



How green is your Lycra?

Chris Atkins of Symmetry's ruminates on how, for such an environmentally friendly discipline, cycling has some pretty unsustainable kit...

BY CHRIS ATKINS

We have a 'sustainability-first' attitude at Symmetry's, which naturally has an effect on everything we do. Take, for example, a recent collective clear-out of years of cycling gear – Lycra mainly. It was amazing how much of the stuff we had accumulated over the years. We love the aesthetics of cycling. And we just love the way our challenging midribs squeeze into a cycle jersey that is far too tight. But what do we do once the Lycra is worn out and needs replacing? How sustainable is it? Some questions came to mind. Let's Google.

So... is Lycra (spandex) biodegradable?

The internet says: *'Synthetic fabrics like polyester, spandex, nylon... Though they will eventually break down, this process might take between 20 and 200 years.'*

Mmmm. That does not sound good... Is it recyclable then?

The internet says, in a word, no. According to Wikipedia: *'Silicone is recyclable, but not collected widely for recycling, while latex and Lycra (spandex) aren't recyclable on a large scale yet.'*

Ah, OK. Surely, then, it is the responsibility of the manufacturer to

think it through to its natural (or not so natural) end? Sadly, that doesn't seem to be happening. Lycra's sustainability statement on its own website simply promises to *'use fewer resources and enhance the environmental performance of fiber and fabrics'*, which doesn't seem to us to go far enough.

So, what to do with all our unwanted (too small?) Lycra cycle jerseys? What are the options?

1. Make a nice tea cosy, or fashion them into a duvet cover.
2. Give them to charity.
3. Give them back to a cycle shop.
4. Let the big boys have it back. Do cycle brands take old Lycra back and re-use it?

Not sure about option 1, so let's look at 2, 3 and 4.

2. Give them to charity.

We contacted a few local charity shops and they will take old products if they are in good enough condition to sell them on. But as the reason we're getting rid of them is that they are beyond useful purpose it comes as no surprise the charity shops aren't too keen.

3. Give them back to a cycle shop.

It would be amazing if we could take our unwanted clothing back to

where we bought it from, and they did something good with it – or at least saved it from landfill. We contacted two high street shops, however, and neither provided this facility.

And although we did find examples of charities which recycle sports equipment, none seem to take clothing.

4. Let the big boys have it back.

We tried to contact three cycle brand companies: Rapha, Donda and Morevelo. Unfortunately, they did not get back to us with a response, although Rapha's website does say it has repaired more than 34,000 garments, and that repairing rather than replacing is one of the most effective ways of reducing their impact. So, we'll let them off for the lack of response, as they are clearly very busy mending old cycle jerseys!

When you scratch the surface of this topic it seems a much larger issue than 'where will I put my old cycling kit?'. It leads into all sorts of questions about the textile industry as a whole – the use and sustainability of Lycra doesn't just lay on the doorstep of cycling. When you think how much Lycra is used in the clothing for all sports, this suddenly becomes a much bigger topic. What are leading brands like Nike and Adidas doing to tackle the expanding mound



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of non-biodegradable sports products in landfill?

Nike declined to answer our questions. Adidas, which previously had a recycling initiative called ‘infinite play’, has placed this on pause as the company it was using to recycle and reproduce unwanted products has recently announced insolvency.

There is, though, some cheery news. Two sports companies are helping customers do their bit with direct projects for unwanted sports clothing. The North Face runs a process called ‘clothes the loop’ where customers can drop off unwanted clothing (any condition, any brand) which is then sent the charity Soles4souls, which repurposes it to keep it out of landfill.

Patagonia, which takes back used clothing to put it back into the supply chain (for example as artificial turf) goes even further. It guarantees any clothing returned to the company will not be sent to landfill – first it will try to re-use, then recycle. And if neither is possible, the company holds on to it until it can work out what to do with it! Patagonia’s website states: *‘We have to choose between sending it to a landfill, sending it to the incinerator or holding on to it until we find a better solution. Since we chose the latter, our stockpile is taking up a room in our Reno warehouse.’*

Of course, the next logical step would be to see the big brands developing eco fabrics, such as Econyl and Tencel, which will replace Lycra. The likes of Patagonia, ASOS, Spark Sporting and The North Face are already including these materials in some of their products, but until they come into the mainstream and we get some clear recycling and/or repurposing projects up and running in the UK, we’re uncertain what the future holds. What to do in the meantime? Start making that duvet cover so it’s ready in time for Christmas. ◦



Chris Atkins is managing director of Symmetrys. He’s excited about his latest purchase: a spiffing new On One Scandal mountain bike