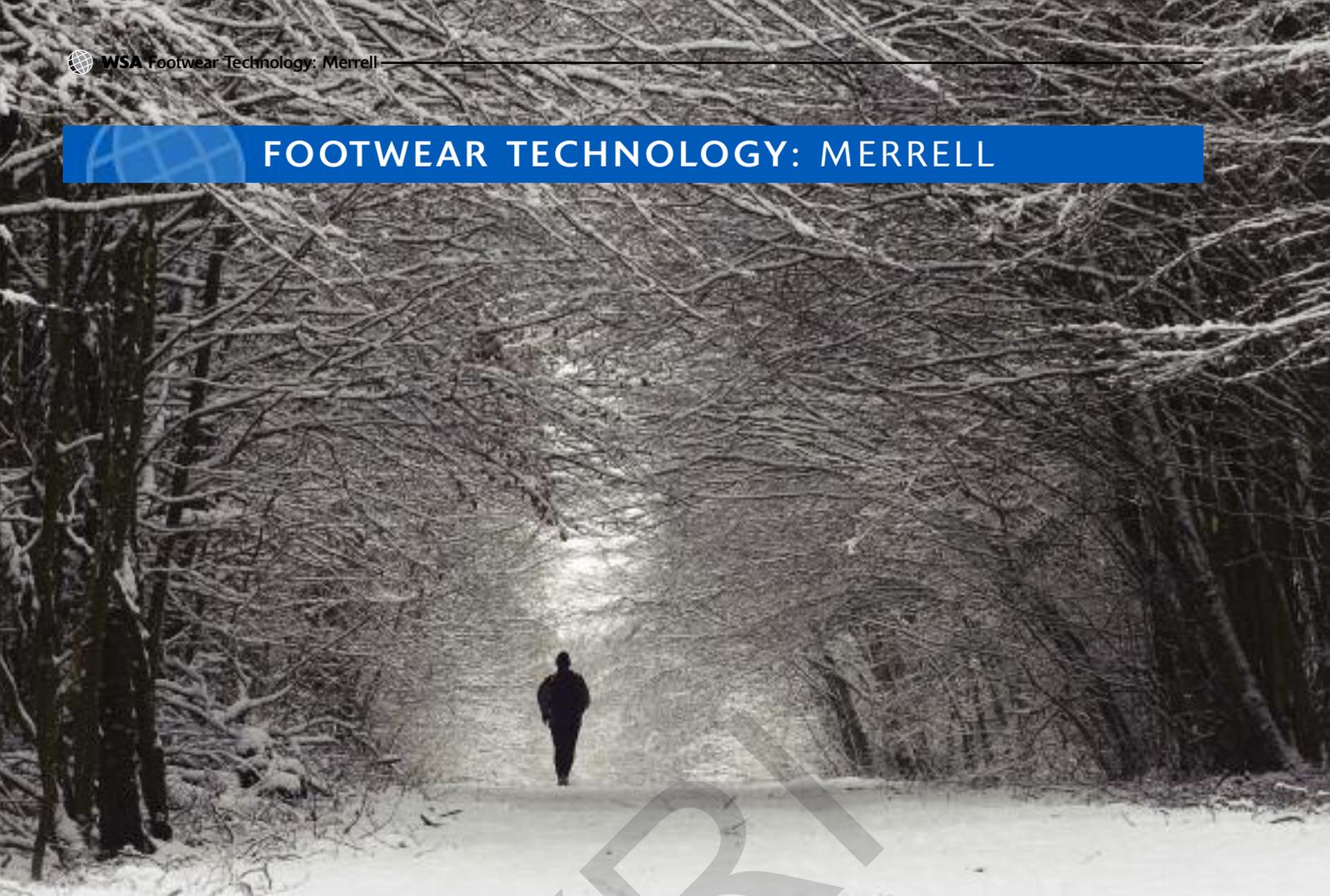


FOOTWEAR TECHNOLOGY: MERRELL



Outdoor footwear brand Merrell knows it faces new in-house competition from Saucony since parent group, Wolverine World Wide, moved to acquire the performance and lifestyle group of Collective Brands earlier this year. Merrell's immediate response has been to emphasise the highly technical characteristics of its shoes and boots, starting with winter 2012.

Technical turns for Merrell

Outdoor footwear and apparel brand Merrell has said its most recent range of performance shoes and boots is one of its most technically advanced collections to date. The new collection, Norsehund, focuses especially on cold weather protection and outdoor traction. Its principle components are weather-proof winter boots for men and winter sports footwear for women.

Men's boots include the Norsehund Alpha Waterproof and the Norsehund Omega Mid Waterproof. The Alpha is a tall winter boot with a thermoplastic polyurethane (TPU) shell on the upper for durability and protection. The

Omega combines a full grain leather upper with the brand's Opti-warm synthetic insulation. Both incorporate new proprietary technology called the ColdSmart, which comprises one system for warmth, and one for traction, a central part of a design that aims to keep outdoor enthusiasts safe and warm in cold and slippery conditions.

ColdSmart Warmth is a system built around "common warmth principles", Merrell says. Wet feet lose heat faster than dry feet, but if feet get too warm they sweat. So the footwear brand set itself the task of finding a way to keep feet warm without overheating, keeping sweat to a minimum.

Merrell has said its new Norsehund winter footwear collection is one of its most technically advanced. A new system called ColdSmart helps provide warmth and traction in cold and slippery conditions.

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Escape channels

As a result, boots such as the Norsehund Alpha and the Norsehund Omega have airflow channels built into them to help air escape when the foot moves inside. This is combined with a lining made from fleece material with a proprietary treatment to give moisture-wicking functionality and move sweat away from the foot. Merrell says its thermo-regulation system, Opti-warm, helps to make winter boots “functional”, another reference to the relationship between warmth and dryness.

The Alpha has a removable booty, which Merrell says offers the highest level of air flow. This is less obvious in the Omega, which has no booty, but here too the design provides a better level of airflow than boots without ColdSmart, allowing air to escape and preventing the foot from becoming moist and then cold because of the trapped moisture. “A key component to foot comfort is moisture management, as you walk in your boots, air is forced to move around your foot,” Merrell states, “and the channels built into ColdSmart allow this movement of air to continue, which in turn keeps the foot temperature regulated.”

Like a wolf

Thermo-comfort aside, another feature of the new collection and of ColdSmart is that it uses high-surface lugs (seven millimetres in depth) on the sole to keep wearers from slipping. The footwear brand says ColdSmart Traction will allow the boots to work like a wolf’s paw for traction, while a moulded TPU shank gives added support. The perimeter lugs on the Norsehund Omega Mid Waterproof are designed to grip ice and wet surfaces while the positioning of the inner lugs gives added traction and prevents a build-up of snow on the outsole, another measure for keeping wearers on their feet in slippery conditions.

Products in the women’s winter sport range include the Whiteout 8 Waterproof and the Snowbound Mid Waterproof mid-height boots. The former has a mix of full grain leather and fabric in the upper with a waterproof membrane underneath to provide a breathable barrier to moisture from the outside. It has Opti-warm synthetic insulation and a ColdProof Ortholite footbed for insulation. Traction comes from the six-millimetre sole lugs while the midsole has a silver reflective film for added warmth in another proprietary system, ActiveHeat Insole. It also has a compression moulded EVA footframe and air cushion in the heel to absorb shock and add stability. At the front, the Snowbound Mid Waterproof has a TPU shell for added protection while the upper has a strobe construction to offer flexibility and comfort. The synthetic lining material in this model is thinner to reduce the boot’s overall weight, but Merrell is keen to emphasise the high level of technical detail all the way through the new range.

Wolverine World Wide announced at the start of May that it was acquiring the performance and outdoor segments of Collective Brands. Wolverine chief executive, Blake Krueger, said at the time that he envisaged that one of the new brands, Saucony, and Merrell would complement one another well. Naturally, this will also mean some internal rivalry between the two.

Mr Krueger describes Saucony as an authentic athletic brand with deep roots in running and of “great strategic importance”. He says: “Saucony will continue to carve out market share. Together with Merrell, it will be very powerful across the growing categories of training, running, trail, minimalist and barefoot. Both brands are rooted in technology and innovation and will provide a broad offering for retailers and consumers.” The team at Merrell clearly wanted to waste no time in showing that its commitment to innovation is as strong as ever. 

The Norsehund Omega (left) combines a full grain leather upper with Merrell’s Opti-warm synthetic insulation.

The Norsehund Alpha (right) is a tall winter boot with a TPU shell on the upper for durability and protection.

 Merrell