

# Golfing's Fashionista

By Laura Franz-Kamissoko

Charlene Lewison has transformed her father's young golf apparel brand, Birdi, into a phenomenon competing head-to-head with established international brands on golf courses not only in South Africa but around the world. She tells us her story.

“My parents have both had a background in clothing; my mother has always owned boutiques and my father has always bought and sold fashion volumes, so it was almost a given that I would have a career in the fashion and textile industry,” says Charlene. After beginning as an in-house model, she worked in a merchandising and marketing role for fashion giant Ronald Sassoon, and then as a designer and fabric researcher for clothing manufacturer Rahmani Enterprises. “Working for these clothing legends taught me not only fashion, but also that buying, sales and marketing work hand in hand and, more importantly, how the quality of garments is key to any label,” explains Charlene.

After running a successful women's fashion boutique for four years, she decided to take a break. That was when her father, Len Lewison, and his partner called on her to assist them with merchandising for Birdi Golf Apparel part-time. It wasn't long before Charlene realised the brand's growth potential, and she has devoted herself wholeheartedly to building the Birdi brand ever since.

“On some level I always knew I would work with my father in a business one day, which we have done for the last 17 years. My dad is now 75 years old and he is still very involved in the business and is very productive. He trained me in all aspects of the business, so when he handed over the reins to me he felt confident that I would make a success of the business. He still guides me today and has been an excellent role model. He's a very intelligent and very intuitive businessman,” says Charlene proudly of her father.

Today, as Executive Director of Birdi Golf Apparel, Charlene and her team of five women source organic materials from textile plants in Thailand, India, China, Durban and Cape Town, which produce thousands of

garments for the company annually. “We use a 50:50 mix of textiles sourced locally and internationally. I would love to source more of our fabrics locally, but often the organic cotton or double-mercerised knitted fabric isn't readily available in the quantities or quality we require,” explains Charlene.

Due to market demand, she has recently introduced a collection of polyester performance fabric garments into her range, which are bestsellers. These top textile producers essentially manufacture, finish, and deliver Birdi garments to Charlene's designs and strict quality standards. “Every shirt or pair of trousers I introduce into my collection is the result of great inspiration and consideration. I invest much love, care and feeling into my design and branding to capture the essence of the Birdi brand. I attribute our success to the fact that I am completely conscious of what is required in the market, understanding our clients' requirements for their golfing garments in terms of fabric and fashion,” she adds.

Charlene explains that golfing wear was traditionally very conservative and international suppliers were bringing in garments of fabrics unsuitable for the South African climate – thick, heavyweight and dense fabrics that didn't allow the skin to breathe naturally. “I was one of the first leading brands to introduce double-mercerised organic cotton – a raw fibre, lightweight, breathable fabric – into the golfing industry,” Charlene points out.

Birdi began primarily as a corporate brand, producing bulk-order garments for large companies and sporting events. Since the conclusion of last year's 2010 FIFA World Cup its brand is becoming increasingly sought-after in the retail market. “I think this unbelievable demand caught us by surprise, but we've very easily adapted to this welcome development,” she notes. The recession notwithstanding, the golfing apparel business has grown



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steadily in recent years. “Individuals still make the time to play golf and invest in golfing apparel, although I often see men and ladies wearing our lounge and golf shirts off the golf course to social occasions,” remarks Charlene.

Women are increasingly taking to the golf course, and similarly Birdi has experienced a surge of interest in women’s wear. “I would estimate that our women’s wear accounts for about 30% of our current sales,” she says. Catering to the women’s market differs from the male market in that women are more fashion conscious – but, make no mistake, men have become just as aware – and also prize their individuality, which means that Charlene produces a greater number of smaller collections for the women’s market.

Although Charlene isn’t always informed of the destination of her clothing by her corporate clients, she has exported her golfing apparel into Africa – to Angola, Botswana, Namibia and the Democratic Republic of

the Congo – and to the Middle East and Europe. Birdi is also associated with a number of prominent sporting events, most notably being endorsed by the PGA as a brand known for its style and quality. Birdi is also known as one of the official clothing suppliers of the South African Disabled Golf Association, and part-sponsor of the Special Olympics, the Joburg Open, the Telkom PGA and the South African Soweto Tennis Open. Moreover, the brand has been endorsed by Cotton South Africa, the cotton board.

“Ours is a proudly South African brand competing on an equal footing with established international brands,” says Charlene with evident pride. □