

Popular new events called obstacle course mud runs may be opening up new possibilities for the sports textile and apparel industry. Some big brands are already taking notice.

Mud run apparel, an under-served niche

By Shari Shallard

The ice water was so shocking to my system that my brain wasn't sure I could move," is not typically overheard at the finish line of a 15K. But Brooke Ganse had just completed a Tough Mudder – slightly longer than a 15K and dotted with obstacles like the Arctic Enema, which required her to swim through a skip brimming with near-freezing water. In under four hours, Ms Ganse had also endured Fire Walker (leaping over blazing straw), Walk the Plank (jumping from a five-metre high ledge), Electroshock Therapy (traversing a span of live wires), and the Kiss of Mud (a commando-style crawl through mud with barbed wire just overhead).

And she was more than sweaty afterwards. "I was literally covered in mud from my head to toes," she says. "Face, hair, clothes. After a long, thorough shower, my hair turned a white towel brown. It took days to get all the mud out of my ears."

Ms Ganse had just plunged into the world of obstacle course mud runs (OCMRs). These events put a twist on conventional runs by adding challenges that require stamina, physical strength, mental strength, a sense of humour, and an affinity for getting messy. They also require new analysis at what participants should wear in a competitive run. The growing popularity of OCMRs opens up an exciting opportunity for the sports textile and apparel industry: to develop fabrics and sports gear that can handle both the unexpected terrains and the unavoidable stains.

Redefining Racing

Perhaps a natural extension of popular whole-body workouts like CrossFit and P90X, OCMRs appeal to curious couch potatoes, reckless daredevils, and disciplined runners alike. Consider Johanna MacKinnon, who after completing two marathons, seven half-marathons, one triathlon, and countless 5-10K

The Tough Mudder's Electroshock Therapy obstacle requires a sprint through a field of live wires, some of which carry up to 10,000 volts.

 Tough Mudder



runs, tried her first OCMR in 2012. Thrilled by the experience, she has since completed a Warrior Dash, Prison Break Run, and a Zombie Run, and welcomes the wild challenges enthusiastically. "I already knew I could run, but this was different. I didn't know if I could get through all of the obstacles," she says. "And they're just so fun. You just get out there and go for it."

OCMRs typically range from 5K to half-marathon in distance; many are locally-designed experiences, some are exploding global franchises. Today, three of the most recognisable names in this market are Tough Mudder, Warrior Dash, and Spartan Series (see panel).

Kendra Alley, race director for Warrior Dash, describes her race's "battleground" as requiring "large amounts of mud and obstacles that will have warriors running, ducking, climbing and crashing through a course that will test every muscle in their bodies".

The biggest of the big three, Tough Mudder, brought in around \$70 million last year. To date, this race has seen some 700,000 participants; the company expects at least that many more participants this year alone. Last year, Spartan Series had 350,000 participants and brought in around \$35 million; this year races are lined up in the US, Canada, and the UK. Warrior Dash earned around \$50 million in 2012 and has 2013 races scheduled all over the US, Australia, New Zealand, Italy, Denmark, Norway, and Japan.

Major brands are taking notice of this movement and have begun building strategic alliances.

In January Reebok announced a multiyear partnership with Spartan Race. "At Reebok, we recognise that the fitness landscape is changing," the brand's chief marketing officer said at the time of the announcement. "[People] are beginning to see fitness as part of a lifestyle rather than simply an activity."

Under Armour has had a sponsorship deal with Tough Mudder since late 2011, and the opportunity for mutual growth is exciting for both brands. Jasmine Maietta, category director of men's runs and training, tells WSA: "Tough Mudder is an ideal partner for our brand because the platform provides us with the opportunity to connect, interact and build relationships with athletes before, during and after these events."

Dressing for Success

As for actually outfitting the participants, Reebok and Under Armour are just getting started. Reebok currently markets its ATV shoe toward obstacle course racers and recently announced that a range designed for Spartan Race competitors should be available in autumn of this year.



Under Armour, while stopping short of listing a Mud Run section on its website, offers a number of pieces recommended for the demands of an OCMR. The Men's FTHR Shield TRC Storm Running shoe has high, locked-in support from an ankle sleeve to allow sudden changes in direction; storm treatment repels mud and water; and mountain-biked inspired 'micro lugs' offer good cushioning and grip.

"A Tough Mudder participant will go through a lot of different obstacles," says Ms Maietta, "so they also need product that is going to withstand the elements of each obstacle, the mud and water." She points to pieces from the company's HeatGear line of technical training and baselayer pieces as giving racers an advantage by keeping them "cool, light, and dry".

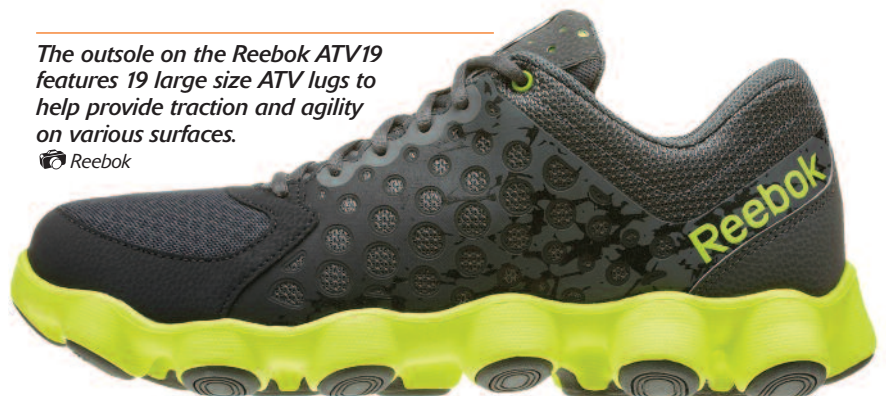
The perspective from the event planners is slightly less pragmatic: Warrior Dash's Ms Alley tells WSA: "We encourage participants to dress in costumes and [donate and recycle shoes] at

The Arctic Enema obstacle on the Tough Mudder course requires racers to swim through a skip filled with icy water.

 Tough Mudder

The outsole on the Reebok ATV19 features 19 large size ATV lugs to help provide traction and agility on various surfaces.

 Reebok





For OCMRs, Under Armour recommends its HeatGear line of technical training and baselayer pieces, designed to keep racers cool, light and dry.

Under Armour

the USAgain Tent located near the finish.” However, she adds that she always recommends Dri-Fit materials for participants’ athletic apparel.

Washing Machine or Waste Basket?

Under Armour’s Sonic HeatGear line and Reebok’s promised Spartan Race range mark an important start in what may be a major industry shift in the needs of racers. Conversations with OCMR participants, however, reveal that this niche is still wide open – and its needs are complex.

Even with four children at home, Erin Mazel has managed to complete over 30 runs in the last three years alone. For a 2012 marathon, she wore her typical running gear: a Road Runner brand hat and running skirt, a Champion racing tank top, Under Armour socks, and Mizuno Wave shoes. After the run, she washed her clothes in the washing machine, stuffed newspapers in her shoes to dry them out, and went on to wear the entire ensemble again for hundreds of miles worth of runs.

And then she decided to compete in a mud run. As part of a five-person team, she found herself trudging through a 25-metre mud pit, crawling under barbed wire, and climbing a four-metre-high mud cliff. “We all wore Army battle dress uniform pants with old Army boots,” she says. “I wore a black tank top from Wal-Mart.”

These clothes would not fare as well as her marathon gear. “The mud had a horrific odour,” Ms Mazel recalls. “I tossed everything in to the trash. I made a costly mistake by wearing a nice

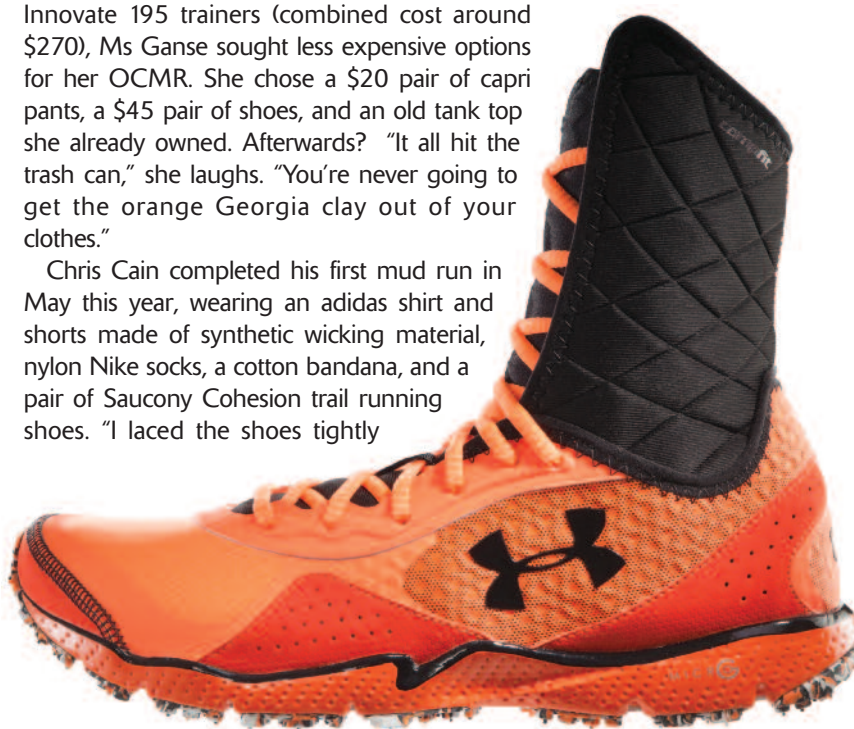
bra from Victoria’s Secret under my cheap black tank top from Walmart. I had to toss that out too. I had not anticipated being so thoroughly soaked in stinky mud. It was disgusting.” Because her Army boots were so expensive, she worked harder to salvage them; next time, however, she says she’ll wear cheap trainers.

“I love Lululemon, but I was not going to ruin my expensive pants,” says Brooke Ganse, recalling how she chose her outfit for the Tough Mudder. While she typically exercises in Lululemon capri pants and tank top and Innovate 195 trainers (combined cost around \$270), Ms Ganse sought less expensive options for her OCMR. She chose a \$20 pair of capri pants, a \$45 pair of shoes, and an old tank top she already owned. Afterwards? “It all hit the trash can,” she laughs. “You’re never going to get the orange Georgia clay out of your clothes.”

Chris Cain completed his first mud run in May this year, wearing an adidas shirt and shorts made of synthetic wicking material, nylon Nike socks, a cotton bandana, and a pair of Saucony Cohesion trail running shoes. “I laced the shoes tightly

The FTTHR Shield TRC Storm Running shoe from Under Armour is designed for OCMRs, with an ankle sleeve, storm treatment repels mud and water; and ‘micro lugs’ for cushioning and grip.

Under Armour



and didn't gather too much mud in them," he says. "I'm glad I wore running shoes instead of old sneakers." He concedes that, following the run, his Saucony shoes will never be the same; he hopes his dark adidas pieces will eventually come clean. He noticed a lot of people wearing cotton, which he'd sought to avoid, having heard the perils of sopping, muddy cotton clothes. "I assume people wore cotton because they knew their clothes would be ruined," he says.

Sticking with the pieces that had served her well when running over dry concrete, Johanna MacKinnon wore an Under Armour wicking top and Nike running capri pants for her most recent mud run. "I chose older pieces, though," she says, "because I knew they would probably get stained." Her trainers were also a relatively old pair, and – as is tradition at many mud runs – she donated the muddied shoes at the end of the race and changed into dry footwear for the drive home.

Practical Solutions

Preparing for mud runs is a relatively new science, hence a website like MudRunningHQ.com – its tagline reads: Your Source For All Things Muddy. Founder Emily Metzloff, a former Peace Corps volunteer who has participated in numerous mud runs and is now training for the Spartan Beast (over 16K long, with more than 25 obstacles), recognises the need for better apparel options.

Like Mr Cain, Ms Metzloff has seen participants don an old cotton T-shirt with intentions of trashing it after the run. "But cotton is not a good choice for mud running. When it gets wet and muddy it gets really heavy and can irritate your skin," she says.

In considering the question of what an ideal Mud Run range of apparel should look like, Ms Metzloff says she thinks participants want clothes that are "practical and cool ... the gear would need to be made from quick-drying material and be in dark colours." Reflecting on the spirit of these competitions, she adds: "[The range would need] edgy slogans and designs to help people feel like they stand out from the crowd."

Yet cost is a key factor, points out Mr Cain, when indelible stains are so likely. "People wanting to save money will tend to just wear old things," he says. "So, a new line needs to either compete on cost with affordable, interesting, loud, wear-once outfits; or it needs to offer a more expensive option of high-quality dark clothes that won't show mud stains and can be worn again."

He adds that in his last run he saw a lot of superhero outfits. "Take what you want from this," he laughs, "but I think a new line might want to consider Marvel comics licensing. Just a thought."



OCMR leaders

Tough Mudder: thus far the most financially successful of these events, this 16-20 km run features up to 25 military-style obstacles. Designed by UK Special Forces, Tough Mudder boasts the tagline "probably the toughest event on the planet". There is no timing; the goal is to finish and to help everyone else finish too.

Warrior Dash: A 5K packed with obstacles similar in style and difficulty to Tough Mudder's; the Warrior Dash has athletes running through (or leaping over) rows of burning logs, and Muddy Mayhem – the event's signature final obstacle – requires a belly crawl under wires through about 45 metres of thick squelchy mud. While Tough Mudder is about simply completing the course, Warrior Dash is competitive; participants wear a timing chip and complete the course as swiftly as possible.

Spartan Series: These races come in various distances ranging from 5.5 to 40 km. Each race is timed, and anyone skipping an obstacle is punished with 30 burpees (this four-step squat thrust move goes from standing to squatting to planking to jumping). Obstacles vary based on the terrain, but all end with costumed Spartans at the finish line with heavily padded pugil sticks trying to fend off fatigued racers.

An opportunity in the rough

The popularity of obstacle course mud runs offers the sports textile industry a vast range of development opportunities: materials that better withstand ragged terrain and shake off mud and water, affordable pieces with colour palettes that embrace – rather than are ruined by – the unbleachable mess, and designs with daring details that capture the unique spirit of these experiences.

It will be interesting to see how Reebok chooses to serve the mud runners with its autumn launch – particularly in terms of price point and colour palettes. Which other brands and designers will follow suit, and how well will each respond to voices like those Brooke Ganse, Johanna MacKinnon, Erin Mazel, Chris Cain, and Emily Metzloff? Perhaps by next summer, the motley trial-and-error uniforms of today's mud runners will be replaced with abundant new OCMR apparel offerings – pieces that are generally free of the colour white and set a new standard of affordable efficiency, style, and adventurous spirit. (Even if we can't see what the new lines look like under all that mud.) 

Finishing the Warrior Dash requires a messy crawl through Muddy Mayhem.

 Warrior Dash