Performance, creativity & marketing

The 17th Commonwealth Games 2002. Ian Thorpe, the young Australian swimmer, crouched at the start of his first race in imitation of a huge bird of prey. Clad in black from neck to ankle; capped and goggled, he had an air of awesome self-assurance that was almost guaranteed to provoke a corresponding lack of confidence in his opposition before they even entered the water. His unsought but not discouraged nickname of 'Thorpedo' was calculated to intimidate.

Thirty seconds later the television cameras showed the water streaming away from his body as he powered through the first leg of the race, the competition left well behind in a battle of their own for silver and bronze placings. Did the high performance fabrics and the advanced design of his suit play the major part in his particular success? Given Thorpe's natural abilities and the fact that almost everyone else in that and subsequent races wore a similar garment, or one derived from similar technology, the answer is probably 'No'. Would any one of them have stood a chance of competing at that level without such fabrics and suits? Again, 'No'.



Ian 'Thorpedo' Thorpe in his signature black Adidas suit.

Desirable performance

For lesser athletes however, the opportunity to race wearing a swimsuit customised in the latest performance fabrics is one to be sought after. As a means of improving race times and one's competitive 'image', to be able to take advantage of the various manufacturers' international development programmes must be a substantial performance bonus. At the recent The Summit 2002 conference, Fiona Fairhurst of Speedo gave the delegate audience an indication of just what's required in terms of financial and technical investment to produce a modern, performance-enhancing swimsuit.

First develop your fabrics – in Speedo's case the well-documented FastSkin range – and then craft them on to the athlete.

Forget any ideas such as fitting booths and an extra tuck or two. Put the swimmers into the water. Measure and photograph them as they float. Film them as they move through their stroke repertoire, starting at the arms and shoulders, move down the torso, through the hips and then along the powerhouse of the thighs and lower legs. When your programme shows the sector from which the greatest forward motion is derived, use the fabrics to give the slower areas a



Parah swim trucks in Eurojersey Sensitive fabric.

'lift'. And use the textile technology overall to ensure that the water becomes an aid and not a drag.

As the commercial value in individual sponsorship is inevitably fuelled by improvements in the personal performance, it is equally inevitable that the swimmers at international level will demand the implementation of development programmes by their sponsors. World records are gained or missed by hundredths of a second. Tens of thousands of dollars are gained or missed at retail level if the swimsuit hinders an athlete in the bid for the podium. Brand owners have never been under such tremendous pressure to produce the right fabrics and designs.

Adidas sponsors Ian Thorpe. The signature black suit that he wears is the result of many months of intense research in the textile laboratory and at the poolside. And the fabrics have now moved through to general availability as the initial expenditure is recouped.

Project Swift, the Nike programme that produced the Stand Off Singlet, the Swift Suit (remember Cathy Freeman's Olympic performances), the Swift Skin for the 2002 Winter Olympics and the Swift Spin cycling suit for Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong, must surely be looking for the next 'ultimate' in fabrics and design in time for Athens in 2004. As evidence to support the theory one should consider the words of the director of Nike's Advanced Innovation Team, Rick Macdonald, on the subject of the Swift Spin – a not unfamiliar set of circumstances:

"Each time we deal with a new sport, we have to relearn that sport. Our team looked at cycling in a way that no one ever had. Then we combined that unique insight with the technology we already had in-hand from track and field, and speedskating. With cycling, the body is in a different position, the speeds are different, different parts of the body are moving at different speeds."

Size and location

Sporting prowess and requirements to one side, the swimwear sector is recognised as one of the barometers for the well-being of the sportswear market in general. According to the Apparel and Textile Sciences Division of DuPont Textiles and Interiors (DTI), presenting at the 2002 Lycra Rendezvous, swimming accounts for 8% of the sport market. This is said to translate into volumes in excess of 600 million units according to DuPont – although a similar figure is mooted as the worldwide potential by Michael St John's Insolito consultancy. Updating whispers at the recent Summer ISPO suggest that the 2002 figures might well be lower than anticipated.

DTI has an unusually strong vested interest because of the inclusion of Lycra fibre in the new company's makeup and the yarn's predominance in the swimwear market as a provider of both performance and flattery. But it's the fabric manufacturers who provide the key link between fibre production and performance of the order required to produce champions such as Ian Thorpe. And the majority of swimwear fabric production is centred on Italy. We asked Michael St John why this should be.

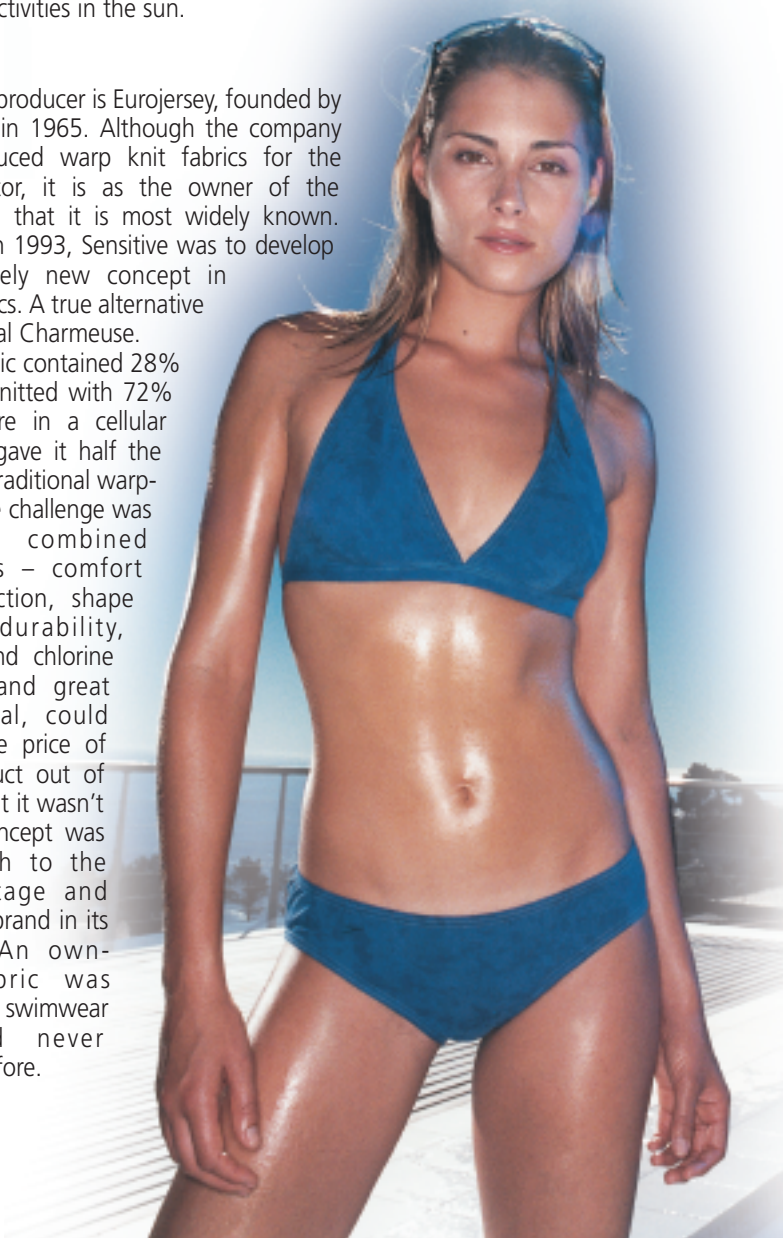
His answer suggested that it was a combination of creative and technical resources existing in the same location, and the fact that there is a fabric printing tradition dating back several centuries. The textile boom that followed World War II brought Italy to the forefront of the industry, and it has retained the technical initiative in warp knitted elastane fabrics. Additionally, he suggests, there is an enterprising and innovative response to market conditions, tempered by an empathy with vacation activities in the sun.

Sensitivity

A significant producer is Eurojersey, founded by Giorgio Crespi in 1965. Although the company originally produced warp knit fabrics for the outerwear sector, it is as the owner of the Sensitive brand that it is most widely known. Commencing in 1993, Sensitive was to develop as an absolutely new concept in swimwear fabrics. A true alternative to the traditional Charmeuse.

The new fabric contained 28% DuPont Lycra knitted with 72% Meryl microfibre in a cellular structure that gave it half the thickness of a traditional warp-knit. Part of the challenge was that the combined characteristics – comfort without restriction, shape recovery, durability, breathability and chlorine resistance – and great fashion appeal, could have taken the price of the new product out of the market. But it wasn't so and the concept was taken through to the marketing stage and patented as a brand in its own right. An own-branded fabric was something the swimwear market had never experienced before.

Speedo two-piece suit illustrates that performance textiles can have a fashionable application.



When Sensitive went into full production in 1995, it represented 10% of the company's turnover. It now accounts for 90%. Swimwear, sports and underwear remain its core applications, but by adjusting the combinations of Lycra and the Meryl microfibre the company has developed a whole range of optional characteristics making it suitable for a wide variety of end-uses. Eighty per cent of Eurojersey's Sensitive production is plain, the remainder printed. A team of four designers works full time developing new colours and prints that fit the spirit of the Sensitive image.

Responsibility

Success, however, brings responsibility. To quote Eurojersey's Export Manager, Andrea Crespi, "A fast, efficient service is a salient part of any modern company's business code, but when you're selling a unique product you simply have to be able to deliver on time, as your customer has no other supplier to turn to."

Andrea Crespi exhibits total commitment to his father's philosophy: that genuine innovation at the right price can provide the foundation for a major market player. He recognises that the company still has a lot to do to take Sensitive to its full potential, and the obvious pathway is to become even more international. Eurojersey already generates 60% of its sales outside Italy, but the aim is to double business in the USA and triple sales in Asia within the next two years.

Though the entire production is manufactured at Eurojersey's facilities in Caronno Pertusella near Milan, today's sophisticated logistics make these targets possible: shipping to the Far East is now almost as quick as delivering to nearby France. Andrea Crespi makes the point that Asia will eventually become a key market for the top European weavers and knitters, with fabrics being shipped out, made up into garments of European quality standards and then returned for sale in the Western markets.

Consultancy

Insolito could be termed a profitable enigma. Billing itself as 'a global consultancy in textiles, apparel and communication' it is also a retailer – with a concept store in Paris – style offices in Paris and London and an agency in Tokyo. In 2000 it acquired a half-share in a computer hardware company and now offers a web design service to its clients.

Founder, general manager and creative director, Michael St John says that his company offers a 360 degree consulting service that includes textile printing, product design, prototyping, communication and marketing. In furtherance of the full service aspect, Insolito has recently acquired the specialist printing company Solaris Impact, which launched its Spring/Summer 2003 collection a few weeks ago.

When asked for the reasons behind so many swimwear brand owners buying fabric from Italy but producing in Asia, St John gave a lengthy list that can be summarised thus:

1. Better quality, response and lead times.
2. Minimums are less restrictive and prices are more competitive.
3. The most creative designs are produced in Italy and the designers are prepared to work closely with the print companies to achieve a level of exclusivity. Italian printers are the best people to successfully deliver the more creative print designs.
4. There are no problems with unethical practices such as the use of child labour or the improper disposal of effluents.

He then commented:

"Swimwear is a product category, which is used in situations where we humans expose our bodies to known and unknown people. Usually we are not suntanned, we are over weight, or we are defective in some real or imagined way. Consequently it is a requirement to indulge in a serious amount of trying on swimsuits before we are convinced we have found the right one. The 'designer brands' have suffered over this problem and can only hope to be taken seriously if the fabric is well studied, the colours are perfect, the stretch is body hugging (but not tight), the fit, support and cut is very well studied. In other words, a technically well designed and manufactured suit, of which a major component is the fabric. For the above reasons Italian print converters will likely continue to be the preferred resource for most leading garment manufacturers. And for the record, Italy also manufacturers 30 million swimsuits each year for the more discerning brands where low prices are not the first component."



Arena Besline competition suit. The textile is Sensitive Classic throughout.



Speedo's Fastskin Wetsuit in action.

Mandolins forbidden

Another leading fabric producer is the Milan-based Itam Group. Founded by textile engineer Lorenzo Gagliardi in 1972, it has shown steady growth in the succeeding three decades and has achieved a reputation for development in Lycra-inclusive fabrics. Thirty-five percent of its annual 12 million tons output is destined for the swimwear market.

Itam talks of 'living the elastic way' to emphasise its commitment to the DuPont product, and considers that the best is still to come in terms of matching the elastane with an increasingly diverse selection of other yarns. Company processes occupy all the 'ground' between spinning and garment manufacturing, covering knitting – weaving – dyeing – printing – and the more tactile elements of brushing, napping and sueding.

Italian production technology, product quality and the creative edge are again given as the factors behind the industry's dominance of the swimwear sector. The spokesman for Itam insisted that strength in the marketplace has nothing whatsoever to do with Italian flair, poetry, macaroni or mandolins.

Perseverance

Equally so there aren't many musical instruments at UK-based Penn Nyla, a company with a moderately chequered history. Once part of the Courtaulds textiles empire, then Acordis, on to Sara Lee – and now privately owned, it is at last enjoying the results of some solid groundwork put in by the management team over the last couple of years. Its 'verticality' extends to warp and weft knitting and finishing processes, but the company freely admits its limitations (for the present) and does not offer any creative or printing services.

Geographical proximity to one of the world's leading brand owners means that a steady 15% of production goes to the swimwear market. Using a combination of PBT (polybuty-lterephthalate) and T400 Lycra, Penn Nyla claims to produce one of the highest chlorine-resistant fabrics on the market.



Eurojersey textiles hit the beach with fashion suit from Casall.

Footnote

To return to Australian swimming, the current 'beat Thorpe' theory suggests that the only way to win a race in which he is participating is to stay ahead of his feet. Suit and fabric technology are a major consideration, of course, but at size 17 – those mighty appendages generate sufficient force to not only propel him through the water but also to lift the rest of his body upwards and minimize drag.

It is reported that the turbulence created by Thorpe's feet is sufficient to adversely affect swimmers at two lanes width to either side. So, to stand any chance of success, hit the water first and stay out of the wash.

Derryck Draper