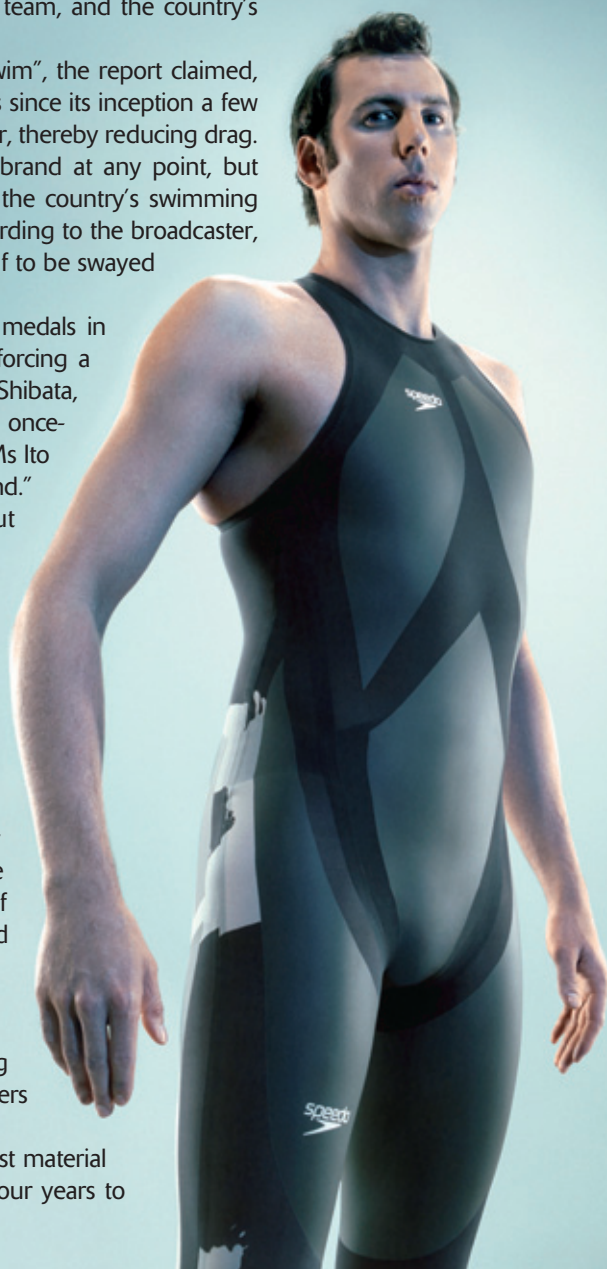
Ai Shibata added: "It's a bit sad that people only talk about swimsuits these days. I hope people will pay more attention to the swimmers and not what we wear."

BBC reporter went from the pool-side to "a factory in Osaka" (a facility run by Biorubber, which manufactures suits for diving, surfing, windsurfing and other aqua sports), where a steam press was producing metre after metre of "a special new material", a lightweight, water-resistant rubber. The idea, clearly, was to use this material to make a new, Japanese body-suit in time for the Olympics.

Managing director, Tomizo Yamamoto, said his country's swimmers also deserved the best. He explained: "I think it's hard for the Japanese swimmers; they feel like they've already lost the race even before they land in Beijing. I'm sure they would understand if they lost fair and square, but not like this. I believe we should send athletes to the Olympics fully prepared."

Japan's swimming federation announced on the last Friday in May that "a few prototypes" of suits containing Mr Yamamoto's new material were ready. But this still left the suits requiring extensive testing, not to mention approval from FINA. The swimmers would also have to get used to wearing them.

Speedo is able to make only 70 LZR Racers a day, using specialist material from Italian textile manufacturer Mectex. The product has taken four years to develop and there simply are not enough to go round. 



passive drag than the FS-PRO, launched in March 2007.

Special low-drag LZR panels are embedded into the base fabric to create a Hydro Form Compression system, helping to compress the swimmer's body into a more streamlined shape. The suit, which has been approved by FINA (Fédération Internationale de Natation Amateur), involved technical tests on 100 different fabrics and suit designs in various flume and test centres, as well as the scanning of more than 400 swimmers' bodies. "Swimsuit design is so important, especially when you're in races that are coming down to hundredths of a second. It matters so much that you're in the fastest suit and you have every advantage you can to get your hand on the wall first," US world record holding swimmer Kate Ziegler has commented.

"I believe swimmers are going to break records in Beijing wearing the Speedo LXR Racer, swimming insanely fast—the fastest they've ever swum." Michael Phelps said that, when wearing the suit, he feels like a "rocket" when he hits the water. Mr Phelps won eight medals at the 2004 Athens Olympics, six of which were gold (see box).

China's own biggest sportswear brand, Li Ning, is another competitor for the main stage at this year's Olympic Games. Although it mainly supplies Chinese athletes at present, the company is hoping the event will help springboard its wares into the global sphere. The athletic apparel producer will kit out several teams in Beijing including the US table tennis squad and Sudanese track and field athletes as well as the Spanish and Swedish Olympic

Grant Hackett, a current world record holder who is a double Olympic and triple world champion, models the new LZR Racer.

 Speedo

delegations for ceremony appearances. It will also sponsor four Chinese teams with gold medal hopes: the teams for table tennis, diving team, gymnastics and shooting.

Although Li Ning is not currently competing with brands such as Nike and adidas on the global stage, it is hoping a Beijing appearance could help to improve its international profile. The company recently opened a design centre in Portland, Oregon, where Nike is based, and has a presence in a number of countries through sponsorship deals, for example with the Spanish national basketball team, Argentina's basketball federation, Croatian tennis player Ivan Ljubicic and American basketball player Chuck Hayes. The brand is also endorsed by basketball great Shaquille O'Neal, albeit only in China.

Home market

According to company spokesperson Philip Lo, Li Ning does not have much direct competition from international brands in its home market as these focus more on the mid-to high-end market. He says Li Ning has, and will continue to capitalise on, several strengths, namely a renowned brand name in China, sound product research and development, a nationwide sales footprint as well as effective marketing. Mr Lo suggests that the 28-year-old

brand is in a unique position because its "ability to offer products that combine oriental design elements with modern technology remains uncontested". Despite this, Li Ning is aiming to keep up with its rivals; head of footwear, Abel Wu, admitted in May that the brand was not as strong as Nike and adidas, and that it currently lacks an imposing international image. So it does not lack ambition.

While the Chinese sportswear market is already growing at a rate of 30% per year, the Beijing Olympics could be a great time for the company to capitalise. "Sport has become an indispensable part of the lifestyle of the people in China," says Mr Lo. Not only will it be looking to shine in the arena, the company hopes the world-famous event will increase the nation's already huge interest in sports and sporting goods.

He adds: "Li Ning is set to benefit from this trend. It has the confidence to grow even stronger in the years to come, given the measures it has put in place to enhance the brand profile and research and development, as well as to perfect its sales strategy and its channel and supply chain management."

It remains to be seen which brands will appear most frequently on the podium at this year's Olympics, and which firms will win the greatest market share in subsequent months. 🌐