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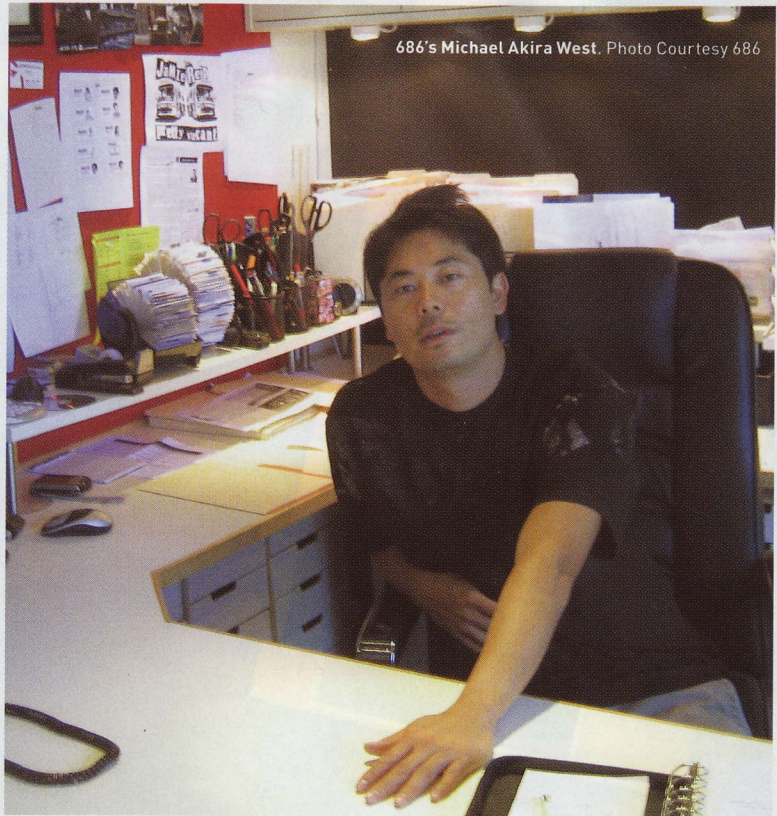
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686: LIVING THE DREAM

by Natalie Langmann

“THE ACE LINE IS CONSTANTLY EVOLVING. FUTURISTICALLY, ANYTHING AND ANY FORM OF MEDIA IS POSSIBLE.”



WHY NOT DO SOMETHING THAT YOU'RE ALREADY INTO? WHY DO YOU HAVE TO WORK AND THEN PLAY? CAN'T YOU DO BOTH AT THE SAME TIME?

These are words spoken by 686 clothing innovator

Michael Akira West, who at one time balanced his addictive tendencies of skateboarding and snowboarding while pursuing an entrepreneurship at the University of Southern California. 686 began as West's college project. From there, the B-graded homework progressed into T-shirts and denim jeans sold out of his dorm room. It wasn't until 1993 that his first breathable jackets were manufactured. 686 would continue to span the next decade modernizing the snowboard market with patented accessories, trademarked features and artist-influenced outerwear.

Westlife, 686's parent company, strives to stay above the trends of the ever-evolving snowboard world by giving the consumer a "more than expected" product. By utilizing the elements of small innovations, surprises, and high-quality clothing, it gives purchasers something they can be emotionally attached to and keeps them coming back for more. Westlife maintains functionality and individuality by introducing new products each season in the Times, Smarty, ACE, Manual, Gaper and ARD lines. This season Westlife crossed over the 686 core roots by also developing all-year fashionable sportswear with an outdoor-active state of mind. By looking outside the office and not at what is hot right now, 686 gives the market something unique.

686 diversifies its practical-yet-fashionable niche by collaborating with other industry leaders to produce the limited-edition Times line.

"The Times line concept is entirely new to our industry," proclaims West. "It breaks down all the rules of what you can't do."

With mutual respect, Hello Kitty and Dragon are the initial co-partners. The woman's Down with Kitty jacket includes a cosmetic bag and a custom wallet for the pants. The men's DX jacket offers 10,000-millimetre waterproofing with a custom Dragon goggle pocket and a reflective lens pocket replacement in the pants. The success of amalgamation has the Times line heading into its second season with its latest partners, Da Kine and Vestal.

Being that 686 was originally an L.A.-based company, it has grown by co-existing within urban and artistic surroundings. From those inspirations, the Artist Collaboration Effort line took shape. ACE is 686's unique way of submersing snowboarders into the progression of art and giving artists a wide-reaching canvas to showcase their own visions. ACE has evolved to include photographers, musicians, graphic and watercolour artists. Instead of the design inside of the jacket, it has been extended to the outside, and to pants as well.

"The ACE concept is part of our DNA," explains West. "It grew into our other passions of apparel and snowboarding. The ACE line is constantly evolving. Futuristically, anything and any form of media is possible."

Westlife's team ignores trends as much as one would think it should. Without fear of taking the chance to be the first, it has created such items as the patented Toolbelt, featuring an adjustable buckle that converts to skate/snow tools and even a bottle opener. The Smarty line is the big seller, offering removable fleece or poly lounge wear. A fresh direction can be found on the 2005-06 Smarty Troop jacket. 686 liked the look of the classy, dual-coloured pinstripe but wanted to add a little more to it. The new

fabric is bombproof, includes the timeless look of a pinstripe, and has textured ridges to give it a much better feel than a plain-weave, dual-coloured pinstripe.

The entire women's collection has been ramped up with a dedicated female design team who ride as much as possible.

West reflects back to a few years ago when they had only two females on staff: "Thankfully, it's pretty much even now that we found a talented girl named Leila who works closely with all the other girls in the office and our female riders. They make sure that fit, style, and the overall look is just what women would want on the hill. This really makes a difference when you have a true connection."

Look for the ACE Windsor jacket featuring artist Pete Campbell and the women's new Times collaboration with Da Kine and Vestal.

Canada is a huge part of Westlife's market. When 686 first entered the market nearly 10 years ago, people thought it was a Canadian company. Perhaps the presumption came from the way it operated—everything 686 did was Canadian, from all sides of Canadian reps, warehousing, currency, language, marketing and sales. The Smarty line has the leading sales within Canada, while the ACE is doing just as well. The big push for next season is the Times line with Da Kine and Vestal.

"We'll be supporting this program with additional marketing broken down into trade and public sections, which include advertising, in-store merchandising, parties, contests and a few others," reveals West.

"For the past 14 years we've been blessed to have a great group of people—from our rep force, retail partners, riders to industry supporters," says West. "Wherever we go in the future, snowboarding will always be at our roots."