

Athletics brand Raging Bull has attracted the attention of retail aficionados following the success of its big and tall range for larger men. **Emily Hardy** takes the market's measurements

Keen to capitalise on what analysts agree is an undernourished fashion market, investors including former House of Fraser chiefs John King and Stefan Cassar have put their money where their mouth is and pledged to fund a rugby heritage label.

Raging Bull, launched by former England international Phil Vickery in 2007, is poised to accelerate growth as a result. It caters for men of all statures and offers clothing in sizes up to 6XL because, "in rugby, being big and tall is all part of the job".

Former House of Fraser chief executive King says he sees "huge potential" in the label, "not only in the UK but in overseas territories where rugby is popular so that Raging Bull can really challenge as a major global brand".

Raging Bull, which at the moment operates primarily through department store concessions and online, hopes to use the investment to branch out internationally and eventually open its own stores.

But why the sudden interest from these retail stalwarts in the so-called 'big and tall' menswear market?

Muddy state of play

The market for big and tall clothing is growing. One of the foremost players in the category is N Brown. It owns High and Mighty, a specialist menswear business offering long and wide sizes. High and Mighty has a handful of stores in the UK and a strong ecommerce offering.

N Brown also owns Jacamo, fronted by cricket legend Freddie Flintoff, which has several UK stores, including one on Oxford Street.

But despite increasing demand – which is hard to put a value on – the big and tall market remains largely untapped, particularly in the mainstream fashion market.

There are a number of factors to account for the reluctance among fashion retailers to enter the market.

First, as Verdict Retail retail analyst Nivindya Sharma explains, retailers have tended to resist selling plus-size clothes as part of their core offering because there are cost implications.

She says: "Retailers can be unwilling to foot the cost of the additional yarn



Former House of Fraser chief executive John King

Making it big in big and tall fashion



Sportswear brand Raging Bull was launched by former rugby international Phil Vickery (centre)

"People are getting bigger, and not a lot of brands have invested enough time and money in catering for them"

Shannon Mercer, Raging Bull

required for bigger garments.

"If retailers have a separate big and tall range it can be costed separately, but shoppers have historically reacted negatively towards these exclusive offerings and have continually expressed a preference for retailers increasing the range of sizes available within the core ranges."

She observes that when retailers introduce a separate range "it can often have a stigma attached but this, of course, depends on how the range is advertised and conveyed to the consumer".

Raging Bull managing director Shannon Mercer puts the opportunity down to a "tough market to crack".

"People in general are getting bigger, and not a lot of brands have invested enough time and money in catering for them," she says.

"This is partly because the demands for a big and tall range are very specific. Success requires a real understanding of the bodies of these big guys," she explains.

"A big guy can get sweaty, so the material needs to be right. They might need a bigger fit on the neck and they might not want to wear dull, dark colours. They desire big, bright colours too.

We're careful to account for their individual requirements, and when you give these men what they want, they are very loyal."

Shaping up

The retailers that come out on top in the big and tall category are value retailers such as Asda's George, Amazon and eBay but, as Verdict Retail points out, there's still a big gap in terms of the premium plus-size mark that "really needs to be rectified".

At the top end of the market, "since Ben Sherman stopped offering its big and tall range Ralph Lauren is the only premium brand that really competes," says Mercer.

Some premium mainstream retailers, such as Ted Baker, are beginning to see potential in the plus-size market, however.

Ted Baker's big and tall clothing collection – the T for Tall range – is aimed at men of 6'3" and taller and is modelled by Olympic swimmer Mark Foster.

Room to grow

While it may not quite fit the big and tall definition, other retailers such as River Island are targeting the plus-size market.

River Island launched a collection for women in sizes 18 to 24 last month, and Asos continues to make waves with its 'Curve' range.

Now is the time for retailers to tap into this market, Verdict's Sharma concludes, because slowly but surely a broader range of people "of all shapes and sizes" is being seen on screen and in magazines, which is likely to fuel consumer confidence and address any stigma that might still be attached to big, tall or plus-sized.