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# WWD WEDNESDAY

Sportswear

## Hard Attack

PARIS — Chain mail, metal leggings and peaked leather shoulders — it doesn't get any tougher than that. Nicolas Ghesquière's collection for Balenciaga had a certain robotic, even road-warrior-esque, look to it. Here, his hard-as-nails girl, ready to do battle. For more on the shows, see pages 4 to 7.



The Lord & Taylor Plan: Downsizing Flagship,

## Treading the Fine Line Between Horsemen Logos

HOW WILL U.S. POLO PLAY?

With the launch of a misses denim collection this November, the United States Polo Association's brand name and logo will strike a higher profile with shoppers, who may have seen the group's active double-horseman symbols recently on some men's and junior items, like polo shirts and fleece.

The logos are resurfacing following a six-year stretch that ended last October, when the USPA won a suit against Polo Ralph Lauren and gained the right to use the horseman marks.

The U.S. Polo brand is betting on its offer of quality at a price — with added value from its logo — to win misses denim customers, although some marketing experts forecast the label could suffer from confusion and comparisons with Polo Ralph Lauren because of the similarity between the names and logos used by the two brands.

"There's a great opportunity for confusion," observed Robert Passikoff, president of Brand Keys. "Clearly, this is one of those instances where the first-to-market [advantage] applies. Sometimes, like with technology, it doesn't," he continued. "But they [U.S. Polo] are dealing with a juggernaut," Passikoff said, referring to Polo Ralph Lauren. "I think it will be a hard slog for them."

For the past five years or so, a raft of fashion brands struggled to decide whether to affix a logo to their apparel, noted brand strategist Peter Levine. Such symbols are now so numerous it's questionable whether many people associate those emblems with the brands they're attached to, from Abercrombie & Fitch's moose to American Eagle's eagle to Mossimo's griffin. Levine himself was asked recently if the navy-blue griffin on his shirt signified Peugeot, when, in fact, he was wearing a \$12.95 turquoise polo shirt from Target's Mossimo collection.

Not surprisingly, Cliff Lelonek, president and chief executive officer at the U.S. Polo Association unit of Jordache Enterprises, sees plenty of room for the U.S. Polo Association and Polo Ralph Lauren brands to coexist. "Polo Ralph Lauren's customer is more luxury driven," Lelonek said. U.S. Polo, in contrast, is aimed primarily at women who shop in midtier department stores. "My customer, not his customer, is what I'm focusing on," he added.

Polo Ralph Lauren officials declined comment.

The value of U.S. Polo denim, as conceived by the brand, Lelonek said, will rest in \$38 to \$48 prices for treatments like hand-sanding on mercerized fabrications, as well as in two fits: traditional and modern. "The fact [that] we're newly branded, with a polo-player logo and packaging, represents added value," he contended.

What value shoppers perceive in the new logo and packaging will start to play out in stores in November, and the launch comes at a time when people have been placing less importance on wearing the symbols and labels of various brands. To wit: Approximately 70 percent of 7,500 adults polled in the first quarter by Brand Keys said it was less important to wear apparel logos and brands than it was three years ago — a percentage Passikoff expects to keep climbing until it levels off around the 80 percent mark.

Polo Ralph Lauren trademarked its horseman icon back in 1967, aware the USPA someday might develop its own consumer products unit — a move the group made in 1984. That year, the polo association created its own line of apparel with a polo-player logo. An on-again, off-again legal battle over rights for the USPA to use its active horseman symbol ensued.



Target or Peugeot? The griffin, symbol for both brands, is seen here on Target's Mossimo men's polo.

Ads trumpeting U.S. Polo's new misses' denim range are appearing in Southern Living and Stuff.

Asked how U.S. Polo's offer differed from other brands of jeans at the same price, Lelonek said simply, "We're trying to achieve looks comparable to \$70 to \$100 jeans at much lower prices." To do so, the denimwear is being sourced in 12 company-owned factories in far-flung locales, from Mexico to Kenya to Jordan.

The campaign to lure consumers to U.S. Polo's denim collection includes co-op print ads for the brand in the November editions of Southern Living and Stuff, and point-of-purchase materials at Mervyns, Lady Foot Locker, Goody's and Bob's Stores. Lelonek is also aiming to break into Kohl's and J.C. Penney with the range.

— V.S.