

BRAND PROFILE: LUTA SPORTSWEAR



Apparel brand Luta supports the growing Fight for Peace movement, which helps children in disadvantaged areas channel their energies into sport. Its recent acquisition by Reebok will help it to grow globally.

A force for harmony

There are a number of brands that have a philanthropic element – Toms, Gandy’s Flip Flops, Sherpa Adventure Gear, for example – but not many that have charity as their reason for existence. The Luta martial arts brand, launched in 2011, began life solely to support a growing movement of boxing and martial arts clubs in underprivileged areas, part of the Luta Pela Paz (Fight for Peace) movement established in Brazil in 2000.

Its founder, Luke Dowdney, originally from London, had spent time in Rio de Janeiro’s favelas while researching his university dissertation on gangs in the late 1990s, and the

experience opened his eyes to another world, one in which sport played a part in keeping children out of gangs and offered a focus.

“I knew from that experience that the sport would be a good way of ensuring access to these kids. I also knew that boxing can be an excellent platform for personal development – for enhancing discipline, confidence and self-respect.”

Mr Dowdney’s background in boxing – he was 1995 British universities light-middleweight champion – inspired him to establish the Luta Pela Paz martial arts club in the Complexo da Maré group of favelas.

With support from charities such as Comic Relief, as well as sponsorship from Brazil-based

Luke Dowdney (left) introduces Reebok’s Matt O’Toole to Fight for Peace in London.

 Reebok

energy group Petrobras, a sports centre equipped with a boxing gym and classrooms was built in 2005. A key differential was that it also offered social services as one of its five 'pillars', alongside education and personal development, coaching in the job market and youth leadership programmes.

In 2007, the programme was replicated in London and established as an NGO (non-governmental organisation), and began to form partnerships around the world, including tie-ups in the US, Central America and Africa.

"When I started this project with 10 students," he says, "I had no idea it would grow into this."

Coveted identity

As attendance grew, Mr Downey realised the clubs needed another income stream, to support the \$7 million per year overheads. "Young people were able to wear the first Fight for Peace T-shirts across entrenched gang lines in the favela because gang members respected the project and what the young people stood for," he says. When they began to get stolen from washing lines, he realised he had a desirable brand.

"I felt there was a real need for advanced, high-performance sportswear with a fight heritage, designed for fighters and anyone else serious about getting fit. I also wanted to pay homage to the positive energy in the favelas and the strength I'd witnessed while training so many young champions since 2000."

The collection encompasses a range of martial arts including capoeira and judo, as well as boxing and Thai boxing, and offers clothing as well as gear – mouthguards, gloves and wrist bands. Half the profits feed directly back into the organisation.

"Luta means 'to fight, to struggle, to never give up' and it needed to replicate the passion felt when wearing the first Fight for Peace T-shirts. To achieve this and ensure that the designs were as authentic as possible, we asked local people of the favelas to submit their ideas in a competition. Needless to say, the designs came back with vivid images of the favelas and the vibrant colours of Rio on display."

Hundreds of boxers were interviewed to find out their particular needs and designers from Central St Martins College of Art and Design in London helped produce the first ranges.

Performance was important – he was keen that the brand stood up by itself and was not just there to support the clubs. The rash guard, for example, is made from a strong, high stretch, wickable material which is bonded with a sonic laser (the company claims it is the first rash guard made this way) to remove seams that can irritate when training. The MMA (mixed martial arts) rash guard uses a silicone hem gripper to keep it in place. Steve O'Keefe, Fight for Peace coach, said: "I use rash guards every day in Brazilian jiu



The MMA rash guard. Reebok estimates thousands have traded in their treadmills for boxing gloves as a way to get fit.

 Luta Sportswear

jitsu and MMA. The arm vents are a great touch, I haven't found them on other products."

Reebok enters the ring

In November 2014, Reebok bought Luta, a move it says will help "even more young people at risk".

"We instantly realised it was a perfect fit for Reebok," says Matt O'Toole, president of Reebok. The US brand, owned by Germany's adidas, is undergoing a transition back to its training and fitness roots (after declining sales, which prompted the reboot, but which have since picked up). The acquisition offers a long-term funding structure, which will allow Luta to grow internationally.

"The work Luke and the team have done over the years to help young people who are growing up with tremendous challenges, surrounded by drugs and violence, is remarkable and is something we are looking forward to supporting and expanding so that together we can help even more young people at risk," he adds.

Fight for Peace now works with over 2,500 young people a year at its academies in Rio and London and has supported 27 organisations in 20 countries. Over the next three years Fight for Peace will support 120 organisations helping 110,000 young people.

"Luta is representative of communities and young people around the world," adds Mr Downey. "It's about saying to gangster culture that it's fake. What's real is the kind of strength to keep going no matter what. That's what the brand represents." 