

**DECATHLON**

A 40-YEAR SAGA

CHAPTER 1: FROM FOUNDATIONS TO CREATION



**AND THE PIONEERING SPIRIT IS  
STILL GOING STRONG . . .**

# "Our start-up is 40 years old!"

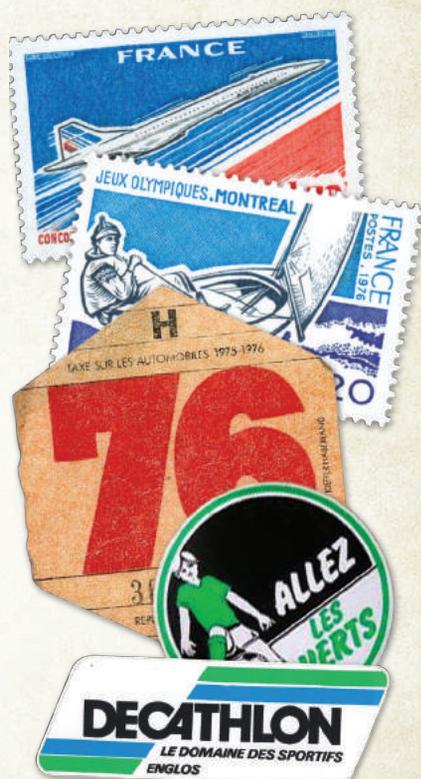
From seven associates to 70,000

Since 1976, Decathlon's ground-breaking spirit has focused on constant innovation to make sports accessible to everyone. Now, in 2016, who better than the founders of the French brand, which went international and grew from seven to 70,000 employees, to tell us about this shared entrepreneurial spirit? A dive into the past that propels us into the future. Revelations and (re)discoveries...

It's summer 1976 and France holds its breath. The heat wave is searing fields and lungs. Eternal sun and cloudless skies, thermometers bursting... While the summer vacationers relish the heat, farmers are scrambling for water. But in between scorching temperatures and holiday pleasures, the country is in the grips of sports fever. The AS Saint-Etienne players have repainted France green with their European soccer epic. Guy Drut is hoisting the tricolor flag atop the world of athletics and the Olympics. He is on his way to Montreal where the Olympics await him... as well as a gold medal in the 110-meter hurdles. A young Breton cyclist with a fiery temperament, Bernard Hinault, has been racking up amateur titles, and under the aegis of his new sporting manager, Cyril Guimard, he will dazzle in the professional frontrunners. Sport is beginning to take hold of a country where a more democratized practice is picking up speed. We are seeing the development of sport-related clubs and associations, in a country with seven

million club members and an annual increase of 6%. From soccer to rugby, the French are discovering, or rediscovering, their passions. Supporters of France's rugby union squad savored the victory of the Bleus over England (30-9) in the Five Nations Championship. Naturally, golf and skiing remain minority sports, but in October 1975 the country adopted

is not far away. On April 1, 1976, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak launch their first computer, Apple-I, into the market. **Sports and innovation... that's what's afoot in a small corner of norther France.**



the Mazeaud Act on Physical Education and Sport. Since then, the practice of sports and physical activity has been mandatory so that these activities have become an integral part of children's education and are included in all training programs, reflecting the recognition of sport as a right. The company feels a tingling in its legs raising your knees to run does not prevent you from lifting your head to create, travel and escape. Quite the contrary... The Concorde made its first Paris-Rio flight on January 21; the supersonic aircraft was Air France's pride and joy. Incidentally, the first winners of the National Lottery, launched in May, can also spend their winnings in the Americas now. And speaking of jackpots, in the United States Sylvester Stallone will certainly hit it with the premiere of the first of his Rocky movies the saga is just beginning. For others, too, the jackpot



# «We Were Just Nuts!»

The adventure begins in the parking lot of the Auchan mall in Englos, a town located about 12.4 miles from Lille... Seven entrepreneurs at work egging each other on. The start-up architects were inspired by Michel's vision, of which Benoît, Didier, Hervé, Nicolas, Stanislas and Stéphane became ardent followers. All seven shared an avid interest in sports. A start-up is being born, and after winning over French sports aficionados, it will spread across the world, but of this, the seven-strong group is not yet fully aware.



## Who are the founders of Decathlon?

These twenty-somethings are young, enthusiastic sports fans, at time friends but more often inexperienced in mass retailing. Hiring salary: 2,200 francs per month for single employees; 2,400 francs for newlyweds. The half-dozen recruits taken on by Michel Leclercq embark on the adventure along with their boss. Passion for sports is the common denominator uniting this group. Didier Decramer is a skilled horserider; Stéphane Delesalle is a field hockey champion who did his military service with the Battalion of Joinville; Nicolas Dubrulle sails and plays tennis and soccer, in particular; Stanislas Ernoult is a windsurfing buff; Hervé Valentin is addicted to tennis, skiing and sailing, as is Benoît Poizat. A dream team for Michel Leclercq, who is himself a fan of hiking, cycling and sailing. "Every chance we got we did sports together," recalls Didier Decramer. "At the beginning we would only open the store in the afternoon; in the morning we would meet to play sports." The commercial success would change their schedule, though it would not erode their sporting passion. "We continued like that for three or four months, and then we ended up opening in the morning, too. But we still had Sundays for sport," says Benoît Poizat with a smile. And the whole week to serve customers.

## 1976 – 2016: The Passion of sharing





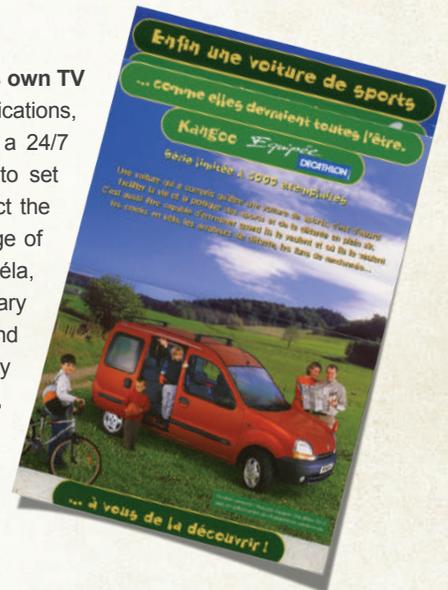
## ***Did Decathlon embark on other adventures besides sports?***

**Yes, they did.** At the Englos store in 1976, customers discovered a... news section. **“We would find newspapers and magazines there,”** recalls Gérard Allenet, **“I had discovered it as a customer of the store; it was original.”** The experience lasted only a few months.

The adventures that Benoît Poizat would lead in the late 90s are more surprising still: **“In 1999, I had a meeting at Renault; they were about to release the Kangoo, a leisure-oriented vehicle. The Renault company wanted to use Decathlon for their advertising, but I told them I was not interested. I did, however, want to meet their product chief. It took me three months to get an appointment, and I finally pitched to him the idea of making a limited series for Decathlon. I invited him to come visit the company’s back of the house (production, engineering, etc.). He then gave me a Kangoo prototype and said, “Design me a project.” We went to work and equipped the vehicle with a number of features related to sports and their practice. Then we invited the Renault people to the Campus store they were so thrilled, in all they produced about 45,000 vehicles.**

**We designed and created products for this vehicle to show them that we were both designers and creators.”** The partnership would last two years.

At the same time, Decathlon **decided it would launch its own TV channel.** It was 1999. Benoît Poizat, then head of communications, was again at the helm: **«Équipe TV had just launched a 24/7 sports information channel. We, at Decathlon, wanted to set up a sports education channel that would faithfully reflect the message of our company.”** The channel was on the verge of being named Decathlon TV... Through Jacques Séguéla, Benoît met Tim Newman, British producer of the legendary music show Rapido. He developed a model of brand channels. **“We wanted to produce ten hours of weekly programming broadcast from London.”** Ultimately, though, the project would not make it beyond the drawing board.



## Michel Leclercq: “You have an idea, I have an idea . . . we have three ideas!”

To speak of Michel Leclercq is to evoke the story of a visionary. The grandson of Louis Mulliez, founder of the Saint-Lievin mills at the beginning of the last century and patriarch of the industrial group of the same name, Michel distanced himself from the family business in the mid-1970s, choosing to work in the area of IT at Auchan. In 1975 he was 35 years old and wanted to create a new retail model. “He thought of books and sports as areas that needed clearing up,” relates someone close to him. Michel, however, would not become a bookseller, as he finally settled on sports. The idea was to gather as many sport activities as possible under one roof and offer customers the most



accessible prices.

Michel’s project vision is extremely innovative for its time; now he just needs to take action. In one week he recruits six young employees. “He put us in front of a blank page with his idea: to create a sports

store that would sell to the largest market while focusing on offering attractive prices,” recalls Benoît Poizat. “We all learned on the job. He was our teacher and at the same time gave us complete freedom. **That is management through trust, which is right in Decathlon’s DNA.**” To Michel Leclercq, his associates are also builders. He is about ten years older than them, but his teammates see him as an entrepreneur in innovation management. In fact, he gives them the power to decide on the spot how to best solve the problems they encounter. They will be thinking (quickly) while also moving (quickly). Michel would tell them, “You have an idea, I have an idea, we have three ideas! Here we go...” When he applied for a job in 1978, Gérard Allenet was interviewed by Michel Leclercq:

“As we were talking, he right away says to me: ‘In three years we will have 30 stores.’ That vision appealed to me. The prospect of growth was evident; it was inspiring. The vision encapsulated a strong will to develop the business. It just made you want to join him!” The success story was to prove true time and time again because, throughout the decades, the sharing of that passion has continued to drive the Decathlon teams. “From the very beginning, Michel told me, ‘Advise customers as you would your best friends. No need to rock the boat. And above all, no one has the right to say no to a customer,’” recalls Benoît Poizat. The power of saying ‘Yes’ is still going strong in 2016...

The Decathlon style of management has also been in place since the early days of the adventure. “Michel would say to us, **‘Hire people who are stronger than you! Choose people who are hungry**

**and who will take your place and strive to do it better than you,’** adds Didier Decramer.

If you want to be a growing company, you must build bosses. If you hire a salesperson, that person could eventually become the manager of the store, and so on. Michel always says, with a chuckle, that he went through the big engineering and business schools to prove that for him experience in the field is what matters the most. Everything he learned through others and what he has instilled in us is worth every bit as much as all the degrees in the world.’ An incubator of ideas and energy, Michel Leclercq has indeed created the conditions necessary for the success of an eternal start-up, whose

“At the end of the day, it is not about having the highest revenue, but rather it is about seeing our customers return in six months, a year. Misleading a customer is forbidden at DECATHLON.”

*Michel Leclercq*



CEO today is Matthieu Leclercq.

# 9,999 francs and a pair of socks, or the taste of competition...

These pioneers, bursting with energy and common sense and passionate about customers and business, were scrambling to ensure the opening of the first Decathlon on schedule. **This flagship store was opened on July 27, 1976.** It soon became a unique establishment.



If the opening of retail outlet dedicated exclusively to sporting goods to the largest number of consumers is simply the next stage of evolution for Michel Leclercq and his partners, for sports practitioners **the name Decathlon will soon become synonymous with a veritable revolution.** What is it that ultimately makes the concept so attractive to curious browsers and first customers, whose numbers are fast growing? Simple: for the first time, in a single store, customers can find a **wide range of sports gear at very competitive prices.** This is a first in the world of retail. Organized in the different sections, side by side, soccer shorts, jerseys and cleats; swimwear; tennis balls and fishing gear; hunting gear; bicycles and horseback riding equipment... Something never seen before a true novelty. The aim of Michel Leclercq and his team of pioneers to make the practice of sports accessible to the greatest number of people by offering them sports equipment at bargain prices was, for the time, a first. But the dream of the Englos pioneers was to slowly become a reality for thousands and then millions of French citizens...

On that July 27, 1976, the store's opening day, Michel and his young staff are awaiting customers. The store opened without much advertising, at the end of the mall's parking lot. Gradually, throughout the day, sports enthusiasts began to arrive. From Englos, the surrounding towns, Lille... word of mouth started to spread, and the concept was an instant hit. **"At 7:00 p.m., once we closed the cash registers and pulled down the shutters, we quickly added up our sales: 9,999 francs!"** recalls Benoît Poizat. The seven partners, being sports fans and competitors, and businessmen at heart, could not leave the total there. "To reach the figure of 10,000 francs, we bought a pair of socks!" Benoît laughs today.

Sales were good, and they would be the next day, too. And the day after that. And they would continue to be good in the following weeks, months, years, and in the decades to follow. Ever since that July 27, 1976, Decathlon found its style, and its customers, and took flight.



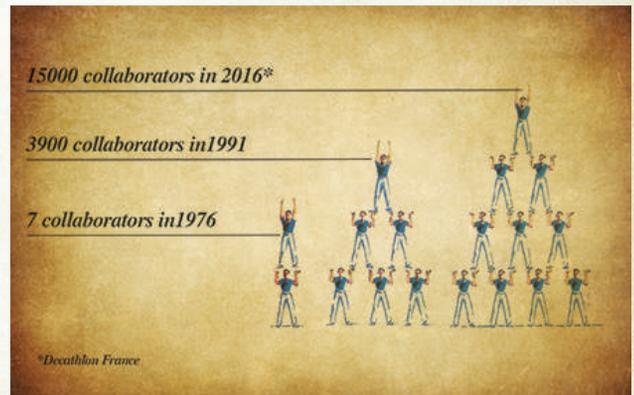
## **Englos, a first store: 20-foot ceilings, or founders' pragmatism**

To launch the project, Michel Leclercq sets up his small team of collaborators in a house lent by his cousins, in Englos's commercial area, southwest of Lille, where there is already an Auchan. It is there where Michel and his partners set to work and where the first store, with an area of 10,000 square feet, springs up. "I was responsible for its construction. I didn't know anything about it," says Benoît Poizat, commissioned by Michel Leclercq to oversee the site. "I built that first store a bit too low-ceilinged: 10 feet from the beams down. We would see customers lower their head as they came in! For the second store, in Roncq, a year and a half later, I had a little more experience. Though, I still wondered then, who we could sell the building to if we happened to go under. In Roncq, where there were a lot of car dealerships, I thought we could always sell the building to a garage, if our store met the necessary standards. I went to Peugeot and **asked them to put a car on a vehicle lift. I then measured the maximum height it was 20 feet. And so that's why ever since all of our stores have 20-foot ceilings.**

It was a biased decision born out of on-the-ground analysis. Ever the pragmatist!"

In 2016, Decathlon celebrates its fortieth anniversary, but **its history has taken tens of thousands of employees** over 15,000 in 2016 in France alone on a much longer adventure. All of it written over the years in the context of a start-up that is constantly renewing itself, which is Decathlon's secret of success. Out of this first team of seven "nuts," as Benoît Poizat likes to say, the passion for sports and for its practitioners has remained intact.

**Not everything has been easy, and there have been setbacks too, of course,** but every challenge, both then and now, has always been seen as an opportunity. A chance to move forward, to advance, to do better. And Decathlon's bounce-back examples are numerous. **"During the first few months before the store opening, as we met with our first suppliers, the building was not yet built. We would receive them inside a dilapidated house. We needed to convince them. If they came after it had rained, we had to enter through the window because the door would swell and jam. The seven of us would split up into two small rooms. At that time our first store existed only on paper, but our Decathlon spirit was already a reality,"** says Benoît with a knowing smile.



In early summer 1976, Stanislas Ernoult had just returned from a trip around the world. He had heard of Michel Leclercq's project through sporting friends and decided to apply for a job. "I had three years of business school but on meeting Michel everything just clicked. He gave us **a lot of autonomy right from the start** and urged us to be pragmatic, again and again." The challenges kept building up: product choices, relationships with suppliers, budgets and... the creation of a brand name. Because this name that now sounds so familiar demanded much reflection and even prompted some hesitation.

## **Watch the interview with a pioneer: "Decathlon in Four Questions"** on your Decathlon channel.





## ***Has the Decathlon logo remained the same since 1976?***

No. It has evolved. «A long word in capital letters, it made for a stable, highly visible company; it conveyed the idea of a trusted brand,” interprets Julie Roger, branding manager at Decathlon’s Design Hub. “The addition of a small graphic accident, from the get-go, between the C and the A lends it a dynamic, sporty quality.”

**At the turn of the 80s, the logo’s black lettering is dropped in favor of white lettering set against a blue background.** This new blue is lighter than the navy blue of the early Decathlon. This background color, present throughout the company’s architecture (façades, shelving, windows, door handles, etc.), becomes firmly established. “It was not an emotional choice where we said, blue represents the sea, the sky... We just wanted the word to be highly legible and visible,” says Julie. The logo has retained its general style unchanged. **“This is a sign that it has not aged in years. Many brands or companies revamp their logos to satisfy trends, through volume and shading.** Today, the dominant trend is to return to the simplest possible style, the flat design. Flat-tint colors; stick, straight font.” Ultimately, a little like the Decathlon logo ;)



## ***Where Did the Name Decathlon Come From?***

To come up with a name for his future chain of stores, Michel Leclercq decided to consult his associates. “We had one brainstorming session after another,” recalls Stanislas Ernout. “We would exchange views, throw names around... Michel had a specialist join our meetings to guide us through our thinking process.” Pentathlon, Triathlon, Decathlon, Marathon, Sportland, Sportmarché, etc. are all brought to mind; a plethora of names. “I think there were several dozen names considered; we took our time. In the end, Decathlon called to mind the top ten sports we wanted to feature in the store.” And so it was. “But to prevent a potential competitor from adopting any of the other names we had discussed down the road, we claimed exclusive rights over all the others!,” says Stan. A decade later, the group would open small outlets in the city center under the name... Marathon, before these eventually became today’s Decat’ stores.

From the very beginning, the company decided to set up shop where there was customer demand for it, in various locales and areas, but the name would always remain, Decathlon, which has become synonymous with “All sports under one roof.”

## “Satisfied sportspeople, that’s my business!”

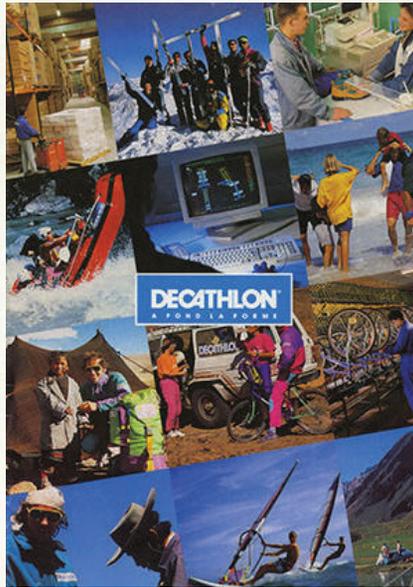
Once the foundations have been laid, it’s time to dive in... Stanislas at the helm of the fishing department, Benoît in charge of hunting, Stéphane cycling, and so on... Welcome to a land unknown, but whose terrain is familiar. The philosophy is clear: in order to serve and support customers in the store, you have to join them outside, and the rule applies to all Decathlon partners. “Michel once told me, ‘Go fishing with your suppliers!’,” says Stan laughing again. Benoît, meanwhile, convinces Manufrance to take him in so that he could learn about their line of weapons during the course of a 15-day internship!

“Choice and very enticing prices that led right away to making sports accessible to the greatest number of people. We learned that an endcap meant stacking products high and selling low. Every day, we adapted. **Today we would speak of a young start-up; a true adventure.**” The will to enterprise, to learn, that’s the DNA of the brand. That is Michel Leclercq’s expressed mantra as he leads the training, even today at Campus, Decathlon’s headquarters of employees, both from France and other countries. A message equally conveyed by Benoît Poizat: **“Look at what I tell you and look at what you are doing today, look at the similarities,”** explains Benoît. “I always engage these younger teammates by asking them: **‘Do you practice sports along with other sports enthusiasts at whatever level? Do you still have in mind the customer’s defense, the defense of his purchasing power?’ That’s precisely what has driven Decathlon’s success since 1976,** and letting go of that drive is simply out of the question. **Our customers know that we are on their side on this and so many other causes, such as convenient and affordable innovation; they love us for it, and we will never let them down, ever!”**

“ When a customer walks in, greet him, ‘Hello, Sir’ and offer him a bag. ”

Michel Leclercq  
Decathlon Founder

July 1976, direct contact with the customer is already a given. Store managers have their offices right inside the store. “A table at the end of an aisle,” describes Stanislas Ernoult. “Customers would approach us right away with their questions.” Sales associates wore a badge that read: “Satisfied sportspeople, that’s my business.” This motto would live on... and the “satisfied or satisfied” of today is the natural progression of that first leitmotif.

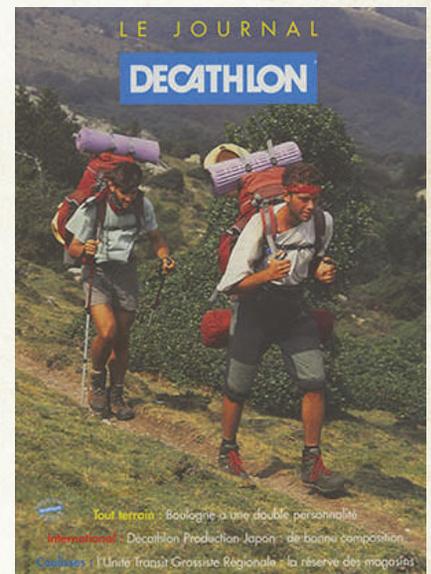


customer is the cornerstone. But for Decathlon and its pioneers, everything else would have to be invented: management structure, advertising, operations... Initiative and confidence are the young company’s first virtues the Leclercq method. “There was a great atmosphere among us,” recalls Didier Decramer. “It was fun to come to work, to create. And then, to boot, we played sports together!” Physical exercise and collective sharing sessions take place in the morning because the Englos shop only opens in the afternoon, except Wednesday and Saturday, which are family and children days. “But given the success of the store, our morning sports sessions only lasted six months. Soon we were opened the whole day six days a week,” says Benoît, who holds a special affection for the store’s ‘pioneering founder.’

“Michel would encourage us, teach us; he would debrief us. He would say to us: ‘First of all, here is your mission; it is clear. From there, the goal comes into focus; your strategy is negotiated; delegate your action plans. Secondly, once your task is written down, go for it; I trust you.’ From day one, I wrote this course of action on a notebook. It was the best approach to avoid behind-closed-doors management.”

In 1976 Benoît turns 24; he had never

built a store before. He listens, exchanges opinions and then he just goes for it. “I finally got a handle on it. I took on a lot of things as confidence gave me wings.” Gerard Allenet, who joined the company a few months after the Englos opening, completes the picture: “I knew two people who were already working at the store. I was heavily into sports, and when I saw the ad for a department manager, I decided to try my luck.” Michel Leclercq was looking to hire someone to be in charge of general services. “Michel was clear with me and presented me with his vision of services: accounting, cleaning restrooms, shopping basket distribution at store entrance, and so on. I said, I’m in!” Gerard would end up fitting the bill. “Michel would prime us: ‘You have to do like they do in the United States: when a customer comes in, you need to greet them, “Good morning, sir” and then you hand them a basket. One, it is a small gesture of welcome and respect, and two, if they fill their basket, all the better.’ My first day, I did exactly that.” The founders put into practice the motto: Learn as you grow, and the infectious message of success of this start-up would soon be transmitted to dozens, hundreds, thousands of employees. *des dizaines, des centaines, des milliers d’autres collaborateurs.*



***“It’s good land sense: much closer to the reality!”***



After overseeing the construction of the first store, the young Poizat is tasked with projecting a second store opening, a year later. “I was considering two possible sites in Roncq (a town near Lille), each of them located near the entrance to the large Auchan parking lot. **Michel had advised me to conduct a rather peculiar, or empirical, market research.** On a Saturday, the two pragmatic visionaries decide to take a drive to Roncq. Michel says to Benoît: “You’re going to stand at that end of the highway bridge, I am going to stand on the other side, and we’re going to count the number of vehicles at each end. In two hours we meet at the pub down the street.” Benoît counts and counts and finally heads to the bar. “Michel comes in and asks me ‘How many cars did you count?’ I answered: 690. He had counted 420. ‘Well, our market research is finished. Now you know what land you need to buy!’ I went to see the farmer and bought his plot of land. It’s good land sense: much closer to the reality!”

**Very quickly, everywhere, and all the time, Decathlon begins to challenge the norms, woo its customers** and raise eyebrows among manufacturers of sporting goods. Benoît Poizat: “When our suppliers saw our policy of unbeatable prices, some of them began to boycott us. We opened in July and by August our shelves were almost empty. We put up posters explaining that our suppliers would not deliver to us because our selling prices weren’t

expensive enough. We already had a **customer advocacy message.**” Michel Leclercq then asks his associates to sue the suppliers for refusing to sell. The legal actions accumulate, and so do the successes. Such would be the case for stocking on... skis. At the beginning of winter, the head of the mountain department was desperately awaiting an order they had placed with a well-known ski manufacturer. In other sports stores in downtown Lille, the brand’s skis were already on the shelves.

“We then found out from another merchant that this brand did not want to supply Decathlon,” says Benoît Poizat. “So we rented a van, headed to Paris and hit a specialty store where we bought almost all their stock, passing ourselves off as a skiing club, which earned us a discount. We set up our stock up at the Englos store and called the brand, saying, ‘We heard that you were not going to deliver to us; there’s just one problem: our store is already full of your skis. If you do not honor our order, then next week we’ll put an ad in the newspaper announcing the sale of all your skis at cost!’ Three days later we received our order, and we had learned to fight.”

**The group of undaunted Northerners holds its ground and gains a reputation for using unorthodox, but effective, techniques and methods of communication and advertising.**



## **What was the first product sold under the name Decathlon?**

**Officially, the first Decathlon products**, designed and manufactured by the company, **came out in 1986**. This is in fact the beginning of the Passion Brands. But actually, back when it opened in 1976, Decathlon offered a product bearing its name: the Decathlon bicycle, which you can still sometimes see on the streets. “At the beginning, manufacturers did not want to sell us their products,” recalls Benoît Poizat. “We covered every base and eventually, one by one, accepted.” Faced with the initial refusal of the major manufacturers which were disconcerted by Decathlon’s reduced margins, Stéphane Delesalle, head of the first store’s cycling department, had the idea of going to see Leleu, a bicycle manufacturer in Lomme, near Lille. “And if we placed our sticker on your bicycles, would you mind?” “No, not at all.” And so Leleu was happy to produce the first bikes that were sold at Decathlon.

They came in only one color: gray. “But we offered every size,” recalls Benoît Poizat. “It was a first compared to other bicycle manufacturers. It also resulted in a form of unbeknown marketing Decathlon’s metallic gray bicycles were easily recognizable from afar.” Guaranteed success that would continue growing.

The entire Decathlon philosophy is already manifest during those pioneering years. **“It’s what we practiced in ‘76 and it’s what we continue to practice in 2016:** customer advocacy rooted in our values; that is the key,” affirms Benoît Poizat. “In our business, we know for sure that in the eight days following a purchase, our customer is going to be in a locker room, a stadium, etc. If he is impressed with our services and products, he will tell those around him that Decathlon is great. A hardware business has no locker room; a food business has no locker room; a sport business does! It is a rewarding market, one that carries through, but we put a lot of effort and high standards into it. From beginners to high-level athletes, from children to retirees, sport for all; it isn’t just a phrase, it’s a reality for us.” A reality that offers just the right products, products that fit well, that are reliable, that respond to a specific sport, and always at the best price.

Starting in the summer of 1976, Didier Decramer had the task of organizing the horse riding department. “Nobody ever told me what I had to have on offer; it was up to me. Every week I would look at the sales to see if my product offer was relevant. We had a reference framework for how we should work with a supplier, but then when it came to negotiating, I was free.” And as always, initiative is paramount to entice the customer. “With my Renault 12 station wagon, I headed to Walsall, near Birmingham, England, where the best leather tanneries were located.

England has the best riding saddlery and steel available. I got settled in there, booked myself into a hotel, went through the phone book and wrote down the addresses of various saddlers. I went to visit them one by one; very nice people until I asked them for discounts. My English then was not helping much, but I knew I was serving my customers!” Decramer filled up his station wagon with gear and returned to northern France, via Calais, and cleared customs. “We’d bring the merchandise in Friday night, spend the whole night labeling it, and on Saturday morning it was on the shelves. And I was the one who calculated the selling prices. It is through action that we advance.”



Ten years after the store opening in Englos, Decathlon is, and has been for quite some time already, the chain that Michel Leclercq imagined. And it continues to develop the same concept, keeping the same values. **The opening of Decathlon Production finally enables the company to develop products of its own design and manufacture, ten years after the Leleu bicycles with the Decathlon stickers.** The Decathlon image goes back to the original advertising.



### ***Stickers and a deli van : always close to the customer***

In 1976, the brand is unknown, and ads in the local press are not enough to reach all customers. To gain recognition beyond the perimeter of the mall, innovation was of the essence. Benoît Poizat: «We had car-door stickers made with the words: 'Decathlon, the domain of sportspeople, Englos shopping center.» Dozens of students who were sports enthusiasts were contacted. "They placed the sticker on their cars and we asked them to leave it on for three months in exchange for a store voucher worth 50 francs. The average purchase was 300 francs. Because they were into sports, we were sure that their cars would often be parked at a sports arena or a sports club. We had 400 cars with the stickers it was pure brand awareness."

Didier Decramer, head of the horse-riding department, proved to be just as inventive when it came to name exposure. "My father had a small deli business. Every Sunday I'd borrow his van to go to a regional horse-riding competition. I'd spend the morning at the store stocking up on products, and then I'd stick a 13 x 9.8-foot Decathlon advertising banner on the sides of the vehicle. **The van doubled as a dressing room. Sunday night I'd bring back the unsold merchandise, and Monday morning we ran the sales through the cash register. The drive to do things, to take the initiative becomes a wellspring!**"



## ***Why do Decathlon sales associates wear a vest?***

**“At the beginning, the Decathlon vest didn’t exist,”** recalls **Benoît Poizat**. All store staff wore a badge that read “Satisfied sportspeople, that’s our business!” so that customers could identify us. **“We** also tried an outfit we had worn in the bicycle section; it was red and it wasn’t working.” Michel Leclercq, talking to his young associates, finally decides to implement the vest. It would be white with the blue Decathlon name on the back. “A functional vest with pockets to carry a pen and a notebook,” points out Benoît. **“But especially to be noticed by customers. And it has been worn by sales associates in stores ever since. It became a Decathlon symbol, which has evolved through time.”**

**In 2012, it underwent a new facelift with the addition of an orange line symbolizing the warm relationship between sales associates and customers.** A small revolution that “subverts” the traditional colors of the brand’s DNA. “Orange is a color that works well with blue. It is a complementary color in terms of contrast, visibility, like red and green,” says Julie Roger, a Decathlon designer. **“The idea was to give it a little more pep, and the vitality that characterizes Decathlon goes hand in hand with a sense of responsibility. The orange is just a highlight; we still have the dominant blue and white. Stylewise, the vest now fits closer to the body; the women’s model is a little more formfitting, more sporty.”** But always very Decathlon...





## ***How was the slogan «Full on Fitness!» born?***

In 1980, advertising executive **Jacques Séguéla**, feeling the excitement generated by Decathlon among the general public, decides to approach the company and pitch his agency's services to develop the brand's communication campaign. "He arrived at our first meeting in his pink Rolls-Royce," says Benoît Poizat, then head of communication and advertising...

A few months later, Poizat is traveling to Paris to evaluate the poster campaign. "The proposed range of posters was: In March, full on cycling; in April, full on hiking; in May, full on tennis, and so on. To me it didn't quite click. **Decathlon is not just sweat and competition sports; rather, it is first and foremost leisure sports.** I wasn't convinced. We get to the September poster. It's the era of Véronique and Davina and fitness on TV, and for that poster the proposed slogan was: 'Full on Fitness, Decathlon!'. That's good! Séguéla tells me, 'We can apply it everywhere!' I gave him the go ahead. It became the company's character.

The slogan was born from a combination of examples. I was not the inventor but rather the instigator. **At Decathlon, we have never really liked outsourcing... We prefer being active proponents of ideas.**"





## A FOND LA FORME

### *How did Tarzan become Decathlon's first advertising hero?*

After the TV sponsorship of TF1's weather report, Decathlon decides to venture into film with the aim of producing a commercial. Their first endeavor cost 1.5 million francs. "It was not a success," admits Benoît Poizat, then in charge of communication and advertising. For their second try, he's given a 3.5-million franc budget: "It was huge." The agency in charge of the production proposed an extreme-conditions natural scenario. "They quickly realized that what we, Decathlon, had that was so amazing and undeniable was the product. They proposed a scenario where Tarzan is racing through the jungle on a Decathlon bike through suspension bridge, vines, the whole nine yards. Guadeloupe for location, big film crew, the works. They just showed me some drawings, story boards. I'm excited about it but how do I sell it to Michel (Leclercq) at that price? Michel, being a spontaneous man, reacts quickly but on reflection he rationalizes things a lot... I have to present him with the project when his spontaneous side takes over. I set up a meeting with him, on such and such

day and time, in Paris, knowing he has a tight schedule because he's flying back right away. He arrives at the meeting; I watch him during the projection, then he cuts things short and says: 'Yes, I like it!' and next thing he's heading to the airport. Three days later, he comes to me and says: 'Perhaps we could film somewhere other than Guadeloupe?' I reply, 'Michel, they are already shooting!' I was on location during the entire shoot; I was nervous, I must admit: eight hours of shooting yielded two seconds of material. There was always someone who'd say that the clouds were not in the right place.

I wanted to understand everything, dissect the cost and the production. When we had the premiere, at the Ritz, I called it "the Night of the Advivores." I arrived at the last moment with my reel. The showing was set for one in the morning. The room is packed with students. We show the commercial. Everyone claps at the end: we had won. We were not very well known because we didn't have many stores yet. **The Tarzan commercial was etched into people's minds ...**"

---

The men and women of Decathlon have always been at the center of the project," insists Didier Decramer who, like the others, has been constantly evolving within the company, from one job to another, thanks to his drive and the learning opportunities, from one place to another. "What I've enjoyed, in all the posts that I've held, is the variety," continues Gérard Allenet. "Accountant, store manager, regional director, management supervision... I participated in the creation of the Domyos brand. We all grew alongside the compan: it is something unique. It is also the recipe for success, even when we are over 15,000 strong in France." **It was seven of them 40 years ago marching together in the right direction.** "Our start-up is 40 years old," chime in Michel and Gérard laughing heartily before concluding in a sort of goodbye, **"See you in 40 years to blow out the 80 candles of our start-up!"**

***"Innovation and design are the secrets of our start-up..."***



***Let's meet up in April 2016 for the next chapter of our story..***

*#40ansDecathlon*

---

***Follow Decathlon's social media news***

<https://www.facebook.com/Decathlon.France>

<https://twitter.com/decathlonfrance>

<https://www.youtube.com/decathlonfrance>

<https://www.linkedin.com/company/decathlon>

<https://plus.google.com/+decathlon/posts>

[@decathlonfrance](#)

[#decathlonmedia](#)

[#40ansDecathlon](#)

***Press/Media Relations***

**Magda Winiarczyk**

[magda.winiar@decathlon.com](mailto:magda.winiar@decathlon.com)

**Valérie Lefranc**

[valerie.lefranc@decathlon.com](mailto:valerie.lefranc@decathlon.com)

***External Communications Director***

**Xavier Rivoire**

[xavier.rivoire@decathlon.com](mailto:xavier.rivoire@decathlon.com)

***Download our media***

<http://media.decathlon.fr>