BRAND PROFILE: VOLLEBAK



Newly-formed adventure sports clothing brand Vollebak believes it can help athletes tackle extreme conditions with its innovative take on garment design that draws on physiology and psychology.

Advanced adventure clothing

Athletes need more than just physical power and high quality gear to push their limits. This is the thinking behind new adventure brand Vollebak, a London-based start-up launched by twin brothers Steve and Nick Tidball in November 2015. The first two products they have made push the limits of garment design with unconventional features such as a hood that zips up to hide the face and a jacket that will not only protect wearers in extreme conditions but also offer them advice if they were to get into difficulty while out in the wilds.

Practising what they preach, the Tidballs engage in multiple sports activities and compete in ultra-marathons and adventure and ironman races. Before launching their brand, the brothers worked in advertising, creating a number of standout realisations, including a Floating House for Airbnb in 2015 and a pop-up store for adidas, the D Rose Jump Store, that won a Gold award in the outdoor category at Cannes Lions in 2014.

They have packed their jackets with all the fittings they believe extreme adventurers will need. The Condition Black jacket is covered in

In 'Eiger Dreams', writer John Krakauer suggests that climbers experiencing what is known as 'tent rage' would benefit from a Baker Miller Pink tent. This inspired Vollebak to develop a jacket made in that particular shade of pink.

Andy Lo Pò / Vollebak Ltd.

19 laser-cut and hand-applied panels of Schoeller's ceraspace ceramic-coated fabric placed at "predicted impact points" on a high-resistance stretch WB40 fabric ground, also made by the high-tech Swiss weaver. Vollebak claims the jacket can withstand falls of up to 120 kilometres per hour. If trouble arrives, two 'survival pockets' on the upper chest encourage the wearer to adopt a foetal position and there are glow-in-the-dark instructions printed on the sleeves. The name of the jacket is drawn from a term used by the military to describe a physical and mental state during life and death situations, 'condition black'.

To prepare for or unwind after an expedition or race, the Tidballs have created a softshell that they believe will help adventure athletes stay calm and relaxed. The name of the product, Baker Miller Pink, refers to special shade of pink that is said to reduce heart rate, slow breathing and minimise oxygen consumption. The main fabric's water-repellent, thermal-insulating and wind-resistant properties also make it a high-performance mid-layer.

If all that is not enough, each jacket comes with a conditioning soundtrack or video. The music composed for the 'relaxing' soft shell, which when worn zipped up "floods" the wearer's vision in pink, is "constructed almost entirely from elements of pink noise – a frequency found throughout the universe that slows and regulates brain activity," the twins claim. The video training programme that comes with the Condition Black jacket is designed to enhance sensory perceptions as well as help combat hearing loss and distorted vision. "It uses light and sound to trigger the Gamma brainwaves you experience in extreme situations, before forcing your senses to train at the limits of cognition," as indicated on the brand's website. Experimental indeed.

Parasympathetic conditioning

The Tidballs have embarked on a radically new direction compared to conventional garment design. "We were attempting to tackle a problem that no one has really taken on. You don't walk into your local sports shop and find the aisle of clothing aiming to enhance your parasympathetic nervous system to help you relax. So we're starting with an entirely blank canvas," the designers tell *WSA*. They liken it to something closer to "behavioural design" than traditional product design. "Our goal is to create a more relaxed athlete with any method available to us. This meant exploring a lot of different avenues before distilling the final design."

They began investigating this project in 2012 after having read John Krakauer's book, 'Eiger Dreams' in which the author suggests that climbers, experiencing what is known as 'tent rage', would benefit from a tent made in a particular shade of pink, Baker Miller Pink. The effects of this colour were discovered in the late 1970s and "if a person looks at it for long enough, it flips a switch in their central nervous system, lowering their pulse and forcing them to relax," the twins claim.

"We were immediately interested in applications this colour could have for high-level action and adventure sports athletes



When zipped up, the hood of the Baker Miller Pink softshell immerses the wearer in a colour thought to slow breathing. The sleeves can be tucked into the pockets to reduce movement and oxygen consumption.

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Named after a military code word for a life-and-death situation, when the subconscious is said to kick in to determine action, the Condition Black jacket features a ceramic-coated outer surface and special details such as magnetic survival pockets and glow-in-the-dark instructions.

Andy Lo Pò / Vollebak Ltd.

looking to stay calm before or after risking their lives. Tension, anxiety, stress and fear are not unique to climbers – they're huge performance factors in any sport. What we then went on to explore was how we could heighten that effect by simultaneously influencing other physiological elements like breathing, body position and the senses."

This inspired the jacket's face-covering hood. When closed, the visor "encourages the wearer to breathe through the nose, which slows breathing," the designers say. To ensure immobility, the hoodie morphs into a straight-jacket: the pockets are placed to function as "slings to reduce movement, limit oxygen consumption and position the arms close to the stomach to help wearers check that they are breathing deeply." These intricate designs come at a certain price tag, the pink soft shell retailing for £220 and the outerwear jacket for £750. Both jackets are manufactured in Portugal by Petratex, considered by the designers to be the "best technical factory in the world – one that understands performance as well as it understands style".

Experimental design

Applying what they learn and endure in the course of their own adventures, Steve and Nick Tidball have plans to develop other products for extreme situations. "Our aim is to use the insights and discoveries from any field that we feel can create products and experiences that can improve how athletes think and perform." Though this implies much experimentation before reaching a final result, they do have a specific adventure planned that will put their new range of kit through what they say is "ferocious testing": the Highlands of Scotland "where the special forces train and the weather can turn at any moment from violent snow storms to blazing sunshine. We think it is really important that we do this ourselves so we have first-hand experience of what works and what doesn't," they insist.

For those interested in picking up the challenge carried by the name of the brand itself – vollebak comes from the Flemish for "all out" – the soundtrack and film are freely available on the brand's website. The twins view all forms of experimentation positively.

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