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POLO AS A VEHICLE FOR COMMUNICATING LUXURY

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13.1 INTRODUCTION: LUXURY BRANDS AND SPORTS

Sports have always been a privileged tool or vector exploited by most brands in order to communicate their image, looking for notoriety, awareness and visibility. When used in the right configuration, sport, synonymous with dynamism, physical prowess, aesthetics and health, seems to represent a real opportunity for brands to promote their goods and services, and to create a buzz, with one of the biggest effective reaches and one of the biggest audiences.

Regarding luxury brands, the choice of the sport has to be precisely oriented, in resonance with uniqueness and exclusivity, both values defining the essence of luxury. One of the biggest challenges of luxury brands is also to be able to stay tuned and to demonstrate innovation and originality. While luxury brand strategies have traditionally focused on golf and sailing, the recent trend is clearly focusing on a “new-old sport” – polo.

Polo has always been “associated with royals and it was the game of kings. It is very fast and it is very sexy”, says Andrew Murray, polo manager at Asprey, the UK luxury goods group which has been involved in polo by sponsoring teams and tournaments since 2007 and developing professional polo lines of clothing and accessories. Andrew Murray adds, “polo is becoming more commercially viable because the game has developed. It used to be amateur, but it’s now much more professional. Players fly in from around the world and
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the game is drawing more commercial interest. The days of it being an amateur game for the gentry are changing.”¹

Golf, sailing and polo have in common the fact that they generally attract wealthy and potential luxury consumers. These sports are obviously linked to elitism because they basically require an important financial investment for the players due to the cost of equipment, registration fees, training and tournament organization. Strongly associated in mind with prestige and superior status, this range of sports activities represents efficient marketing channels for luxury brands.

For luxury brands, diverse ways exist to partner with sport: the positioning and building of their brand around a particular sport, the creation of a special collection specific to the practice of a sport with ergonomic considerations, the sponsoring of sporting cups, events or competitions, the selection of professional sportsmen or women as emblems of the brand, or even the participation in winning prizes.

For example, TAG Heuer, the Monegasque watch-making brand revolutionary for having introduced the first automatic as well as the first square-cased chronograph, launched the first special watch for professional golfers in 2005 and logically chose the famous professional golfer Tiger Woods as ambassador. Limited to 8,000 copies, this watch was priced at €1050. The system presents a patented clasp located in the head of the watch so as not to interfere with the golfer’s swing, weighs significantly lighter than watches in general, and possesses an incredible shock-absorbing capacity, 45 times greater than that received by the watch during a swing.²

Another example of association between sport and luxury trademark is the collaboration between Omega and sailing. The Swiss luxury watchmaker known as “the first watch on the moon” in 1969 thanks to the NASA’s choice has been designing a tailor-made watch for sailing, promoted by Dean Barker, the legendary New Zealand yachtsman.

Without going into any further detail, we can clearly conclude that the watch industry has always been at the forefront of this type of sports-celebrities communication activity, as a catalyst in the innovation carburant, reaching the most refined target customers within even the smallest emerging international destinations.