

Jack Carlson: Rowing Blazers Isn't Just a Clothing Company



Jack Carlson
Creative Director & Co-Founder

Rowing Blazers
<https://rowingblazers.com/>

Interview conducted by:
Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor
CEOCFO Magazine

CEOCFO: Designer, archaeologist, author, and former U.S. team athlete — a true Renaissance man. Give us some background and insight on your journey.

Jack Carlson:

Ha! I have an eclectic background. I never saw myself ending up in “fashion.” But I’ve always been very interested in clothes. I wrote a book called [Rowing](#)

[Blazers](#) when I was in grad school studying archaeology. I thought it was going to be pretty niche. It was kind of an anthropological look at the blazer tradition at rowing clubs around the world. Most people don’t realize that the blazer originated in the sport of rowing! But the book took off in the menswear world, thanks in part to the support of Ralph Lauren. Its success gave me the idea of starting my own brand. I wanted to create a brand that was dedicated to the classics —but that did the classics in a way that is more inclusive, subversive, and thoughtful than other brands. I wanted to adapt some of the ideas of street wear, like frequent collaborations and smaller “drops,” rather than big collections. And I wanted to create a classics brand that is also dedicated to giving back to the community and to doing everything in a thoughtful, ethical way.

CEOCFO: What drives your passion?

Jack Carlson:

I’m passionate about designing clothes that bring joy into the world. I’m passionate about making things that are a little bit preppy, but have nothing to do with the stuffiness and elitism that the word usually conjures up. I’m passionate about pushing the industry in the right direction in whatever small ways we can, in terms of how and where we are making our products and the kinds of materials we are using. I’m passionate about collaborating with amazing brands that I have loved for a long time as well as celebrities and sporting heroes I’ve admired since I was a kid. And I love creating and bringing things into the world that don’t or wouldn’t exist except for Rowing Blazers.

CEOCFO: What’s the vision behind Rowing Blazers?

Jack Carlson:

Rowing Blazers is about nostalgia, color, and sport. It's about a timeless American and British aesthetic with modern values. It's about the belief that clothing should be fun. I think with everything we do, we try to embody all of those things, whether it's a watch collaboration with Seiko, or the other small brands we carry on our site, or a new category we're releasing.

CEOCFO: *How has the company grown and evolved? What surprised you along the way?*

Jack Carlson:

The company and the brand have grown like crazy in the past two years. It's becoming a name that people recognize. Even that is a surprise. I don't mean that to sound like I had low expectations for what we would achieve, because I've always had very high expectations and high standards for myself and for the brand. But this whole world is still new to me, and it always just blows my mind when I see an NBA player or a world-famous musician wearing something I designed.

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CEOCFO: *According to your site, Rowing Blazers is a community. In what way? How does this approach reflect your values?*

Jack Carlson:

We are a community and that informs everything we do. If we were just a clothing company and if we didn't care about building and fostering our community, we would probably operate much differently. But that's not something that I would be interested in, or that I would wake up in the morning and feel excited about. I think this approach informs what we do in a couple of ways: For one, we only pursue projects and collaborations that are genuine to who we are and to who our community is. Of course, not everything we do is going to be for everyone. Our community is as diverse and eclectic as we are and as our influences are. But we aren't ever going to do something that is disingenuous or inauthentic to who we are. We do a lot of [brand collaborations](#), but we turn down even more. We only pursue the projects that are true to who we are.

The other way that this community aspect informs what we do relates to how we give back. We believe actions speak louder than words. "Esse quam videri": to be, rather than to seem. And we believe in putting our money where our mouth is, and donating to causes we believe in. We've partnered with Row New York, Play Rugby USA, the NAACP, Stop AAPI Hate, Save the Children, The Robin Hood Foundation, Social Change Fund United, Athletes Against Anxiety and Depression Foundation, The Bee Conservancy, and many other organizations.

CEOCFO: *Would you tell us about Row New York? Why is that organization important to you?*

Jack Carlson:

Row New York is extremely important to me. I first met Amanda [Kraus], who founded Row New York, and Jennie [Trayes], who worked there with Amanda, in 2014. We were having a book launch party for my book at Ralph Lauren, and I wanted a portion of all the evening's sales to go to Row New York. At the time, I thought: This is a nice program. It gives kids who wouldn't otherwise have the opportunity to try rowing some exposure to the sport. I didn't realize how robust a program it really is. It serves so many kids and it's a very competitive program! These kids go on to row and study at some of the best university programs in the country. It's really amazing. And it's changing the face of the sport for the better. It's helping to make the sport not only more accessible but also more diverse — which I think is extremely important.

CEOCFO: *What have you learned from past activities that helps shape Rowing Blazers —what to do in business and also what not to do?*

Jack Carlson:

[My rowing background](#) taught me a lot. It taught me about competition. About determination. I first raced at Henley, which is kind of like the Wimbledon of rowing, in 2004. I got knocked out in the first round but kept going back again and again and again. Every year I made it a little further. It's a big bracket, like Wimbledon or March Madness. I made the semifinals (the final four) in 2011. I made the final in 2012, and we lost by 3 feet. And finally won in 2013, nine years after I first raced there. It also taught me a lot about teamwork. It's amazing what you can accomplish when a group of diverse people sync up and pull together in the same direction.

CEOCFO: *What's next for you?*

Jack Carlson:

Rowing Blazers has lots of exciting projects coming up this year! I don't want to give away too many secrets, but you can follow us at [@rowingblazers](#) on Instagram.

