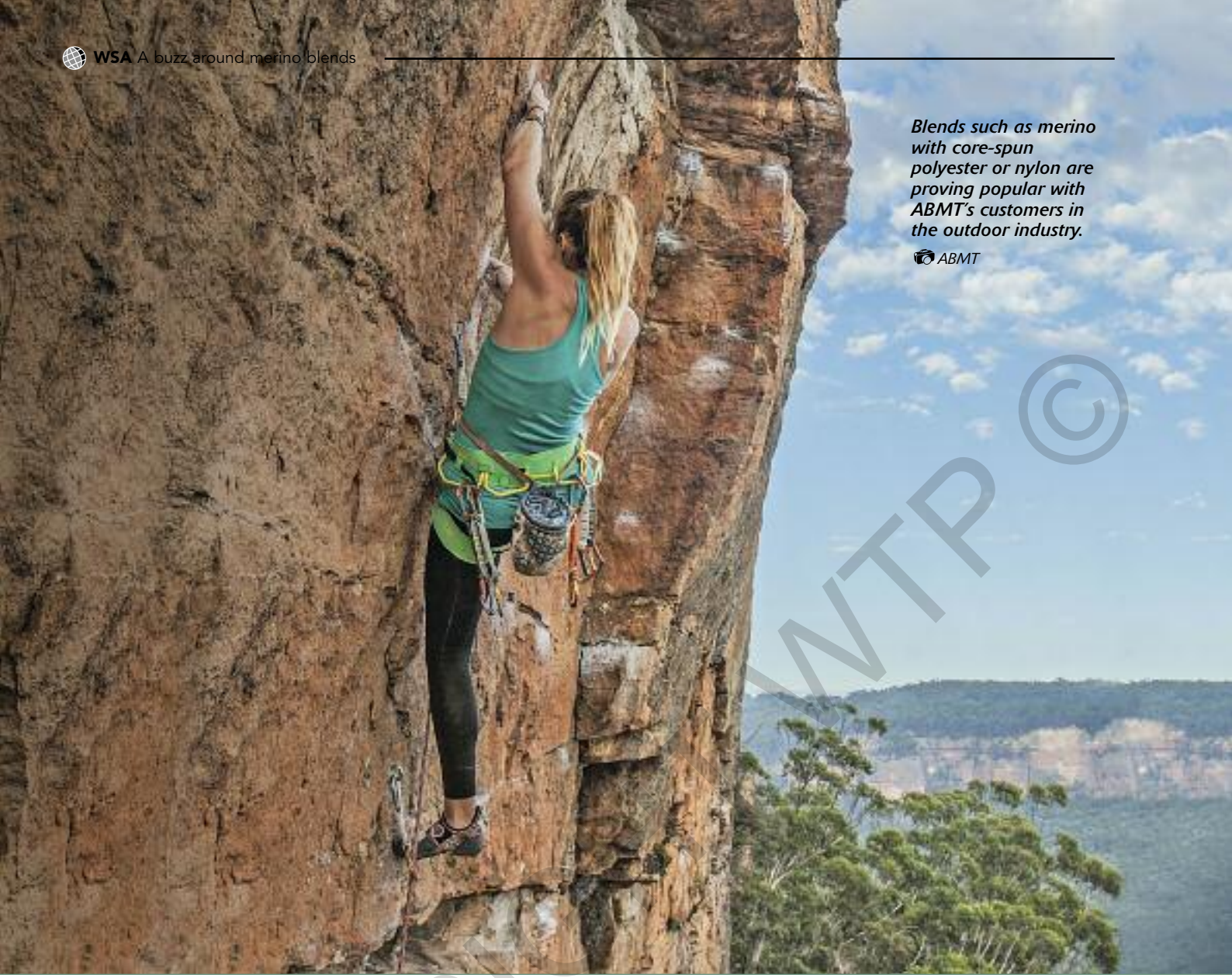


*Blends such as merino with core-spun polyester or nylon are proving popular with ABMT's customers in the outdoor industry.*

*ABMT*

COPYRIGHT WTP ©

Merino wool is highly prized by activewear brands, but it's expensive. In the right hands, blends of merino with core-spun synthetic fibres or with natural fibres such as cotton, Modal and Tencel, can produce circular knit fabrics that tick all the boxes.

# A buzz around merino blends

The momentum behind merino wool in the activewear industry remains strong. The benefits of using merino are well established and widely accepted: it's a natural, renewable fibre that offers warmth, softness, breathability and high levels of odour- and moisture-management. But it's also expensive and the garment industry, even in its sports and outdoor sectors, remains extremely sensitive to price. In this context, the growth in prominence of merino-based blended fabrics manufacturer ABMT Textiles has come at a good time.

Melbourne-based ABMT has been producing fabrics for almost 20 years and had already carved out a niche for itself, as a pioneer of circular knit fabrics, when it began to partner with activewear fabrics specialist Concept III in 2013 with a view to making a bigger impression on North American and European brands.

Almost five years on, Concept III founder, David Parkes, now describes the ABMT fabrics he is able to offer customers as "one of the most exciting things we are carrying in our bag at the moment". He likes the people who run ABMT and particularly likes the merino blends they have been able to make, including merino with core-spun nylon, with core-spun polyester and, most of all, merino with Tencel and Modal. "There is a lot of buzz around merino and merino blends like these," David Parkes insists.

General manager of ABMT, Steven Tsonidis, says the blends have been successful at least partly because of the desire among activewear brands to keep their products as cost-competitive as possible. "Merino can be eight or ten times more expensive than polyester," he explains, "so it's an expensive raw material. But we know it's a premium fibre and we don't tire of pitching its technical benefits; it's the most breathable fibre in the world."

## Integrated supply chain

Intimate knowledge of fine-micron merino is almost part of the DNA of the Australian textile firm's founders. It may be a high-cost raw material, but it's their own and Australia's own high-cost raw material and they are determined to add as much value to it as they can. ABMT has built up high levels of respect for Australian sheep farmers and goes directly to source, to these same wool-growers, for the fibre. With research and development, bulk production, dyeing, finishing, testing, distribution, management and customer service all under one roof in Melbourne, ABMT is able to produce collections such as its Merino Edge range of fabrics on home soil, using its links with farmers to add high levels of traceability to its offering. It does also have a production facility in China, which specialises in fleece fabrics, and is also partnering with a finished garment producer, OCC Apparel, to make clothing in Vietnam and other parts of Asia—but its heart and soul are in Australia.

Successfully blending merino with other fibres presents a series of technical challenges. Dyeing is difficult, Mr Tsonidis says, because you cannot dye merino at high temperature while heat has traditionally been essential to dye other fibres such as polyester. Finding ways to complete the dyeing process without what he calls "disrespecting the integrity of the fibre [merino]" has been tricky, he admits.

## Core strength

As well as cost, Steven Tsonidis says a desire for more fibre strength has increased the popularity of certain merino blends, such as those combining wool and core-spun fibres. These are the products in which customers are showing the greatest interest at the moment. Yes, there is a price advantage, the general manager makes clear, but technically these blends work well too. With the right combination of merino on the inside and polyester on the outside, for example, fabrics with impressive wicking functionality are achievable. This is the classic combination that came out of the Sportwool project, initiated at the start of this century by not-for-profit research and consultancy body Australian Wool Innovation (AWI). Steven Tsonidis points out that ABMT's was one of only four Sportwool-accredited mills before AWI phased out the project.



*Melbourne-based fabric producer ABMT says it will never tire of pitching the technical benefits of fine-micron Australian merino.*

*Australian Wool Innovation*

## Certified organic

Lightweight fabrics are another key focus, and Mr Tsonidis explains that the company's technical expertise has allowed it to develop a blend that is 85% merino, 10% core-spun nylon and 5% elastane at a fabric weight of 100gsm. "There's a real environmental focus, too, merino blends with other natural fibres, such as cotton or Modal, are also popular," he adds. "We're the only certified organic textile mill in Australia, so that helps. We introduced organic textile standards to Australia more than 10 years ago. Before that, organic only applied to food here, but we went through and had everything certified."

None of this is easy, but it's all part of ABMT's determination to tailor its products to suit its customers' needs. "It's the variety of product that separates us," Mr Tsonidis concludes, "and that means we can help brands stand apart from their competitors. We don't want to be everything to everybody. What we want is to offer our customer what's fit for purpose for them. And to do that you have got to be able to offer reliability, speed, price point, delivery performance and continuity of quality."

COPYRIGHT WSA