With a surge of new disciplines, a fast-growing off-road pedelec market and outdoor brands moving in, mountain-bike apparel is quietly morphing into a new action sportswear category.

New ventures in mountain-bike clothing

Among the many different categories that make up the world of cycling, mountain biking is a relatively recent addition. Originating in California in the 1980s as a makeshift offshoot of road cycling, it rapidly gained Olympic standing, becoming part of the official programme of the Atlanta games in 1996. Since then, it has grown to dominate the market, representing 25% to 30% of bicycle sales in many key countries *(see box opposite)*.

The appeal of the sport continues to grow thanks to new types of bicycles and corresponding activities. Gravel and fat bikes are two new tribes that have joined a field counting numerous families, from cross-country, trail, enduro and downhill disciplines to various free-ride categories. "Gravel bikes, which are essentially road cycles with larger tyres, have emerged in the past few years," William Brana, apparel buyer for French retail group CycleLab, tells *WSA*. "With fat bikes, these easier and more fun activities are driving growth in mountain biking in general."

The recent surge of e-bike sales is also bringing new populations to the sport, attracting older generations in particular who appreciate electrical assistance to offset a slightly lower level of fitness or endurance. "These consumers have more money and more free time," says Tom Louage, category manager for performance at Swiss technical brand Odlo. He points out that pedelecs require that the cyclist pedal and manoeuvre around obstacles, implying a certain level of skills and equipment. The e-bike trend is also attracting recreational cyclists looking for family-friendly activities and who would not envision a cycling trip in hilly regions without assistance in pedalling.

These market trends are inspiring outdoor clothing brands to take a closer look at the mountain bike category as a possible vehicle for growth. Norwegian premium sportswear label Norrona is introducing a mountain-bike clothing range in 2017 and Patagonia launched its first line of clothing for the category in 2016. A maker of helmets and protections, Poc Sports, has been gradually expanding its apparel ranges, introducing a mountain bike-specific line this year, and developing clothing for 'gravelists' next year. New brands are also appearing, such as UK-based Upper Downs (whose Kickstarter-based launched was featured in *WSA's* May-June 2016 issue).



In Odlo's new Morzine range for S/S 2017 specially developed for off-road riders, the tops provide moisture management and the bottoms are made in tougher, abrasion-resistant fabrics for added protection from falls.

Odlo

Not the "Lycra" set

As opposed to Lycra-clad road cyclists, off-road riders wear loose-fitting clothing designed to be worn over elbow- and knee-pads and spinal protectors. "Unlike road cyclists, mountain bikers spend more time off the bike and this implies a different approach to design," says Mr Louage at Odlo. "The pros will wear close-fitting kits for competitions, but they will layer a pair of baggy shorts over their padded shorts when training." He sees a difference between continental European off-road cyclists, who more readily wear fitted clothing, and North Americans and cyclists from the UK, who prefer more casual



Vaude's new Garbanzo Pro bike shorts are made in a robust yet lightweight stretch fabric that is bluesign-approved. It has a PFC-free water repellent Eco Finish, like 95% of the items in the German brand's S/S 2017 collection.

Vaude / Alpsolut

Off-road is king of the hill

With revenues of $6.2 billion in 2015 in the United States, the bicycle market has been stable for the past few years, according to the US National Bicycle Dealers Association. It says the mountain bike category accounts for roughly 25% of all bikes sold at specialty retailers (as opposed to mass retailers). Research by NPD Group indicates that the mountain bike segment grew by 10% in dollar sales and by 7% in units in the US in the 12 months to August 2015. In France, the category increased by 5% in units in 2015, within a market (all categories included) valued at €1.7 billion, according to the Observatoire du Cycle FPS and UNIVELO trade organisations. Mountain bikes are also the biggest category in France; 863,000 units were sold there in 2015, corresponding to a market share of close to 30%. Within this positive context, the real news is the surge in demand for pedelecs, battery-assisted mountain bikes. E-mountain bike sales grew by 45% in France in 2015 and the same trend is seen in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, where off-road pedelecs now account for almost 30% of all e-bikes sold, says trade journal *Bike Europe*.



Norrona is expanding into cycling with Skibotn, a range made for enduro riders. The main material for its long- and short-sleeve tops is wool.

Norrona

styles. "Fitted is not always considered cool," he points out.

In a move to expand beyond technical underwear, Odlo relaunched a cycling clothing collection in 2010. The range is now opening up to mountain biking to address growth in demand in both performance and casual clothing with a wider selection of prints and looser, baggier styles. "For the first time, the proportion of road to off-road clothing will be 50/50 for spring-summer 2017," says Mr Louage.

To keep up with the constantly changing landscape of mountain biking, Poc is also pushing the boundaries of its apparel ranges with new styles and high-tech fabrics, says the brand's marketing manager Björn Seitner. The recently launched Resistance collection features ceramic-coated SuperFabric panels on bottoms and Cordura reinforcements on tops. "The sleeves of the new Resistance Pro Enduro rain jacket are reinforced with Vectran fabric and we've placed Cordura panels on the outside of sleeves for added durability," he says. Hard goods, which includes helmets and body armour, are by far the brand's main business in cycling. "We will be growing our apparel offering in the coming years, and particularly mountain bike apparel. The S/S17 collection is our largest yet."

Off-road and gravel enthusiasts are the main focus of the S/S 2017 collections at Italian brand Rh+, developed by the Benetton family-owned Zero Industry. New styles and colours are in store for both men and women and a new shell jacket, to be presented at the Eurobike show, will be suitable for all types of outdoor activities, says Samuele Bressan, product manager of the cycling division. The adventure/outdoor crossover category is seen as the most dynamic. "Gravel in particular is one of the fastest growing disciplines, and we believe in it strongly," says Rh+ marketing manager Andrea Pizzi. A long-standing partner of Polartec, the brand will be adding newly developed Polartec Delta fabrics in its S/S 2017 collection. The dual-effect knit is made in a blend of polyester and Tencel that is said to "maximise" the cooling effect of perspiration.

New players

As mentioned earlier, Norrona is introducing a mountain-bike range in its spring-summer 2017 collection. The brand has already dabbled in the discipline, developing the Flex1 pants a few years ago, specifically for mountain biking. The reference has since become one of its bestsellers for all outdoor activities. For spring-summer 2017, it will be introducing Skibotn, a new range for enduro cyclists named after a town in the north of Norway. In line with Norrona's "loaded minimalism" approach to design, the range is deliberately sober in style but cut looser for backcountry cyclists. The key material for tops is merino wool and bottoms have rugged panels placed atop a recycled polyester four-way stretch fabric.

As new populations engage in off-road cycling, the mountain-bike clothing category seems set to develop into a wider market with input from both cycling specialists and outdoor companies. As a less crowded niche with a more versatile product positioning, compared to road cycling, it appears particularly well suited to appeal to a mature outdoor clothing industry on the lookout for new ventures.



Scott's women's Trail collection for S/S 2017 features a gradient print top with a hidden side pocket that comes with a microfibre wipe to keep glasses clean. The shorts have an integrated pad for long rides.

Scott Sports

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