BRAND PROFILE: AQUA SPHERE

Michael Phelps has teamed up with the Italian company to make use of its 'first compression fabric for water' for his spin-off brand, MP.

Making a splash

As the most decorated Olympian in history, Michael Phelps would be forgiven for taking things easy since announcing his retirement after the London 2012 Games. Instead, he has made a tumble turn, having missed the 'routine', and is back in the pool preparing for competition. He has also taken on an additional role as a tester for, and face of, a new brand: MP, part of the wider Aqua Sphere company. What he lacks in finely tuned fitness he hopes will be boosted by its first suit, which he has spent the past year working on with the Italy-based manufacturer.

"I believe we have created a racing suit that provides the correct level of compression in the right areas combined with flexibility that is noticeably significant in and out of the water," he says.

Speedo's sponsorship of Phelps expired after the last Olympics, and Aqua Sphere approached the swimmer seeking to move further into competitive swimming. They were found to be a 'good fit' and a multi-year deal was signed last summer and officially launched at the Ispo Munich trade show in February – when Phelps also confirmed he would return to competitive swimming (after a drink driving-related ban).

"Michael and his coach, Bob, had a very involved role in terms of their vision and how they challenged our team to develop something that doesn't exist today," explains Todd Mitchell, manager of the swim business line at Aqua Sphere.

The company is a division of Aqua Lung, a Genoa-based manufacturer which claims to have invented self-contained underwater breathing apparatus (scuba) in 1943, and which continues to a big manufacturer of dive and water sports gear. Aqua Sphere was established in 1998, originally to focus on eyewear, but which has since expanded into swimsuits, wetsuits and accessories. It owns a number of technologies in eye protection and wetsuits as well as body shaping swimwear and has grown into a worldwide enterprise, with operations in 90 countries.

Aqua Sphere debuted the Seal Mask in 1998, and the much-copied design is now a staple in all brands' portfolios. All googles are still designed and manufactured at the Genoa factory, eschewing temptation to move production to Asia in order to maintain the



Michael Phelps said designing his own range is 'a dream come true'.

Aqua Sphere

COPYRIGHT

'Made in Italy' kudos. In recent years it has targeted the 'triathlon' category and won awards for its Kayenne googles design, which offers added peripheral vision.

Controversy in the pool

The Xpresso suit, MP's first product, uses the 'first compression textile used for water' and is one of only a few novel suits to launch in the past few years. Brands and manufacturers were scalded by the memory of the hydrofoil suits, versions of which were launched around the time of the Olympics in 2008.

Speedo's high-tech LZR Racer Suit, described at the time as the "world's fastest swimsuit", was worn by a number of top swimmers in Beijing including Michael Phelps, who won the most gold medals in a single Olympics at the event. An incredible 94% of swimming races were won by competitors wearing the suit. In total, 23 of the 25 world records broken were achieved by swimmers competing in the LZR.

Shortly after, president of USA Swimming Jim Wood spoke out against the suits, saying they gave competitors an unfair advantage, and when swimmers wearing an adidas version, the Hydrofoil, also began to smash records, FINA, the International Swimming Federation, took a closer look. After originally approving the suits, it revised the rules and banned some styles. New regulations stated only waist-to-knee suits, known as 'jammers', for men and shoulder-to-knee suits for women would be allowed. They must also be made of 'textile' rather than polyurethane or materials that can act as buoyancy aids, and the low-drag panels were removed from the LZR.

The furore caused ripples throughout the sport; Speedo claimed the move could "take the sport back two decades" adding that "technology – properly monitored and adhering to guidelines – does have a place in all sport".

Aqua Sphere's design team, hoping to develop a suit that surpassed rivals but which needed to be cleared by FINA, would no doubt have this at the forefront of their minds when developing the Xpresso. "Luckily, we had a running start on the process, as we knew we wanted to get into the competitive space in advance of this partnership," Aqua Sphere's marketing manager Lauren Schuil tells us. "Integrating Michael and Bob into the development process was seamless. They have some great insight and are eager to contribute."

The team developed a dual fabric technology, which combines Exo-Foil and Aqua-Core fabrics, providing compression and flexibility. The Exo-Foil is Aqua Sphere's proprietary 3D stretch material, the three dimensional structure of the fabric allowing it to mimic and flex with the movement of the muscles. Aqua-Core is a woven



The Xpresso uses a new type of dual fabric construction that offers increased flexibility.

Aqua Sphere

fabric that delivers a high level of compression for stability and support. Panels of Aqua Core are strategically placed and designed to follow the femoral artery, which the company says improves circulation throughout the leg, allowing muscles to stay relaxed. "The combination of these two technologies is called Exo-Core and it is FINA-approved," adds Ms Schuil. "There is no polyurethane or extra buoyancy."

The 2015 MP product line features the racing suit, which became available this April, as well as K180 and K180+ performance goggles and a swim snorkel in various colours.

Wider audience

Mr Phelps sees the collaboration as more important than the usual athlete-brand tie-ups, rather as vehicle for change in the sport. "We've seen over the years how certain technical aspects of swimming products and teaching aids could be improved, not only for the elite-level competitive swimmer, but also for entry-level and fitness swimmers. We believe there is an opportunity to help make the sport more inviting by recognising that everyone begins at a different level and requires assistance matching their skills with products."

He has been signed as an ambassador until at least 2020, the Games in Tokyo, but Aqua Sphere is tight-lipped on forthcoming products. "While we're focused on the elite competitive swimming market place, we want to help more people lead active, healthy lifestyles, so over the next several years you'll see our partnership expand and broaden as we reach into different areas," says Mr Mitchell. "This is the most logical starting point, but there's much more to come."

COPYRIGHT