

Performance

My experience matched the promises made on the SmartWool website. It claims to combine “the temperature and moisture regulating properties of Merino with polyester for greater stretch and recovery and quicker dry time than Merino alone.” There certainly was freedom of movement and it did dry quickly. It maintained my body heat, and, when at peak effort, my perspiration did not leave me feeling wet and clammy. It does not claim any wind-breaking quality and, in my use, it doesn't have any. It was warm enough under my jacket that I was able to dispense my customary vest. If one needs wind resistance, I would suggest adding a biking vest that has a very open mesh on the back.

I first wore it inside for an entire day followed by two days of skiing in temperatures varying from 10 to 30 degrees. Inside the fabric is comfortable – little, if any, sense of scratchiness that I commonly experience with 100% wool base layers. Outside, the garment kept me warm without a sense of overheating. I did not experience the clamminess that often occurs when I use various weaves of polypropylene. The latter often feel sticky and consequently are often hard to remove when changing after a workout. Not so with the merino wool (56%) and polyester (44%) combination used in this SmartWool garment. It retained its shape as it absorbed and transferred moisture. It was easy to remove.

In a departure from my normal practice, on several occasions I did not remove it immediately after working out. Twice I kept it on as I drove off in a cold car and later visited with friends at a local café. While I'll admit I was not soaked to the core from my workouts, I was pleasantly surprised by the degree of comfort and warmth that it provided during the post-workout period. In another departure, I wore it for three successive workouts without washing it to test its odor resistance. No problem – unlike my other garments made of 100% polyester. I can easily imagine using this garment for a multi-day trip that requires packing lightly. Thus far, the material has retained its performance and appearance after repeated washings.

Fit

For me fit was less clear than the performance aspect. Matching my body measurements to the size chart on the SmartWool website, I would need a XXL for arm length, something between an XL or L for chest size, and an L for waist. Obviously, one needs to find a mid-point. I tested an XL. The arm length was surprisingly long, probably because of the thumb holes at the end of the sleeve. One expects sleeve length to be measured to the wrist. This garment, however, covers most of the palm and has a hole for your thumb, similar to winter biking jerseys. It might be helpful to insert my thumb to keep the sleeve from riding up my arm if I were putting on a skin-tight racing jersey. I don't do so, and thus I needed to fold the excess length back because I wanted to view the readings on my watch. If I were to use this as my outer garment for a hike or jog on a spring or fall morning, then the thumb and sleeve-lengthen would be advantageous. Similarly, the 14inch zipper seemed excessive for a base layer for skiing, but it would be a positive feature for temperature control when worn as an outer garment in cool, not cold, weather.

The garment was loose around the chest as it also was around the waist. A snug, skin-tight fit for constant moisture transfer would have required a smaller size. I haven't worn tight-fitting clothes since giving up on one-piece ski suits. Thus, for me, a loose fit was not a disqualifier. What did surprisingly raise questions for me was the torso length. The garment was long enough to tuck in, but just barely. Given the length of the sleeves, I had expected a more ample torso length.

The seams are soft; they do not scratch. The material is slightly meshed under the arms to provide additional venting – again an advantage for use as an outer garment. It added nothing to my experience of the garment as a base layer worn under a jacket.

Price

At list price of \$95 this product is stretching the limit. Merino wool products in general are more expensive than polyester. The SmartWool PhD Light Zip top is a blend that does, in my experience, retain qualities of both merino wool and polyester. The combination (or compromise) works. The price, however, leans in the direction of merino wool. This garment's utility beyond that of a base layer for skiing may justify the higher cost for some readers. It is stylish, with a two-tone color scheme. My compromise between cost and value is that it is worth buying one as a treat. Then, you are on your own with regard to your own set of trade-off within your budget.

Reviewed by Richard Nysse