High-Tech Vision

# New Crop of Performance Eyewear Boasts More Bells and Whistles

**BY ERINN MORGAN**

WATKINSVILLE, GA—Team Milram's Erik Zabel road-tested Rudy Project's new one-ounce Exowind sunglasses at this year's Tour de France. Also at the Tour, Oakley outfitted several racers with a yet-to-be-named, lightweight, frameless sunglass that won't even go into production until 2009.

While pro cyclists require the latest technology to shave grams, hone optics and enhance performance, today's savvy cycling consumer demands the same. Sunglass suppliers are targeting this customer by packing more high-tech features into performance styles.

"Today, everything has a lot of bells and whistles," said Joe Earley, owner of Tifosi Optics. "We have features like adjustable earpads and nosepads, ventilated lenses, and photochromic lenses."

Economy-weary consumers now want more for their money. "People are looking for both performance and value," said Wink Jackson, owner of Zeal Optics.

Most eyewear companies said next year's crop of sunglasses will reflect higher prices resulting from higher materials and shipping costs, making it even more important to deliver more features in each sunglass style.

**Performance Plus.** For the past few years, performance eyewear suppliers have made a major push to use the best in lens technology. While that trend continues, some are now focusing on the makeup of the frame.

"Frames now boast almost as much technology as lenses," said Paul Craig, president of Rudy Project USA, which recently debuted its 30-gram Exowind performance sunglass. "It's extraordinarily lightweight, fully Rx-able, and has a split vented temple," Craig said about the Exowind.

"The story is comfort and looks; Erik Zabel came back from the Tour [de France] and said 'This is the best and most comfortable Rudy Project product ever,'" he added.

Oakley's Tour-tested "frameless" prototype sunglass features a lens that rests on a minimalist material to avoid lens compression and potential optical distortion. "This allows for a wide open field of vision because the wearer can't see any of the frame," said Steve Blick, sports marketing manager at Oakley. This unnamed sunglass should become available next June.

High-tech features have also filtered down to more moderately priced product. At Tifosi, the product plan is based on "high-tech sunglasses with a retail price point where cycling retailers can get good turns," said Earley. "We have made inroads in the $50 to $60 area where we've added quite a bit more technology over the last few years."

Price-conscious, performance-driven eyewear is also the focus at Optic Nerve. New styles include the Eyeque, Autovaughn and Roger That, which feature photochromic and impact-resistant lenses, Tactilite rubber to reduce slippage, and Toric lens technology for the most ergonomic, flattering fit.

Increasing the technology quotient is also on tap at Zeal Optics, but the company is going back to the basics by using recycled materials in its frames.

"We have effectively been able to put up to 30 percent recycled material into our frames," said Zeal's Jackson. Zeal's new Flyer, Emit, Sustain and Swap-It frames all have recycled nylon content.

On the lens side, polarized and photochromic lenses continue to be a big trend with suppliers at all price levels now offering both in their product mixes. At Zeal, for example, the entire 2008/2009 line comes with its proprietary ZB-13 polarized lens.

Meanwhile, Rudy Project has launched ImpactX polarized photochromic lens technology this year to solve an age-old issue with polarization. "ImpactX enables you to read your GPS navigation systems, Blackberries and heart rate monitors while wearing a polarized lens," said Rudy's Craig. ImpactX will be found throughout the company's line of performance sunwear next year.

At Julbo, NXT soft lens technology is utilized in the new Trail sunglass, which also features a Zebra photochromic lens. NXT technology allows for a flexible lens.

**Quick-Change Artists.** The performance sunwear market's prolific interchangeable lens feature is coming on even stronger. "About 80 percent of the product we sell is interchangeable," said Tifosi's Earley. "That's still bread and butter for the cycling market."

Interchangeability is still a key technology at Smith Optics, which pioneered the niche. "We are taking our interchangeable Interlock sunglasses and giving them a more urban appeal," said Greg Randolph, communications manager for Smith Optics. "Without screaming sports dork, you can have performance, technology and fashion." Smith now also offers a prescription program for its interchangeable lenses.

New interchangeable technology is the buzz at Giro, which launched its sunwear line last year. "Interchangeable lenses have been around for a while, but the technology has been really rudimentary because it involves tugging the lens out of the frame and jamming or snapping it back in," said Eric Richter, Giro senior brand manager. "It's simple to do and it's been that way forever, so people understand it, but you put a lot of stress on the frame and you can easily damage the lens."

Richter said Giro developed a more mechanical solution that eliminates the need to touch the lens. Called Pop Top, it employs a mechanical lever that flips up to slide the lens in and out of a groove. "It's as easy as flipping a light switch or opening a can of beer," said Richter. Each sunglass comes with two sets of tinted, high-quality Zeiss lenses.

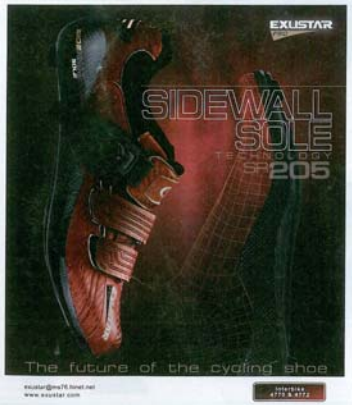
On the flip side, some suppliers are touting their own photochromic products as an alternative to interchangeable lenses. Rudy Project's Craig said the company's PhotoClear lens fits this bill. "There is a whole population that buys sunglasses with three sets of lenses and sticks the extra in their underwear drawer he said. "The PhotoClear lens goe from clear to dark so you can ride a day long with one lens."

**The Style Quotient.** Retailers can als expect more influence on performanc eyewear from the fashion world. "A sunwear brands have seen a trend tc ward sport fashion," said Tifosi's Earle "Real techy sunglasses are definitel geared to cycling, but there is also a extremely large crowd that wants soma thing they can wear off the bike."

Tifosi's Dea is in that range—it's fashion piece, but also a full-on spor sunglass with features like interchange able lenses and adjustable nosepads.

Specialized's new Strafe sunglass i an aviator-inspired piece that provide full cycling performance but in a mor lifestyle-based silhouette. It's designe for folks who want a less "cycling-only look, but still boasts the Specialized exclusive Road Formula lens in photo chromic Adaptalite. **BRAIN**

The Giro Fitter employs new, patented "Pop Top" technology for lens swapping.

The Rudy Project transparent Exowind weighs 30 grams.

The Tifosi Dea delivers a dose of sport fashion for cyclists.