FOCUS ON WINNERS: HAKEEM OLAJUWON

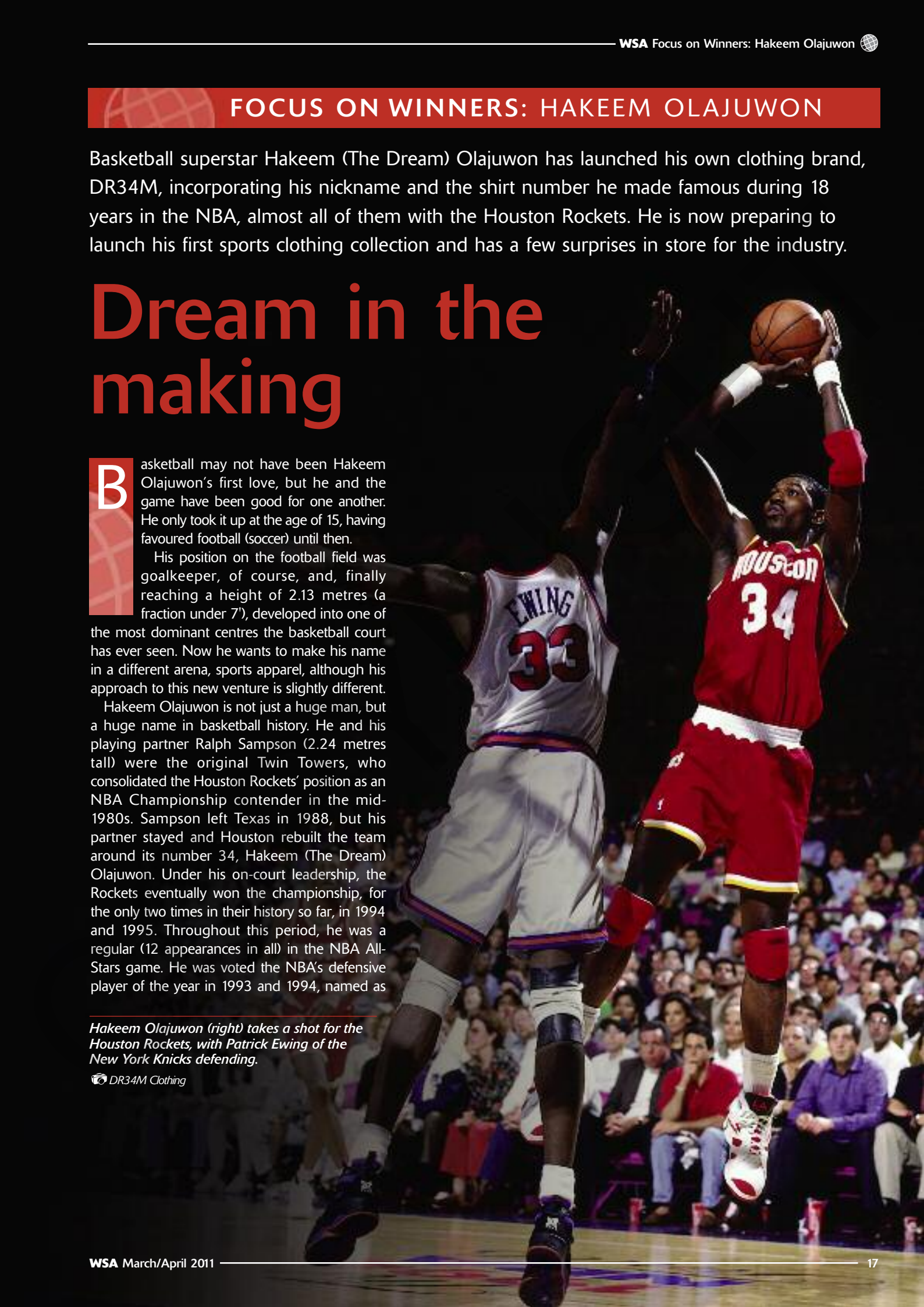
Basketball superstar Hakeem (The Dream) Olajuwon has launched his own clothing brand, DR34M, incorporating his nickname and the shirt number he made famous during 18 years in the NBA, almost all of them with the Houston Rockets. He is now preparing to launch his first sports clothing collection and has a few surprises in store for the industry.

Dream in the making

Basketball may not have been Hakeem Olajuwon's first love, but he and the game have been good for one another. He only took it up at the age of 15, having favoured football (soccer) until then.

His position on the football field was goalkeeper, of course, and, finally reaching a height of 2.13 metres (a fraction under 7'), developed into one of the most dominant centres the basketball court has ever seen. Now he wants to make his name in a different arena, sports apparel, although his approach to this new venture is slightly different.

Hakeem Olajuwon is not just a huge man, but a huge name in basketball history. He and his playing partner Ralph Sampson (2.24 metres tall) were the original Twin Towers, who consolidated the Houston Rockets' position as an NBA Championship contender in the mid-1980s. Sampson left Texas in 1988, but his partner stayed and Houston rebuilt the team around its number 34, Hakeem (The Dream) Olajuwon. Under his on-court leadership, the Rockets eventually won the championship, for the only two times in their history so far, in 1994 and 1995. Throughout this period, he was a regular (12 appearances in all) in the NBA All-Stars game. He was voted the NBA's defensive player of the year in 1993 and 1994, named as



Hakeem Olajuwon (right) takes a shot for the Houston Rockets, with Patrick Ewing of the New York Knicks defending.

DR34M Clothing

the most valuable player (MVP) in the championship's final series of games (a best-of-seven set of head-to-head games between the winners of the NBA's eastern and western conferences) in 1994 and 1995, and as the NBA's best player overall in 1994. His achievement that year of winning all three of these accolades is one that no other player in the history of the NBA has ever managed.

However, his aim in launching a new clothing brand in 2009 and in expanding it now from fashion and lifestyle into sports apparel, is not to try to be the biggest. The brand is DR34M Clothing, incorporating his old shirt number into his NBA nickname. "When I started playing for the University of Houston," Mr Olajuwon relates, "my big hero was Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. I wanted his number, 33, but 33 was taken, so I took 34 instead and now 34 is also a special number." It is one of only five numbers that the Houston Rockets have retired as a tribute to their wearers.

His focus with the company will be much more on offering high-quality clothing than on building a brand to compete with the global giants. And he has made up his mind that natural fibres will predominate in DR34M collections.

"From college basketball to the pros, I had 27 years at the top of the game, and I had experience of the big brands' different products, of all their innovations, testing them in a real-game environment," Hakeem Olajuwon says. "And when you really put these products to the test, you can see the areas in which improvement is possible."

Comfort aids excellence

For him, the key is, and always has been, comfort. Athletes at the level he has performed at (he also has an Olympic gold medal, having represented his adopted country, the US, rather than his native Nigeria at the Atlanta games in 1996) need to be able to feel that the shirts they wear can breathe, he says. They also need to feel that the material is lightweight. "Nothing can replace talent," he adds. "But if you are comfortable, it enables you to perform to the best of your ability. If you're comfortable, it enables you to excel." His view is that what athletes are wearing should be the least of their worries.

The new DR34M sports collection will include T-shirts, polo shirts, tanks, sweat pants, and even shoes. High-end cotton will predominate in the fabric mix. During a visit to the February 2011 edition of Expofil in Paris, several technically enhanced high-end cotton offerings caught Mr Olajuwon's eye.

One of these was TransDry, a patented, high-performance moisture management application that allows 100% cotton fabrics to transfer moisture away from the skin or across the surface of the fabric and dry faster. It's a technology from Cotton Incorporated, the North Carolina-based promotion organisation that works to increase demand for cotton through promotion and through research. According to Cotton Inc., TransDry takes the idea of cotton with moisture management to the next level. It allows users of cotton to combine treated and untreated yarns in a wide range of constructions, engineering fabric to match the desired level of performance in the end product.



One of only five numbers retired by the University of Houston men's basketball team, Olajuwon's No.34 hangs in the university's Hofheinz Pavilion.

Nick Juhasz/Wikipedia

Swiss yarn manufacturer Herman Bühler's SwissCotton BeDry, which uses TransDry technology, was one of the products that particularly appealed to Hakeem Olajuwon at Expofil. The company has partnered with Cotton Inc. to produce pure extra long staple cotton (Supima) yarns with high levels of moisture management. The softness of the sample fabrics on display ticked the right boxes for the former NBA star with regard to comfort, and TransDry's ability to move moisture from the inside of the material to the outside gives him confidence that using fabrics like these in his DR34M Sports collections will allow him to offer the best of both worlds: the comfort of natural fibres with the same functionality as synthetics.

Another Swiss idea he liked was Ice cotton, a concept developed by yarn manufacturer

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Spoerry1866. By carefully choosing premium raw material, and employing an innovative spinning technique, Spoerry has been able to engineer the pima cotton that "transmits a feeling of coolness, freshness and dryness" when it comes into contact with the body. The company is proud of its ability to do this without the use of any chemicals, and this is one of the things that helped it win Hakeem Olajuwon as an admirer.

He says: "I love the fact that all this research is taking place and that we can benefit from it. I want to use the experience I have of synthetics to choose the best now. I want our clothes to be high-end, although still competitive compared to synthetics. I want to appeal to people who are looking for alternatives."

DR34M Sports will be a global brand, with its headquarters and flagship store in Houston. The store will be housed in one of the Texan town's most iconic buildings, the West Mansion in Clear Lake, an Italian-style villa built in 1930 by one of the state's first oil tycoons, James West Jr. A restoration project is now in progress and the building will be ready in the autumn of 2011, providing, dare we say it, a DR34M home for a brand that hopes to make almost as big an impact on the worldwide sports apparel market as its founder made on the game of basketball.



Fireworks light up the Houston skyline. Hakeem Olajuwon led the Rockets to the NBA Championship in 1994 and 1995, the only occasions it has won the title in the team's history.

City of Houston

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