Awards for excellence abound in all walks of life. Ranging from the eminence of the Nobel Laureates to a 'Well done' at the end of the school day; they recognise the application and quality of competence.

They are the 'walk tall' factor in the recipient's life; an acknowledgement of worth to the donor. So when, in 1999, Malden Mills of Lawrence, Massachusetts, announced its first Polartec Apex Awards – there was a mild sense of bewilderment because, in the textile industry, such promotions are usually competitive and this programme is far from that.



Walking tall to the Apex

According to a spokesperson for Malden, the purpose of the Apex Award is three-fold. First, it encourages the development of functional, innovative products made from Polartec fabrics by recognising the quality of the designers' work. Second, it recognises the level of risk deployed by the brand-owning companies in the manufacture and marketing of the products. Third, it provides a focus for Malden's product promotional activities throughout the year, beginning with the winter trade shows in Munich and Salt Lake City.

The company has always sought to encourage work that expands the limits of what can be achieved with Polartec fabrics, so that is a prime consideration when the judges make their recommendations. Garments and accessories are judged on innovation, design, style, workmanship, fit and functionality with a complex marking system that exists only to ensure that judicial attitudes are smoothed in the final analysis.

To be the recipient of the award is recognition that the product makes a positive contribution to the market sector to which it applies.

Susanne Fischer, Malden's Marketing Manager Europe, explains the effect on the winning companies:

"Winning a Polartec APEX Award is considered by our customers to be credible and prestigious as it helps boost sales and confidence with both the consumer and the sales team. This award enables the manufacturer to promote the garment in various ways including at point of sale, on swing tags and by highlighting it in the catalogues. We receive many garments from all over the world and to be chosen as a winner is a real achievement in itself."

There are physical 'goodies' of course. Each award recipient is presented with a custom-made piece of Tiffany crystal and the leading selections are highlighted on Malden Mills' exhibition stands at the ispo Winter, Outdoor Retailer and OutDoor exhibitions. The prestige has been known to extend beyond the apparel manufacturing industry, with specifiers in protective and corporate clothing asking for 'the design that won the award'.

Judging criteria

The Apex judging panel, based in the USA, consists of industry professionals who have an extensive understanding of each individual Polartec fabric and its end use. They therefore fully comprehend the necessity for the performance of each fabric specification to be correctly incorporated into the design of each item. Thereafter they work to the following criteria:

a) innovation and versatility;
b) functionality, fit and comfort, which includes performance and wear qualities;
c) aesthetics, which includes beauty, style, flair and the fundamentals of good design.

All the entries are marked against a numeric scale that quantifies criteria and applies a ranking against a, b, and c.

Strangely enough the products under review do not of necessity have to be 'fresh to market' in the USA and Europe. They can have been available at retail for several months before the judges make their assessments.

Brand owners are not required to participate in the trade shows, and the entries are not restricted to apparel – indeed a winner in the recent round is the Baby Polar Gear Nuzzler, an infant's care seat cover that provides additional warmth without sacrificing safety.

With the exception of footwear, entries are required to be made from >50% Polartec fabrics (logical) and must not contain competitive performance fabrics. Footwear must not contain any competitive fabric.

With aesthetics playing such an important part, colour is particularly important and companies are requested to submit products in as wide a range as possible.

Finally, it must be stressed that the Polartec Apex awards are not a competition. If no entries meet the criteria, then there are no awards given. Recognition by one's peers is sweet, sweet music.



Ground Zephyr jacket



Browning Gator fleece jacket



Nuzzler reversible infant car seat cover from Baby Polar Gear



180s Exolite earwarmers



Timberland Snow Lizard Soft Shell Mid

THE 2004 NORTH AMERICAN POLARTEC APEX AWARD

180s: Exolite earwarmers

The 180s Exolite is ideal for athletes who want to keep ears warm without overheating under the bulk of a traditional hat. Designed with Polartec Power Stretch outer shells, the Exolite protects ears from the elements without sacrificing hearing or breathability.

The next-to-skin layer of the inner ear piece wicks moisture away, ensuring comfort during rigorous workouts. A permanent anti-bacterial treatment contains odour between washings and the innovative frame design applies no more than 6 ounces of pressure on the user's head.

Arc'teryx: Covert Cardigan

Providing technical performance in a classic style, the Covert Cardigan is durable and totally functional. Constructed from a sweater knit Polartec Thermal Pro, this unique fabric looks like wool but offers all of the Polartec performance qualities.

Breathable and quick drying, the Covert has great thermal properties for its weight. Other features include a stretch woven laminated sleeve pocket, underarm side panels for greater freedom of movement and a full front zip.

Baby Polar Gear: The Nuzzler Infant Reversible Car Seat Cover

This product is a must-have for any new parent. Constructed of Polartec Classic 200 weight fleece, The Nuzzler is designed to fit over the top of a car seat providing soft warmth and protection. Machine washable and reversible.

Beyond Fleece: Law Enforcement Tactical Jacket

Constructed as work wear for police forces, the Law Enforcement Tactical Jacket blocks 100% of the wind, is water repellent, breathable and designed to meet officers' specific needs. Polartec Windbloc combines a soft insulation layer with a full windproof, water resistant membrane and a durable outer layer to provide weather protection and insulation.

Browning: Gator Fleece Jacket

In Polartec Wind Pro with Hardface technology, the new Browning Gator Fleece Jacket offers the ultimate in weather protection for the 2004 hunting season. Very durable and machine washable, the water repellent surface sheds rain and snow and is highly breathable for active sports.

The form fitting design eliminates weight and bulk and won't hinder freedom of movement.

Ground: Zephyr Jacket

In Polartec Power Shield, the Zephyr is new to the market this year. An anorak-style soft shell garment with a stylish cut that can cross over from activity to street. Zephyr uses active stitching and a two-tone colour way to create a unique design style. Abrasion and wind resistant, the Zephyr offers a breathable, water resistant alternative to multiple layers.

Eastern Mountain Sports: Quadzilla Pullover

The Quadzilla incorporates Polartec Thermal Pro high loft with Polartec Power Stretch to produce an essential layering garment.

Outdoor Research: Rucker Gloves

Designed for military pilots and similar personnel, the Polartec Power Stretch Nomex Military Glove incorporates a longer cut. Nomex provides resistance to flame while the Power Stretch fits snugly without hindering freedom of movement.

Timberland: Snow Lizard Soft Shell Mid

Designated go-anywhere footwear the Snow Lizard Soft Shell Mid's sturdy and supportive construction and footbed provide excellent support and traction while the Polartec Power Shield zip-up cover keeps snow, wind and water out while at the same time allowing feet to breath and remain comfortable for outdoor activities.

Prana: Microfleece Hoodie

The Microfleece Hoodie from Prana incorporates modern fitness fashion with the soft hand of Polartec Classic Micro. This top is highly breathable, offering warmth without the weight and dries very quickly. The Hoodie complements Prana's line of fashion-forward yoga and fitness apparel.

Simms: RiverTek Fishing Shirt

With the RiverTek Fishing Shirt, Simms has created a garment that is extremely technical and highly functional. The body is breathable Polartec Power Dry keeping skin dry and comfortable. Polartec Power Dry with X-Static fibre has been panelled into the under arms providing odour-resistant fabric technology in the areas where fishermen need it most.



Women's Quantum jacket from North Face.



Chiemsee Tadora jacket



Wild Roses Power Pile jacket



Santacana Wind Pro lined gloves.

Patagonia: R2 Granular Jacket

The Patagonia R2 Granular is a versatile midlayer that can also be worn as outerwear. The smooth face of the Polartec Wind Pro resists wind and abrasion, sheds snow and layers effortlessly. Highly breathable, directional knit construction on the inside speeds drying time, increases moisture transport and is highly compressible. The left bicep pocket is large enough to hold a communication device. Modern styling represents a departure from the traditional fleece look.

Awards were also made to:

- *Ariat: Insulated Tek Grip gloves.*
- *Mountain Hardwear: Poodle jacket.*
- *Mountain Equipment Co-op: Women's Pamir jacket.*
- *Ojai: Winter-Tec Hoody.*
- *Patagonia: R2 Body Rug.*
- *REI: Groove Parka.*
- *Scent-Lok: Dakota Fleece jacket.*
- *Seirus Innovation: Soft Shell glove system.*
- *Shebeest: Polartec Wind Pro vest and tights.*
- *US Army Soldier Systems Center: USMC Cold Weather layer system.*

THE 2004 EUROPEAN POLARTEC APEX AWARD

Chiemsee: Tadora jacket

Chiemsee uses Polartec Thermal Pro to develop the high-performance Tadora zip jacket, created for skiing, snowboarding and all general outdoor activities.

Eider: Power jacket

Eider with the Power Jacket made of Polartec Power Shield - High Loft. An extra-warm jacket that will protect against the harshest of elements as well as being abrasion resistant and highly breathable.

Nalini: Nostromo Retro jacket

Nalini strung the line with a total of three products; the women's jacket Sartia, the men's jacket Nostromo, both made of Polartec Power Shield, and the Bucintoro pant made of Polartec Power Stretch. Highly technical, these three garments emphasise the exclusive features with design and a construction optimised for cycling.

Wild Roses: Bicolor Power Pile jacket

Wild Roses gained awards with two products: the Curly Freeride Pile, made of Polartec Thermal Pro - Curly Look and Polartec Power Stretch, and the Bicolor Power Pile, made of Polartec Power Stretch. The first is a high-performance fleece, warm, soft and innovative, combining creative design and technology, while the second is a highly functional and versatile zipped sweater specifically designed for the female body and suitable for all sports and outdoor activities.

Santacana Wind Pro lined gloves

Santacana Complementos launched a range of Polartec Wind Pro lined gloves: available in three different designs. The quality of design and construction is complemented by the warmth, wind resistance, breathability, and durability of the lining.

Sprayway: Lightspeed jacket

Good use of colour in this Sprayway jacket in Polartec Power Shield. A three-season, versatile soft shell garment: stretchy, lightweight, highly breathable and water-repellent.

The North Face: Women's Quantum jacket

A quarter-zip jacket using Polartec Power Dry silk weight, the Quantum is a quick-drying lightweight performance top, ideal for all outdoor activities.

Trangoworld: Chaqeta Nota

One of the few awards gained with Malden's Hardface technology, Trangoworld's Chaqueta Nota is manufactured in Polartec Thermal Pro to produce a warm, soft and practical woman's jacket, and perfect for cold weather.

Awards were also made to:

- *66° North: Tindur Technical lady jacket.*
- *O'Neill: International Simplicity jacket.*
- *Reusch: a set of six items for motor-cycling.*
- *Taiga: Thule Warm-up pants.*
- *TAO: Energetic underwear.*
- *Vist: Power Shield jacket and pants.*