

GAME CHANGERS

IN THE LAND OF 10,000 INNOVATIONS, VISIONARIES FROM THE GREATER MSP REGION ARE CHANGING THE WAY SPORTS ARE PLAYED.

Profile: WSI Sportswear

Eagan-based WSI is a leading manufacturer of cold-weather sports gear - including that worn by the Minnesota Vikings and many other NFL teams. They've built a niche in the sports world.

PROFILE > WSI Sportswear and founder Joel Wiens

TYPE > Sports gear manufacturer

STORY THEMES > Sports gear
Cold weather gear
NFL team supplier
Entrepreneurship

OVERVIEW > Eagan-based WSI is a leading manufacturer of cold-weather sports gear – including that worn by the Minnesota Viking and many other NFL teams. Made entirely in the USA and using a network of piecework providers in the Twin Cities, WSI has built a niche in the sports world with advanced fabrics and high quality manufacturing.

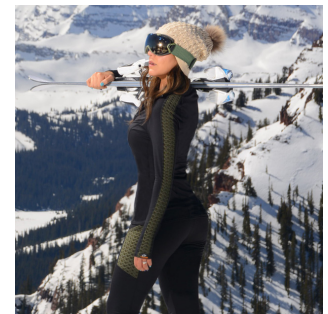
KEY PEOPLE > Joel Wiens, founder and CEO

KEY QUOTE > *“There are very few apparel companies in the U.S. The costs are not the cheapest out there, but it allows us to focus on innovation and quality, and it appeals to the socially-conscious customer.”*
- Joel Wiens

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Profile: WSI Sportswear



As a thriving business community, Minneapolis and St. Paul have many advantages to offer a company. For WSI Sportswear, one of the biggest advantages is also one of the most unexpected.

“The climate. It’s cold here,” says WSI founder and CEO Joel Wiens. “It gives us credibility as a manufacturer of cold-weather gear. Customers give me kudos for living here.”

How has WSI managed to thrive in the Twin Cities making garments, when most of the global clothing industry has consolidated overseas? By focusing on a tight, loyal niche and tapping into some of the region’s unique resources. For Wiens, these include:

- Strong garment design programs at local schools, which help supply part of his workforce
- A strong business support network, from investment, to services like patent law and marketing, to management and mentorship
- A local community of piecework sewers who assemble garments in their homes. In WSI’s case, the contracted garment-makers are all part of the local Hmong community, and his history working with them has helped Wiens ensure a ready pool of talented labor.

“There are very few apparel companies in the U.S.,” Wiens notes. “The piecework model, where we send it out to local individuals for production, that’s what Roots and American Apparel does. We cut and decorate at our factory in Eagan. The costs are not the cheapest out there, but it allows us to focus on innovation and quality, and it appeals to the socially-conscious customer.”

PRO-GRADE GEAR DESIGNED FOR EACH SPORT

WSI has capitalized on this winning formula for highly-engineered, made-in-the-USA thermal layers and athletic gear. It does a small but meaningful portion of its business every year with NFL and MLB teams and other pro sports teams and athletes.

(Famously, the Seattle Seahawks learned the Minnesota Vikings were wearing WSI during the 2015 season, when the Vikings played outdoors. Before the two teams met for a playoff game in Minnesota in January 2016, the Seahawks put in a rush order so their players could have the same benefit.)

“We do custom items for these sports programs,” Wiens said. With skilled garment designers on staff, WSI can adapt clothes to specific positions – a wide receiver uses his body differently than a

lineman, and the way a piece of clothing is cut can help ensure the garment doesn’t restrict or impede that motion. “The construction, how you body map – we have patents around that.”

WSI’s products are so popular with some NFL players that they have been known to special-order rush pieces just before a cold game. Wiens himself has personally driven some orders to the airport so they could be overnighted and reach the player in time for the game.

STITCHING TOGETHER SUCCESS THROUGH INNOVATION IN MINNESOTA

Pro sports, however, are just a small part of WSI’s overall business model. Its bread and butter is in outdoor sports – hunting, skiing and the like – where a network of respected influencers help advise on, test, and ultimately recommend WSI gear.

Wiens founded WSI in 1990. “I had ideas for products back in high school, and with my family we would take our kitchen table and be sewing away,” he remembers. One was for a pair of compression shorts with an integrated protective cup – “I should have patented that one” – and since then WSI has looked to merge advanced fabrics with innovative design to provide athletes with high-performing gear that is designed to help them excel at whatever they are doing.

“We can dial in a product that’s thinner, lighter and warmer,” Wiens says. “Some of these fibers we develop ourselves.” A key fiber is called Heatr, designed to expand 40 percent more than other common fibers. That extra expansion is the secret to providing extra insulation and allowing moisture to wick away. “The more you work, the warmer it gets.”

Another innovation is in the use of bamboo-based fibers. “It’s a natural fiber, it’s anti-microbial to keep smell down, it’s super soft and light, more for cool weather than cold.”

Wiens said his focus on innovation has been encouraged and aided by the local business community. “I’ve traveled and talked all over the world, and what I come back to here is the people. In the Twin Cities you have people and institutions that want to help.”

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