BRAND PROFILE: LO SWIM

Options appeared limited when collegiate swimmers Sheeva van Gemeren and Annie Babicz decided they would like to look better when training for competitions, so they set up their own swimwear brand, Lo Swim, which they now run full time.

Functional, but feminine

Members of collegiate swimming teams in the US, like all university sports programmes there, have to be serious about what they do, giving up hours that could be spent studying, working at a part-time job, socialising or sleeping in order to be in the pool or in the gym. They are driven people.

When Sheeva van Gemeren and Annie Babicz, who competed on different University of California teams (Davis and Berkeley, respectively) in the second half of the last decade, met up after graduation, they found they had this determination in common, but something else as well: they were, in their own words, "fashion lovers" as well as competitive swimmers, and they believed strongly, as they still do today, that the training suits women swim athletes are given to wear should be more feminine, more flattering and more attractive.

"We are talking specifically about training suits," Sheeva van Gemeren says. "We were given two training suits a year as collegiate swimmers, plus one suit for competitions." But she explains that athletes would keep the competition suits, including Speedo Fastskin suits and, towards the end of her time, a Speedo LZR, for "the one big meet each year; you feel so light wearing them", and rely heavily on the training suits for the rest of the time. "The fabric was always ruching at the chest," she recalls. "This balloon would form between your breasts when you pushed off. We all used to use a hair-tie to try to improve the look."

In the autumn of 2009, Ms van Gemeren and Ms Babicz began working together as coaches at a swimming club near Los Angeles and they quickly agreed, not only that the look of women's swim-suits needed to improve, but also that they could make a difference themselves. Before the end of that year, they had launched the first of their own designs under the brand name Lo Swim.

A bridge between beach and competition

Lo Swim products attempt to bridge a gap its founders perceive between beach and competitive swimwear. Two-piece suits have an adjustable neck-strap and a T-strap at the back to customise fit and minimise tan lines. A draw-cord allows for a snug fit around chest, minimising ruching to combat drag. The bottoms also have a draw-cord for a snug fit around waist, and any ruching on bottom will match ruching on the top for a more attractive overall look and an effect that the brand's founders believe is reminiscent of some Victoria's Secret lingerie styles. Ten colour options include teal blue and various combinations of pink and purple tie-dye, as well as black.



The Lo Swim training suit has an adjustable neck-strap and a T-strap at the back to customise fit and minimise tan lines.

Lo Swim

The first batch of Lo Swim suits became available quickly for online purchase, but the brand remained a sideline for the two founders for a few years. Then a breakthrough came in 2012.

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Big-name customer

One of the people who, in spite of its size and the limited reach of its marketing, discovered Lo Swim's training suits was Missy Franklin. This was in the build-up to Ms Franklin's preparations for the London 2012 Olympics at which the swimmer cemented an already stellar status. Having broken the world record for the 200 metres backstroke in a short-course pool as a 16-year-old at the end of 2011 in Berlin, (and another as part of a 4×100 metre medley relay team in Atlanta a little later), she won four golds and a bronze in London and broke both of the above world records. In 2013's major event, the World Aquatics Championships in Barcelona in July and August, Missy Franklin won six gold medals, setting a new record for the most golds won by a female swimmer at a single edition of the World Championships.

She is the hottest ticket in swimming, and although she is maintaining her amateur status for her college career (which began, at Berkeley, in the autumn of 2013), which means she is refusing to accept endorsements, for some time now she has had big brands courting her attention. This is not what happened with Lo Swim. To get her hands on a Lo Swim training swimsuit, Missy Franklin did the same as anyone else: she went online and bought it. "This was in the spring of 2012," recalls Annie Babicz. "Missy was training at Florida Keys for the Olympic trials, which involved being out in the sun a lot of the time, and she wanted to look good. But it's also distracting when your suit isn't comfortable. In training suits, it was just primary colours, geometric designs and cuts, all designed by men."

Other prominent swimmers to have become customers include Olympic gold medal winner Jessica Hardy, three-time Olympian Kara Lynn Joyce, World Championships gold-medal winner Emily Silver, and US national team member Madison Kennedy.

Trial and error

Ms Babicz had made some of her own clothes in the past but admits she and her partner had no design experience. She describes the process of coming up with the Lo Swim suit as "lots of trial and error", but she believes they have managed to eliminate many of the flaws women swim athletes have put up with for years. "We've had a great reception," she continues. "So we quit our jobs, I was still a swim coach and Sheeva was working as a recruiter, and now we're doing this full time. We have a lot of ideas for the future."

Sheeva van Gemeren says the aim is for Lo Swim to do for swimwear "what Lululemon has done for athletic wear". Both women spent time working in Lululemon stores when they were students. "We just want to put more femininity into swimwear," she says.



Serious women swimmers want to look good while they are training.

Lo Swim

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