



Well suited

An accidental fashion designer with a talent for smart menswear, Matt Jensen is creating a crowd of well-dressed gentlemen on both sides of the Tasman.

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Plenty of men would love the opportunity to shout Matt Jensen a drink. The Australian entrepreneur and designer — responsible for founding high-end menswear boutique Herringbone in 1999 and, more recently, MJ Bale in 2009 — has made navigating the often complicated path to sartorial elegance a little less perilous thanks to high-quality, stylish and functional garments. Speaking with *The CEO Magazine*, Matt discusses the evolution of his design career and MJ Bale to date, and offers proof that his suits are made to go the distance.

The CEO Magazine: You were inspired to pursue a career involving menswear, design and manufacturing while working in the finance industry. What was the catalyst?

Matt: It was entirely by accident. My rugby team needed a new rugby kit and I volunteered to get them made. I found the whole process intriguing — from the design of the garments to the sourcing of the fabric and then the manufacturing. That was when I knew that I wanted to do menswear. We started off with making high-quality men's shirts and the rest just followed on from there.

You discovered your appreciation for merino wool while growing up in a rural area. What in particular makes this type of fabric special, and why do you use it for your brand?

Merino wool is undisputedly the world's best fibre, particularly when it comes to tailoring. It has a beautiful handle, while also being strong and durable. From an end user's perspective, a merino wool suit is super-practical to wear, particularly in the harsh Australian climate. Merino wool suits are lightweight and

breathable. They also absorb excess perspiration and redistribute it across the rest of the garment. Most importantly though, from an ecological perspective wool is natural, sustainable and renewable, as well as being biodegradable. We knew when we launched MJ Bale that Australian merino wool would be a core part of our brand offering, and that hasn't changed in more than seven years.

What challenges did you face while launching MJ Bale, and which are you most proud of overcoming?

We launched MJ Bale in late 2009, which was obviously a difficult time in the Australian market with all the economic headwinds. However, I think we were able to prosper due to a number of factors; one of which was we created a multi-tier brand hierarchy of good–better–best products traversing the price–quality spectrum. Blue Label is a more democratically priced range of suits, shirts and ties for price-conscious guys who still want good products; but the range has fewer options. Our Classics label is for the guys wanting more colour and a bit more creativity in their garments, while our top-of-the-range Collections label is for those true believers: men wanting suits handmade in Japan using the best Italian fabrics. I'm proud of what we've been able to achieve in a relatively short space of time. We now have more than 50 stores both here and in New Zealand and employ hundreds of Australians in almost every capital city.

What is unique about your job, and what do you love most about it?

The most unique thing about my job is the characters I get to work with every day. We have a lot of fun creating the MJ Bale product and doing what we do. I wouldn't change it for the world. The



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What aspects of the MJ Bale brand and products allow it to stand out among its competitors?

We've got a pretty special global network of artisans that we work shoulder to shoulder with to ensure we get the best-quality garments. That could be wool growers in Tasmania, fabric weavers in the Italian alps, tie makers in Lake Como, knitters in Umbria or tailors in the Iwate Prefecture of Japan. This value chain of working with some of the world's best experts in their respective fields gives us the confidence and belief that what we're offering the MJ Bale customer are garments with integrity and authority.

A recent article in *The Australian* this year, 'Can an MJ Bale crumple-

free suit endure a day at Luna Park?', concluded that the suit provided adequate breathability and held up impressively well after a long day. How do you feel about this kind of consumer experiment with the brand?

We love it when people interact with the brand in such a positive manner. We make suits for Australian high-performance sporting teams, such as the Australian cricket side and a lot of AFL and Super Rugby teams, so a lot of thought and consideration goes into the design and construction of our garments and making sure they go the distance. We did a campaign earlier this year called 'An Unsuitable Journey', where we sent a model from Sydney to London via nine different countries and ten different modes of transportation to test the resilience of our merino wool suits. The model, Tom, was crushed, but, thankfully the suit wasn't. ■