

FOCUS ON WINNERS: RUSSELL COUTTS

In this new section of *WSA*, we present the views of champion sportspeople on recent textile developments for the clothes, footwear and equipment they use. In this issue, Olympic gold medallist and three-time America's Cup winner Russell Coutts provides an insight.

A life on the ocean wave

Sponsorship may be more important in sailing than in any other high-profile sport. This seems to be the current view from the top of an activity that has always been prestigious, but which has suffered in the video age from being valued by broadcasting companies only for short, spectacular clips at the end of a sports bulletin.

If elite athletes in football, rugby, tennis, golf, American football, basketball, baseball and motor racing are multi-millionaire household names, it's because they've been seen in most people's households thousands of times on TV. Even when economic times are tough, broadcasters fork out millions to show the UEFA Champions' League and the Super Bowl on television. In contrast, the top people in sailing claim that they are having to pay to have their events covered. With regard to merchandising, another important revenue stream for most sports, the excellent clothing, footwear and equipment ranges that brands such as Henri Lloyd, Gill, Slam, Musto and so on continue to bring out all have a popular following, but only among relatively small groups of consumers.

Fortunately for sailing, it has always had enough cachet to attract super-wealthy sponsors, and those that are investing money in the sport at the moment are likely to ride out the current economic storm quite well, giving sailing teams that already have sponsorship in place a degree of security. Larry Ellison, founder of the Oracle software company is the owner of the BMW Oracle Racing team. His great rival in sailing—

Russell Coutts, captain of the BMW Oracle Racing team, is used to winning and demands a great deal of his crew, of himself and of the clothing and equipment he uses.

Gilles Martin-Raget/BMW ORACLE Racing





Russell Coutts (left) has worked in partnership with sailing apparel brand Slam since the middle of the decade. He says: "The aim of the partnership with Slam is to continue developing a clothing range with high performance levels."

*Gilles Martin-Raget/
BMW ORACLE Racing*

the Bill Gates of his sporting life, if you will—is Ernesto Bertarelli, the man who inherited Swiss pharmaceutical company Serono from his father, turned it into a biotechnology company and sold it to Merck for \$13.3 billion in 2006. Mr Bertarelli is the driving force behind the current America's Cup champions, Alinghi.

The two are from different countries and different business backgrounds, but their passion for sailing made them friends at one time. Ellison hoped this would earn BMW Oracle the chance to compete for the cup, which he has never won, next time around; by the quaint rules of the 150-year-old competition, the winner gets to choose a 'Challenger of Record' for the defence of the title. Bertarelli passed up the chance to pit his wits and his boat against his friend for the thirty-third America's Cup in 2010, choosing an unknown, specially formed Spanish team, Desafío Español, instead. Larry Ellison has taken the matter to court and told ABC News in December that there was a simple explanation for the scandal that now surrounds the oldest active trophy in international sport: Alinghi is afraid of the BMW Oracle skipper, the widely acknowledged greatest competitor in the sport today, Russell Coutts.

Mr Coutts is from a great sailing nation, New Zealand, and is the only yachtsman to have won an Olympic gold medal and three America's Cup competitions. He's used to being first and demands a great deal of his crew, of himself, and of the clothing and equipment he uses. Since the middle of the decade, he has been working with Italian company Slam and has been the public face of many of the brand's recent activities. Before formalising the relationship in January 2006,

Slam made use of Russell Coutts's expert knowledge and experience during field testing and has used direct feedback from him in its designs.

Russell Coutts has said on more than one occasion that he is happy to contribute to the sports and activewear industry in this way because he believes it is "of crucial importance" for sailing apparel to meet all the requirements of a life on the ocean wave, which means being able to adapt to highly variable conditions and circumstances. He sums up his view on this by saying: "The clothes must be comfortable and warm, and at the same time shouldn't be too heavy, allowing you to move around freely on board."

Most recently, last summer, Slam announced that it was kitting out the whole of the BMW Oracle team with official clothing, specifically for the next America's Cup. Slam chairwoman, Carla Gardino, explained that her company, in conjunction with the skipper, had come up with a combination of the Slam Area 51 jersey and shorts. Both articles of clothing use advanced textile technology, with a variety of top yarn and fabric manufacturers—including Dryarn, Maglificio Ripa and Eurojersey—combining to make sure the products have excellent insulating capacity to keep body heat stable, and also the ability to convey water, sweat and humidity to the exterior. Having the capacity to avoid absorbing water helps the kit stay faithful to Russell Coutts's demand for lightness and freedom of movement.

All that remains to be seen now is if he will get the chance to wear it in an attempt to win the America's Cup for a fourth time. The world of sailing expects a final decision from the courts in April. 