Once the exclusive domain of serious athletes, sportswear has become big business in recent years, with celebrity designers jumping on the bandwagon to create sportswear-inspired capsule collections and stay-at-home moms donning yoga pants to pick up the kids from playschool. Gone are the days when women borrowed their boyfriend’s T-shirt to go running; today’s sportswear offer needs to be customized, high-performing and stylish enough to go from gym to high street. The democratization of athletic apparel, combined with growing interest from the women’s segment, has placed pressure on sportswear brands to expand their offer, producing both activity-specific and trendy casual-wear collections. Add to this encroaching competition from regular fashion brands, coupled with a rapidly expanding global market, and it has never been more crucial for sportswear brands to be on top of their game.

Comfort, fit and performance are the cornerstones of quality athletic apparel. In addition to the challenges faced by other fashion companies—keeping costs down, improving time to market and changing up the product assortment regularly—sportswear companies also need to produce clothing that can accommodate a dynamic range of motion and withstand more stress than the average fashion garment. Precision is key; seams need to be placed carefully for comfort and transparency from sweating needs to be taken into account. Innovative, high-tech fabrics that protect from sun, wind, cold and rain can make the development process complicated and expensive, while logo placement can pose unique design challenges.
Sportswear is unique in that it needs to be adapted to a particular activity and specific postures. A pair of bike shorts, for example, is designed to support activity in a seated position and equestrian riding pants never have seams on the inside, to avoid chafing. Meanwhile, sportswear aimed at serious athletes needs to account for extra muscle mass; a rower is likely to have bigger biceps than the average fit model and will require extra room in the sleeves. Precision in the development process is crucial to ensuring optimal comfort, allowing for incremental adjustments to be made until fit is just right.

To complicate matters further, sportswear is made from innovative technical fabrics that behave differently than regular fabric and are sometimes so new that they are not available during the development process. Worn close to the skin and subject to more stress than regular streetwear, this fabric needs to be high quality and is often expensive, making a lean process that minimizes fabric waste essential.

Under pressure to produce fashionable collections, sportswear brands are also speeding up the design process and renewing their offer more frequently. Styles have become more elaborate, sometimes featuring prominent logos that need to be considered during the design process or contrasting fabric colors that make managing fabrics, markers and plies complex.

Although the US remains the leader in sportswear consumption, growing target groups worldwide, combined with an increasing interest in sports from women, are posing new challenges in fit and pattern complexity as companies adapt their sizing to a wider variety of morphologies and their designs to suit different climates.

3D product-development technology gives sportswear companies the tools they need to meet their unique fabric, fit and functionality challenges. Companies can pre-visualize clothing as it will appear in different positions, simulate technical fabrics that are not yet available, fine-tune designs for fit and comfort, manage logo placement and share their results across different departments in real time. The number of physical prototypes required is reduced. With a turnaround time of 3-8 weeks for one prototype and expensive technical fabrics in the mix, the savings in time and development costs add up quickly.

Meanwhile, design technology allows companies to store and reuse pre-existing elements like hoods or cuffs, saving precious time when they need to come up with new styles fast to keep up with a shortened collection cycle.

An optimized cutting room helps maximize efficiency and cut down on expensive fabric waste during production, even more important with expensive technical fabrics. With improved control over the manufacturing process and a shortened time to market, companies are in a better position to compete with fast fashion brands encroaching on their territory.

Finally, a PLM solution can help sportswear companies manage increasingly complex collections and a wider variety of sizes and styles. With a collaborative platform, communication is improved across all departments from design to sales, allowing more informed decisions to be made early on and resulting in a better overall process from beginning to end.

$300 BILLION
2017 PROJECTED REVENUE
FOR THE GLOBAL SPORTSWEAR MARKET

With 40 years of experience in the fashion industry, Lectra has the technology and expertise to help sportswear companies overcome style, fit and manufacturing challenges. Lectra’s design, development and production solutions help the world’s biggest sportswear brands improve on quality and comfort, cut down on expensive prototypes, reduce time to market and maximize profit margins. Lectra solutions help athletic apparel manufacturers keep their offer competitive and technically superior to the sportswear-inspired offers from fast fashion brands.

Lectra in Fashion
With over 40 years of expertise in fashion and apparel, Lectra’s mission is to provide a complete spectrum of design, development, and production solutions to confront 21st-century challenges. From first creative spark to final product, our professional services address an end-to-end process. We support the day-to-day operations of our customers in over 100 countries for around-the-clock process optimization. From fast fashion to luxury to ready-to-wear, Lectra’s 23,000 customers in markets as diverse as casual, sports, outdoor, denim, and lingerie represent every development and sourcing model imaginable. Beyond suppliers and manufacturers, they are the brands you love and the stores where you shop.