

By Stephen Regenold on November 14, 2011, 8:41 am

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Filed under: **Apparel Outerwear Technology**

By **STEPHEN REGENOLD**

Snowguns blast the ski hills in Colorado this time of year. Ice hangs in daggers off cliffs that line I-70, fine stalactites descending in chill November air. I had come west with a couple dozen outdoor-industry types at the invite of The North Face to get a glimpse, appropriately in a lodge at 8,000 feet, of a few to-be-released products from the company's 2012 line. In the flesh to demonstrate the company's "Athlete Tested, Expedition Proven" mantra, mountain climber Conrad Anker was present to talk on his team's hard-earned ascent this fall of a route on 20,700-foot Meru in India's Garhwal Himalaya.

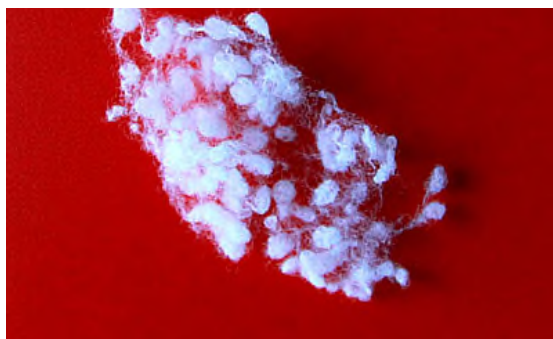


*The North Face team's camp near the high-altitude tooth of Meru*

In India, where Anker, Jimmy Chin and Renan Ozturk spent **12 days working up the high-altitude route**, testing jackets may not have always been front of mind. But two members of the climbing team were there wearing parkas with a new technology, which was previewed for media at the Colorado event. Called **ThermoBall**, the product is a "revolution in insulation technology," the company touts. In the hand, the fine filaments of ThermoBall feel like wispy pillowed cotton, light and knotted with tiny spheres. Stuffed in a jacket, the new insulation will offer an alternative to synthetic insulations like PrimaLoft and natural down, the current mainstays of insulation for serious outdoor apparel.



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*New ThermoBall insulation is an alternative to down*

Made to mimic the clustering of down, ThermoBall is fabricated as small individual balls of synthetic fibers. More loft, warmth and compressibility are the promised results. In charts delineating ThermoBall's insulation qualities, the TNF fluff was shown to have a warmth-to-weight ratio not quite as good as down, but 15 percent better than a tested synthetic (we assume that would be PrimaLoft One). Like PrimaLoft, ThermoBall works when wet (down does not work well when wet). I pulled on a prototype puffy ThermoBall jacket, which was knit with a new type of triangular baffle system to cradle the fluff, and immediately I felt the warmth.



*ThermoBall Hooded Jacket, to be released in fall 2012*

In the 1960s, when **The North Face** was a small startup brand in San Francisco, a mission of the company was "to make the best products in the world." Simple and flat out. In Colorado this week, the company hammered that its "best products" theme has always been present, but with innovations for next year, including ThermoBall and another fabric technology called **FlashDry**, the ante would be upped in 2012. The company also unveiled an avalanche airbag backpack and a vest jacket with an airbag inside. Both products activate with the tug of a rip-cord. The tug triggers compressed nitrogen cartridges and inflates a pair of angel-wing-like airbags that ensconce a skier's head for protection if tumbling in an avalanche while also giving float and helping to keep the victim on the surface of the sliding snow.



## Outerwear

Jackets, technical pants, waterproof-breathable, softshells, and rainwear.



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Like a backup parachute, TNF pack has rip-cord-triggered airbag inside

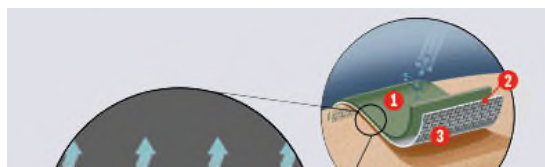
The North Face partnered with [Germany's ABS GmbH](#) for the airbag tech. It then built the ABS system into a backpack, the **Patrol 24 ABS model** (picture above), and an outerwear piece, the **ABS Powder Guide Vest**. At about \$1,300, the vest, which will ship in mid 2012, is touted as the first ABS airbag apparel to market. The pack, which will cost about \$1,000, cinches onto a skier almost like a climbing harness, including a metal hipbelt buckle and an under-the-crotch strap, as it is made to stay on the body of a skier tumbling through debris and down a slope.



Airbags on ABS pack inflate like "angel wings"

Hilaree O'Neil, a North Face athlete, spoke on stage about the pack and the ABS system. She has seen firsthand the terrifying effects of avalanches, including with her husband, who broke his neck after being caught in a Colorado slide. O'Neil had many avalanche stories. One of her close friends was saved by an ABS airbag. "Airbags will become mandatory and mainstream" for backcountry skiers, O'Neil said. She thinks skiers and boarders in the near future will include an airbag pack as well as shovels, beacons and probes as mandatory gear. The North Face pack and vest is a big step toward this "mainstreaming," O'Neil said.

Back to fabric upgrades, the final significant unveiling at The North Face event last week was a technology called **FlashDry**. I did not get the nitty gritty on what FlashDry exactly *is*, but The North Face calls it a "naturally-derived fabric additive." This secret sauce will be added into base layers and jackets, and it is touted to be a technology that embeds micro-porous particles that dissipate moisture (i.e., sweat). The particles increase the surface area that moisture sits on, the company cites, allowing the moisture to spread out more and evaporate quicker.



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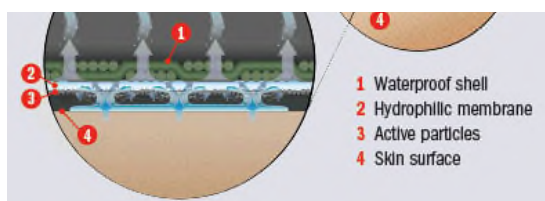


Diagram of new type of waterproof/breathable jacket incorporating FlashDry

FlashDry will be sold both as a wicking-type solution for base layer clothing as well as in a Gore-Tex type system for jackets. It will come in a fiber-level additive or treatment for clothing where micro-porous particles will do the moving of moisture. For jackets, the company will use FlashDry in a laminate, creating a waterproof/breathable shield for Gore-Tex-like performance but greater breathability, the company cites. In an interview, Todd Spaletto, president of The North Face, told me FlashDry was one of the "biggest innovations in the history of the company."



FlashDry base layer

Overall, I found the new products unveiled in Colorado to be impressive. These look to be big leaps, not just incremental updates, and The North Face indeed is poised to offer some serious new technical toys for climbers, ultra-runners, skiers and other active people beginning in 2012.

In the company presentations, the TNF executives liked to pull out tag lines and mantras the likes of "Athlete Tested, Expedition Proven" and "Never Stop Exploring." Another one, which I thought was kind of neat, was about making products with "unrivaled performance to [allow people to] explore the world and test the limits of human potential." Maybe it sounds melodramatic from the outside. But sitting at a table with Conrad Anker as he describes ice climbing on Meru above 20,000 feet at night "with spin-drift coming down my neck, and bad protection far below" you remember that despite the marketing this equipment is seriously tested and seriously real.

*Correction: In the original version of this article, we attributed Todd Spaletto, president of The North Face, as saying ThermoBall was one of the "biggest innovations in the history of the company." In an interview with GearJunkie, Spaletto was referring to FlashDry technology (not ThermoBall) with this quote. The quote has been moved in the article to reflect this change.*

—Stephen Regenold is editor of [GearJunkie](http://gearjunkie.com). Watch for tests of The North Face ThermoBall and FlashDry products on GearJunkie this winter.



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High in the Himalaya: North Face team on Meru's steep face

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#### By Stephen Regenold

Stephen Regenold is Founder of GearJunkie, which he launched as a nationally-syndicated newspaper column in 2002. As a journalist and writer, Regenold has covered the outdoors industry for two decades, including as a correspondent for the New York Times. A father of five, Regenold and his wife live in Minneapolis.

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