

# Sportism

by Silvia Bombardini



Chromat – SS19

## Kristin Hildebrand

After over a decade of experience in the sportswear industry, then Nike's creative director of global concepts, Kristin Hildebrand decided to go solo. Earlier this year she launched her startup, Wone – pronounced like 'won' and standing for, as she put it, 'the philosophy beyond the winning'. Made out of textiles ten times as expensive as those of her competitors, and seen until now only on the world's best athletes, Hildebrand's luxury workout pants and sport bras are selling out, despite costing as much as \$320 and \$150 respectively. What's more, there's an ongoing waiting list to buy them, and that's despite the brand's best effort to keep

**their marketing and social media's presence to a minimum. Limited edition, minimal, black and timeless, Hildebrand's promise to be the last leggings you'll ever need – which means that as you look good while you exercise, you're keeping the planet a little healthier too.**

S.B.: Wone was born in spring with the very ambitious goal to become the best performance athletic wear in the world. But in just a few months, that goal may have been reached: I've read of this fabric you use, both UV and chlorine resistant, that is lighter than the leggings we're used to, and will resist pilling for as many as 50,000 washes. Will you tell me more about your materials and innovation lab? What else is left, still to improve upon?

K.H.: In the words of Gianni Agnelli, "A thing well done can be done better". What we've done so far is better than what existed, however there is more to be done and we believe we can do better.

We are partnering exclusively with a knit manufacture as well as a woven textile manufacture in order to push the boundaries of what currently exists and what these machines are capable of. So far, it's been difficult for these manufactures to commercialize anything that isn't hitting a mass market price point and such is the state of the industry as we see it today. We believe we can make better product and steer the industry in a more compelling direction by taking on a leadership position that has sadly been neglected. There are countless technological advancements being developed that are absolutely applicable – this is the work that needs to be done.

S.B.: I know that your second collection, only counts 350 units for each style: the limited runs, as much as the durable, long-lasting fabrics your garments are made of, speak of Wone's sustainable ethos. When did environmental consciousness become a concern for you personally?

K.H.: I do believe that we are more aware of our actions and how they affect this planet we all live on, than perhaps our past generations. It would be difficult to separate ourselves or our actions from this world seeing as they are one in the same. Having children forces you to see the world from a new perspective – how my kids exist on this planet is incredibly important to me.

S.B.: Like couture designers, you've launched Wone with the aim to build personal relationships with your customers – and word of mouth, rather than ads, has been how knowledge of the brand has spread from the start. How have you gone about making it happen, and what have you learnt about the women who now wear Wone?

K.H.: I believe product speaks for itself. Good or bad. If we are making the world's best athletic apparel, people will know and will find out about it. Our customers are so diverse it would be disrespectful to generalize who they are. I'm fascinated to hear the stories of how they found us, what they are drawn towards, what they are looking for, what inspires them. In this age of advertising noise, it's really my pleasure to listen to individual real stories from real people.

## **Becca McCharen-Tran**

**With a background in architecture, Becca McCharen-Tran launched Chromat in 2010 – a 'future forward bodywear' brand that specializes in lingerie and structural cages along with its trademark swim and sportswear. Since then, her shows have become a highlight of New York Fashion Week, and she's been dressing activists and pop stars alike, bringing together performance and sensuality in wet t-shirts and self-ventilating sport bras. Herself a member of the LGBTQ community and forever fighting for a more inclusive industry, McCharen-Tran's models and role models are strong women of all sizes, sexualities, and colors, the likes of whom the fashion industry has hardly ever seen before.**

S.B.: If fashion has proven slow in its embracing of sizes above 0, this is all the more true when it comes to sportswear and swimwear. 'Power dressing' has we've come to know it, would have us roleplay patriarchal types all wrapped up in suits and ties. What's empowering, to you, about activewear, whatever one's gender identity and shape may be?

B.M-T.: Sport and swimwear are very form-fitting garments- they are designed to function as a second skin. For this reason, the fit has to be perfect. It's become our mission and our obsession to design for all bodies, which is a huge challenge, as you know that no two bodies are the same. It's empowering to wear a garment that supports and fits perfectly – this enables movement and comfort.

S.B.: I've read that you're inspired by female athletes who push to the extreme both their bodies and their sport. Is there anyone in particular who you would call yourself a fan of?

B.M-T.: I'm a huge fan of Serena Williams! She's the greatest athlete in the world and a role model both on and off the court. I admire her honesty and openness with her recent health complications from childbirth, and her focus on calling into question why black women are three to four times as likely to die from pregnancy-related causes as their white counterparts. I also admire her sharing her journey with being comfortable in her own body. She's a body positive role model in every way!

## Charli Cohen

For Charli Cohen, style and movement go in sync. Not long after the launch of her eponymous brand – fresh out of university, and it wasn't her first – she co-founded an online fitness programme, *That Girl*. The London-based designer and personal trainer works with the same mills that manufacture fabrics for the Olympic teams, and her 'augmented garments' recently caught the attention of Reebok, whom she entered a commercial partnership with. Committed to principles of sustainability and transparency throughout her supply chain, Cohen is also a staunch advocate of mental health awareness – a subject the fashion industry notoriously handles poorly. Hosted on the charli-cohen.com website, her *Shades of Blue* initiative is a platform that aims “to openly discuss, highlight and act to change endemic issues and abuses within the creative industries” and that's only just the start.

S.B.: Sustainable fashion, in the imagination of many, is still pictured as somewhat bucolic. Activewear, with its technical, high-performance textiles, hardly looks like it could tick that box. Yet yours does – I know that 70% of your fabrics are created using recycled ocean plastics. Would you tell me more about your materials, when did you first become aware of the importance of an ecological approach, and why did it resonate with you personally?

C.C.: One of the benefits of technical textile development is that the processes are much recent. The mills that specialise in the production of these fabrics were established at a time when sustainability and environmental friendliness was already a key consideration, especially in Italy where we primarily source from. They have been able to build out their processes with this in mind from the very beginning, rather than attempting to update outdated systems, which is always more challenging. Sourcing high quality recycled materials from sustainable, and/or carbon neutral mills has actually been one of the easiest aspects of putting together our supply chain.

I honestly can't remember what triggered my awareness of the importance of sustainability – it was something my family would talk about whilst I was growing up. My first fashion brand, which I launched back in 2005, was based around upcycling – I was 15 at that time, so the ethos set in young and became increasingly valuable to me as I learned more about the grim environmental reality of the fashion industry. It has never been an “extra” consideration for me, it has always been fundamental to my business strategy and my personal moral compass.

S.B.: At around the same time as you launched your – current – brand, you certified as a personal trainer. And now, I've read that you donate surplus stock to charity partners to support the use of exercise in treating mental

health conditions. As a fitness expert yourself, what do you think can be the potential of sport, to benefit not just the body, but the mind and soul too?

C.C.: The impact of exercise on mind and soul is significant and there's study after study to back that up. On a physical level it aids just about every system in the body, on a chemical level it boosts endorphins, on a psychological level it offers a sense of purpose and accomplishment, and on a social level it gets you out and interacting with others. Personally, regular exercise – be that a long, meditative walk or an intensive gym session – has been a huge part of managing my own struggles with depression and anxiety.

S.B.: You mentioned that you launched your first brand when you were 15 – earlier this year, instead, you were featured on Forbes' prestigious '30 Under 30' list for Retail & Ecommerce. As a young female entrepreneur, what does this milestone mean to you? Now, what else remains to tick off your bucket list?

C.C.: It was a real honour to receive the recognition from Forbes, especially as a platform outside the world of fashion. My bucket list is too long to publish here, but some key items are designing clothing for video games and digital experiences, launching a production arm that specialises in music videos, and a charity dedicated to mental health awareness and support within the creative industries.