

Gareth Kemp to lead Ares Group as new CEO



By [Lauren Hartzenberg](#)

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Ares Holdings Group, the distributor of apparel brands Under Armour, Birkenstock, Crocs and 2XU in southern Africa, has appointed Gareth Kemp as its new chief executive officer, succeeding Neil Scheibe who will remain on the company's board.



Gareth Kemp, Ares Holdings Group CEO. Source: Supplied

Kemp was instrumental in establishing the Ares Group in 2016 and has since occupied the role of managing director of Under Armour since its launch in South Africa. He has been a key player in the larger business, supporting exiting CEO Scheibe in growing the brands and their distribution as well as establishing the systems infrastructure and teams required to position the business as a foremost distributor of global brands.

Here, Kemp talks us through the meaning of this next step in his career, the challenge that awaits in steering the company through a turbulent economic landscape, and the market opportunities that Ares aims to harness.

■ ***Gareth, congrats on the new appointment. What do you believe this means for you and brands in the Ares Group Holdings stable?***

It's a huge honour to be heading up the Ares Holdings portfolio with leading global brands Under Armour, Birkenstock, Crocs and 2xU in southern Africa. I was one of the founding members who started this fledgling company back in 2015 when I took up the responsibility as MD of the Under Armour brand.

Ares has collectively experienced a number of major successes and milestones over the years. My new role is to make sure we continue this upward trajectory.

The CEO appointment is a huge undertaking; we are busy navigating a very tricky period with the pandemic having caused major issues globally and locally. I enjoy working in a challenging environment, and with the amazing talented teams we are fortunate to have within Ares, I believe we are going to be in good shape once we come out at the other end. It's an exciting new chapter for both myself and the group.

▣ ***What's at the top of your to-do list in your new role?***

We are currently adapting strategy to take advantage of new opportunities and to address the new challenges of today. As a company, we must continue to evolve and remain relevant and top of mind with our customers. Our global partner relationships are critical to our success, getting alignment of our strategy we are wanting to implement and an understanding of our local market conditions will be a key task.

We have always had a great culture, nurturing this, and working out how we can build on this, especially with the challenges around workplace and work from home, will also be very important.

▣ ***What inspires/excites you most about the brands you're working with?***

The Ares Group has set a very high standard for itself, individually each brand has its own unique story with its own unique selling points. We have clearly defined goals, and we service varied market segments, so every day poses a new challenge and with that comes new opportunities. It is very exciting to work in such a dynamic environment.



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▣ ***In your opinion, what are the qualities of a great business leader?***

To be a successful leader you need to be more than just a visionary steering the brand around pitfalls. You must know when to seize opportunities and how to rally employees to work hard toward the company's goals.

For me, it's all about being honest, transparent and collaborative, being completely self-aware, understanding your own strengths and weaknesses and that of your team. Every day is a new opportunity, remaining humble and hungry and to keep learning and working on my own leadership skills is something I will keep pushing myself to do.

▣ ***How do you plan to help navigate Ares Group Holdings through these unusual times?***

There is no pretty answer, every brand has been forced to reinvent themselves and adjust to a new and ever-changing normal. We need to continue to do the grunt work, stay abreast of the latest trends and also understand that the global pandemic has not only affected the consumer pocket but also their buying power and trends.

We need to accept that we will be operating in prolonged survival mode and are going to have to learn to be more elastic and flexible. For me, it's all about leaning on your strengths, embracing new technologies, remaining innovative, understanding the customer's needs and being agile to ensure that we stay ahead of the competition.



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■ ***What do you view as the key challenges and opportunities in SA retail at present, particularly in the apparel and footwear space?***

South Africa's clothing industry has not escaped the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, with retail sales in the SA clothing and textile industry reaching the worst decline ever recorded in 2020. There is simply no margin for error, we have however been fortunate to be in a particular sector that has seen some impressive growth despite the current economic climate.

We have continued to open stores with decent results, further proving that we have demand for our brands. The focus for us is to remain relevant, to offer a product that solves a problem and services a need. There's some stiff competition and consumers are spoiled for choice, however we are all fighting for the same pocket.

Consumer behaviour is changing rapidly, and this is largely because of the explosive growth of e-commerce. Customers have many choices at their fingertips before they commit to a purchase decision. A huge share of purchases are now made online, but studies show that consumers prefer to buy things in person at brick-and-mortar shops.

It's common for customers to research products online only to purchase in person. This is a massive opportunity for us, and we have invested substantially in our e-commerce offering as well as our retail offering and experience.

■ ***Could you share some of the most rewarding moments or milestones of your career journey?***

Throughout my career I have always wanted to start a distribution business. The set-up of Ares and seeing where we are today, especially having dealt with what we have, is a proud moment.

This new chapter is definitely a big milestone. Being a part of the team that launched Under Armour to the SA market, growing the brand and its distribution lines and firmly cementing UA's presence as one of the leading performance footwear and apparel brands in the country has also been special.

■ ***Anything in particular you're currently reading or listening to for work inspiration?***

I listen to podcasts on a regular basis; understanding how different companies are reimagining themselves is inspiring.



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■ ***What is your hope for the company and South Africa's retail industry at large?***

I hope that we will find a bit of stability and consistency in the not-too-distant future. I encourage our industry and others to find ways to support each other, keep investing and building their businesses wherever they can. The business leaders in South Africa, however big or small, can all play a part to positively influence our country's economic recovery.

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