

High-style sweat suits — for a price

By Allison Kaplan
KNIGHT RIDDER NEWS SERVICE

Michelle Waller wanted more from her Juicy Couture jogging suit. Unable to find a flashier option for running errands after the gym in comfort and style, the Minnesotan created her own line of hoodies and unstructured cotton pants — heavy on embellishment, hardware details and intricate stenciling. She called it Royal Plush.

After nearly a year in development, Royal Plush debuted at a Los Angeles trade show in March 2005 and sold to an astonishing 200 high-end boutiques nationwide. Since then, the line has more than doubled its reach, adding L.A.'s famed Fred Segal and Boogie's, a celebrity favorite in Aspen, Colo., as well as 13 Nordstrom stores.

Waller, 42, had worked as a retail buyer and store owner in her native L.A. as well as in New York before moving to Minnesota five years ago when her husband took a job with Wilsons Leather. Once the younger of her two daughters

started first grade, she began sketching the clothes she wanted to wear.

"I was working out in the morning and didn't want to go back home to change clothes. I wanted something that looked cute enough to wear all day — something with more embellishment than Juicy," says Waller, who hasn't had time to work out in months.

She started with a fleur-de-lis design across the chest of cotton fleece hoodies and added antiqued silver zipper pulls. Waller is big into details: Fabrics are washed three times for a distressed look.

Every garment has a heavy silver charm sewn onto it and a satin label inside. Some of her newer pieces have delicate chains dangling from ornate graphic designs punctuated by crystals.

Understated, Royal Plush is not. Nor is it cheap — sweatshirts retail for \$120 to \$180.

Waller targets her own demographic: fashion-conscious women who are in shape but have the stretch marks to show they no longer belong in J.Lo's ultra-

low-rise bottoms.

"I'm not 16 anymore," Waller says. That's why Royal Plush pants have a generous 8-inch rise and come up higher in back, with flattering flap pockets. The hems are intentionally raw so pants can be trimmed to fit without requiring professional alterations.

Says Waller, "I don't want to pay to have my sweatpants shortened."

From its core sweatshirts, pants and tanks, Royal Plush has moved into knee-length tunics, long skirts in French terry, and camouflage print tops and skirts in tissue-thin mesh. Royal Plush also makes belts, handbags, jewelry, hats, even dog collars.

With the family totally committed to Royal Plush, the Wallers this summer are moving their company and their kids to L.A., where it's faster and cheaper to receive shipments from China.

Getting a publicist might also be a good idea — Waller has heard from retailers that Teri Hatcher and Hilary Duff have paid full price for her clothes.