

The ispo 2011 trade show highlighted the increasing popularity of using wool in performance apparel. With natural properties and eco credibility, wool is fast becoming a luxurious alternative to the most commonly used fibres.

Counting sheep

For centuries, wool has been used in clothing by apparel companies and designers, to great effect (the staple wardrobe piece that is the woolly jumper) and with less-than-desirable results (the long-sleeved woollen swimsuits worn by men in the eighteenth century). The use of wool in sports apparel has in recent years experienced something of a resurgence in popularity, with companies such as Haglöfs, an outdoor equipment firm based in Sweden, introducing merino wool into their collections.

Wool from the merino breed of sheep is regarded by many as being the finest and softest in the world, and its properties lend themselves to use in performance athletic apparel; in particular running, hiking, skiing, mountain climbing and cycling wear. Excellent at regulating body temperature, merino wool provides some warmth without overheating the wearer. The fibre is naturally hydrophobic thanks to the so-called cuticula, a scaly layer that prevents the wool fibre from taking on fluid moisture, but allows it to take on vaporised liquid. Wool can take on about a third of its dry weight in vaporised moisture and still not feel damp. Wool is also naturally antibacterial. Odour, via bacteria, develops when the moisture during exercise stays on the skin; as wool keeps the skin dry, there is no real opportunity for bacteria. New Zealand outdoor clothing brand Icebreaker has used merino wool in its products since the company was founded in 1994. Icebreaker came about when founder and chief executive Jeremy Moon met a wool farmer who handed him an insulating t-shirt he had created. "It felt gorgeous and like cashmere," said Mr Moon. "[In the past] I couldn't stand wool because it was so itchy, but this was so soft."

For spring-summer 2011, New Zealand brand Icebreaker launched its first technical clothing range designed specifically for mountain bikers, the GT Bike collection, in which apparel is made with a minimum 85% merino wool content.

Icebreaker

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Mr Moon then began experimenting with the fabric, and realised its potential. "It's breathable and light, odour-resistant, keeps you warm when it's cold and cool when it's hot, and is natural. I launched Icebreaker to offer a natural choice."

Natural benefits

For those promoting merino wool, its benefits and advantage over synthetic fibres and cotton are plain to see. Australian Wool Innovation (AWI), a not-for-profit company which invests in research, development and marketing along the global supply chain for Australian wool, has promoted the use of wool in sports apparel since it was established in 2001. "Wool has many benefits which in the last hundred years have been more or less copied by synthetics, like 'soft as wool,' 'breathing like wool,' but in the end, wool has it all," says Ingrid Oomen, a key account manager at AWI. "It's pleasant to wear, especially merino wool which has a low micron of 19.5. The merino breed has very fine hair; it's soft and you can wear it next to skin. We are promoters of wool and the use of wool and we're very pleased with new interest in wool as a natural fibre."

To demonstrate merino wool's capabilities in sportswear, AWI recently launched Merino-Perform, a new knitted fabric technology made of pure merino wool, which the company claims transfers vapour and sweat away from the body, enabling the wearer to stay cool and dry during exercise. AWI general manager, Jimmy Jackson, says the innovation was developed from a unique double-face 100% merino fabric. "During the initial phases of exercise, the inner layer of the merino fabric absorbs moisture vapour thereby creating a drier micro-climate. Any sweat is efficiently absorbed by the fabric's outer layer where it quickly evaporates, leaving the wearer cooler and drier," Mr Jackson says. "MerinoPerform is ideal for base layer garments aimed at low to high activity sports, all year round and in all climates."

Haglöfs is just one of many sports apparel companies to take advantage of merino wool's natural properties. Its merino wool baselayer range was introduced last year as part of the autumn-winter 2010 collection using wool from South Africa, New Zealand and Argentina. "By introducing wool, Haglöfs is showing that we take the baselayer as seriously as other parts of our range," says Haglöfs CEO Nicolas Warchalowski. "We now have a complete programme of baselayer products, with wool bringing a number of technical properties that synthetic materials do not have."

Haglöfs' use of wool ties in with the company's sustainability ethos, by which the firm "aims to contribute to a society that is sustainable in the long-term, through responsible actions and with products that are manufactured in an ethical and environmentally sustainable way".



Haglöfs' Active Warm Zip Top is a merino wool and synthetic fibre mix garment for layering in cold conditions. The fabric is 78% polyester,18% merino wool and 4% elastane.

Haglöfs

Eco aims

The increase in popularity for sports brands to use wool could be attributed to the current trend for sustainability, according to Stefan Franke, a key account manager for AWI. "I think there are market drivers and I think the strongest market driver is the trend towards sustainability," he says. "So I think nature is in all our minds and we have the luck that our fibre is exactly what the market is requesting."

The argument for wool as an 'eco' product is a strong one, as Ms Oomen points out: "Synthetic fibres are almost always made out of oil, whereas merino wool comes from the wool on a sheep. And as long as there are sheep and grass and water, you have wool. So from that point of view it's a renewable source."

Designer Textiles International is another New Zealand company producing and promoting merino performance wear. In May last year, the company signed a bluesign screening agreement, providing a guarantee for its partners that its processes are environmentally responsible. Shelley Parker, international business manager at Designer Textiles, believes the step will be pivotal for the firm's future. "It's an ethical statement on our use of chemicals in our business as well as an important aligning with other brands that are bluesign partners," she says.

Although it is unlikely that wool will ever surpass cotton and synthetic fibres in the sports textiles industry, its increasing popularity among brands is surely a sign that environmentally-aware consumers are looking for a natural alternative – and wool is fast becoming the obvious choice.

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