

Fashion at the Winter Olympics

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In terms of competitiveness and global scale, few sporting events can rival the Olympics. As hundreds of athletes gather in Vancouver for the opening weekend of the 2010 Winter Games, millions of viewers worldwide will tune in to watch the sporting showcase.

The 835 hours of planned coverage by the US television network NBC and the 160 hours planned by the UK's BBC also offers a significant showcase to brands looking to reach consumers around the world. The 2006 Winter Games' opening ceremony reached 95m viewers worldwide.



US figure skater Evan Lysacek in Vera Wang

The scope for fashion and sporting collaborations at the Olympics – be it the Summer or Winter Games – is extensive. So it's no surprise the world's most publicity-savvy designers have been jockeying for position in the run-up to the games.

Those supplying outfits for the Winter Games include Ralph Lauren, DSquared and Vera Wang, who will dress the US team, the Canadian celebrities for the opening and closing ceremonies, and US male figure skater Evan Lysacek respectively. That's not to mention the professional ski outfitters, such as Spyder, Burton and Bogner, which are contending to get their brands on the podium.

One of the strongest sporting fashion brands is Ralph Lauren. It already provides uniforms for Wimbledon and the US tennis open, a roster of professional golfers, and the Black Watch polo team, and will also be the official outfitter of the US Olympic and Paralympics team for the opening and closing ceremonies at both the Winter Games and the 2012 London Olympics.

David Lauren, son of Ralph and senior vice-president of advertising, marketing and corporate communications, says: "The Olympic partnership was the perfect fit for us. Ralph Lauren is the quintessential American brand, and has always represented a patriotic sensibility."

As a result, the Olympic outfits will display a patriotic palette of red, white, and blue. But not only will they be seen on the backs of Olympic athletes, they will also be on sale during the games in Polo Ralph Lauren stores throughout the US and in Canada's Hudson Bay. Naturally.

The combination of commerce and nationalism is crucial. Take the Greek designer Sophia Kokosalaki. She gained international fame by designing the costumes for the opening ceremony of the Athens Olympic Games in 2004 owing to the fact that the event was viewed by around 127m people worldwide.

It helped to boost her profile like no catwalk show ever could but she also concedes: "To take part in such a monumental event for my country was a once in a lifetime experience, and the result was so good in the end. But I did have to give away a year of my life – it was a difficult job."



A Team USA gilet from Ralph Lauren

But does simple patriotism or serious commercial gain propel fashion labels into the sports field? Peter Levy, senior vice-president and managing director of fashion at talent agency IMG, says: "Obviously a sense of duty and enthusiasm for the project probably plays a large role. But the opportunity also exists to reach consumers and sell clothes, especially for brands that are closely associated with particular sports, like Polo and Ralph Lauren ... then the sponsorship is doubly effective. Performance inspired sportswear is a core component of fashion houses around the world, so identifying with, and reaching, sports enthusiasts is a key demographic."

Playing sartorial host may be onerous but it can reap unparalleled commercial benefits as the sports brand Hudson's Bay Company, which is kitting out the Canadian team, can testify. More than 500,000 hoodies, toque hats and scarves from its official 2010 Canadian Olympic Team apparel range, alongside 1m pairs of branded red mittens, have been sold – and that's before the event even began.

More brands are looking to future sponsorship. Swedish brand J Lindeberg, which expanded into ski wear too late to link up with an athlete in Vancouver, already plans to sponsor the Swedish freestyle skier Jon Olsson for the 2014 Winter Games. Stefan Engström, J Lindeberg's chief executive, says: "[Sponsoring Jon] gives a very strong credibility to the brand. He looks fantastic in our product and will inspire a lot of young consumers to discover the brand. Yes, I would say the main reason is marketing." And yet such partnerships can also bring technical benefits in terms of the design process. "Jon is also on the slopes every day," continues Engström. "So he's helping our design team test products and fabrics."

Some brands, however, take a more cynical view of the synergy, particularly those with a more niche offering. Mover, the only ski brand stocked on Net-a-porter.com, will not be supplying an Olympic kit for the Swiss ski team but rather for the Swiss television team.

Nicolas Rochat, Mover's Swiss owner, says he has been paid to dress 367 people for the next four years, rather than donating clothes for publicity purposes. "I see no point in sponsoring a competitive ski team. The essence of sports sponsorship on this scale is to appeal to the mass market. Mover would lose its exclusivity by doing so – we want to remain the best-kept secret there is on the slopes," he says.



Swedish skier Jon Olsson in J Lindeberg

"Dressing the Swiss TV team is a much more subtle way of introducing the brand to a wider, more knowledgeable, and appreciative audience. If people are interested, then they will find out more."

Fonte: Financial Times, London, Feb. 19th 2010, Style, online.