RISE TO THE CHALLENGE: SYMPATEX/BENCH

UK-based clothing brand Bench has ventured into the sports apparel market, launching its first high performance range for autumn-winter 2011/12.

Bench heads for the mountains

When the clothing brand Bench was founded in 1989 in Manchester, England, it produced menswear with a cool, urban look. Its printed t-shirts and sweaters were influenced by BMX biking and skateboarding, and the label was considered part of the underground, independent scene in Manchester at the time.

More than 20 years on, Bench clothing is sold across the world, and although the brand now appeals to a much wider demographic than its early '90s Manchester niche, it has retained its urban, 'anti-fashion' approach to design. It makes sense, then, that when the company decided to create a high performance sportswear range, it did so with a certain rebellious flair. The first Bench Sport apparel line was launched in spring-summer 2009/10 and consisted of beachwear for swimmers and surfers. The line's autumn-winter 2011/12 collection is its first step into high-tech sports apparel and features insulating, windproof and breathable garments for skiers and snowboarders.

To create high-performance pieces, Bench teamed up with Germany-based functional textiles provider, Sympatex.

"Bench were looking for the best functional fabric on the market and they found Sympatex," says Daniele Grasso, Head of Division Apparel at



The Core Coco jacket and Core Coretta pants for women feature performance textiles from Sympatex combined with a young, urban look.

Bench

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Sympatex. "The functionality convinced them. Very high waterproofness, very good breathability and of course windproofness, combined with the environmentally friendly concept we have; I think these are the main reasons Bench chose Sympatex."

Bench used a 100% polyester Sympatex two-layer laminate in two styles within its 'Level 3' product offering (the highest performance level the brand currently produces). For women, Sympatex fabric was used in the 'Core Coco' jacket and the 'Core Coretta' trousers, and for men, it features in the 'Tech Taurus' jacket and the 'Top Tim' trousers.

The right look

The performance range not only had to provide excellent functionality; one of the challenges that Bench and Sympatex faced was creating a high-tech product that retained the brand's 'street-style' look. "We offered different type of fabrics and Bench chose the best matching fabric to the brand," says Mr Grasso. "The difficulty was really in having the lifestyle look and the background of Bench combined with the functionality of the laminates."

In the end, Bench chose a Sympatex fabric that they felt combined an urban look with functionality. "The range is bigger and better [than last season's] with a variety of silhouettes to cater for both snowboarders and skiers," says a statement from Bench. "Improvements include anatomic fits across all styles, two-way adjustable hoods and inner cuffs as standard on all jackets."

According to Bench, its Level 3 products offer stylish, high-performance clothing for outdoor professionals. "The Tech Taurus Jacket for men and the Core Coco Jacket for women are the fulfilment of various different requirements packed in one unique style," the company says. "A combination of high-tech materials and fabrics make this super lightweight, waterproof and very durable jacket a perfect all-rounder with a street-style design. The Sympatex membrane provides for breathability and freedom of movement, at the same time it offers superior protection in harsh weather conditions and meets the high demands of intense outdoor activities."

The jacket also features a three-dimensionally adjustable hood and a stand-alone soft-rim collar with chin guard to avoid unwanted scratches on the skin. The convenient chest pocket and two large hand-warmer pockets on the sides are both laminated and trimmed with water-resistant 'aquaglide' zips from YKK.

The Top Tim Pant for men and the Core Coretta Pant for women also feature a Sympatex membrane, as well as reinforcements in high-stress sections, such as the bottom, thighs, knees and lower legs. Laminated ventilation zippers on the inner thighs allow for comfortable cooling, and the pants also feature details such as anatomically shaped knees and lower legs and integrated adjustable gaiters.



The Tech Taurus jacket and Top Tim pants for men are wind and waterproof as well as being breathable for maximum comfort.

Bench

Challenges ahead

Bench is currently developing its winter 2012 collection, which will also use Sympatex performance textiles. According to the apparel company, its biggest challenge is pricing. "We believe that Germany will continue to be our biggest market for Bench Sport whilst we will also focus on Canada, Austria and Switzerland. The biggest challenge will be to deliver excellent product at competitive price points. This is where we believe our sourcing and design strategies will be key."

In terms of the aesthetic of next year's collection, Bench intends to introduce more colour and structure into its sportswear range. "We see a shift away from the typical all over prints of previous seasons and a move into more colour blocked and structured cut lines. We also see a move away from pure sports styling with a combination of streetwear detailing and technical features creating a new aesthetic – this we believe is our opportunity to bring something new to the market."

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