

MAKING A DIFFERENCE WITH PRIMAL WEAR

by Dan D'Ambrosio

This Denver-based bicycle apparel company is out to make a profit, but it's determined to do much more



Primal Wear began in Denver in 1992 as a T-shirt business before evolving into a cycling apparel company with \$15 million in sales, nearly 200 employees, and offices in the United Kingdom and Seoul, Korea.

Founder Dave Edwards, who remains president of the family-owned business, spotted a market to be filled on Colorado's active racing circuit, said national sales manager John Hutchinson, known as "Hutch."

"There were no really cool mountain biking T-shirts out there," Hutchinson said. "Dave and his partner at the time said, 'Why don't we try this out?'"

The pair began designing T-shirts and taking them to races like the Mammoth Kamikaze downhill race in California, known around the world. Soon Edwards started going to the Interbike tradeshow with a very small booth, often shared with other companies.

"From there, it became very much a design-based company," Hutchinson said. "We still pride ourselves on our ability to design apparel that is more

like a piece of art."

One example of Primal Wear's "art" is Adventure Cycling's Route 66 jersey, which captures the unique allure of that historic highway and the sights along it. Hutchinson visited Adventure Cycling in February to discuss the jersey, which he said is selling well. He also talked with Adventure Cycling leadership about what Primal Wear is doing to develop products more aligned with the touring cyclist.

"I think the industry is moving in a direction to not only address the needs of touring cyclists, but also the more casual rider," Hutchinson said. "They're looking for apparel that's functional both on and off the bike."

Touring riders want to feel comfortable walking into a restaurant or brewery and not stand out because of their clothing. Hutchinson has been trying out some of the new line himself, which continues to grow and will be more extensive in 2016, he said.

"Last night, for example, I went on a mountain bike ride with a new pair of shorts called the Modena," Hutchinson

said. "It's a new mountain bike baggy. We did all of the product development, construction, and fabric sourcing."

Primal Wear is also developing a line of looser-fitting jerseys that is much more like a shirt but has the performance features of a cycling jersey in terms of the pockets and the fabric.

Hutchinson said he rode with a group of 10 people to a local brewery and that everyone else decided to change before going into the business.

"I just rolled in and felt comfortable for the evening," Hutchinson said. "That's the direction I see the apparel industry going."

Jerseys for a cause

Primal Wear provides the official jerseys for many fundraisers. In return, the company also donates to many causes.

"We proudly support Bike MS as the national sponsor," Hutchinson said.

The company is also a national sponsor for the American Diabetes Association's Tour de Cure and other rides associated with the National

Cancer Society.

Primal Wear is also a major presence among large-scale event rides such as the Register's Annual Great Bicycle Ride Across Iowa (RAGBRAI) and the TD Five Boro Tour in New York City, the world's biggest charity ride.

"We are specialists when it comes to large-volume production," Hutchinson said. "When you talk about RAGBRAI, that's a 10,000-person event. The Five Boro Tour is a 35,000-person ride. We do apparel for more than 100 Bike MS events across the country."

To make sure it can meet the demand for its jersey and maintain the expected quality, Primal Wear decided to set up its own factory in China, owned and operated by the company together with Chinese partners.

"We found the only way we could have control over our product quality and artwork was to do it ourselves," Hutchinson said. "We had to have business partners to help facilitate that."

The Primal Wear factory in Dongguan, China, is subject to strict audits to ensure workers are being treated well. Hutchinson said the company produces jerseys for Limited Brands, which includes Victoria's Secret, New Balance, and Bath and Body Works in addition to other companies.

Limited Brands has nearly 2,000 employees who participate in the Pelotonia ride in Columbus, Ohio, which raises \$20 million every year for cancer research at The Ohio State Comprehensive Cancer Center. The clothing company does not want any

hint of scandal from its jersey supplier like the scandals that have embroiled so many companies that manufacture in China — from Apple to Nike.

"You'd better believe the people who own New Balance and Victoria's Secret hold a high standard," Hutchinson said. "They don't want their companies in jeopardy."

Primal Wear has 15 designers in-house, with backgrounds ranging from photography to painting and tattoo artistry. The company takes a great deal of pride in its stable of artists, Hutchinson said.

"That's what sets us apart," he said. "We don't charge our clients for that service. That's something we provide within the costs of the apparel."

The company also prides itself on customer service, whether the client has ordered 15 or 10,000 pieces, according to Hutchinson.

"We're not here just to take an order, produce apparel, and send it to you," Hutchinson said. "We look for ways to better the industry and events — if they're a fundraising team, to help them financially. The company is looking for people who share the same values."

Remember the fun

Primal Wear is a national apparel sponsor for the National Interscholastic Cycling Association, founded in 2009 to develop high school mountain biking programs across the country. Hutchinson said the program has established 15 leagues in the U.S., garnering a huge amount of support.

"Although we are here for profit, I

wouldn't be working for this company if we weren't changing individual lives and the industry," Hutchinson said.

He will mark his fourth year at Primal Wear in August.

"Our business model is really to build partnerships and relationships by giving back, whether it be to a charity team or event, or by supporting advocacy in a large way," Hutchinson said.

On the advocacy front, Primal Wear sponsors the Bicycle Leadership Conference in Monterey, California, and the National Bicycle Tourism Conference to be held this November in San Diego.

The Bicycle Leadership Conference brings together about 250 industry leaders to talk about how to grow cycling and to look at the trends and determine "what we need to do to further cycling," Hutchinson said. The goal of the National Bicycle Tourism Conference is to bring together different policy leaders within the states to talk about how rides like RAGBRAI or Cycle Oregon affect the economy within towns and states.

"And that's really our goal," he said. "What sets us apart, I think, is our perspective on what we need to do as a company to make a difference. We're not here just to make a profit. We all need to remember why we started riding a bike when we were kids and continue that excitement throughout our lifetimes." **AC**

Dan D'Ambrosio is a contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist magazine.



The image shows a large graphic for Iron Donkey Bicycle Touring. On the left, the logo features the word "iron" in a lowercase, rounded font, with "DONKEY" in a larger, bold, uppercase font below it. Underneath the logo is the text "BICYCLE TOURING". To the right of the logo, the website address "WWW.IRONDONKEY.COM" is repeated seven times in a stacked, vertical arrangement.