



Photography Jordan Graham.

‘WOULDN’T BE CAUGHT DEAD IN’ EM, MATE’: ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SPEEDOS

Story Jonathan Seidler.

Banana hammocks and dick-togs and budgie smugglers and nut huggers and ding-a-ling slings and junk trunks and ouch pouches and lolly catchers and cock socks and marble sacks and dick stickers and dong sarongs and nad buckets and balbushkas and truffle duffles and pickle pinchers and weenie bikinis and meat compactors...

Like all great Australian inventions – Gotye, Vegemite – Speedos are the brainchild of someone not entirely from here. As it turns out, it was a Scottish man who invented the undergarment that proclaims Australia’s *laissez-faire* swimming approach to the world. We’ll claim him, though. We’re good like that.

Presumably scared pants-less by the prospect of trying to navigate Bondi Beach in his longjohns, Alexander Macrae, who migrated Down Under near the turn of the twentieth century, originally set up shop as an underwear manufacturer. His arrival happened to coincide with a boom in public bathing on the East Coast (God knows what they were all doing in summer before then) and like Tom Ford with the classic suit, he instantly recognised a niche area on which he could capitalise. This one, however, required a lot less tailoring.

Speedos are now at the inviolable point where the brand name is synonymous with the product. They are quite unashamedly the Hoovers of fashion; whether it’s Nike or Dolce & Gabbana, thousands of brands make them, but around the world they’re only ever known by one genericised title.

This ubiquity is interesting, primarily as Speedo has been constantly reinventing itself and it’s offering for the entire century it has been in existence. These days, swim briefs account for less than 2% of the company’s global sales. Sometimes it’s difficult to shake off your crowning achievement. Nobody cares that Hoover also made washing machines.

But honestly, what are Speedos good for aside from embarrassing your kids, partners and friends in public? Well, swimming faster, for one. Macrae’s junk pouches may have become popular for their use on the beach, but it was their appearances in competitive swimming lanes that made them world-famous.

Olympians have been winning gold, smashing personal best times and breaking world records in Speedos since the 1930s. That’s a long time at the top; from Claire Dennis being criticised for showing ‘too much shoulder’ in her one-piece at the 1932 L.A. Games to Speedos being personally responsible for over 80% of all gold medals scooped by swimmers during Sydney’s 2000 Olympics.

Frankly, it’s unlikely anybody at Speedo gives a shit about your vanity concerns. They’ve been dealing with prudes and naysayers for over 100 years. Post WWII, women were being hauled off the beach in Australia for trying to get away with a Speedo bikini. Public attitudes towards fashion have never been as important as their number one design consideration: function.

Just as there is a set of rules for aerodynamics, there’s another one for water. If you want to travel fast, you want to be streamlined and to avoid drag at any cost. Rather than worrying about the precise arrangement of male genitalia, Macrae and his team were primarily concerned with speed. They were trying to get lifeguards through choppy waves quickly enough to save drowning tourists, and world-class athletes down the pool at times that defied imagination.

Those futuristic body suits that made Australia’s relay team look like X-men? Speedos. The swimmers that are chlorine resistant and don’t lose their shape or colour after repeated use? Speedos. The sleek LZR Racer, which actually repels water as you glide through it? Don’t even bother. Speedos aren’t just the Hoover of swimming, they’re also the Google.

Do no evil. Innovate or die.

The other life of Speedos, the one you know of, is bound up in the general history of the product and at times has seemed destined to overtake it. Like anything that deals with what goes

on Down Under, Speedos have been an endless source of fascination for those trying to prove something – or prove something about contemporary male fashion.

For a male model, Speedos are your lingerie; if you can’t cut a good figure in one, you may as well pack up and go home. The theory that there is nothing to hide in a cosy banana hammock is one that has been debated and capitalised on for years, most recently by the globally successful AussieBum brand, with their hater-baiting tagline: ‘If you doubt yourself, wear something else.’

Most recently, Speedos have re-entered the vernacular via the most bizarre vehicle imaginable: politics. Rising out of the crashing waves of inter-party infighting, Liberal leader Tony Abbott has thrashed his way into Australia’s top office despite a well-documented penchant for nut-huggers.

Abbott, an Ironman competitor and devout athlete, has undoubtedly been pictured in his bathing suit more frequently than an actual one. Whether this will do wonders for international diplomacy remains to be seen, but Australia’s perception as an active country bursting with confident men has never been quite so assured.

Speedos may be an Australian transplant’s brainchild, but they’re now carving up culture the world over. Chances are you can tell a European man on the beach from an American one these days simply by what they’re wearing below their hips. The line between liberal and conservative body politics is being renegotiated during summers across both hemispheres, and usually that line is drawn with string and tied into a bow around the waist.

The varied levels of meaning that go into Speedos and Speedo-wearing continually collapse onto each other like shore breakers. They’re in and then they’re out, they’re hideous and then they’re wonderful, they’re outdated and then they’re practical, they’re strictly for gay men and then they’re for all men.

Navigating the sexual debate around Speedos as a concept has become especially significant in the last two decades, as the swimwear icon has been embraced by the gay community and therefore positioned as ‘other’ in many hetero-normative societies. But skimpy swimwear is a pendulum that swings both ways.

On any Australian beach, you’re as likely to see a fabulously buff man lounging about in brightly coloured marble sacks with his partner as you are a straight lifesaver running into the surf to rescue a kid that’s been dragged out into a rip. Speedos have been partnered with Australian lifesavers for almost as long

as they have our athletes. Without their red and yellow-clad bums on the beach, *Bondi Rescue* would probably not be fun reality TV viewing.

In reality, Speedo is not well-versed in the art of discrimination. They provide equipment to the Chinese swimming team. They kitted out Olympian Matthew Mitcham, who famously came out of the closet ahead of winning the gold medal for diving. They’re on sale in over one hundred countries, some of which probably hate each other. Their basic offering has gone through a few tweaks, but remains pretty similar to how it looked when your dad and your grandfather wore it.

They are the Geneva of swimwear. Ding-a-ling slings for every man.

Despite their innovations in the pool and sponsorships out of the box, it’s still Speedo’s most basic offering that has people talking. It’s fascinating that an item of clothing worn by most cultures for only a few months of the year at most nonetheless retains the power to shock, provoke, flatter and divide.

Even as Speedo the brand doesn’t necessarily focus on reinventing this particular wheel, there are plenty of others out there doing it for them. They are immortal simply for being the best possible archetype of dick stickers, budgie smugglers and marble sacks that will probably ever exist.

Speedos aren’t just the Hoover, Google and Geneva of swimwear. They’re Australia in a Y-front.