

Transitions' sponsorship of the Garmin Slipstream pro cycling team late last year may have left a few UK opticians scratching their heads. Chris Bennett joined the team on a training camp in Spain to find out more



Tour de frames

Many people in the UK still consider professional cycling a minority sport for wiry foreigners with shaven legs, but things are changing. British cyclists have enjoyed massive success at the Olympics; riders such as Mark Cavendish and Bradley Wiggins have become stars of the Tour de France while the formation of a new, British-run, Sky team is set to raise the sport's profile in the UK.

This is all good news for Transitions which has spent an undisclosed, but large, sum sponsoring one of the world's top cycling squads.

The scale of pro cycling should not be underestimated. Each team will cost between €5m and €10m to run, the Garmin Transitions squad has 28 riders but they are supported by double that number of permanent staff.

Jonathan Vaughters, ex-pro cyclist and chief executive officer of the team's management company Slipstream Sports, says professional cycling is an efficient global marketing vehicle for Transitions lenses which offers a good way for Transitions to boost its customer awareness.

Cycling as a sport is ready made for glasses, he says. 'Cycling is a sport where glasses are consistently used. It's a sport where you have the wind blowing in your face at 30mph. If it's

sunny you race, if it's raining you race, if it's snowing you race. Transitions felt that would show off their products in an enhancing way.'

Plenty of people will get to see how those products perform. The team will compete in 200 race days watched by 25 million people in the flesh and two billion following on TV and in magazines. The products will also get a work out. The cyclists typically ride 20,000 miles a year spending five hours a day outside. They ride for 11 months of the year and the racing calendar lasts for nine.

Vaughters says the ethos of the two firms also fits in well. Slipstream has an ethos of fairness, health and style which he says gels with the kind of people Transitions wants to reach. The desire to win, but not to win at any cost, he adds.

Optimum refraction

The sponsorship has also had immediate effects on the team. Prentice Steffen, chief medical officer at Slipstream, says that since Transitions joined as a sponsor the team has taken the eye test to a new level. The whole team has undergone a visual questionnaire and eye exam, while a smaller group has been put through a fuller evaluation. He says the tests highlighted issues in about a quarter of the team. Within the test group some were chosen because of their screening

results and others were put on the programme because they are at the elite level and are looking for an edge. 'We wanted to make sure their refraction was at the optimum level.'

Steffen says cyclists' experience of contact lenses is not good. 'These guys are like sharks speeding through a soup of dust and particles. Most opt for prescription eyewear.'

The International Cycling Union has recommended since 1999 that professional cyclists have an eye exam every year so the teams are familiar with screening, he says. 'I was shocked by the number of guys who have poor vision.' Steffen says he was excited about the prospects when he heard Transitions had joined the team as a sponsor. 'We are always looking at ways of enhancing performance and riders' eyes do get uncomfortable at the end of a long day's ride. After a race their eyes are bloodshot.'

'Transitions lenses are well known in the US so I was aware of them,' he says, but he had no idea the technology had been applied in so many different ways or so heavily towards sports.

To date riders have largely relied on swappable lenses, which are far

from ideal, and he thinks the team will be very interested to hear about other options. 'So much of the input in cycling is visual. The other issue, says Steffen, is the duty of care the team has. The guys are mostly in their 20s and don't consider long-term UV issues. 'As a management team we have to think about that,' he adds.

The screening programme and fuller investigations were arranged by Transitions using a leading Spanish university ophthalmology department.

The team has a selection of frames and lenses to choose from and a partnership with a Spanish retailer has been set up to ensure the chosen products can be supplied.

Emma Ribot-Mariotte, marketing manager with Transitions, says the team has been offered a selection of frames and existing Transitions lenses such as Transitions VI, Solfox and the Activated by products such as Oakley



David Millar: 'You only need one pair, that's the great thing about Transitions'



Riders were given a visual questionnaire and eye exam

and Drivewear. In the longer term the idea is to gather information from the team which is vital in developing new products. Those new products will then be tested on the team and feedback gathered.

These are early days for the relationship, says Ribot-Mariotte. As the team becomes more familiar with the product ranges they will be able to try out different options.

The current trademark orange and white Jawbone is an Oakley custom product, but Transitions is hoping to launch a completely new cycling lens for the team by April which could go on general sale.

One of the riders who benefited from the screening programme was David Millar. He has been advised to wear glasses for driving but, luckily, has been advised that he doesn't have to wear glasses for cycle racing.

His early reaction to using Transitions was the benefit of not having to carry extra lenses and pairs of glasses during a race.

Like Steffen, Millar was aware of Transitions: 'Jonathan [Vaughters] wears them all the time. What's amazing is that none of the riders use them at the moment. Transitions have seen that gap. You only need one pair, that's the great thing about Transitions.'

He says what any professional cyclist is looking for is protection from the wind and clarity of vision. 'When you have got 200 people around you, your peripheral vision is vital. Cycling is so dependent on your eyes. You could have a six-hour

ride with people this [he motions with his elbows] close to you.'

He agrees that contact lenses aren't ideal for cycling, although some riders do persevere with them. But, he says, wearing contact lenses doesn't provide protection from the wind and dust or get around having to carry glasses for different light conditions. 'In a single stage you can go through five different types of weather conditions. With Transitions you just put them on and forget about them.'

Positive feedback

Millar also says having a sponsor that shares the ethos of the team and one that supplies a relevant product is great. You can wear it and use it, it's not like having a floor tile maker as your sponsor. He cites the questionnaire and the feedback the riders gave. 'Transitions came back and shared the results with us, that was nice.'

He says that feedback showed that what the riders wanted was performance in extreme weather conditions. The experience with Transitions so far is positive and he is looking forward to trying out new products in the future.

Mylene De Saint Pierre, brand manager at Transitions, says all of the new products will be available to the team as they became available. The team is an ideal test bed for new products, she adds. More specific products for more specific conditions will come through aided by the team's feedback and experience. 'The team are a great example of people who are out there in all conditions and need protection from the changing light and UV protection.'

She says some riders preferred starting with a tint and others opted for Transitions VI. Once they get to know the lenses they will be able to choose the right lens for the right conditions.

From April a TV campaign using the rider Tyler Farrar will also be screened around Europe and this will be backed by practice promotions. This will seek to tie in performance in elite sport and eyewear with everyday use and everyday spectacles.

The Garmin Transitions team is a significant step for optical sponsorship putting an optical product in an aspirational setting in front of millions of consumers. If cycling fulfils its potential to become a summer sporting phenomenon in Britain the whole business may benefit. Perhaps opticians along with cycling fans will be wishing for British success in the classic cycling tours this summer.