

The right sportswear for the most special event

By Shari Shallard

When my grandmother was pregnant with my mother, her doctor gave her this advice: if you're hungry, eat half a head of lettuce. If you're still hungry, eat the other half. And avoid exercise as it may divert blood-flow away from the growing uterus (although strolling in the garden is acceptable).

When my mother was pregnant with me, she was allowed to eat real food (and smoke and drink, but only in moderation—though I hasten to add she did neither), but studies regarding the benefits of exercise were only just starting to emerge. However, when, three years ago, I became pregnant with my first child, the doctor told me to eat healthily and—by all means—keep moving.

Every year new research reveals the myriad ways in which exercise throughout pregnancy benefits both mother and baby. As the importance of prenatal exercise has found a foothold in medical and popular thinking, however, the accompanying market niche of prenatal exercise apparel has struggled to keep pace—until now. As we near the end of maternity apparel's most explosive decade of growth, it seems the maternity specialists—not the global names in athletic wear—have taken ownership of this complex market.

A vital need

There are few times when exercise can have a more immediate and significant impact than during the 40 weeks preceding labour and delivery. Dr James Clapp, author of the popular book *Exercising Through Your Pregnancy*, has spent the last four decades focusing largely on this topic. "I was initially concerned that vigorous exercise would damage fetal growth and development," he says; however, his early research proved otherwise, and he is now a leading advocate for maternal exercise. According to Dr Clapp, women who work out during pregnancy can expect these benefits: to deliver 7–8 days sooner (but to carry

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to at least 37 weeks); to be 35% less likely to need pain relief during labour and 55% less likely to need an episiotomy; and to be 75% less likely to need a Caesarean section or forceps delivery. Plus, fit women have one-third shorter labours. It is findings such as these that compel expecting women off their couches and into more active pregnancies.

The displaced market

Unfortunately for these women, maternity exercise-wear is not available at most sports apparel shops. In 2004, Rachel Moritz finished fourth place in the Chicago Marathon; finding out she was pregnant the following year did not mean putting away her running shoes. "My doctor said to continue as long as I felt well," she says. "If it hurt, I should stop." Averaging 50 miles per week, Ms Moritz ran through the 37th week before switching to a Stairmaster and elliptical trainer until her delivery. Staying fit was not her challenge; finding adequate clothing was. "Maternity sportswear was not easy to find at all," she says. "The lack of it left me wearing the same shorts over and over."

In fact, none of the big names—Nike, Reebok, adidas, Lotto, Champion and so on—are currently carrying maternity exercise apparel. That was not true five years ago, however. The story of maternity sportswear is filled with promising characters that enter the scene grandly but slip out of sight without a word.

As the new millennium rolled in, so did announcements of big-name collaborations: in 2001, Nike announced that America's maternitywear guru, Liz Lange, was designing their new sportswear line for expectant mothers; the next year, Reebok joined forces with maternity retailer babystyle to do the same; and adidas soon had onehotmama.com carrying its new line.

Also harnessing the emerging trend were unknown entrepreneurs. Rebecca Cutler and Jennifer Krane founded Raising a Racquet, a Connecticut-based company specialising in tennis-wear for pregnant women. Their multipiece box sets grossed \$250,000 the first year and were projected to hit almost \$1 million in 2004. And yet, today, an hour spent on Google searching for any of these lines will yield nothing but a few outdated articles and some listings on eBay.

Relinquishing the market

As mentioned above, when Reebok decided to enter the maternity market, it approached babystyle, which also sells baby and children's apparel. At the time, babystyle was only a couple of years old; the opportunity to collaborate with such a big name on exercise pants, shorts and tops for pregnant women was a welcome one.

Today, babystyle boasts a thriving e-commerce business and operates 20 stores throughout the US, but the Reebok relationship is no longer. Emilia Fabricant, president and chief merchandising officer of babystyle, simply says that the line did well but that it had "served its purpose for that time-period".

Roxanne Beckford Hoge, co-owner of onehotmama.com, wonders if adidas' now-defunct maternity line suffered from design faults. "[Adidas] asked for notes on their samples, and I gave them copious ones," she says. "As this was when maternity fashion was on the cusp of being very body-conscious, the notes



Maternity wear guru Liz Lange is no longer working with Nike, but currently has a deal with retail giant Target. She believes pregnant women's clothes should make them feel "pretty and celebratory", even when they're working out.

 Target

were all about fit." Ms Hoge had advocated the removal of belly panels, and an increased focus on keeping bras and shirts close to the body without being binding. "Every pregnant woman is sensitive about being touched—especially by labels," she says. "But the [adidas] line was being cut by an old-time maternity manufacturer who told them to ignore me." She feels that adidas missed a prime opportunity: "The hunger for exercise wear was so huge that other businesses took notice; now women have lots of options available."

Perhaps it was that hunger, and the resultant boom of maternity retailers, that encouraged the empires of Reebok, adidas and Nike to extract themselves from the maternity market. Maternity designer Liz Lange feels this could be the case.

The Liz Lange for Nike line ran from 2001–2006 and, according to Ms Lange, was an unquestionable success. "Women loved it. I still get emails from women asking about the line and how they can possibly find it; they want to know if we still have some pieces lying around somewhere," she says. Using Nike's proprietary DRI-FIT fabric and Ms Lange's designs, the line's sports bras, pants and shorts were customer favourites: "I wanted the clothes to be simple and fashionable—no prints or patterns that would seem more athletic than chic."

When the five-year Nike contract ended, so did the line—although Ms Lange points out that this was not due to any disappointment on either side. Although the line may have been "swallowed up" in the vast offerings of NikeTown (which are sometimes as much as seven storeys high), she attributes the non-renewal to hers and Nike's respective other plans. "Nike was doing different things; I had entered into a relationship with Target (the US retailer with whom she's had an exclusive deal for six years) and I wanted to be able to produce athletic apparel with them."

Reclaiming the market

Every year the world welcomes at least 130 million new babies, with more than four million full-term annual pregnancies in the US alone. That's a lot of expanding women seeking stretchy material. It seems the big sports names have decided to yield this consumer base to the 40-week specialists.

According to Emilia Fabricant, maternity exercise apparel is an important part of babystyle's business. "Women today are taking care of themselves more and continuing some kind of exercise programme throughout their pregnancies," she says. "In the past, this category was ignored."

Her company very recently launched a yoga group, which "takes into account the growing



Yoga is a popular form of exercise among expectant mothers.

 babystyle

shape and gives the mom-to-be a comfortable yet beautiful alternative," says Ms Fabricant; she anticipates this will be a strong area of growth, as the group expands in the coming seasons.

Swimwear is by far onehotmama.com's best-selling piece of sports apparel, according to Roxanne Bexford Hoge. "We sell it like crazy, and there are two reasons," she says. "The first is that every first- or second-time pregnant woman realises that life as she knows it is about to change—drastically, and so she decides on a last tropical vacation with her hubby. The other reason is that swimming is the best exercise a pregnant woman can do. It alleviates the pressure on the joints and enables a pregnant woman to get into positions she can't manage on land."

The Liz Lange line continues to offer lounge and exercise wear through Target. "We always offer crossover pieces you might be wearing around your apartment, around your home, but you might also work out in," says Ms Lange. "These days there's such a meshing of what is street wear, what is workout apparel, what is intimate apparel. These are clothes you might wear when you're running around the park with your kids, or to work out in, or to just put on when you get home from the office to be more comfortable."

Aside from the ubiquitous offerings of Target (which has approximately 1500 stores in the US

and has recently begun to expand into India), selections of maternity exercise apparel within driving distance is not a luxury all mothers-to-be share. Online, then, is where many pregnant women are shopping; babystyle started as an e-business, and onehotmama.com now functions entirely online.

Canada-based Maternityactivewear.com is the internet and retail arm of Sevensseas Apparel, which has designed and produced maternity yoga and exercise clothing for the wholesale market since 2003. According to Lilian Dang, director of product development for Sevensseas and maternityactivewear.com, the web arm was launched in 2006 "in response to numerous requests from frustrated active moms-to-be who could not find high-quality maternity workout clothes in stores or don't live near maternity stores carrying this clothing". Claiming to be the first in Canada to heed the call for maternity yoga/exercise clothing, the company uses technical fabrics known for their high performance qualities. Supplex, for example, is known for its moisture wick-away and four-way stretch; bamboo, cotton and spandex are employed for moisture evaporation.

A sports bra by any other name?


There is a tendency by pundits to sometimes lump 'specialty' and 'gimmicky' into the same category—could maternity workout apparel be a gimmick? Have clever marketers capitalised on a perceived need that pregnant women could easily address by 'sizing up'? Doctors, designers and mothers-to-be will answer that with an emphatic "no".

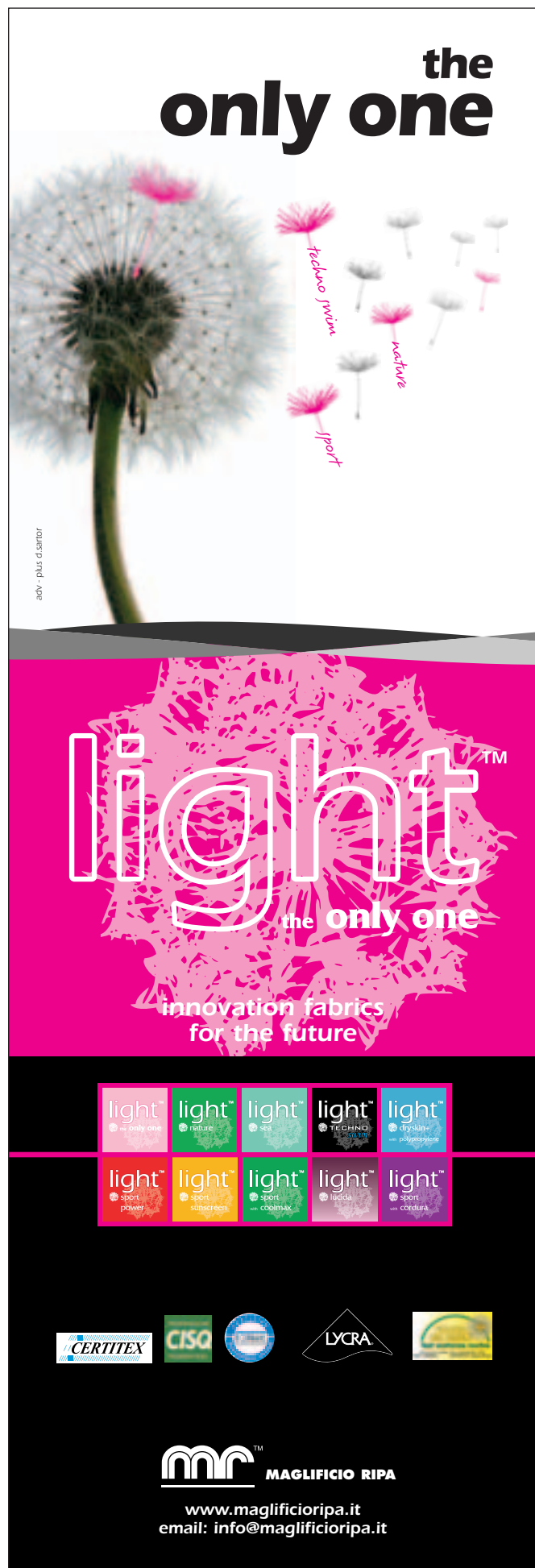
Dr Clapp highlights the necessity of support and compression without chafing, as well as a garment's breathability and/or wicking ability. In addition to an expanding belly, a pregnant woman's breasts are likely to grow two to four sizes during her pregnancy, with increased blood flow and sensitivity. For a sports bra, says Dr Clapp, "the idea that works best is compressive support panels built into the garment".

Maternityactivewear.com's Ms Dang adds to this: "Maternity sports bras take the same concept of a regular sports bra: they support the breasts and wick away moisture, but with the added feature of room for expansion." When it comes to the lower half of the body, Ms Dang points out that maternity bottoms should have higher back-rise, so that the pants will stay up as the belly grows.

And—perhaps topping most pregnant athletes' lists of priorities—maternity sports apparel must be comfortable. "When you are pregnant," says Liz Lange, "even the smallest thing can irritate you. It's like The Princess and the Pea; the feeling of a little tag in the wrong place might drive you nuts. There can already be such discomfort in working out; I want everything I design to be really comfortable."

And the niche goes to...

While the maternity sports apparel market is certainly a niche market, it's a niche for which there are both growing appreciation and increasing offerings. But it's a multifaceted niche, one that is most successfully filled by designers and manufacturers who truly understand it—medically, physically and emotionally. "I feel that every point in the pregnancy is extraordinarily exciting; it is the most life-changing experience you can have," says Ms Lange. "The apparel you wear should make every part of your body—even if it's while you're working out—feel pretty and celebratory. You should feel good." 








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