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# Model and Front-Runner



Raymond McCrea Jones/The New York Times

**THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER** Oscar Pistorius, a double-amputee sprinter turned model.

By **ERIC WILSON**

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THE first thing that registers in a glance at the new advertising campaign for Thierry Mugler A★Men fragrance is that the model, shown running across the page, appears to have neon laser beams shooting out of his rump.

The second thing is his physique, his thick slab of a chest and powerful forearms in motion.

The last thing (and here it takes a moment to click) is that in place of feet, his legs end in hooked metal blades.

The model is [Oscar Pistorius](#), the South African sprinter with Olympic ambitions who is known on the track as the Blade Runner. As a double amputee, he runs on J-shaped prosthetics made of black carbon fiber. In the ad campaign, his blades are stylized to evoke the legs of a superhero, dipped in liquid chrome and wrapped in metallic foil, now resembling something like the shiny body of a motorcycle crossed with a dental pick.

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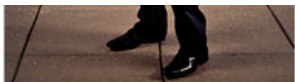
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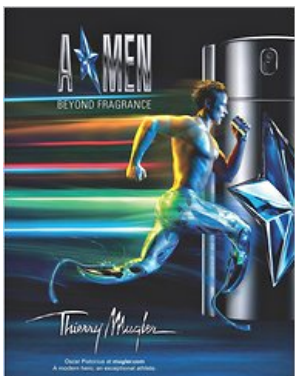
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On the rooftop of the Mondrian Hotel in SoHo.

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Mr. Pistorius wears stylized blades in the Thierry Mugler A★Men ad campaign.

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Jamie McDonald/Getty Images

Mr. Pistorius competes professionally in his Cheetah blades.

They are a striking addition, certainly, but not what draws you into the picture.

"It boggles your mind a bit," Mr. Pistorius said of the image, during a recent interview at the Mondrian Hotel in SoHo. His hair was shaved much closer than when he was photographed for the campaign. He wore a pinstripe suit and an open-collar shirt, and his prostheses that day gave the appearance of natural legs. He looked like a model, but not quite.

"When people see something that has a stereotype of not being perfect, or that we think is a bit taboo to discuss, it just catches them off guard," Mr. Pistorius said, "especially in a context where they are so used to seeing what we as human beings deem as perfection."

By hiring Mr. Pistorius for its ads, which will begin to appear in magazines in the United States this fall, Clarins, the beauty company that owns the Mugler label, was sending a deliberate message. The company wanted to challenge the often-singular ideal of beauty that is promoted within the fashion industry, said Joël Palix, the president of Clarins Fragrance Group.

"We have come to a time when people must understand that the world is diverse and that there is no such thing as conventional beauty," Mr. Palix said. "Corporations need to show that diversity is not just an idea, but a reality."

At a time when more attention is being paid to models of different races, shapes and sexuality, the appearance of one who was born without the fibula in his lower legs, which were amputated below the knee when he was 11 months old, in a campaign for a luxury fragrance is still unusual. After L'Oréal, a competitor of Clarins, coincidentally announced that Aimee Mullins, the model and athlete who also wears prosthetic legs, would become one of its global beauty ambassadors, the bloggers at Fashionista responded with a post that asked, "[Are Paralympians the New Black in Beauty?](#)"

That was not exactly the reaction the folks at Clarins were going for, but, Mr. Pistorius said, he recognized that the campaign would be provocative. And the overall response has been largely positive.

"I think the ad is just captivating," said Jane Larkworthy, the beauty director of W. "Oscar just exudes sex appeal. He's so strong and sexy. There is a kind of mystery about him. At the end of the day, he does have these unfortunate adversities, but he's hot."

For years, his efforts and legal battles to compete in able-bodied events, including the Olympic Games and the world championships, have put him at the center of a dispute over [whether his prosthetic blades give him an unfair advantage](#). Scientists have tried to measure, with conflicting results, whether his blades act as springs or are more durable or efficient than a biological human ankle. Although the Court of Arbitration for Sport ruled in his favor shortly before the 2008 Games in Beijing, he ended up not qualifying for the South African team that year. He is continuing to train in hope of reaching the London Games in 2012.

"I have a strong sense that I have to educate people about disability," Mr. Pistorius said. "And this campaign kind of gets people talking."



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His story, told in a memoir published in 2008, caught the attention of Clarins executives after the French edition came out last year. Now 24, he started running when he was 16, actually as a result of a rugby accident. His parents had encouraged him to compete, and so he did, fearlessly playing [cricket](#), water polo, wrestling and tennis.

When he injured his knee, running sprints was part of his rehabilitation. He eventually began training on prosthetics known as Cheetahs, which were being manufactured by an Icelandic company called Ossur. And while he was successful in the [Paralympics](#), his sights were set on competing at the Olympics.

Mr. Palix and Christophe de Lataillade, the creative director for Mugler fragrances, recognized his potential for the brand, which has featured futuristic robots and cyborg characters in previous campaigns. "This idea of the bionic man is so Muglerian," Mr. Palix said.

And it turned out Mr. Pistorius was already a fan of the fragrance, one of those, he said, "that you either love or you hate." Upon meeting Mr. Mugler, the eccentric designer whose personal body transformation in recent years is the stuff of its own bionic legend, he seemed charmed. Mr. Pistorius has his own idiosyncrasies, including a pair of pet tigers named after gods of the underworld. (Mr. Mugler is still involved in the fragrances produced under his name, but not the fashion, which is headed by Nicola Formichetti.)

"He's cool," Mr. Pistorius said of Mr. Mugler. "If I were to ask you to sketch for me what a French fashion designer would look like, and then write down five points on his personality, I can tell you that neither the diagram nor the words would look at all like Thierry or explain what he is like."

In his book, Mr. Pistorius wrote about his parents' decision to amputate his legs at an early age to give him the best chance of living a normal life. Whenever a child stares at his legs, he said, he will make up a story to help them understand he is not abnormal. For instance, he said he teases them, "I've got these cool legs because I lost mine, because I didn't eat my vegetables."

Being portrayed as a superhero in the campaign, then, made him slightly uncomfortable, but he looks at it this way:

"It talks about not conforming to what are believed to be the limits of others, but striving to make the limits of your own," he said. "That is an analogy I am more comfortable with when it comes to being a superhero."

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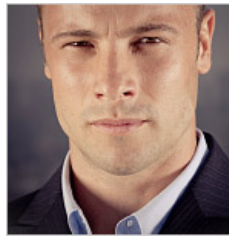
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