

Sports influences have made numerous inroads into menswear collections for many seasons, but appeared to reach a new level for summer 2014 where the trend has been spotted on countless catwalks from Burberry to Louis Vuitton, and inspiring fast-fashion retailers to expand their own athletic offering.

Function is the new chic

Menswear collections from top designers have flirted with sports influences for a number of seasons adopting not only an athletic look but also bona fide performance fabrics to update the contemporary man's wardrobe.

In an article headlined "Lush, Sporty, Luxury" (*The New York Times*, June 30, 2013), illustrious fashion reporter Suzy Menkes wrote in her report of the Paris spring-summer 2014 menswear shows: "Who are these luxury clients, California dreaming, wearing a suede top as if it were surfer's neoprene, along with wildly printed shorts in silk and crocodile beach sandals? There are thousands — millions, maybe — of male customers out there who are buying into lush, sporty, casual clothes, especially in Asia. And that laid-back attitude dominated the Paris menswear shows for summer 2014."

Commenting on Kim Jones's menswear collection for Louis Vuitton, French daily *Libération* wrote on June 28, 2013: "A series of parkas sums up the spirit of the collection: they are practical and classical, in other words sellable, and they are urban and casual, which fits perfectly with the current zeitgeist."

The new performance edge in upscale collections is being heralded as the "in thing". "Functionality is the new chic," states Lacoste in a

Fast fashion retailer H&M has partnered with London-based cycle shop Brick Lane Bikes to create a functional and urban collection for men. The range is both eco and techno, featuring eco-conscious materials and a weatherproof jacket outfitted with straps to be worn as a backpack.

H&M



press release, using the catchphrase as its global mantra. Major sports brands are also promoting designers in their organisations. Dirk Schönberger, a graduate of Esmod Munich, was named creative director of the adidas Sport Style division in June 2010. At Puma, a new team of designers has recently been recruited, including Annet van Rijswijk, creative director for lifestyle apparel who arrived in 2013. Timberland, now a VF group brand, appointed Camila Vesth as its new global design director for apparel and accessories in April of this year.

In addition to the new sporty ranges seen at high-fashion brands, a new generation of urban sportswear brands has emerged promoting a design principle in which fashion and function are of equal importance. Outlier, in New York, and Aether, in Los Angeles, are walking in the steps of Italian sportswear forerunner Stone Island. Outlier is on a mission "to build the future of clothing," say the brand's co-founders Abe Burmeister and Tyler Clemens. They believe "clothing should be liberating" and their garments evolve "around the boundaries of fashion using a function-driven design process and high-quality technical fabrics." Outlier's first commercial product was a pair of dressy cycling pants made in a Schoeller fabric.

In a similar vein, Jonah Smith and Palmer West, the founders of Aether, note on their website that "as outdoor enthusiasts who live in the city, we found our shopping options to be extremely limited. We could either go with a flashy performance-driven brand and feel out of place in the city, or, go with a design-oriented label and sacrifice outdoor functionality." Since 2008, the brand has made its founding principle the application of "technologically advanced outdoor fabrics designed in a more sophisticated manner for the modern-day outdoor enthusiast".

These brands are just a few examples of the many new players in a menswear market that continues to grow while womenswear, though much larger, is seeing sales progress at slower rates. According to the Institut Français de la Mode (IFM), a higher education fashion institute and economic observatory, the men's market has experienced growth both in terms of retailer space and brands, progressing 5% yearly on average over the past ten years in France.

But while the menswear sales increase continuously, the institute has found that the sportswear category is steadily losing market share: sportswear represented 38% of the total menswear market in 2001 but accounted for only 27% in 2011, the latest figures available. Not only has the category decreased relative to other segments but also in absolute value. "In fact, over the ten-year period from 2001 to 2011, sportswear is the only category that has receded," says Franck Delpal, economist at the



Working with Stella McCartney (for a performance range), Yohji Yamamoto (for a lifestyle collection) and Jeremy Scott (for a streetwear oriented line), adidas's long-standing partnerships with international designers can be considered an early sign of the crossover between sports and fashion.

 adidas

IFM. Between 2006 and 2011, total retail surfaces for sportswear increased by 1%, but sales dipped by 1%, while in the same period, retail surfaces for jeanswear progressed by 11% and sales by 7%.

Franck Delpal attributes this loss of market share, in France, to the underperformance of sports giant Decathlon. The retailer accounts for 43% of sales in the sportswear category in France. Three markets benefitted from sportswear's loss of appeal: jeanswear (6% of menswear according to IFM data), casual chic (9%) and affordable luxury (3%). "There are a number of brands in the casual chic segment that are linked to the world of sports, such as the rugby inspired menswear label Eden Park," notes Mr Delpal.

Smart fabrics and functional designs

The chic sportswear market, which can loosely be defined as the use of performance fabrics in upscale city ranges, crosses over the ready-to-wear and active sports apparel boundaries. This is a trend that adidas has actively pursued in the co-branding ranges made with Japanese fashion designer Yohji Yamamoto in the Y-3 label and with UK fashion designer Stella McCartney. Arc'teryx has also moved into this new hybrid



territory with its upscale urban label Veilance, headed by Canadian designer Conroy Nachtigall. The strategy behind the new brand is to bring functional fabrics “beyond the extremes of the outdoor environment” to offer “an instrument for negotiating the many complexities of contemporary living” professes Arc'teryx. The range, which is only sold at select retailers, adopts many performance fabrics, including Gore-Tex laminates and merino wool. Zegna Sport is also part of the move for what the Italian company calls “performance-driven sportswear”, and incorporates several high-tech fabrics including Sympatex's eco-friendly membranes, merino wool and even electrotexiles offering wireless connectivity.

Brazilian sportswear designer Oskar Metsavaht has steadily gained international recognition for his blend of elegance, performance and environmental activism. Said to be the first Brazilian to scale Mont Blanc, Oskar Metsavaht founded the Osklen brand in 1989, expanding from snowboarding apparel to a “lifestyle” fashion line that is both surf-inspired and environmentally friendly.

“The level of creativity in performance fabrics has caught the eye of top designers,” says François Lavaux, trend consultant and fashion designer who did a stint at Reebok. From novel surface effects with 3D textures to neoprene, technical fabrics are being massively adopted by upscale designers, as seen in Christopher Bailey's collections for Burberry. “Sporty styles are a way to inject novelty into a market in which shapes haven't evolved much lately, which is

why there's a lot more emphasis on innovative fabrics,” he says.

On a broader level, François Lavaux believes the barriers between styles and social codes are being blurred to the point of disappearing: “Even the question of genre is being swept away as men feel more comfortable with fashion. As I see it, style ghettos are dissolving and there is a lot more freedom to mix garments of different styles.” Mr Lavaux also notes that ‘collabs’ between sports and fashion brands have also fuelled the crossover trend, making luxury less elitist and more open to outside influences.

The men's market has undergone a dramatic shift in recent years, notes Sylvia Lotthé, designer and trend forecaster specialising in menswear. “Erratic weather patterns are certainly pushing functionality in everyday menswear,” she says. It's no surprise to her that brands focus on trench coats and jackets that pack up to fit into a briefcase or a backpack.

The sports influence in menswear, seen at Fred Perry, Outlier, Kistuné, even Sandro, is based on clean shapes that are part sportswear, part smart casualwear, she says. “The market is moving away from the outdoorsy Timberland styles to more streamlined urban styles, such as slim 2-button jackets with mesh panels under the arms for breathability and classic shapes modernised by functional fabrics.”

Fashion experts tend to agree that a global trend usually lasts about five years, representing roughly the time it takes for a new trend to appear, be picked up by the high street or mass-market, and then peter out. “I have a feeling the

Rainy Day Essentials is a W.L. Gore project in which trendsetters from Paris to Tokyo are asked to choose their favourite rainy day gear. A jacket by Japanese brand Acronym and a cape co-developed by French labels Aigle and Kistuné were among the fashion gurus' must-haves.

 Gore-Tex



Since launching in 2008, Outlier has used many fabrics manufactured by Swiss weaver Schoeller. The Climber pant for instance is one of the brand's core products and is made in Schoeller Dryskin with a nanosphere finish to repel water and stains. Outlier says it's the "most versatile fabric around."

 Outlier

sports influence in menswear will last longer because it is more of a lifestyle trend than a fashion trend," says Sylvia Lotthé. Like any trend, this one will evolve through various shifts in the way garments are worn and fine-tuned. Bomber jackets or cycling shorts, which used to be worn in certain conditions only, will be revamped for new uses.

"When sports brands branched out into the lifestyle market, the move was designed in part to justify the development of stand-alone stores and was also seen as a way to attract investors when going public; it was a strategy to drive growth to raise capital. These strategies work fine for a while, but they are cyclical, and we are at the end of the cycle in the sportswear market," says trend consultant and sportswear designer Vincent Lecrosnier. He now expects major retailers such as Zara, H&M and Mango to move into the urban sportswear market to offer products at more accessible prices and really open up the market, signalling new competition for sports brands.

Fast fashion sportswear

On the high street and online, fast fashion retailers have actually already spotted sportswear as a new area for growth. Oysho, the lingerie

and homewear brand of Spanish Inditex Group, which currently counts 444 shops in 28 countries, now carries the adidas Neo line. Puma develops special ranges for the online fashion and beauty retailer Asos, which claimed 12.1 million registered users in May this year.

High street retailers Uniqlo and H&M, which have both signed up top-level athletes to promote their products, are some of the most visible new players to branch out into sports. For the launch of Airism, a new range of performance apparel, Japanese retailer Uniqlo recruited Novak Djokovic, currently the number-one tennis player on the circuit, and Polina Semionova, principal dancer for the American Ballet Theater in New York, as the new range's ambassadors.

Similarly, H&M has recently signed a long-term partnership with top tennis player Tomas Berdych, currently ranked sixth in the ATP rankings. "I love fashion and it's great to now have H&M to help me develop my tennis and off-court apparel," stated the 27-year-old. The Swedish retailer is also pursuing its collaboration with Brick Lane Bikes, now in its second season and sold in 180 stores around the world. The eleven-piece range includes water-repellent jackets and is made from more sustainable materials as a part of H&M's Conscious collections.

As upscale fashion labels and mass-market retailers ramp up their sports-inspired offering, casual and active sportswear will benefit from the new design-led momentum. But this also means that the competition is going to get stiffer for the lifestyle ranges of traditional sports brands, highlighting further the importance of good design. 

Before designing fashion, Oskar Metsavaht, the designer behind Brazilian brand Osklen, first made snowboard clothing in a range launched in 1986. The technical line included a waterproof and breathable laminate called Storm Tech System.

 Osklen

