

Too Hot Brazil
stripes and
flowers bikini from
Apparel Ventures

Fashion and fit in swimwear

Both circular knits and warp knits have a lot to offer in the highly competitive US swimwear market.

With the constant demand for swimwear manufacturers to be on the leading edge of finding something new and different in the fabrics they use, there will always be a debate, depending on who you talk to, as to which knitting process offers the most advantages, or the most creativity — circular knits or warp knits.

“Circular Knits have become more important in swimwear over the last three to four years. And, we’re finally beginning to see it happen on a more global level. You never used to see circular knits used in Europe. But, when you see better lines like La Perla, for instance, which makes a beautiful, young contemporary swimwear line, using all these matte circular knits in microfibers, it’s becoming more evident that this is an important trend,” commented Lynne Koplin, president of Apparel Ventures, Inc., a Los Angeles-based swimwear manufacturer, who sees circular knits as a growing trend in today’s swimwear market.

On the other hand, Al Swider, vice president of sales for Hafner USA Inc., a 50 year old Canadian based warp knitter, believes that warp knits provide a better fit. He explained, “In the swimwear and intimate apparel industries, the most critical factor in a garment is fit. The loyalty to a brand is based on the fit of the garment. And, fit is certainly a function of the

fabric. If the fabric is inconsistent, the finished product is not going to fit right. Tricot is far more consistent, when compared to other knit constructions, and tricot maintains consistency. It’s a more viable product. And, that’s why, for the most part, the industry has always gone to tricots.”

Since the yarns used in the manufacture of swimwear doesn’t tend to change much beyond the typical nylon/spandex or polyester/spandex blends, the market is dependent on other ways of diversifying the product in order to make it appeal to the consumer.

In this feature, *KnitAmericas* takes a look at the American swimwear industry — this season’s fashion trends, the fabric trends, the attention to fit, and what both circular knits and warp knits have to offer in this highly competitive market.

Changing landscape for US swimwear

Over the last five years, a large segment of the swimwear business has moved towards lower-price points. It’s acknowledged by some in the industry that this trend began when Warnaco licensed its ‘Catalina’ label to WalMart.

Koplin noted, “The move into lower price points really put WalMart in the swimwear business in a major way. And, over the past several years, this was followed by the entry of Target, Sears, etc. As a result, the chains have established a well developed

swimwear business, which has really changed the swimwear landscape quite considerably. Essentially, a large portion of the junior business has moved into the chain store distribution."

As this was happening, Apparel Ventures also experienced a transition of its own, in terms of the brands it represented. Today, the company, which licenses Ralph Lauren, Anne Klein, Rampage, and Tommy Bahama swimwear labels, also produces its own swimwear brands under the names of LaBlanca and Sessa labels, which have a bit more missy look for the more mature customer. In addition, the company also produces private label swimwear for WalMart, J.C. Penney, and Victoria Secret. Apparel Ventures now sells to a broad range of stores from WalMart to Bergdorf .

The shift of swimwear into the mass market, and the resulting price-pressure have had a large impact on swimwear specialty stores, which were previously a major avenue of distribution for swimwear. However, the specialty store retailer, which includes Nordstrom, along with the small warm weather resort -based retailers located in Florida, Hawaii, and southern California, have still been able to maintain an important place in the swimwear retail business. Because of their service-oriented philosophy, their educated sales people, and their knowledge of their customer base, these specialty stores, although small, continue to be important.

All of these market segments are now vying for a share in a swimwear business, which hasn't grown much over the past few years. The result is that the U.S. swimwear business is becoming more competitive than ever, and it has spread throughout a growing number of distribution channels. Going forward, it is anticipated that this competition will become tougher as the internet will continue to take market share away from brick-and-mortar stores.

Consumer buying patterns

According to Koplin, the size of the overall swimwear industry doesn't change that much from year to year anymore. She stated, "Generally, I'd say that this year's business is probably down by about 5%, due mainly to a rough start to the season, brought on by the Florida hurricanes."

In addition to the odd weather patterns,

the amount of traveling done by consumers also makes an impact. Koplin explained, "I just don't see people traveling as much on vacation this year, as they have in the past. It's become very expensive to take vacations."

There are also changes in consumer buying habits which impact business. Koplin noted, "The junior customer is not buying as much as she did a year or two ago. This could be because there's just not enough new out there in the marketplace to make her want to buy. And, outside of the teenage customer, who buys a new suit every year? I believe that the average woman maybe buys a new suit every three years."

As far as the missy customer is concerned, Koplin said, "The forty-five year old woman is probably coming back to wanting something that makes her look younger. But, at the same time it's expensive. And, when you pay \$100 on a swimsuit, there just isn't the frequency in buying. Overall, swimwear has become an item that the customer buys only when she needs it!"

Fashion trends

The swimwear business has seen the same fashion trend for about the last three years, with the key silhouettes being the bikini, the halter top, and the hipster pant — and consumers at every level are

buying separate tops and bottoms. Choosing a unique top and bottom, allows a consumer to customize her suit both in a fashion sense, and to her own size and body type. Koplin said this continues to be the biggest growth area of the business.

She added, "I think, now more than ever before, a woman can put two coordinated prints together — stripes, florals, geometrics. A consumer can inter-mix all of them. She can buy four pieces, and make six or more suits out of them. This is a real advantage, particularly for the younger customer, who wants to have a suit that is different from her friends."

According to Koplin, Apparel Ventures is selling more matte look fabrics than shiny fabrics. She stated, "Today, shine is really coming in the form of embellishments, and putting a lot of real trendy details on the suits — rhinestones, nailheads, beading, sequins, etc. All of that 'bling' that's happening in

accessories and ready-to-wear is definitely moving into swimwear!" In solid swimwear fabrics, Ruth Gordon, director of merchandising



Lynne Koplin, president of Apparel Ventures, Inc.

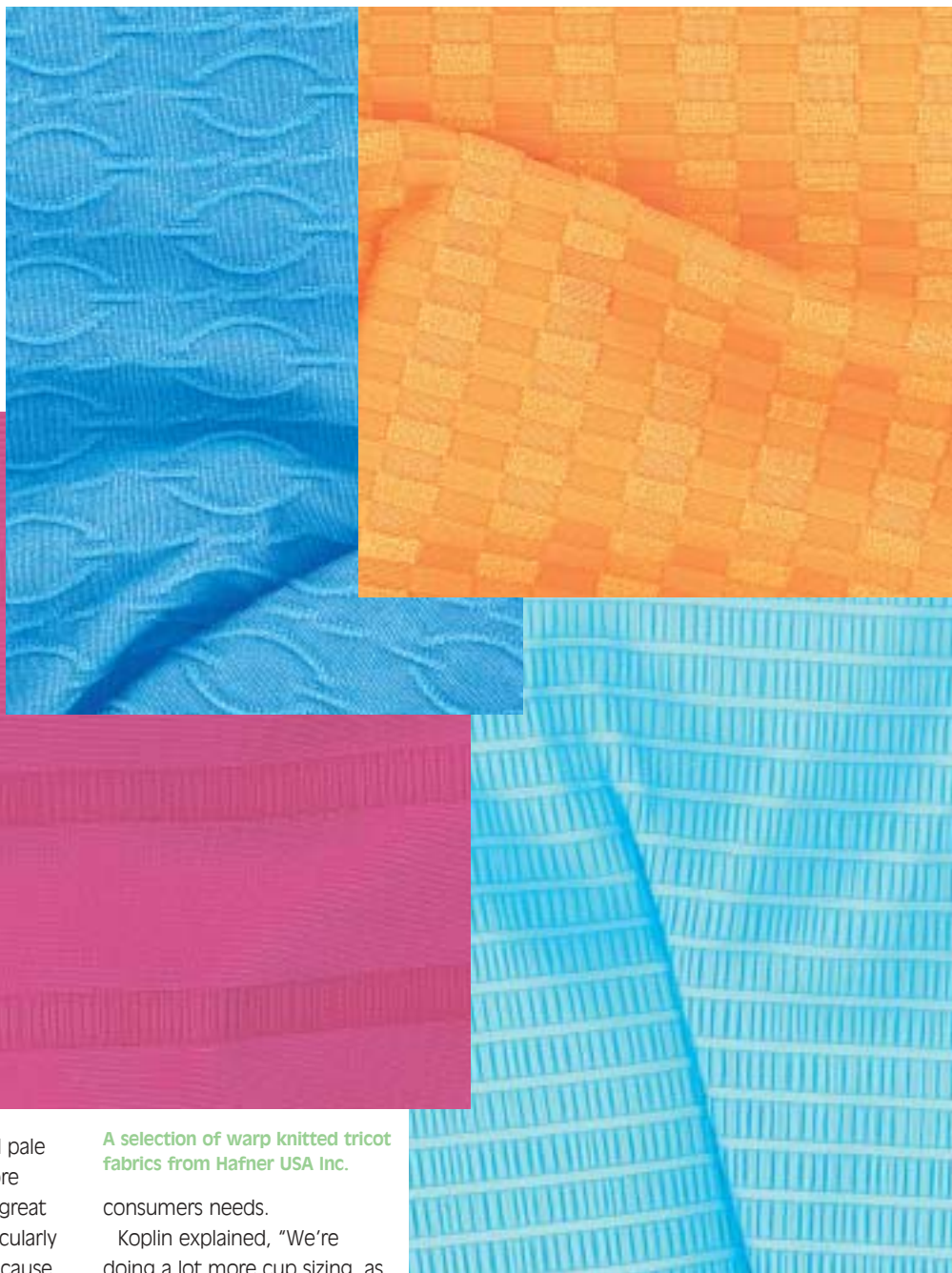
for Hafner, cited the important trends in warp knits for swimwear. "Satin and luster have been important. We are doing matte/shine combinations, crinkle, and pucker looks, meshes, and tonal patterns. We see geometric and plaid influenced patterns as well," she noted. "And, there are always ribs in the mix, which continue from season to season, although the configuration may change. We do not do printing, but we make the base cloth for the print product."

Right now the prints continue to be very retro-inspired. Koplin noted, "The print story is really coming from the 50's and 60's. It is much like what is seen in vintage stores today — graphic, Hawaiian-inspired florals, geometrics, etc."

In colors, both Koplin and Gordon see the same trends. The citrus brights, combined with dark inky colors. Koplin stated, "I think pink has basically run its course. It looks like the greens are doing well right now — lime greens, mint greens, and pale shades. I think we're heading into more blues going forward. Brown is still a great neutral. And, we're selling black particularly well this year. I think, this is mainly because the customer hasn't updated her black suit in a long time. Typically, we always sell black, but it depends on the time of year. Darker colors are usually more important at the beginning of the swim season, which starts with the cruise line in late September into October. Then as the season progresses, you start to see more colors checking in the stores."

Importance of fit/control

The separate swimwear business continues to grow, in part because it offers the customer a better fitting garment. And, manufacturers are responding to the



A selection of warp knitted tricot fabrics from Hafner USA Inc.

consumers needs.

Koplin explained, "We're doing a lot more cup sizing, as the consumers' bust sizes have increased in recent years. For someone who has a D through a DD, there's a lot more offerings in the marketplace. One of the main reasons the styling has shifted to halter tops is because it's a lot easier to accommodate a larger bust with a halter top."

Control has also become a major issue when discussing the fit of a swimsuit. This means, they want control in the exterior shell fabric, not only in the support fabrics for the interior construction of the swimsuit.

Gordon noted, "Almost all of our

customers are asking for some sort of control product. This has become very important in swimwear! We have a collection of fabrics that offer a range of light control to heavy control. A control fabric is not only achieved through the use of spandex, but can also be developed through knit construction technology. Fabric control can be accomplished through the machinery used in the production process, or it can be created in the type of pattern notation in the fabric. There are many different ways to build control into a product."

Koplin added, "Typically, swimwear needs

La Blanca by Rod
Beattie bandeau 2-piece



to solve the world's problems! To appeal to the woman over 40, you really have to provide a solution-based product, whether it's through the fabric that has a high Lycra content, or by offering different bust sizes to accommodate larger breasts. Basically, in order to make the body look thinner, the customer wants as much underneath as possible to provide support, but she still needs to be able to breathe and function in the suit."

One of the swimsuits that is generating a great deal of interest is Mainstream Swimsuits' Miraclesuit. Koplin continued, "Since we live in a very fat country, the customer wants a swimsuit that makes them look slimmer, and feel thinner. She has discovered that the Miraclesuit, which is made from a warp knit, does that — and that's why it's probably the best selling brand at retail right now!"

In addition to control, a swimsuit can also enhance the figure through camouflage. Koplin explained, "There's a lot of draping going on in swimwear today. Since today's fabrics have become more refined and lighter in weight, we are now combining these fabrics and heavier weight fabric within the same garment. This gives you the control where it is needed, basically through the tummy and the hip areas, along with providing some draping or softer treatments over the bust. This makes the swimsuit more comfortable on top, draws the eye upwards to enhance the bustline,

and increases the shoulder line. I think the reason the halter bra is so good as a top is because it really broadens the wearer's shoulder line."

Circular and warp knit fabrics

Koplin said, "We're a company that uses about 75% circular knits. I believe there is a lot more innovation in circular knits today. They are a lot more comfortable to wear. And, although they don't necessarily dry fast and are typically a little heavier, when



Too Hot Brazil tropical fruit print bikini from Apparel Ventures.

microfibers are used along with texturized yarns, the fabrics tend to be softer and have more of a cottony hand than the warp knit counterpart."

According to Koplin, there are also interesting techniques that can be achieved in circular knits through more diversification of fibers and textures. "Whether it's a jacquard construction, a rib, a double knit, or a double-face fabric," Koplin emphasized, "we focus on circular knits, because it's a fabric that has a more sophisticated look. It's also swimwear that can be offered at a higher price point. You won't see much in circular knit at the lower-priced distribution."

On the warp knit side, in addition to the control features that warp knits provide, Swider of Hafner USA pointed to some of the unique fabric techniques that warp knits offer the swimwear manufacturer. In the same way a manufacturer can use an engineered print for a unique garment, Hafner has introduced many engineered placement concepts. He noted, "Take a rib, for instance, it can be set up any way the customer wants it to fall on the body. We work with the customers' patternmaker so that the repeats can be made wherever they want them. It's a way for the customer to bring individuality into their lines."

Swider also mentioned some of the advantages of warp knitting in the production of both seamed and seamless patterning panels. He said, "We're bringing a lot of mesh looks into the market. Some of these meshes have an athletic look to them, but the hole doesn't go all the way through the fabric. It maintains opacity, and yet gives a novelty mesh look within the construction. We can also make the true athletic mesh, which has a real hole in the fabric. This mesh can be engineered into the tricot, so that the garment can have a mesh panel or a ventilation panel in a particular place on the garment. It can even be engineered so that a single garment is half tricot and half mesh without the use of seams."

When it comes to swimwear, it appears that there are options, and that both circular knits and warp knits have their place in the market. It really depends on the target customer, and the design demands of the manufacturer and the consumer as to which knit fabric is used.