RISE TO THE CHALLENGE: ABACUS SPORTSWEAR

Swedish golfwear Abacus Sportswear felt there was something missing from the technical tests to which it was able to subject its clothing. So it worked with the independent Textil & Läderlaboratoriet testing facility in Stockholm to come up with a new one.

New stretch measurement for fabric



Swedish clothing brand Abacus believes there is a gap in the market for golf apparel with all-over stretch, to give players protection without hampering their swing.

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Swedish technical clothing brand Abacus Sportswear offers a wide range of tops and bottoms for golfers of both sexes and most ages, including jackets made from a proprietary fabric called StretchLite. The clue is in the name: StretchLite is a lightweight, waterproof two-layer stretch fabric, flexible and packable with an added durable water repellency (DWR) finish and stain protection.

Recent additions to the Abacus line include the Barton StretchLite and an updated version of the Pitch StretchLite, which the company describes as a featherweight, waterproof product, suitable for wearing next to the skin. Both jackets are unlined, making them easy to play in. And here we come to the crux of the story behind recent Abacus innovations.

To add to standard scientific tests for measuring a fabric's water resistance (water column test) and breathability (moisture vapour column test), Abacus has introduced a new measurement of its own for freedom of motion, which it calls the coefficient of stretch (CoS). Following independent tests at the Textil & Läderlaboratoriet testing facility in Stockholm, the clothing brand has come up with a CoS measurement for its jackets and it intends to share the numbers with golf enthusiasts as part of its product presentation to allow consumers to compare, contrast and decide for themselves how much freedom of motion they want to have. For example, the Barton StretchLite jacket has a CoS of 2.64, while the new Pitch has a score of 1.90. Unlike in the game of golf itself, the higher the number the better here.

Abacus's head of design, Chris Mattsson, explains that Textil & Läderlaboratoriet carried out the tests in the following way. Based on the laboratory's extensive experience in testing the tensile strength of materials of all kinds, it took a 25-centimetre strip of the fabric used in each of the jackets and measured the length it would stretch to without compromising the integrity of the material. In the case of the Barton, the limit was measured at 66 centimetres, giving the jacket its CoS of 2.64 (66 divided by 25).

Fast service, good advice

At the laboratory, head of marketing Göran Grönskog explains that the Textil & Läderlaboratoriet has more than 60 years' experience of testing textiles, sports equipment, shoes, leather, luggage and toys. Its approximately 350 clients are mainly from Scandinavia but companies from other countries in northern Europe also call on its services from time to time. "We perform more than 400 international test methods for textile fabrics and leather," Mr Grönskog explains, "and our laboratory is accredited by Swedac (the Swedish Board for Accreditation and Conformity Assessment). Our routines adhere to a high level of security to guarantee complete confidentiality. Although we have tough competition from laboratories near the main production areas in the Far East, we believe we have a solid position because we offer quick delivery (two working days) and deliver more than figures on a test report. We also give our clients guidance on which test methods are the most suitable for their needs and explain what the test figures are actually worth from a quality point of view."



Light, breathable and packable, the Pitch and Barton jackets now offer a measure for 'coefficient of stretch', based on a test developed for Abacus by the Textil & Läderlaboratoriet facility in Stockholm.

Abacus Sportswear

Fabric sourcing

This helped Abacus decide on which fabrics would work best in the Barton and the Pitch jackets. Chris Mattsson explains: "The way we work is to spend a lot of time with fabric suppliers in Asia after initial meetings at shows such as ISPO. It's a dialogue. We tell them that we like a particular fabric in principle but have certain additional properties in mind that we would like it to have and we go from there; we develop the end-fabric jointly."

She prefers not to name the partner in Asia with whom Abacus has developed StretchLite, but confirms that what her company wanted to add to the partner company's existing portfolio of waterproof, breathable, lightweight fabric was more freedom of movement. This is where Abacus perceived the gap in the market to be. It took about a year for the Swedish sports brand and its Asian partner to complete the development.

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Abacus Sportswear's head of design, Chris Mattsson.

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With the fabric and the new test measurement for coefficient of stretch in place, Abacus has gone ahead and made the jackets, complete with each product's score. This allows consumers to make a comparison between the Abacus jackets, but if other brands fail to carry out the same test, no comparison with other companies' jackets will be possible. Ms Mattsson's contention is that this will not detract from the benefit of the new test. "We can't control what other brands are doing," she says, "but we certainly hope others will use the same test in the future. We can't tell them what to do, obviously, but what we can say is that there is a need for this in golf. Also, because Textil & Läderlaboratoriet is completely independent, anyone can go there and ask them to use the same test on other products."

She describes as "extraordinary" the level of elasticity in the two new jackets. The fabric, at 99 grammes per square-metre, is light and easily packable, with a high level of breathability, but for the head of design, it's the freedom of movement that the jackets allow that will make the biggest impression on golfers. "It simply moves and stretches without resistance to the twists and turns of the golf swing," she says.

All-over stretch

Many waterproofs have stretch panels built in, she points out, but the way StretchLite works, these jackets are stretchable all over. Abacus has used fabric with stretch panels in the past, typically on the shoulders and under the arms, but Chris Mattsson says she was always left feeling the garments needed more. "I always thought we could give more freedom of motion," she says. "And you could tell that this is what golfers want because you would see golfers wearing jackets that were too big. They wanted the additional movement, but they ended up with a lot of extra fabric getting in the way of their swing."

Solheim Cup success

In terms of a response from golfers so far, Abacus says it's always been encouraged by its success as an official supplier to the European Solheim Cup team, the women's equivalent of the Ryder Cup, in which professional players from all over Europe form a team of 12 and play a total of 28 matches under different formats against 12 professionals from the US. The 2013 Solheim Cup in Colorado in August will be the third time Abacus has supplied kit. Chris Mattsson explains that, last time out, at the Killeen Castle Golf Resort in Ireland in 2011, the signs were already good. "You could see that the European players were comfortable enough to keep our jackets on to hit their shots, while their opponents tended to take theirs off before playing the ball," she says. "And the comments from the European players afterwards were positive."

Preparation for kitting out the European players for the 2013 competition has already been going on for months, with the Swedish clothing company working on a whole new collection for players with the European captain, Liselotte Neumann (who is also Swedish). New Abacus StretchLite products, complete with their coefficient of stretch measurements, will feature.



The new test involves taking a 25-centimetre strip of the fabric and measuring the length it would stretch to without compromising the integrity of the material.

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