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Spanish Fuss Poses Olympic-Sized Test for Bosco

By Rachel Nielsen

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Swimmers Andrei Grechin, Nikita Lobintsev, Vladimir Morozov and Danila Izotov posing in Bosco uniforms with their bronze medals Sunday in London. **David Gray**

As Spain's leading athletes go in and out of the Olympic Village in east London during this summer's games, they probably have a whole raft of questions on their minds. When do I have to show up for qualifying heats? How many more practices should I fit in? And why, *Dios mio,* do I have to wear this uniform?

Russian sportswear company Bosco Sport dressed the Spanish Olympic team for free this summer, and both the company and its Olympic outfits have been receiving tons of coverage in media outlets worldwide — though it might not be the publicity that the company had hoped for.

The subject of astonishment and ridicule, the Spanish kit ranges from the old-timey yellow jackets and long red skirts worn by its female athletes during Friday's opening ceremony,

to competition wear in a never-before-seen mix of cherry red, orange and canary yellow.

When the newspaper El Pais gave the Spanish public its first glances of the Bosco Sport uniforms, one reader said on the Spanish paper's website that the warm-up suit looked like a costume for "a lion tamer."

"It's best if I don't comment. Leaving that to others," Spanish Olympian Saul Craviotto wrote on Twitter to caption a photograph of himself trying on his uniform at home this month. In the picture, the handsome sprint canoer wears a look of pained disbelief underneath a sports cap with an orange-red crown, a yellow visor and red embroidery resembling turkey feet.

He models bright red pants and a polo shirt covered with horseshoe-crab-shaped orange-red motifs. A yellow and red knapsack rounds out the outfit.

He was one of a handful of Spanish Olympic participants who have commented publicly on their dislike of the uniforms. Field hockey champion Alex Fabregas tweeted out a mock-enthusiastic photo of himself in uniform, saying, "There are no adjectives."

For Bosco Sport, part of Russian fashion importer and retailer Bosco di Ciliegi, the Summer Olympics outfits aren't just about what fans think as they watch a handful of matches from the stands or at home. Rather, the company's long-term international expansion goals hinge in part on the impression of Bosco Sport formed during the games.

The founder of Bosco di Ciliegi, a company whose name is an Italian translation of "cherry orchard," was skeptical of the negative reaction.

"Spanish people will be at the cash tills to buy our clothes," Mikhail Kusnirovich told Bloomberg News. "I understand that for some Spanish fans they are unusual designs, but we have to be recognized very fast — you only have a few seconds on TV."

Bosco Sport has stores in Russia, Ukraine and now Britain. According to Bloomberg, Bosco timed the openings of its first two stores in London with the London games.

Bosco Sport is already well-represented back home. It has stores here from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok, including about 10 shops in southern Russian cities and more than 12 stores in the Moscow area. In Ukraine, its stores number about 10.

Those markets can be attributed to the company's close ties to both countries' Olympic teams. Founded in 2001, Bosco Sport has designed the Russian Olympic uniforms since the Salt Lake City games in 2002 and will provide the outfits for the Russian teams in Sochi 2014 and Rio de Janeiro in 2016, Bosco says on its website.

Though the outfits for this summer's Russian athletes have attracted some criticism, the uniforms are far more muted in style and color than Spain's, and the criticism has been mild.

This summer, Bosco also is dressing Ukraine's Olympic team, a relationship that began with the 2008 Beijing games. Bosco will outfit the Ukrainian Olympic teams and give "additional funds" for athlete training under an agreement that runs until 2017, the Ukrainian Olympic

Committee says online.

In Spain, Bosco was a formal sponsor of the Olympians this year in addition to being the provider of its free uniforms, El Pais reported. The Spanish Olympic Committee has pointed to that financial aid — coming in a year when the Spanish economy has been reeling — to defend against the barrage of criticism over the uniforms.

Parent company Bosco di Ciliegi began and still operates as a Russian importer and retailer of luxury clothing and accessories, many of them from Italy. It runs stores for brands such as Emporio Armani and Hugo Boss, all in addition to its own Bosco Sport shops.

In Moscow, it has stores for these luxury brands in GUM and four other shopping centers, and it runs such stores in Milan, St. Petersburg, Samara and Yekaterinburg as well.

Bosco di Ciliegi also is the main owner of GUM, the iconic shopping arcade that sits across Red Square from the Kremlin. It became the principal shareholder of the GUM Shopping Mall OAO in 2005, Bosco di Ciliegi says online.

The company didn't respond to e-mailed questions about its sales or expansion plans. But the track record of Russian clothing retailers suggests an uphill climb, in spite of any publicity, good or bad.

Only a small number of Russian consumer goods companies have made substantial inroads in markets beyond the former Soviet bloc, and that number is even smaller for clothing designers in particular.

Russian brands with followings overseas include Sinergia's Beluga vodka, Russky Standart's Russian Standard vodka and Baltika's beers. Except for AFK Sistema, which runs the Detsky Mir children's stores, there are no publicly traded Russian companies in the retail clothing sector, said Irina Prokopyeva, a consumer goods analyst at Alfa Bank.

Fashion brands have made limited forays into foreign markets. From 2000 to 2006, domestic brand Razu Mikhina appeared in stores in Italy, the United States, Britain, Japan and other countries, said Irina Lobachyova, deputy editor-in-chief at Cosmopolitan Magazine in Russia. Denis Simachyov also used to sell in Japan, the United States, Italy and the Middle East, but now the fashion line sells only domestically, she said.

Kira Plastinina, a brand offering short, frilly clothing for young women, entered the U.S. market in 2008, but its operation there filed for bankruptcy the next year, television station RT reported.

One of the rare success stories is Mikhail Panteleyev, who sells his designs in Britain, the Netherlands, Italy and other locations, Lobachyova said.

But the presence of Russian labels on foreign fashion racks is rare. Bosco's attempt to form good impressions on the backs of Spanish athletes — literally — might be difficult given the tone of some press coverage.

Then there are the customers themselves that Bosco must win over.

"The uniforms are ugly, old-fashioned and uncomfortable-looking," one poster wrote on the El Pais website. "I refuse to get one of these absurdities inspired by Soviet people's fashion."

Kusnirovich, however, is upbeat on the power of Bosco Sport's Olympic image. At the presentation of the Ukrainian team's outfits in Kiev this month, he said the Olympic kit "gives athletes a true sense of identity when they compete."

In its press release, Kusnirovich was quoted as saying the team uniform "reminds them of the part that they play in Olympic history, and the history of their nation."

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