

# Alligator back in Great White North

*Maker of 1980s iconic shirts, Lacoste to open three shops in Canada in next year*

BY HOLLIES HAW

The uptown alligator is staging a comeback in Canada. Can the intrepid polo pony be far behind him? Lacoste, maker of the ubiquitous reptile-embossed shirts which, along with Ralph Lauren's Polo shirts, epitomized preppy style in the early 1980s, will open three boutiques in Canada in the next year, company officials confirmed yesterday.

"It is the old thing that is new again," said Michel Brouillard, a leasing specialist representing the Lacoste account for Montreal-based Oberfeld Snowcap.

The polo shirt that plunged in popularity almost as quickly as it peaked is enjoying a stunning resurgence among teens and the golf and tennis set it was created for, thanks to an updated design and its distributor's efforts to preserve the alligator as an elite brand.

"Eight years ago nobody wanted it," says Dominique Bouchard, chief executive of Devanlay Canada Inc., the Montreal-based licensee and manufacturer for Lacoste, a 71-year-old company founded by French tennis champion Rene Lacoste.

(The company emblem is derived from the Davis Cup winner's nickname, acquired because he won a suitcase made from the reptile's skin in a bet over a key match, and for his tenacity on the court.) "It has only been in the last two years that people have wanted it back," Ms. Bouchard said.

Lacoste, with two stores in Toronto and a third in Montreal, plans to unveil two locations in Vancouver and an additional Toronto store in the next year, and Calgary is on the horizon after that, Mr. Brouillard said.

"They are perhaps capable of having a lot more stores than that, but they they do not want to affect their existing client base and they don't want to cannibalize themselves," he said. "This will never become an Aldo type of brand with 40 stores per city."

Lacoste, which in its heyday enjoyed sales of US\$400-million in the United States alone, had been dead for a decade among the fashion-forward set by the time the French company repatriated the brand from its North American licensee, IZOD, in 1996. The distributor had slashed prices and begun selling the products through mass channels. "It was definitely a high-volume, low-quality product by 1996," Ms. Bouchard said. "[Lacoste] was not satisfied."

The tide began turning after designer Christophe Lemaire took over as Lacoste's creative director in 2000, with a focus on colour and refreshed designs. The classic shirt's boxy cut was jettisoned in favour of a more modern, close-fitting silhouette for men and women. Lycra was added for stretch.

Following in the steps of BMW and its moody series of short films, Lacoste commissioned a series of shorts by renowned Hong Kong film director Wong Kar Wai to air on European television. The company also began an extensive remodelling of its stores, and by 2003 the iconic shirts had once again found their way onto the backs of Hollywood's young celebrities, such as cast members from hit nighttime soap *The O.C.* Long-forgotten lines such as Ben Sherman and Penguin — affectionately referred to in fashion circles as "grandpa shirts" — have also resurfaced as big sellers in the teen market.

"We used to sell it to old golfers and now we sell it to 14- and 15-year-olds," Ms. Bouchard said with a chuckle.

"They think they discovered a new brand. But we also sell at Holt Renfrew and Harry Rosen. We try to reach everybody now."

But not everybody will be reached, and that is deliberate. It is essential to Lacoste's strategy that the brand remain on the leading edge of popularity, which means it cannot become too accessible lest it again run the risk of overexposure. Aside from its stores, Lacoste will only be sold at department stores and high-end boutiques.

The prices — \$95 for a women's polo and \$109 for a men's — will not slide into mass-market territory.

"It is a critical balancing act to grow the brand by spreading it virally in the streets but to not become too pervasive through advertising," said Ted Matthews, founder of Toronto-based marketing consultancy Brand Coach. "It takes a pretty vibrant brand to be able to hold on to that popularity." Financial Post

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DANIEL ACKER / BLOOMBERG NEWS After falling out of favour, Lacoste, with its alligator logo, is making a comeback among younger buyers.