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THE BOOK: SUMMER OUTDOOR 2003

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- CLIMBING SHOE PRICE WARS
- SLOW WATER FOR PADDLESPO RTS
- HAVE YOU HUGGED YOUR REP TODAY?

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✓ SAY HELLOOOOOO TO MY **little** FRIEND

BY CLYDE SOLES

Though it is one of the most popular buzzwords in the outdoor industry these days, "ultralight" is nothing new. Serious backpackers have been tinkering with reducing the weight of their packs for decades. Most famously, well over a century ago, John Muir took the *reductum ad absurdum* of gear to an amazing degree by foregoing almost everything so he could cover up to 40 miles in a day.

The outdoor industry has gone through several cycles of lightening up gear to minimal levels. It seems that for a while, everyone jumped on the bandwagon trumpeted by radicals like Jack Stephenson and Ray Jardine. There were superlight tents, ultralight packs, phantomweight clothing and so on.

The problem was, as consumers quickly discovered, none of the stuff held up to normal wear and tear; it cost a lot and fell apart. After getting spanked with high return rates and disgruntled customers, manufacturers would revert to heavier, more rugged materials. Then a couple years later, some new technology would

again lure companies into trying the weight-savings game. More often than not, the hype didn't live up to the reality and it was back to beefier materials.

Having witnessed history repeat itself several times, it's understandable that some view the recent ultralight trend with skepticism. Yet three factors are converging to give this product category a boost: less vacation time, better consumer education, and technology that finally makes good on the claims. Add

"Ultralight is a focus in every category of Marmot hardgoods for spring 2004."

SLEEPING BAGS

Two decades ago, high-quality sleeping bags typically had shells of 1.6-ounce nylon fabric that weren't particularly wind- or water-resistant. The standard insulation was 550-fill goose down; 625-fill was reserved for premium bags. There was only so much that designers could do to reduce weight without turning the bags

LIGHT AND FAST GEAR IS HITTING THE MAINSTREAM

to this mix the growth of adventure racing, and its associated publicity, which has also pushed ultralight gear to superior performance.

Of course, you'd expect companies like GoLite to be enthusiastic about ultralight gear; owners Demetri and Kim Coupounas have been singing that song for years. Yet the concept is now becoming pervasive in many of the old guard brands; just about everyone has products with "lite" in the name. According to John Cooley,

into boa constrictors.

Now, the best bags have shells of 0.9-ounce nylon that are nearly windproof and have superb DWRs; Pertex Quantum and Dimension Polyant are the leading fabrics. With regard to insulation, 600 is considered standard while 750-fill goose down is a minimum for high-end bags, with several companies claiming 900-fill. (A change in the testing protocol by those in charge certainly helped boost the power.) Next season, it will be sur-

RICHARD DURHAM PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF GOLITE



prising if somebody isn't touting four-digit fill-power down, handplucked by the marketing department. At some point, the numbers get ludicrous because the weight of the fabric compresses the down.

Last year, Mountainsmith entered the market with 750-fill bags and threw down the challenge in March 2003 that these were "the lightest sleeping bags on the market." Obviously, longtime bag makers such as Marmot and The North Face weren't going to let that one slide. And other companies committed to ultralight, such as GoLite and Mountain Hardwear, were also not to be put off.

For 2004, all three of the Marmot Ultralight bags (Hydrogen, Helium and Lithium) will feature Pertex Quantum Endurance, which adds a waterproof/breathable coating to the spectacularly light fabric. The Helium is also getting a full-length zipper while the other two

when most others have two). The 40-degree F rated Feather-Lite has no hood or zipper, while the 20-degree F Feather has a contoured hood and one-quarter-length center zipper; both come with superb silicone stuff sacks (other brands should copy this).

Expanding its line-up of superlight bags, Mountain Hardwear has turned the current Phantom (35 degree F) into three models rated at 0, 15 and 45 degrees. All bags in this series have three-quarter-length zippers and 800-fill down, while the two warmer models have draft collars and face muffs. A new cut reduces volume below the elbows to increase efficiency while allowing foot room.

Now that it's moved from sea level to higher altitude, Sierra Designs has pared the weight of some components in its modular sleeping system. The Wicked Fastbags feature 800-fill down "lids," available in two ratings, that zip to a floor

TENTS

It's deja vu all over again—single-wall tents are back. Sure, Bibler (owned by Black Diamond) and Integral Designs have been making them for decades, but other tent companies have also dabbled with the concept—often with disappointing results. Rather like one-piece mountaineering suits that never sell at full retail but supposedly offer brand credibility, single-wall alpine tents were prestige items for the catalog.

In 1996, several manufacturers introduced single walls that were nice in principle but deficient in actual field testing. Only two years later, most of these novelty items were gone from the lines while the designers went back to the drawing board.

Companies now aim to improve ventilation, rather than working to enhance the performance of waterproof/breathable fabrics. The new breed of single-wall tents are less expensive because they do not have the costly fabrics that only work well in cold, dry conditions.

Next spring, Mountain Hardwear will ship three new models of freestanding single-wall tents with welded (rather than sewn in) floors. The alpine model, called the EV2, will have a waterproof/breathable fabric canopy and all the bells and whistles expected in a tent destined for Himalayan climbs. Both the new superlight Airjet and roomier Mountain Jet tents will have waterproof canopies and be available in two- and three-person sizes. These feature mesh vents around the bottom of the tent and upper vents near the peak.

Enhancing the appeal of its classic Ahwahnee, Black Diamond is adding a second door making the Bibler tent one of the most versatile waterproof/breathable single-wall tents around. For the first time, Black Diamond will offer tents that do not use a PTFE laminate, this time under the Black Diamond brand and not Bibler—confused yet? The Firstlight (based on the I-tent) and Lighthouse (based on the Ahwahnee) will have canopies of Epic fabric and floors of silicone-coated nylon. These new three-season models are even lighter than their predecessors and about a third less expensive.

Marmot, which has sporadically made single-wall tents since the late '70s, continues to experiment with the concept. The new Alpinist has a waterproof/breathable canopy with a built-in vestibule, yet it's 10 ounces lighter than the current Up High and breaks the magic 5-pound barrier.

AND GETTING MORE THAN JUST A PASSING LOOK.

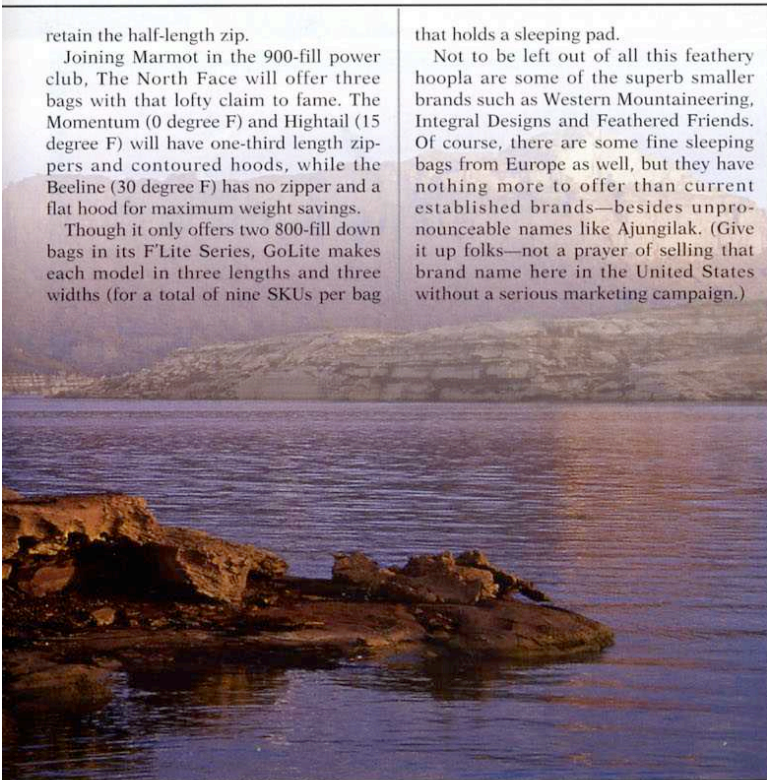
retain the half-length zip.

Joining Marmot in the 900-fill power club, The North Face will offer three bags with that lofty claim to fame. The Momentum (0 degree F) and Hightail (15 degree F) will have one-third length zippers and contoured hoods, while the Beeline (30 degree F) has no zipper and a flat hood for maximum weight savings.

Though it only offers two 800-fill down bags in its F'Lite Series, GoLite makes each model in three lengths and three widths (for a total of nine SKUs per bag

that holds a sleeping pad.

Not to be left out of all this feathery hoopla are some of the superb smaller brands such as Western Mountaineering, Integral Designs and Feathered Friends. Of course, there are some fine sleeping bags from Europe as well, but they have nothing more to offer than current established brands—besides unpronounceable names like Ajungilak. (Give it up folks—not a prayer of selling that brand name here in the United States without a serious marketing campaign.)



The new Trig 2 is the closest that GoLite has come to producing a “conventional” tent. It is a single-wall design that uses trekking poles for support and has a silicone-coated nylon canopy like its other designs. Yet the Trig 2 sports such luxuries as a floor, mosquito netting and a vestibule—pure decadence for the ultralight purists—and still weighs in under 3 pounds.

Showing what can still be done with double-wall tents, Sierra Designs introduces the Lightning. Weighing around 4 pounds, this very compact shelter claims to be the lightest freestanding tent with a full fly. In an attempt to counteract the common mistake of storing wet tents, the next generation of SD tents will have floors and flies that have an anti-fungal agent in the urethane coatings.

PACKS

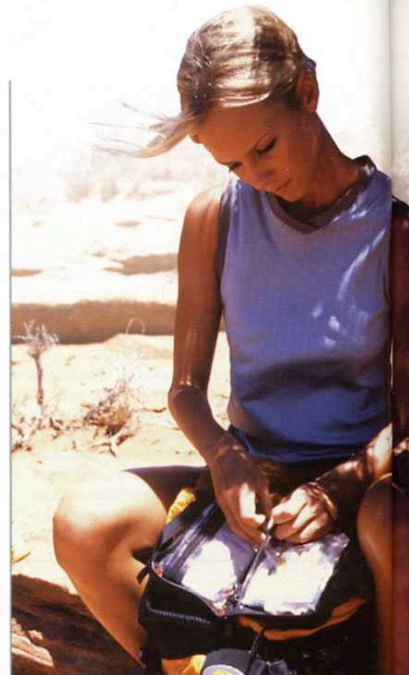
Mountaineers have long pushed designers to make lighter, streamlined packs that could withstand abuse, resulting in such classics as the Wild Things Andinista and the Kelty Cloud packs. A recent influence on ultralight pack design has been adventure racing. Though the

numbers of competitors will likely remain small, their influence has been large because they abuse gear that is well suited to the average outdoorsperson.

These days, it’s a rare pack indeed that is not designed to carry a hydration bladder. Unfortunately, many companies insist on providing a poorly designed bladder and hose that they out-sourced. The savvy consumer will replace the cheap hydration system with a Camelbak or Source.

Long known for its stripped-down frameless packs, GoLite is entering the internal frame market with three new models that have a removable, moldable framesheet (reminiscent of old Karrimors). The Infinity (50 l) and Continuum (40 l) are ultralight top loaders that differ mostly in volume, while the Vision (30 l) is a rear loader with watertight zipper. These should appeal to those who want lightweight gear that doesn’t sacrifice performance.

Lowe Alpine, which played to the strip-down market with its original Alpine Attack models, is going teeny with its Alpine Attack 20, a pack which will either be *(continued on page 26)*



THE CONCEPT IS NOW BECOMING PERVASIVE IN MANY OF THE OLD GUARD

(continued from page 24)

loved or hated. Designed using a unique shoulder suspension system, the pack, with a lean 1,200 cubic inches of room, is positioned to sit well above a climber’s harness, offering unprecedented unrestricted climbing on multi-pitch routes.

Marmot is entering the ultralight pack market with two new models for climbers. The Alpinist pack comes in either a 40- or 55-liter size that has a removable framesheet with stays; the large weighs under 3 pounds with the frame. The Himalayan is an 80-liter pack that has a bivy pad for a frame, two removable side pockets and a crampon pocket; it should weigh just over 3 1/2 pounds complete.

Mountainsmith is adding a women’s model, the Seraph, to its Mountainlight pack line and offering more sizes in several of the men’s models. Otherwise, it’s just a color change for its trickiest packs.

Arc’Teryx is also putting some of its packs on a diet for next season. The new line will feature roll closures and strip-pable accessories while retaining the company’s apparent commitment to uninspired styling.

SHELL GEAR

Though the summer Outdoor Retailer show isn’t the usual time for softgoods introductions, some ultralight clothing is so technical and summer-oriented that it makes an appearance. In particular, lightweight shells are generally considered too delicate for winter sports like skiing and ice climbing, yet they are all the rage when the conditions are less hostile.

One side benefit of all the soft shell hoopla has been the broader realization that heavy, bombproof outer shells are seldom needed. Thus, a lot of emphasis has been placed upon designing shells that weigh virtually nothing and disappear inside a pack. While these shells are designed so that they can be stowed easily, very few have a pocket that serves as a stuff sack, and this is a major oversight.

For the past few seasons, several companies have offered pullover windshells made of 15-denier nylon that are remarkably compact (size of an energy bar) and lightweight (just 3 ounces). Though they are merely water-repellent, these next-to-nothing shells are ideal for

just-in-case situations where a normal shell might be left home.

Next year, Patagonia will offer a jacket version of its featherweight Dragonfly Pullover. Likewise, GoLite will add the Ventus and Helios Jacket (the latter has a hood) to its Wisp line, which already included the Wisp and Ether Wind Shirts. Most people won’t notice the extra half ounce of weight but will appreciate the convenience. Mountain Hardwear is also entering this market with its Phantom Anorak, which will have the distinction of coming in men’s and women’s sizing. (The Patagonia and GoLite jackets are available in men’s sizes only.)

Many of the new storm shells are made with waterproof/breathable fabrics, though they lean toward the more waterproof/less breathable side of the scale. Since each manufacturer has its own proprietary coating these days, it’s all but impossible for consumers to know how they compare with one another. (Plus, in this age of short and quippy, magazine reviews sure don’t help anymore.)

Unquestionably, Marmot shook up this

BRANDS; JUST ABOUT EVERYONE HAS PRODUCTS WITH "LITE" IN THE NAME.

part of the industry several years ago with the introduction of its affordable PreCip shell gear, a major cash cow—for retailers at least—that left everyone else scrambling. Particularly in regions like the Rockies, this level of rain protection is all most people need for occasional summer showers. Now most lines have a waterproof/breathable rain jacket hovering around the \$100 price point and weighing well under a pound.

For next spring, The North Face introduces its Prophecy Jacket (in men's and women's sizing), which is aimed straight at PreCip sales. One difference is a microdot print on the inner surface that should help reduce the uncomfortable feel most coatings have against bare skin. Patagonia will replace its Lightning with the Specter Jacket, which is essentially the same but will come in men's and women's styling.

At the beefier end of the ultralight scale are the shells utilizing Gore-Tex XCR laminated to gossamer fabrics. In part due to the three-ply lamination, these tend to be the most durable for extended field use.

The question to be answered this season: How will consumers respond to really nice, but necessarily less-durable, shells that cost nearly \$400? At least Gore-Tex PacLite shells are in the \$250 range and it's debatable whether they are significantly less rugged.

Keeping to its minimalist roots, last winter MontBell introduced the Dyna Action Parka, which is a Gore-Tex XCR shell that weighs a mere 16 ounces and is arguably the lightest technical shell on the market. Similarly, Mountain Hardwear rolled out the Tenacity Lite Jacket, which is also XCR and just 2 ounces heavier.



MIKE ERICART PHOTOGRAPHY/PHOTO COURTESY OF GORE-TEX

SELLING ULTRALIGHT

The allure of hiking for days with just a few pounds on your back, or climbing a remote peak in a day is very appealing to many. After all, nobody likes to carry a pack that weighs half their lean muscle mass.

But reducing pack loads by half, or more, generally requires an all-or-nothing approach to gear selection. Hikers must examine every single item that will be worn or carried if they want to get their pack to under 20 pounds. It's even possible to go sub-10 pounds, but that requires a level of commitment only a few are willing to make.

Since it involves cutting back to the barest essentials, ultralight hiking is not for outdoor newbies—experience is required to plan a safe trip, read the weather and terrain, and handle emergencies. Nor is this style for technophobes, because somewhat fragile equipment must be properly used and matched to the conditions to avoid suffering. Steer these people into conventional equipment that is more forgiving of mistakes and less expensive.

Ultralight hiking is a category where outdoor specialty shops have the opportunity to excel over big-box stores. A complete ultralight setup (pack, bag, tent, clothing system, kitchen) can

easily run upward of \$1,000. Superb product knowledge and customer service will be expected since these tend to be educated, demanding shoppers.

Often these customers already have good equipment, but it just won't get them into the sub-20 pack. Folks who aren't dripping money will usually upgrade components of their system as they can afford them. For them, it's best to start downsizing the items that will give the most weight savings for the buck—typically tents and sleeping systems. Then get them thinking about their entire clothing system, from head to toe.

Although substantial reduction can come from a minimalist pack instead of the typical internal frame model, this upgrade should be saved for last. The lightest packs simply lack the support to comfortably carry moderate loads, particularly when several days of food and 2 liters of water add about 10 pounds; climbing gear can mean another 10 pounds.

While some may have grandiose visions of speedhiking thousands of miles, most people attracted to ultralight gear are probably just thinking about fast and light weekend trips. Stores can key in on selling more fun and less discomfort—often the same thing. There is a greater availability of ultralight products than ever before.