

Swiss cyclist, Fabian Cancellara, wearing the LCS Yellow Jersey at the starting line during stage five of Le Tour de France 2012.

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Racing cyclists know how hard it can be to work their way up from midfield to pole position: overtaking, pursuing, switching rank. These are also key features in the sports apparel market, and in particular for the outfitters of athletes and teams. French brand Le Coq Sportif hopes to surpass its rivals with a fresh strategy that includes sponsoring the Tour de France.

Changing lanes

After 24 years' absence, French sports-wear specialist Le Coq Sportif (LCS) has this year become the provider of the ranking jerseys for the most famous cycling race in the world, the Tour de France. This means it will produce the legendary yellow jersey to identify the rider with the lowest total time, the green jersey for the leader in the points competition and the spotted jersey for the best hill climber, among others. As part of the agreement with the organisers, the Amaury Sport Organisation, cyclists will also wear LCS during some of the main ASO cycling races, among them Paris to Nice (in March 2013), Paris to Roubaix (April 2013), Tour de Picardie (April 2013), Critérium du Dauphiné (June 2013), Vuelta (August to September 2013) and World Ports Classics (September 2013). It is part of a rethink that puts a greater emphasis on research and development and a desire to be recognised as one of the world's leading players in the cycling apparel arena.

Strength through association

Brand building is an important focus for any company. The catalogue of sports stars that have been associated with the LCS over the years has created valuable brand identity. Its current advisers include former tennis star Yannick Noah, winner of the French open in 1983, and his basketballing son Joakim Noah, who plays for NBA side the Chicago Bulls. Rugby players Frederic Michalak from France and Italy's Marco Bortolani are also sponsored by LCS; and last year The Qantas Wallabies, Australia's national rugby team, chose the French brand as their shoe supplier.

The company's roots can be traced back 130 years to when Emile Camuset, by trade a stocking manufacturer, founded Maison Camuset in Romilly-sur-Seine, to the south east of Paris. An avid sports enthusiast, he combined his expertise in clothing production with his passion and established a company to supply apparel to sports teams. The easily recognisable black cockerel was hatched. By 1920 the company had become the official supplier to



Le Coq Sportif technical director, David Pecard, has said CAD and CAM solutions from Gerber Technology meet the needs of his team.

Le Coq Sportif

France's professional football, rugby, basketball and track and field associations. Over the years it has also been worn by numerous football teams, including World Cup winners France in 1958, Italy in 1982 and the 1986 winners Argentina.

Back to the roots

To maintain the value of a brand, however, a passion for sport, team spirit and fun are not the only necessary ingredients. Authenticity, value and functional expertise in the product itself form the real basis. LCS recently changed its strategy and has set ambitious growth targets. It is seeking consolidation in its shoe segment and aiming for increased sales in sports apparel, and it has revamped the production and development of its collections.

Growing its store base and entering new markets plays a key role in this strategy, and it has refined its collection structure to appeal to targeted groups with clearly defined ranges.

It has a strong basis to build on – its 130 year history helps it to foster long-term customer ties and brand loyalty, despite the strong mid-field in the competitive sports clothing market.

In 2010, the company returned to its original factory in Romilly, setting up a research and

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development centre for textiles, and work began at the facility this year. Up to 100,000 prototypes and samples will be developed and produced there every year in line with the design guidelines set at the Paris headquarters by creative and marketing head Cyril Du Cluzeau.

Flexibility in production

To facilitate optimum preparation for production, LCS opted for Gerber Technology's CAD system AccuMark. "The Gerber CAD works primarily by using a natural process, and enables the pattern makers and stylists to create whatever they can envisage," says David Pecard, technical director at LCS and head of the Romilly facility.

To cope with the wide range of materials used in the clothing and accessories, the team uses the Type Z1 latest-generation Gerber cutter for single-ply cutting. This affords the high degree of flexibility required for cutting the prototypes and samples. "We are extremely satisfied with our Z1 as it meets our high demands in terms of versatility and precision," explains Mr Pecard.

Le Coq's polo shirts, T-shirts, shorts and chinos are produced in Europe, with 80% made in the north of Portugal, where the company works closely with four production sites. This is also a key hub for its leather shoes, as Portugal has a strong history of working with leather. Apparel is also produced in Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria, with a handful of products such as knitted sweaters, nylon jackets and hoodies for the collection ranges made in Asia.

"We see the forming of tight relationships with all our suppliers, from the fibre producers to dyers to technology providers, as a fundamental element for the growth now planned at LCS," adds Mr Pecard.

Retail investments

Le Coq Sportif is controlled by the Swiss investment fund Airesis, and as well as operating in France, Spain and Italy the brand has now established a base in the UK. In Germany, Benelux, Scandinavia and Austria it is distributed via licence partners. The company has recently made considerable investments in its retail outlets and is represented in Europe and Australia with 41 stores, nine of which are in France. However, the expansion is far from complete. The company has recently opened a flagship in Milan and three other stores, including one in London, are set to open before the end of the year.

The company, which employs 200 people, reported revenues of €98 million in fiscal 2011. For 2012 they had risen to €122 million.



Fit forms a key part of LCF brand authenticity.

Le Coq Sportif

Instant recognition

The company's graphic development department is responsible for the brand's authenticity, for instance transferring the motif to an HD flock print to highlight the cockerel logo using the sublimation printing process, transfer printing or elaborate embroidery.

The laboratory that tests the materials' performance characteristics ensures high standards are maintained, in line with the brand's philosophy. "We are a sportswear company that is closely and sometimes quite sentimentally linked to sport's glory years," says Mr Pecard. The company's recent investments tie-in with the sporting spirit perfectly. "Le Coq Sportif is perfectly geared up to develop its global position with what is virtually a training centre in Romilly," he adds.



The most varied of knits, single jerseys, weaves as well as technical materials are cut by the latest-generation Gerber Z1 cutter.

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