



# Colour consciousness creeps into climbing

**S**ports specific socks always seemed to be white. There was a time when a visit to a Thorlo booth was akin to walking into a blizzard...everything was white, from the socks to the display walls to the uniforms staffers wore to meet the public. No longer; sure there are still plenty of white socks but they have become the minority and corporate press releases speak just as enthusiastically about colours as any other apparel sector with an awareness of, and eye on, consumer fashion, even among those who go hiking for exercise. Complementary colour ranges to tie into outdoor apparel are very much in vogue.

This doesn't mean that a company such as Thorlo has forgotten its origins, the fact that it was first into sports specific socks (it still features 36 different categories) and still preaches foot protection and foot health. It still enjoys extraordinary brand loyalty but it is also aware that the sock market has become ever more competitive.

The company has recently introduced two new outdoor styles (and a host of colours). Now there are Trail Runners and wool/silk Light Hikers to add to the range. Trail Runner is constructed with the company's acrylic yarn and Coolmax, providing excellent wicking and moisture control. The combination of light and medium padding protects the foot from the stresses and strikes of trail running. The medium density padding is placed under the ball and heel of the foot, while the low density padding provides arch support. Besides white, the sock comes in a range of heather mixes, including walnut, charcoal, everglade, and navy.

The Light Hiker is a natural blend of wool and silk, with the addition of Thorlo's proprietary acrylic yarns which add additional strength for resiliency and durability - and it comes in five colours.

The company has continued its move towards producing lightweight padded socks. Its Lites are designed to be worn with a close fitting shoe and are available in running and walking styles. It has recognised that there is a need for these styles to be available in both mens and womens ranges; sizing is based on shoe size and offers a narrow range, which provides a snug fit on the foot. There was a time when one could have been forgiven for thinking that one had to

change ones shoe size before one could wear a Thorlo - fine, if you only had Thorlos in the sock drawer but otherwise not that economical for the average person.

Besides padding under the foot in the important areas, the Lites also have a special lace pad which cushions the instep from lace pressure.

## Fit for feet

Since the market first became aware of socks being knitted to the shape of the left or the right foot when Falke introduced its L and R shaped socks a few years, others have followed suit. Fox River Mills, based in Osage, Iowa, is knitting its socks in various widths, anatomically correct for lefts and rights. The company sees fit as being critical to foot comfort. In spelling out the trends it foresees for the next decade or so, it sees further moves towards high-tech, high performance socks to keep feet super dry and comfortable no matter what the activity. Friction in socks will be reduced (it uses Teflon now) which will help to avoid blisters. Fox River is already knitting socks in a matter of seconds on high-tech machinery which eliminates irritating toe seams.

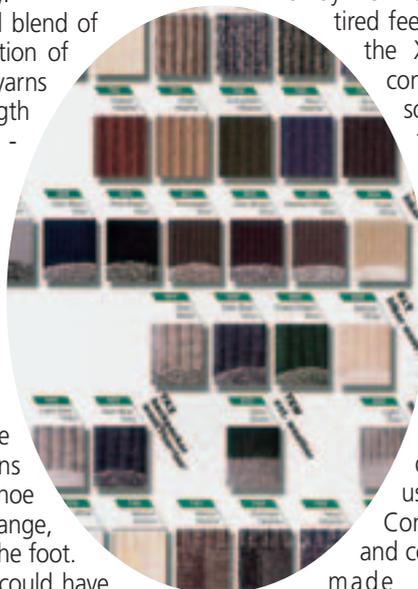
Sports specific must be seen to be therapeutic, as well as providing performance benefits. After a tie-up with Noble Medical Technologies, Fox River has already promoted X-Static silver coated nylon fibre which is said to eliminate foot odour, inhibit the growth of bacteria and fungi, transfer heat away from the foot and helps rejuvenate tired feet. It is also being claimed that the X-Static fibre in socks helps control swelling round the ankles, something many people suffer from on long distance flights.

If everyone follows Fox River's advice, it will be further bad news for all-cotton socks which the company claims retain moisture, causing friction and blisters and creating the ideal environment for bacteria and fungi to grow.

A wide variety of yarns dictated by the way customers use socks goes into its products. Common natural fibres like wool and cotton are used as well as man-made fibres such as nylon, polypropylene, and acrylic. High tech fibres



*Fox River's Xcursion X-Static styles*



*Left: Part of the colour range being offered by Thorlo.*



like Hollofil, Thermastat, Lycra, Coolmax, Teflon, and X-static also go into the range.

Today's Fox River brand has changed much since its beginnings 100 years ago when it was the choice of lumberjacks and other men that made a life for their families from the cold and sometimes unyielding world around them. Even so, it has retained a focus on quality and performance. Since its beginning in the Fox River Valley of Appleton, Wisconsin in 1900, Fox River Mills, Inc. has made knitted socks and handwear. During its first 60 years, it produced socks, mittens and gloves primarily for outdoor enthusiasts and skiers. In the early 1960s, it extended its product line to include innovative styles and colours to keep pace with the expanding sports market.

In 1985, the company began manufacturing hosiery under the Wick Dry brand name. The patented Wick Dry Health System reinforced Fox River's commitment to meet consumers' expectations. Fox River's ties to the Iowa community of Osage started with the purchase of the Marr Knitting Mill in 1966. Two years later, this mill burned down. By 1971 a new mill was completed and the company permanently relocated its headquarters from Appleton to Osage. It continued to grow by acquiring Rockford Textiles of McMinnville, Tennessee in 1985 and Portage Mills of Portage, Wisconsin in 1988. Zwicker Knitting, Zwicker International and Nelson Knitting were acquired in 1992.

The growth of the company can be significantly credited to the efforts of the Lessard family. In the 1940s, Joseph Lessard went to work for Fox River as a line mechanic. He worked his way up through the ranks and bought the company in 1973. The family still owns and operates Fox River, which employs more than 300 employees drawn from Osage and surrounding communities.

The question of foot temperature has obviously been considered by many manufacturers and a number feature the equivalent of a temperature gauge on the packaging to indicate the sock's peak temperature range. One such manufacturer is Dahlgren with its Dri-Stride range, 'incorporating a temperature control system', where each model is constructed with a different combination of yarns to provide different weights of sock for each season, using the company's patented Climate Knit system. The problem with such systems and claims is that it demands that the wearer knows what temperatures he is going to encounter and also what temperature is being generated by a sporting activity within the shoe and around the feet.



UK-based manufacturer Bridgedale, having won a major accolade in the USA for its GTX Trekker socks last year (against nine other top brands), a Millennium Product award and the 1999 Exporter of the Year award in Northern Ireland (with export growth of 130%), nevertheless had been beset by Group financial problems as 1999 drew to a close. In January, however, a buyer for the successful sock business was found when Oakham Securities (also based in Northern Ireland) took it over and formed Bridgedale

Outdoor Limited. Its GTX range also won approval from W. L. Gore, another first, as being suitable to work in harmony with waterproof, breathable footwear such as Gore-Tex lined boots. The fibre content of the GTX Summit is 40% wool, 36% nylon, 23% Isofil (a polypropylene and the basis of Bridgedale's engineered moisture transport system) and 1% Lycra. Its GTX Trekker is a combination of 45% Coolmax (polyester), 34% merino wool, 20% nylon and 1% Lycra - such are the subtleties of sports specific sock engineering today.



### Taking friction out of footwear

Engineering of a different kind is the basis of the 1000 Mile Outdoor sock in the UK. It uses a double layer construction, designed to keep the inner layer close and still against the foot while the outer layer moves with the shoe. So confident is the company that this system eliminates friction on the skin that it offers a 1000 mile blister-free guarantee with every pair. The collection is available in eighteen different styles including sports specific to golf, tennis, cricket, cycling and athletics.

Italian manufacturer Pieffe Sport has followed a different line to avoid friction, chafing - and blisters. The sock contains Teflon PTFE fibre which reduces the friction and keeps the wearer's feet cool. Another DuPont fibre, Coolmax, is used and the resulting sock is specifically targeted at professional or serious amateur cyclists. The socks are designed to achieve a snug fit and the Coolmax takes perspiration away from the skin. It seems that pedalling creates friction between foot and shoe, frequently causing hot spots leading to blisters - and this development is seen as the way ahead for foot comfort and health. Six professional teams have already signed up to use the sock while Pieffe Sport is planning to adapt Teflon and Blister Guard, the patented technology developed in the US by PTFE LLC, into other sports specific socks.

David Buirski

Left: Thorlo's Light Hiker

Left: The Brasher Boot Company recently launched its new range of 'Exact Fit' socks in the United Kingdom with a "Y" stitched heel for improved fit.

Construction of Bridgedale's GTX Summit sock



A technical wool sock with MTS wicking technology, to ensure maximum moisture transport in breathable, waterproof footwear in extreme conditions.

- 1 Double cuff 'anti-welt' support.
- 2 Dense, wool rich, cushion loop lining for comfort and warmth.
- 3 MTS wicking technology with wool for dry, comfortable feet.
- 4 Lycra ankle and arch supports prevent sock movement.
- 5 High density pads for protection against abrasion and blisters.
- 6 Forward flex technology shapes the sock to foot for perfect fit.
- 7 Smooth toe seams.