NEWCOMERS: SELKIE SWIM

UK-based Selkie Swim's aim is to create products that allow open water swimmers of all abilities to push their boundaries. It also recognises its obligation to help protect the natural spaces that make this invigorating activity possible.

Selkie Swim opens the door to nature

Jeremy Laming, co-founder of open water swimwear brand Selkie Swim, has always been active. Having been a junior international boxer in his youth and a rower in his teens, he decided to try his hand at triathlons. He quickly realised swimming was not his strong suit, somewhat of a problem given that along with running and cycling it is one of the three pillars of this multi-sport event. To get up to speed he sought the help of a more experience swimmer in the form of friend Tom Kean, with whom he would later found Selkie.

Prior to launching their brand, their focus has been on organising open water swimming events. This venture began in 2004 when they elected to swim the course that hosts the Henley Royal Regatta, an annual rowing event that has taken place on the River Thames in southern England since 1839. The only problem was that to avoid the rowers, they had to do it at four o'clock in the morning. Alongside them on this early morning swim was a photographer friend. What the three men did not realise was that the pictures he took would be featured in a well-known free daily newspaper, drawing wide-spread attention to their exploits.

What began as two swimmers in 2004 has grown into an important open water swimming event, supported by a team of timers, safety monitors and support staff. Now known as the Henley Classic, it consists of a 2.1-kilometre upstream endurance swim at first light on the Sunday morning before the Henley Royal Regatta. Around 800 people took part in the 2018 event.

Mr Laming and Mr Kean run this event as part of their business, Henley Swim. Other events in their portfolio include the Henley Mile, the Thames Marathon and the Club to Pub swim, which begins at Henley Rowing Club and ends at the Angel on the Bridge, an historic pub dating back to 1728.



Selkie Swim offers a range of apparel and equipment, including swimwear, wet suits, T-shirts and sweatshirts.

Selkie Swim

Gap in the market

The creation of Selkie Swim was a result of the growing popularity of these events, at which the partners would often sell merchandise. Demand was strong and they spotted a potential gap in the market. There was no brand that solely focused on open water swimming and they felt the products offered by swimming and triathlon brands were inadequate. Believing they better understood the needs of open water athletes, the founders set about designing a range of apparel and equipment that allows swimmers of all abilities to push their personal boundaries. The swimmers taking part in their events

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The brand's swimwear is made from Aquafil's Econyl recycled nylon yarn.

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Open water swimming can be addictive, according to Selkie co-founder Jeremy Laming.

Selkie Swim

offered a perfect base from which to launch their business.

Mr Laming tells *WSA* that the idea for the brand's name came at a dinner party he attended with his co-founder. They had already considered several options, but he says Selkie seemed perfect for a number of reasons. As well as it being easy to pronounce, its original meaning has some relevance to the company. References to 'selkies' can be found in various mythologies, where they are described as being similar to mermaids. In Celtic folklore they are seal-like creatures that can shed their skin and walk on land as humans. Other 'tales' suggest they are half-human, half-seal beings. The link to Selkie Swim is that they are as comfortable on land as they are in water.

After settling on a name, Mr Laming says the founders were very aware that they would need more investment to get their business off the ground. One of its initial and still active investors had previously been involved with UK outdoor clothing company Superdry and so knew how to scale a brand. This investment helped it gain access to talented designers and establish its e-commerce operations.

Since then, it has been an "evolving process", according to Mr Laming, with designs tweaked and reworked until they are right. This process was assisted by the recruitment of one of the original designers at surfwear specialist Quiksilver. Mr Laming is a hands-on owner; he asks for the first samples of new products to be in his size so he can test them out for himself and give his feedback.

Selkie Swim offers all the apparel and equipment that open water swimmers need, including wet suits, swimwear, swim robes, T-shirts and sweatshirts. Mr Laming says it previously sourced its products from 'white label' manufacturers in Belgium and in Germany. The last orders with these companies have now been completed, however, and from 2018 the company is in control of its own manufacturing at facilities in Portugal.

Duty to nature

Mr Laming says it is important for the brand to do things the right way from an environmental point of view, whether that be through its selection of materials or by how it packages its products. If they are going to promote and encourage participation in open water swimming, an activity for which nature is such a crucial part, it would be unacceptable for it to not make an effort to protect these natural spaces.

Selkie's swimwear is made from Econyl. This recycled nylon yarn, developed by Italian company Aquafil, is made using plastic waste collected from the world's oceans. Aquafil is a pioneer in recycling abandoned fishing nets into virgin grade nylon 6. Since opening its first Econyl production line in Slovenia in 2011, it has turned hundreds of tonnes of nets into usable material. Speedo, Levi's, Vaude, Volcom and Ternua are among the brands to have incorporated Econyl into their clothing.

Selkie says it chose to use Econyl to help with the needless waste and discarded plastic found in waterways. Mr Laming feels the robustness of the material makes it particularly well suited for use in clothing for open water swimmers. He adds that it has also allowed the brand to differentiate itself from competitors.

Away from swimwear, its range of T-shirts are made from organic cotton. It has committed to all its cotton garments only featuring organic cotton by the end of 2018. Its packaging is 100% recyclable, with products shipped in recycled carboard boxes that are designed to be reused or recycled again.

Selkie's products are designed to help open water swimmers of all abilities perform to their best level.

Selkie Swim



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One of the issues Selkie is currently wrestling with is the neoprene used in its wetsuits, which include its top of the range model, the Wraith Tekniikka. This product features a stretch neoprene that acts like a second skin, helping to reduce fatigue during long periods of swimming. It is designed to offer a good balance of protection against the cold, buoyancy and shoulder flexibility.

The concern for the company is the environmental problems associated with neoprene as a petroleum-based material. Mr Laming says it is exploring alternative materials it could use. If this avenue proves to be closed, it may launch an initiative to collect and recycle used neoprene wetsuits. This would involve swimmers bringing their products, regardless of brand, to Selkie in exchange for a discount on a new one. The challenge then would be to find a way to responsibly dispose of or reuse the material. Mr Laming admits Selkie has not yet found the answer, but it is continuing to search for it.

A refreshing experience

Selkie Swim has come a long way in less than five years. Mr Laming acknowledges it is still very small compared with swimwear giants such as Speedo, but he confidently predicts that if you were to ask 100 UK open water swimmers, at least 80 would have heard of the brand.

As it continues to strive to become the 'go-to' brand for open water swimmers, this year saw it undergo a 'refresh'. Evolution rather than revolution, it includes a new website and logo design. Its autumn-winter product range, launched in September, was aimed at all outdoor enthusiasts, not just swimmers, as it seeks to expand its offering and its customer base.

In addition, Selkie has teamed up with the 'Wild Swimming Brothers' (otherwise known as Jack, Calum and Robbie Hudson), a fraternal trio who promote wild swimming and conservation. They were born in Cumbria in the far north of England, but were raised in the Lake District, a UNESCO World Heritage site since 2017. Having developed a passion for the outdoors in their youth, they found there was something missing when they had to relocate to cities due to their jobs.

Determined to seek out some form of outdoor release, they committed to going on wild swimming adventures together and to exploring the world by water. Among the considerable challenges they have completed is swimming for nine days and 90 miles down the River Eden near to their childhood home. This activity, a world-first attempt, and many others have helped them raise awareness of wild swimming and build up a strong social media following.

"We wanted genuine swimmers to be our ambassadors; authentic and true," Mr Laming explains, describing the brothers as "energetic, pro-active and passionate" in their promotion of open water swimming. "They really are a perfect fit for us, as they're not afraid to try something new out in the open waters and this is exactly what our kit was made for," he adds.

Open water swimming is the "fastest growing sport in the UK", claims to Mr Laming, which he believes offers a great opportunity for Selkie. He says one of the biggest surprises when people take part in this activity for the first time is how much colder the water is in comparison to a pool. This is why many participants choose to wear a wetsuit. He insists, however, that once you have got over the initial shock of the cold, open water swimming is an addictive experience and that, more often than not, those that try it are never tempted back to the pool.

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