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FASHION

Left and right, photographs by Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times; center, Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

A customer shops at the Theory store on the Upper West Side, left. Current looks from the New York-based label, whichhas prospered with a low-key business approach, are at center and right.

A Life in Rags and Nags: A Good Ride, Either Way

By GINIA BELLAFANTE

For seven years, Andrew Rosen, a third-generation doyen of the garment industry whose laconic presence defies the stereotype of a Seventh Avenue executive, has presided over Theory, the fashion label known for clean-line clothes, which he founded with a friend, Elie Tahari.

Mr. Rosen had served as the chief executive of Anne Klein and before that as the head of Puritan Fashions, a company begun by his father and bought by Calvin Klein in the early 1980's. Yet despite such a history, Mr. Rosen's morning reading does not begin predictably with Women's Wear Daily. It begins with The Daily Racing Form, countless copies of which are stacked in his otherwise spare white office on the 48th floor of the Grace Building in Midtown.

Alone or with friends and family members, Mr. Rosen owns over two dozen thoroughbreds, one of which, Master David, surprisingly landed in the Kentucky Derby, an event that took Mr. Rosen to Louisville with wads of $100 bills in his pocket and an entourage that included his teenage children, their dates, a Japanese business partner, a horse broker from Ireland, a friend of his father's skilled at handicapping odds and his private chef.

Fashion, like horse racing, is a high-risk enterprise, but Theory has been relatively immune from the vagaries that cause labels to rise and fall, partly because it has avoided the self-generated hype that relegates so many design houses to swift obscurity. It does not advertise, stage fashion shows or otherwise aggressively market itself. Nor does the company employ or cultivate known designers.

"For me, fashion was the last aspect of what I was looking at," Mr. Rosen said in the paneled television room of a house he had rented for the Derby festivities in Louisville last week. "I wanted to make clothes that were comfortable and looked good on a woman's body. Being in the pages of a fashion magazine was something I was not interested in."

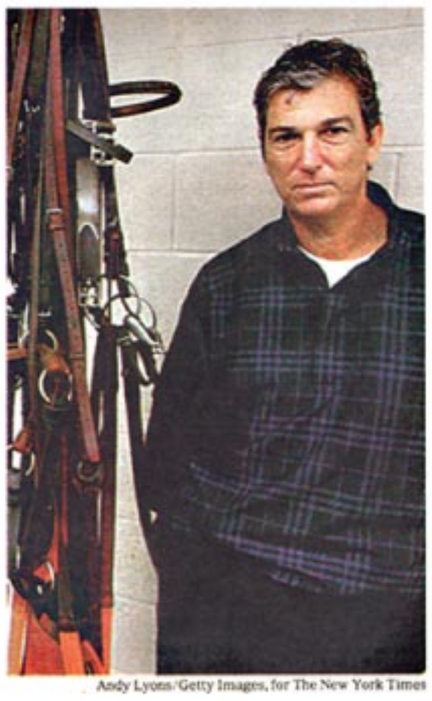
Associated Press

Theory clothes share the universe of Prada and the Gap, which is to say that they are uncomplicated and unassuming, though Theory, unlike those two brands at opposite ends of the cost spectrum, is almost impossible to identify. The clothes — well-fitting jackets up to $400 and $200 pants often cut from Lycra, simple skirts and comfortable T-shirts — have virtually no profile, in part because they are often intentionally nondescript, but more so because you have not seen them on billboards, atop taxicabs or associated with Gwen Stefani in the pages of In Style. So meticulously self-effacing is the brand that its logo is officially rendered in lowercase letters.

"I didn't feel I needed advertising to sell the clothes, because I felt that the modern woman did not want to be dictated to, that she'd get excited by something she had discovered on her own," Mr. Rosen said.

Despite that low-key public image, Theory has grown into a business that generates wholesale revenues of $200 million a year. Sales are expected to grow to $300 million this year, Mr. Rosen said. Though he still serves as president, he and Mr. Tahari sold the company to Japanese interests last fall, bringing capital that will help it to expand.

There are nine Theory stores around the world, with addresses as incongruous as Suburban Square in Ardmore, Pa., and the Avenue Princesse Grâce in Monaco. On Monday, the company agreed to lease a 55,000-square-foot building on Gansevoort Street in the increasingly chic meatpacking district. It it will include another retail store (Theory's second in New York City) and the corporate headquarters.



Andy Lyons/Getty Images, for The New York Times

In some sense, Theory imagines the modern woman as vaguely male in her consumer patterns. Assuming that many women value consistency more than mercurial fluctuations in style, Theory — like a Brooks Brothers, say — will make certain pairs of pants season after season. "This is obviously very unusual," said Robert Burke, the fashion director of Bergdorf Goodman, where Theory now occupies 35 percent more of the store's selling space than it did 18 months ago.

At the same time, however, Theory is not blind to developments on the runway. "Their strength comes partly from their ability to respond to trends," acknowledged Jaqui Lividini, the fashion director of Saks Fifth Avenue, which also carries Theory.

The clothes, 70 percent of them made in a garment district factory, are constantly in production. Because Theory makes clothes continuously, it can rush out a line of pencil skirts for spring when other designers have just shown them for fall — getting a jump on competitors. Unlike Zara or H&M, stores that subsist on replicating almost exactly looks from trendsetters like Marc Jacobs, Theory takes a more subtle approach. It borrows ideas from the runway — a cut, a shape, a potentially popular color — but does not brashly copy.

LEFT Andrew Rosen, a founder and the president of Theory, at Churchill Downs before the Kentucky Derby last week.

FAR LEFT Master David, a thoroughbred owned by Mr. Rosen and three friends, in a practice run for the Derby.

Renée Sumner, 56, a director of an outpatient drug treatment center in Miami, buys Theory to the exclusion of almost all other labels in large part because of the quietness of the clothes. "It doesn't define someone's style like Dolce — you can create who you are," Ms. Sumner said. "You put on Dolce and you've lost your identity. Suddenly you're a Dolce woman."

Theory sales representatives in major department stores, who are paid jointly by the retailer and by Theory, are asked to learn everything about the Theory woman that they can.

"We'll have a salesperson in Florida, and we'll know who her No. 1 customer is, everything about her, what she does in her spare time," said Trish Wescoat Pound, the president of sales for Theory's women's division. "We'll know that her name is Maria and where her daughters go to school."

Twice a year, Theory sales clerks come to New York for a meeting that Ms. Pound described as "really like an Anthony Robbins seminar."

But a confidence-building seminar of the Robbins sort would have been no use to Mr. Rosen on Saturday, who had little control over the fate of Master David when the horse faced a squishy, sloppy track after a rainfall late in the day. Master David finished 12th in a field of 18, though the odds had been more promising.

Mr. Rosen, who wore a loose-fitting flesh-toned blazer to Churchill Downs, setting himself apart from the legions of Derby-goers in coat and tie, said he and his team would skip the Preakness and preserve Master David's strength for the Belmont Stakes, the final leg of the Triple Crown. Pushiness, as he knows, does not necessarily win the race.