

Tiny Detergent Maker Scores Big as U.S. Sponsor

By STEPHANIE KANG – Wall Street Journal, 8/11/2008

BEIJING -- While training for a marathon in 2002, Mark Konjevod never imagined that a berth at the Olympic Games might be at stake.

And sure enough, Mr. Konjevod isn't here in Beijing.

What is here, however, is a product that emerged from his awful-smelling marathon-training apparel. Called WIN, it is the official detergent of the U.S. Olympic Committee, and it even has its own Olympic pitchman, U.S. decathlete Bryan Clay, who not long ago never imagined himself endorsing soap.

"I didn't even know there was an official detergent," says Mr. Clay. "But you know what? It works."

Popular perception is that it takes a corporate giant -- Coca-Cola Co., McDonald's Corp., Visa Inc. -- to sponsor the Olympics. But tiny WIN Products Inc., with revenue of \$4 million, is one of dozens of companies that sign deals with USOC, including one company that makes scrapbooks and picture frames.

WIN won't specify how much its licensing deal costs but says it is a six-figure amount, plus a percentage of its sales. The sponsorship is the company's primary means of marketing, and it appears to have paid off. WIN, based in New York, has slapped the Olympics logo not only on its products but also on executive business cards and company letterhead. The sponsorship also makes it into every pitch it makes to retailers.

"We literally said [to retailers], 'If it's good enough for the USOC, it should be good enough for you,' " says Mr. Konjevod, WIN chief executive, who was a banker and media executive before plunging into the laundry business in 2002.

WIN now boasts shelf space in hundreds of sporting-goods retailers, including Dick's Sporting Goods, a Pittsburgh-based equipment company with more than 300 locations in the U.S.

Retailers say WIN solves a problem familiar to multitudes of sweaty exercisers. Traditional detergents are made to remove stains and odors from mostly cotton clothing. But these days, athletes tend to wear high-tech fabrics, which pull sweat away from the body, keeping it cool and dry.

But that synthetic fabric is made of fibers that are much finer than cotton fibers. Sweat molecules burrow into the tiny holes and bacteria feed on the sweat, resulting in a smelly piece of clothing. WIN's formula uses active oxygen, a molecule so minuscule it can slip into the crevices and remove the smelly bacteria, says Nat Elbi, a senior research-and-development director at JemPak, a contract manufacturer to WIN.

As owner of running-shoe store **Fleet Feet Sports Mahwah**, in New Jersey, Joe Glotzbier buys that argument. Mr. Glotzbier tested several detergents before concluding that WIN did the best job of removing odor.

Other retailers also subjected WIN to the smell test. "We were skeptical," says Lee Silverman, owner of retailer JackRabbit Sports in New York. "We worried that customers would feel like we were trying to sell them one more thing. But the fact is, our clothes that stank don't stink anymore. That's major."

Little WIN has won other big endorsements, including [Nike Inc.](#) Call the customer-service reps at Nike and complain about your smelly workout clothes, and they will recommend you buy a bottle of WIN. That isn't something WIN pays Nike to do. In the U.S., sales of high-tech athletic apparel reached \$5 billion in 2007, a 39% jump from 2005, according to Matt Powell, an analyst at market research firm Sports One Source.

Of course, WIN would lose by winning if its success attracted a competing offering from the likes of [Proctor & Gamble Co.](#), which has a nearly 29% share of the \$56.3 billion U.S. market for laundry products.

Soon after founding WIN in 2002, Mr. Konjevod and his partner, Thomas deNeufville, discovered that the USOC's sponsors included no detergent makers. Elated, they hitched WIN to the Olympics. "Let's face it, doing laundry is an inherently unsexy thing," says Mr. deNeufville.

As a USOC sponsor, WIN has lost a few battles. With the assistance of the USOC, it sent 3,000 samples to Beijing along with the U.S. Olympic team's gear, hoping that athletes would use the product when doing laundry. It turned out that protocol here calls for laundry to be washed by the Beijing organizing committee.

"Our original plan of having the detergent for the athletes and staff to use as needed no longer applies," says Laura Sokol, associate director of licensing for the USOC.

It was during his marathon training that Mr. Konjevod, a former college linebacker, discovered that multiple wash cycles failed to remove odor from his shorts and shirts.

But at first he wasn't certain this represented a business opportunity. He recalls asking himself: "How do you not have people think this is a joke?"

Mr. deNeufville's father, a physicist, introduced the pair to chemists who had developed detergent formulas for consumer-product giants like [Unilever](#).

Messrs. Konjevod and deNeufville tinkered with WIN's formula for 18 months before they were satisfied. To choose a detergent scent, they spent hours at beauty emporium Sephora in New York. They opened jars, sprayed perfume and generally "stuck their noses in everything" to sniff out the right scent, says Mr. deNeufville.

In trying to hire experienced detergent veterans, they encountered some skepticism, as when they approached Jeff Crow, who had worked on detergent brands like Unilever's Wisk. "I said 'Yeah, yeah, good luck with that,' " recalls Mr. Crow. But he came around. He now serves as WIN's president.

