



A LOCAL HERO WITH global reach

Smitten Merino products have been given as gifts for royalty while its outdoor performance wear is in demand from peak athletes around the globe. Dawn Adams reports.

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THE DUKE OF EDINBURGH, PRINCE PHILLIP AND HIS WIFE CAMILLA WERE EACH GIVEN GARMENTS FROM THE SMITTEN MERINO COLLECTION WHEN THEY VISITED TASMANIA SOME YEARS AGO.

Carl Mason, who owns the company with his wife, Smitten Merino designer Nicola, is modest about this royal encounter. But he remembers in detail the gifts that were presented; Prince Phillip received a marle grey zip neck top and Camilla a blue long drape cardigan and scarf when they visited Salamanca to see the company's range. "We got to meet Prince Phillip for a five-minute chat, Camilla couldn't make it," Mason says. "We talked about the business; he was very pleasant and very interested."

The business is also reaching a far broader market as it sponsors high profile elite athletes in their pursuits. For example, the firm sponsored Pat Farmer when he completed a pole-to-pole run, from the Arctic to the Antarctic, in 2011. "Pat ran in our clothing from the north to the south pole which is the equivalent of two marathons a day every day without a rest day," he says.

Also wearing the firm's garments was Eric Philips when he skied the north and south poles, Greenland and Patagonia, becoming the only person to ski the four ice shelves unassisted.

It's been a remarkable journey for the five-year-old Smitten Merino, founded when the couple had moved from Perth to Tasmania and were looking for a new career path. "We had the idea that we wanted to do something that was good for Tasmania, good us and good for the environment," Mason says.

MERINO AN ENVIRONMENTAL CHOICE

The company uses Australian-sourced merino wool from two businesses; Merino State and The Merino Company. "We get a good balance of fabrics using these two suppliers," he says. "We have a great relationship with them and they supply different needs."

And he claims the use of merino fulfils his aim to provide an environmentally sound alternative. "We love the fact that we help farmers who are producing this great fibre which is sustainably grown and does no harm to the environment," he says. "And we're especially pleased we've been able to run this business in a way that's good for the planet; it's a good feeling."

Mason insists a competitive pricepoint can be achieved in the market when using Australian-made fabric. "We can design the product here, have the fabric made in Australia and put Smitten on the shelves at a reasonable price," he says. "If you buy a middle range women's dress in Australia, it's usually around the \$150 or \$200 mark, which is where we sell our dresses and they're made here."

The merino fabric used by the firm is described as superfine and designed to be worn next to the skin, machine washable with a no scratch feel. "It looks like Lycra" or silk but it is wool," he says. Referring to it as the best possible quality wool on earth, with advanced properties," he says: "I do dances around the fabric they make".

Suitable for use during outdoor adventures, Mason claims these garments can be worn for a week or two and barely develop an odour. "It holds 60 per cent of its warmth when wet," he says. "In other words, it's still warm even when it's wet. And when you stop exercising, it dries itself. It feels like total luxury."

EMPLOYING TASMANIANS

The selection is produced at the Tasmanian Clothing Company, a business that received a Federal Government grant at the same time as Smitten Merino enabling both firms to streamline their efforts by

installing the computer-aided software, StyleCAD. "Nicola designs the dresses and emails them across to their cutter," he says. The label's focus is on simple and classic looks. "We started with a traditional little black dress and then included a wrap dress, swing dress and maxi, all for everyday wear," he says. Skirts, tops, leggings and camis, cardigans and scarves are also in the range.

The firm's original business plan is progressing well. At that time, it intended to capture the tourist market, build a strong website and secure online sales from around the world. Some 700,000 tourists visit Tasmania each year, a major target market for Smitten Merino's 17 stockists. "All but one of our stockists is in a tourist location," he says. "We get Smitten in front of 700,000 tourists and they buy it and take it to the mainland and then, buy online."

The company also received a Federal Government grant in recent years, to build a website and develop its marketing program. And that website is enabling the company to capture sales from across the globe. "Just last night, we sold two really good orders to Hong Kong," he says. "We have free shipping and sell worldwide, although most [of our business] is in Australia." But the company is selling its range online to the US, Canada, Europe and New Zealand.

TARGET MARKET

While some shops stock the range on the Australian mainland, the firm has focused its efforts on stores in Tasmania and securing online sales rather than building a network across the country. However, the range is available in certain locations such as country New South Wales at the Uralla Wool Room and The Outdoor Shack on Sydney's northern beaches.

The firm also recently moved its flagship store into a busy location in Hobart and is reaping the rewards. "We're in a brilliant spot now," Mason says. "I'm an optimist, it's tough running a business like this; you have to keep your eye on the ball. We set reasonable goals, grow at our grass roots and test things before we expand." Among those goals is to open a Sydney and Melbourne store within a year or two. "If our store in Hobart keeps going this well, that will give us confidence to open shops in Sydney and Melbourne."



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