

Sports apparel from budget retailers is turning even experienced heads by offering surprisingly high functionality and excellent value for money.

# Cheap and cheerful

By Shari Shallard

**E**avesdrop for a moment, if you can forgive the run-on sentences, on a slice of virtual conversation:

"...I use it for everyday training gear that you don't mind gets a bit of rough treatment and lots of washes and found I have more than got value for my money," writes Coolrunner.

"I'm with you on that one," Sunshine replies. "I bought two pairs of shorts well over 12 months ago and wear them for the majority of my training runs, the zip on the back pocket still works and the elastic in the legs of the inners is still in tact, I think they were €11 a pair."

A discussion of the latest releases from an international megabrand like Nike or Reebok? Not at €11 a pair. This conversation recently posted on a popular runners' website featured a lively exchange about the merits of the sporting apparel available to shoppers at Aldi.

Yes, Aldi. The German-owned discount grocery store, known to many as the place where you've got to hire your trolley and can buy great wine for €5, is making a name for itself among cost-conscious athletes. And Aldi is not the only unlikely sporting hot spot; Target in the United States has also achieved respectable status among the western world's movers, shakers and climbers. More and more athletes are willing to trade logos for low prices—provided the quality of the gear remains high. It's a balance that these retailers are managing with great success.

## Eggs, milk, cheese and - windbreaker?

Price tags as low as €6.30 for a running top can strike some as worryingly inexpensive, but users attest to Aldi apparel's comfort and quality. According to Lisa Morgan, account manager for the marketing agency representing Aldi, the company sent samples of Aldi gear to several cycling and running clubs for feedback and comments. "The results showed that 92% of the testers would recommend [the gear] to a friend," she says.

The features of an Aldi running top do not differ greatly from its bigger-name competitors. According to the company's website, the €11 Aldi running jacket is lightweight, water repellent and windproof, with contrast mesh

inserts, reflective piping and prints, back ventilation slits and elasticated cuffs (plus the invaluable MP3 player pocket). By comparison, adidas' description of its \$60 (€40) Response Wind Jacket (available through the company's US website) is much the same: it provides

*Head to toe in Aldi: running jacket, pants, socks and shoes total less than £35.*

 Aldi



lightweight, breathable protection from wind and rain and features front zip pockets, full-front zip, anatomically placed mesh inserts and back vents. Admittedly, the €40 jacket also features the adidas brandmark on the left chest—which may in fact be worth the extra €29 to some runners.

The Aldi range of running gear also includes €5 shorts made of knitted and woven fabrics; €7.50 running trousers designed to be quick-drying and lightweight, and the €6.30 running top, which is made of Coolmax X4 air and uses reflective prints. The grocer even offers “Technical Jogging Shoes” for €15, which contain shock-absorbing midsoles and gel cushioning heels.

Aldi’s performance apparel extends to penny-pinching motorcyclists, hikers and fishermen as well. While the offerings for these and other sports is similarly limited, it is equally affordable. A motorcycle jacket, which typically retails elsewhere in the hundreds, costs €50; trousers—which feature removable inner thermal pants for extra warmth, knee protectors, embroidered logo, reflective piping, wind and water proofing and CE approval—cost €38. Rainsuits, helmets and boots are available, none of which cross the €51 mark.

That sense of surprised satisfaction so prevalent on the runners’ online forum is just as familiar among the blogging bikers who have tried Aldi’s gear. “I bought a pair of £13 (€16.50) Aldi gloves last year as a cheap test item,” reads one entry, “I’m still wearing them and they are the first gloves in 30 years I’ve worn that are 100% waterproof costing less than £50 (€63).”

According to the company, Aldi’s affordable prices are the result of an “honest, straightforward deal: [buying] to stringent quality standards but [reducing] costs by cutting out gimmicks.” That trolley collateral, for instance, ensures that the trolley is returned to the store by a customer rather than a paid employee.

A more lamentable gimmick is the unpredictability of Aldi’s sports apparel. Twice a week an ever-changing range of non-food items becomes available in stores; periodically sports gear is that non-food item. Consumers must be ready to seize the deals when they are announced, which may sometimes mean stocking up on socks long before one’s existing pairs get worn through. The anticipation of Aldi’s weekly specials seems only to aid the company in free marketing—at the end of April, the website [www.bikeradar.com](http://www.bikeradar.com) ran an article announcing Aldi’s upcoming release of biking gear, informing readers of when to hit the stores and what would be available. Such previews among the online sporting communities are not uncommon.



### Affordable means accessible

Aldi is not alone in this growing niche of budget exercise apparel, and it was certainly not the niche-maker. France-based Decathlon was created 30 years ago and continues to operate under the mission of making the pleasure of sport accessible to as many people as possible and even uses ‘Keeping sport affordable’ as a marketing slogan.

As one of Europe’s biggest sporting goods retailers (it also has a presence in Russia, China, India and Brazil, but US stores closed in 2006), Decathlon covers the ABCs of affordable sportswear—from aikido and archery to windsurfing and yoga. The company is now growing faster than ever: last year saw nearly 12% growth, and a recent corporate renaming of the group to Oxyane (stores will still be called Decathlon) reflects some ambitious organisational movement.

Cautious consumers only hope that Decathlon’s famously low prices do not experience this same accelerated growth. Currently, ladies’ jodhpurs sell for €11; a breathable, wicking, seamless running shirt retails for €7; and a 4mm wetsuit costs less than €100.

“Decathlon’s quality is excellent; that’s where most of my running and biking gear comes from,” says Oliver Chesher, a member of the UK’s Stockport Clarion Cycling Club. “I run in a top that costs £4 (€5) and some shorts that cost £7 (€9), both made with proper breathable microfibre materials.” He adds, however, that his bike gear tends to be of more expensive brands because “mountain bike stuff takes a hammering”.

*Lightweight, water repellent and windproof, the Aldi running jacket holds up well against competitors but at a fraction of the price.*







*Affordable riding gear from Decathlon.*

 Decathlon

### **Paying the price for not paying the price**

Mr Chesher's decision to turn elsewhere for his mountain bike gear seems to reflect a universal view that low-cost shopping is best applied towards particular needs; even the avid fans of budget exercise gear say that they necessarily must ignore some characteristics. One runner pointed out that the ankle zips on Aldi's leggings sometimes come loose, and another advised fellow runners to look elsewhere for shoes.

Sophie Matthews\*, a Lance Corporal soldier in the UK's Territorial Army—whose training includes such undertakings as 12-kilometre tabs (a very fast walk) in under two hours carrying more than 15 kilos—feels there is a lack of adequate antimicrobial technology in her less expensive gear.

"I have bought inexpensive exercise apparel, and it has generally been fine but, without being too grim, there must be something in the material that reacts with sweat and makes the clothes seriously reek," she says. "Granted you sweat when doing sports, but my more pricey Nike, Reebok and adidas stuff never smell like that. They get sweaty, but not stinky."

Indeed, Aldi's sports garments do not purport to have antimicrobial properties, nor do many of Decathlon's lower-priced pieces. Factors such as antimicrobial technology and reinforced stitching vary from line to line, and even from garment to garment. The degree to which a consumer values any one of the innumerable technologies available in today's performance apparel is a key factor in determining which, if any, pieces of budget apparel he or she will purchase.

### **Even more for your money**

A line launched in 2005 by Target (the United States' fifth largest retailer in sales revenue) is a current leader in this emerging niche of high-quality, low-priced sporting apparel. Like its other lines of fashion, shoes, bathing suits and maternity wear, Target has brought in a big name to please its huge customer base: in this case, it's C9 by Champion.

"We recognised an opportunity to create a line of authentic technical active apparel at a great value for our [customers]," says Anne Rodgers, a spokesperson for Target. "We see the C9 by Champion line continuing to offer an incredible value on technical apparel and will continue to innovate at a competitive price without sacrificing quality."

Details regarding the construction of C9's apparel—which, depending on the piece, may be stretchy, reflective, wind resistant, UV protective, antimicrobial, water resistant, seamless, and designed with ventilated fabric, compression fit and Duo Dry technology for wicking—are highlighted on the company's website, aiming to assure potential consumers that affordability does not require sacrifice.

The C9 line carries pieces for golf, running, training, tennis, yoga and everyday activity, with tiered prices that, even at the highest point, remain below many competitors'. For example, C9's sports bras range from \$13 to \$20, whereas Nike sports bras range from \$27 to \$70. (It is worth noting, however, that Nike's \$70 sports bra is capable of supporting a 40C or 38D chest—a claim that few, if any, other sports bras can make.) C9's yarn-dyed golf polo shirt retails for \$20, whereas a yarn-dyed golf polo from

Fred Perry costs closer to \$100.

The Platinum Collection sits at the top of the C9 line, and uses bamboo charcoal in its fabric to manage moisture, control temperature, protect skin against UV rays and—as Lance Corporal Matthews would be pleased to know—naturally neutralise odours. This high-performance fibre, according to the company, creates “an elite class of athletic wear”.

“Our guest base for C9 activewear is someone who appreciates performance athletic products but realises that they do not have to pay premium retail prices to get the same technology and quality,” says Ms Rodgers, “They might be more conscious of their budget, and they realise they can get the same product for less.”

### Affordable active wear

Sporting retailers need to take note: cost-conscious athletes are a growing breed. (More accurately, cost-conscious people are a growing breed, but athletes are the subset we're most concerned with today.) People in the US are debating the meaning of the word “recession” and whether or not one is under way; the UK is trying to slow its own housing crisis; CNN has called India's economy “gloomy”; Australia and New Zealand are reeling from widespread drought. Money is tight around the globe, and the sports retail sector will inevitably feel the uncomfortable squeeze.

A report published earlier this year by the UK's Centre for Retail Research acknowledged that it is difficult to estimate how global economic struggles will affect the retail industry, but is certain that “... the world economy [is] in a mess and no one knows how long this will last, how bad it will get, and whether some other problem will occur to worsen the situation even more.” The author, Professor Joshua Bamfield, predicts that although some areas such as supermarkets and internet trading will fare just fine, others, including sporting retail, will do badly.

Ironically, Professor Bamfield believes it is the more exclusive shops that will do better in the emerging economic environment; he notes that shoppers with more disposable income are increasingly preoccupied with quality, naturalness and difference. “[Wealthy people] are already starting to move back from Primark and Lidl to other shops and farmers' markets,” he writes. Shops aimed at the strapped masses




*A Target store in Illinois. Lower-cost retailers such as Aldi and Target are becoming popular sources for performance gear as household budgets tighten.*

 Kelly Martin/Wikipedia

must “compete much more vigorously”.

How the existing retailers of affordable apparel will maintain and grow their customer bases at a time when even cheap leggings are, for some people, too much, remains to be seen; however, if Mr Chesher is a reliable gauge, the budget sports sector should remain optimistic. Although he has thus far been loyal to Decathlon for

his inexpensive performance apparel, he says that a recent experience may change that: “I went out riding with a mate recently and asked him where he got his windproof from. I was thinking it was a £100 Pearl Izumi or something like that, and he told me it was under a tenner from Aldi!” he recalls. “I might make my first Aldi purchase soon.” 

*\*not her real name*

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Global Sales/Marketing Manager  
Tel: (636) 936-0299 Cell: (636) 578-8999  
susan.mcgreall@fibervisions.com

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