

# The Welsh firm challenging fast fashion with its own sustainable sportswear for women

A start-up firm is challenging the fast fashion industry with the launch of its own sustainable and ethical clothing brand.

Dryad is a women's outdoor sportswear company offering an alternative to the mass-produced, low-cost, throwaway clothing of major fashion brands.

The business, based in Abergavenny, launched in December 2021 with an initial range of women's trail running gear, with each garment made with 90% recycled fabrics.

It was set up by Matthew Thomas, a keen triathlete and runner, who runs [Dryad](#) while working full time as a strategy manager for a climate change organisation.

With a desire to use his skills and experience in sustainability, Matthew wanted to create a clothing brand that didn't follow the 'pink it and shrink it' model – where sports brands are created for a male audience first before being adapted for women.

He also wanted Dryad clothes to be made in a fair and transparent supply chain, as opposed to fast fashion where clothes are often produced by workers in poor conditions and on low wages.

"We want to make sure that everyone is treated fairly in our supply chains. This is just as important as having recycled content in our t-shirts," said Matthew, speaking to BusinessLive.

“I want to make sure they have a fair wage, haven’t been exposed to any harmful chemicals and have proper training and development,” he added.

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Working with business partner Joby Barnard, the pair approached Scottish sportswear design agency [SSEAMS](#) with a remit to design and manufacture a range of long-lasting women’s running apparel made with recycled fabrics that was also repairable.

“The agency designed the products to our specification and then helped us identify progressive textile mills to find the right fabrics for our products,” said Matthew.

“A lot of small brands and start-ups in the fashion industry work with an agency that helps to support them at the start to create the designs and walk them through the process,” he added.

The clothing range is produced by technical sportswear manufacturer, Petratex, which is based in Portugal and powered by renewable energy.

The manufacturer was a good fit for the brand for its fair treatment of garment workers and geographical location.

“When we explored options for Asian factories the supply chains were not as transparent,” said Matthew.

“I’m not saying they were all bad, but for us as a small business it seemed appropriate to start with a really reliable manufacturing facility with a really good reputation.”

As the business grows however, Matthew has ambitions to reshore the manufacturing of its high-tech garments to Wales.

“That’s a long term goal. But to make good quality sportswear you need a lot of skill and a lot of expensive machinery,” said Matthew.

“We want Dryad to be just one part in a step towards bringing some of that manufacturing back to Wales and support local employment by doing so,” he added.



(L-R) Dryad founders Joby Barnard and Matthew Thomas

At the moment, the brand's only route to market is direct-to-consumer via the Dryad website to retain control over the brand and pricing.

They also use recyclable packaging to fulfil online orders, part of its sustainable ethos.

"If we went through a big online retailer then some of our products might get discounted and we're trying to make clothes that are good quality and will last," said Matthew.

Dryad's retail pricing is at the higher end of the market. Its running leggings have an RRP of £90 while its running t-shirt has a retail price of £46.

But Matthew said the company works on smaller margins because of its high manufacturing costs.

He said: "We're hoping that the consumers understand what we're trying to do. If you're wearing a t-shirt that costs £10 it means someone who made it hasn't been paid very well. You can't be sustainable and cheap, that's not how it works."

The brand eventually wants to launch a circularity programme, where customers can return worn Dryad clothes back for a discount.

"The longer you keep your clothes, the bigger the discount you'll get when you return them," said Matthew.

"Once we get them back we can either determine if we can tidy them up and resell them at a discounted price or if we can repurpose them. The idea is that we become a fully circular business rather than an end-of-life business."

For now, the start-up is focusing on building sales in Wales and the wider UK market, and while the business has had one order placed from Australia there are no plans to look at exporting yet.

“If we manufacture something in the UK and send it to Australia, that’s a huge carbon footprint on that product,” he said.

“Our remit is to be as sustainable as possible, so we have to think about the best approaches for that, whether we need to look at offsetting those emissions or we say that’s a market that’s too far away and should be supported by someone else. That’s kind of a moral dilemma,” he added.

The business is also looking at expanding the range to include cyclewear, yoga and leisure wear. But are there any plans to expand into men’s sportswear or a children’s line?

“The brand is so female focused that we’d like to keep it that way, but that’s not to say that we aren’t going to launch other brands. We’ve got ideas for a male brand that we could launch further down the line that would use the same manufacturer and supply chain,” said Matthew.

Dryad is also working with local sport initiatives and charities to support women’s trail running activities in Abergavenny to build brand awareness.

“We want to build the best brand and find the community to support that brand and support them in turn,” said Matthew.

“As the company grows we can do more to bring awareness to supply chain issues and put more of our profits into increasing access to all sports for women.”

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