

Jonathan Glancey examines the advertisers' designs on sport

# This Sporting Life

'Sport, sport, masculine sport,' Vivian Stanshall, of the erstwhile Bonzo Dog Doodah Band, sang some 20 years ago, 'Equips a young man for society / Yes, sport turns out a jolly good sort / It's an odd boy who doesn't like sport.'

Only a public school-educated Briton could have written this ditty. Only an ex-public school boy would remember sport as a form of ritualistic and humiliating punishment, to be satirised in later life.

The new **Sport 90** exhibition at London's Design Museum (April 6 - May 27) reviews a very different type of humiliation: the descent of sports equipment and sportswear into the world of fiercely competitive corporate advertising. If only all those suffering schoolboys and schoolgirls (do they still suffer?) could have been paid to suffer by corporate sponsors, those pointless cross-country runs would have bought consolation at the tuck shop, if nowhere else.

The Design Museum show, brilliantly designed by architects Powell-Tuck, Connor and Orefelt, tackles a number of issues. The most intriguing one is the relationship between sportswear, sports

equipment, fashion and advertising. Sport and its accoutrements are now designed to generate vast sums of advertising revenue. Health and wellbeing are becoming at best mere by-products of manufacturers' race to the top of the advertising league.

Since the original Olympic Games, sport has always meant to be ennobling, character-building, aimed at turning seven-stone weaklings into people capable of kicking sand in others' faces.

Sport is meant to be challenging, life-enhancing and fun. Yet, it has also long had a more sinister face. It has been used to instil military spirit into pacifist weaklings, to demonstrate how one race or nation is superior to another, to promote cigarettes, petrol, oil and brake dust, to satisfy the need for 'bread and circuses'.

Sport has been variously politicised, commercialised and corrupted. It has also given pleasure and a sense of wellbeing to millions over endless generations, controlled the release of potentially-destructive charges of adrenalin, and, if the 'playing fields of Eton' theory holds true, has enabled

countries with God or right on their side to triumph over those with the devil or the extreme Right on theirs.

Military metaphors make sense when discussing organised sport, for - just like soldiers on parade - footballers, cricketers and athletes dress in uniforms and wield hardware that derives in part from weapons, in the case of cricketers and javelin throwers; or the severed heads of enemies, in the example of football. Racing drivers can be seen as grounded fighter pilots and American footballers as only a mildly less effective fighting force than the Green Berets.

In some sports the weapons and tactics employed are identical to those of warfare: the war against grouse, pheasant, badger, rabbit and fox. At British public schools the same boys who rose to the highest ranks in the officer training corps were those who spent most of their time on the playing fields. The fact that the word 'field' is used both for scenes of scrums and carnage seems appropriate.

But the link between militarism and sport has been declining as consumerism

has replaced jingoism as a key driving force in society. This change has radically influenced the way that people dress for sport, the equipment they use and the spirit they play under.

A modern motor race, for example, is more advertising festival than challenge between motorised jockeys. Until the late 1960s, racing cars were painted in national colours: green for Great Britain, red for Italy, blue for France, white for Germany and so on. Jingoism ruled the roost. Today, the cars are 200mph billboards. Television

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cameras slow the cars to a snail's pace on screen so viewers get no sense of speed, no impression of the tremendous g-forces being generated. But they do get a good close-up of advertising logos.

At the end of each race, the winning drivers are forced to wear extraordinary high-rise peaked caps. If they wore these on any other occasion they would be laughed out of court. But on the trackside these hats are designed to bear as many advertising labels as physically possible. The hats may yet have to grow taller to accommodate the names of even more sponsors as the cost of motor racing escalates.

If motor racing set the advertising sponsorship ball rolling, other sports fell quickly into line. Now Boris Becker is in the ridiculous position of having to paint out the logos on tennis racquets not provided by his major sponsor. It was not so long ago when umpires refused American professionals to play if their sports bag carried even the most innocuous and unsponsored Coke or Pepsi logo.

Today, the centre court at Wimbledon is a highly animated sports fashionwear and accessory show. Cricketers like to dress in any-



Gripping stuff: It takes some horsepower to shift all that advertising

thing other than white flannel for the television cameras. Cyclists squeeze tiny advertising logos on to minimalist stream-lined racers.

In fact very few events are now logo-free: the Boat Race, a few rugby internationals and, most popular of all, racing. A jockey's flamboyant silks do announce the name of the stable's owners to those well-versed in racing lore, but to people who go along to meets just for the ride, the silks are simply a delightful part of the established racing scene.

The commercialisation of sport is not seen just in this vast increase in advertising and the pox-like spread of the corporate sponsor's logo; it is also witnessed in the transfer of sports clothes and equipment to the realm of high-street fashion.

Sportswear is now *de rigueur* for fashion victims as well as most of the British population off-duty. There are few more incongruous sights than that of paunchy people decked out in sportswear. Their clothes scream health and fitness; their posture and colour suggest an addiction to watching sport on television rather than active participation.

It is rather ironic that the weekend sportswear adopted by so many Britons is an outward sign of slobbish and fundamentally lazy behaviour. Sportswear means an end to grooming: no more polishing shoes, pressing trousers, ironing shirts. Sweatshirts and trainers undermine civic values, destroy the dignity of city streets, reduce everyone to a human advertising hoarding.

Sports equipment has also changed fundamentally since sportswear became treated in the same way as couture and high-street fashion.

Couture sports equipment boosted sales of skis, tennis racquets and cricket bats dramatically during the 1980s. Where, traditionally, a cricket bat or tennis racquet would last the amateur player several seasons and maybe a decade or more, the new logo-embazoned carbon-fibre racquets of the 80s were designed to complement ap-



**Tongue-tied: The ubiquitous trainer - with unusually modest logo**

pearances.

Undoubtedly a carbon-fibre tennis racquet will drive a ball that much harder and give an edge to a good amateur player's performance, but its effect is marginal, to put it generously, on players who dress up for a few weeks each summer during Wimbledon to swing a casual racquet.

Ski equipment is perhaps the most absurd example of sports equipment taken too far into the world of fashion. There is, as Helen Rees, the Design Museum's director, points out in her introduction to the exhibition, something quite absurd about people who spend a maximum of two weeks a year on the slopes - and most of that in bars and bedrooms - arguing about the relative merits of different types of hi-tech ski

boots. It is probably true that you will ski faster with fashion-generation skis, but if your ski-ing is not up to scratch then this might be dangerous rather than fun.

What sports equipment manufacturers have learned is an old advertising game that the motor industry, for example, has been using for decades. Increase the power of a bog-standard family hack by a few degrees, stick a 'turbo' badge, flared wheel arches and a spoiler on the back and you can hike up the price to real advantage.

But the success of sports equipment and sportswear manufacturers in the 1980s was largely due to dramatic change in high-street retailing in the same period. The Olympus chain of stores, for example, gave shorts and

squash racquets the Marks & Spencer treatment. Where once you felt you had to know something about sport before plucking up courage to enter a specialist shop, now sport and all its paraphernalia seemed as daunting as racks of polyester-cotton mix socks and knickers.

The backlash against advertising and fashion-led sport will surely come in the amateur world. In the professional realm it will only increase.

However, if money is pumped into sport's pseudo uniforms and weaponry rather than real guns and body armour, who can deny racing drivers their silly hats or tennis players their ostentatious slugs of Fanta? Better an advertising hoarding than a target.