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Look Good, Play Good

The World of American Sports Uniforms

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Report

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Abstract

Look Good, Play Good

The World of American Sports Uniforms

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As part of America's cultural traditions, sports have become one of the most followed and widely appreciated aspects of entertainment and enjoyment for generations. The one consistent part of sports, that all fans and non-fans can understand, is the practice of team uniforms serving as identifiers and connectors to the city, franchise, and history they obtain. Look Good, Play Good: The World of American Sports Uniforms informs of the sports realm in the context of clothing. Four parts of the uniform world help describe and explain the teams and locations that wear them. They do this through historical, influential, and forward thinking distinctions.

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Introduction

Every sport, team and player is defined by something that gets sporadic attention, but it is one of the most important elements of athletic competition, especially from a fan's perspective. The aesthetic elements add to the allure for fans and makes one sport stand out from another, or one team from another. Uniforms, jerseys, kits, sweaters, or whatever they are referred to as, are a soulful center to sport itself; functionality and fashion collide in an attempt to look good while playing good. And in the end, uniforms have become a universally recognized way for fans to show their colors and to define themselves. It is tribal, cultural, and competitive – the whole sub-culture of sports uniforms, what they mean and imply, says volumes.

Sports have encompassed American lives and become a cultural identifier, indicator and engager ever since the first immigrants arrived. They have a built-in audience and a built-in cultural connection that speaks to our consumer-driven, aesthetically compelled society.

American sports have become powerhouse businesses with huge followings and absurd amounts of money flowing in and out. The connection of a team to its uniform makes the traditional customs of sports stand out. Shirts, pants, socks, helmets, and more all play a part in America's perspective of sports.

Being a fan of a team means connecting oneself with the clothing worn by their favorite players, and helps people make more than just a fashion statement. They make statements regarding their hometown, preference, and heritage by donning a team's uniform.

Without the distinct and dynamic clothing worn by sports teams, the world of athletic competition wouldn't be the same.

This article will explore the history and context of sports uniforms, with firsthand experiences told through the fashion and function of American game-worn jerseys. The idea is to expand knowledge on the singularly basic aspect of the world of sports, and enlighten even the most fair-weather fan to a level of appreciation not reached before.

History of Baseball Uniforms

Materials used in sports team uniforms began with basic wool and flannel. According to *Baseball Uniforms of the Twentieth Century* by Marc Okkonen, the first professional baseball team to adopt a uniform was the New York Knickerbockers, owned by Alexander Cartwright. White flannel shirts with a black collar, blue wool pantaloons, and straw hats adorned the team as they played out the 1849 season. This would be common (except for the straw hats) for nearly the next 100 years of Major League Baseball uniforms. The flannel and wool were imperfect for players and equipment managers. Wool, which is permeable to air and water, wicks moisture away from the inside to the outside, dries from the inside to the outside, and therefore insulates on the inside. Even when wet, wool kept athletes warm and comfortable; its ability to hold water without becoming completely saturated was key. Unfortunately, wool was expensive, hard to dry once it was saturated, and required hand washing and line drying. Of course, wool is also known to be itchy, and its bulkiness and fragility added to the problems. Eventually, wool was replaced with a cotton-poly blend woven flannel, which was much lighter and cooler. By this time, baseball uniform styles became more functional. Such flannels stuck around for years, and identification tools began to emerge, like numbers and names on the uniforms, explained in *Baseball Uniforms of the Twentieth Century*. Materials didn't change much until 1970 and the era of the cotton-nylon knit fabric, later shifting into polyester. The idea was to produce a cooler, lighter fabric than the flannels, and make it easier for professional league baseball teams to be comfortable

on the diamond. These uniforms will be detailed in the next section when highlighting the revolutionary aspects of the first arrivals of knit fabrics.

Since the years of the first knit uniforms in major league baseball, materials have improved without drastic changes. Styles and colors may shift here and there, but to this day uniforms are made out of knit fabrics, which seem to give athletes the ideal balance between function and fashion.

In-Depth with the Baltimore Orioles

From start to finish, a uniform goes through a process of inception and design. But what exactly goes through the mind of team officials when they come up with the idea? Greg Bader, Communications Director with the Baltimore Orioles, gave some insight.

“One of the primary objectives is to design a uniform that represents your brand and that you find aesthetically pleasing as a company,” said Bader.

“How you believe your uniform will be perceived is of course critically important as well. From our perspective, we are not looking to set a new trend league-wide, as we are simply concerned with our own brand and image.”

That brand is what Major League Baseball Organizations, true business-operating companies, look to as visual symbols of their identity. Some specific aspects of Orioles uniforms stood out for Bader when he considered the importance of branding.

“The color orange, one of the key design elements for our ballclub, and the script “O” are two brand elements that are critical to our identity,” he said.

As for leaving things the way they are, the Orioles have consistencies that have lasted throughout the years.

“We have our own identity and try to stick with that identity in all of our uniforms over the years,” Bader said. “You will see some changes over the years, but none are particularly trendsetting.”

The orange of the Baltimore uniforms is one of the primary things that the Orioles are most happy about. Only a handful of teams display orange colors in their uniforms so prominently, and Bader recognizes that.

“We are proud that our color scheme is relatively unique in professional sports,” he said.

“The closest colors are the San Francisco Giants, who do a great job with their uniforms and their use of orange. Only a few other sports teams, including the Mets and the NFL’s Broncos among them, use orange prominently, so we believe that is a strong design and brand advantage.”

Color is big, and it connects spectators with a team whether they are watching the game in a stadium or on television, seeing the image of the organization on the professional sport stage.

“Your players in uniform is the most widely seen image of your club, so you want to stand out and have your fans (and organization) proud to see the team take the field,”

Bader said.

New uniform design has often been accused of having mere economic impact for professional teams. He said some clubs might see the value in merchandise sales that change over with consistent frequency, but not Baltimore.

“We have not made our uniform design decisions based on a desire to sell more product,”

Bader said.

“We of course hope that our uniforms are well received and that our fans wish to purchase them, but that is not by any means a primary objective of the club. When our uniforms undergo changes, they are to keep up with the times and to continue to grow our brand.”

Back it comes to the brand again. Establishing that instant recognition and understanding of a team’s uniforms is what the Orioles have tried to do.

As recently as 2009, the organization decided to add “Baltimore” to the front of the road jerseys, after it read “Orioles” for the last 35 years. Why such a change?

“[It] was done in part due to the club’s desire to demonstrate a reconnection with the City of Baltimore,” Bader responded. The Maryland flag also hangs from the uniform’s left sleeve.

A fan base starts in the city the team plays in, and connecting with that community lists high in the group of objectives behind a uniform’s conception.

The Icons

When we think of certain sports and sports figures, the clothes on their back are as visually important as each individual's physical attributes. Who is Magic Johnson if he isn't wearing Lakers uniform? Wouldn't Bobby Orr look strange in anything but a Bruin's number four? When you think of Troy Aikman, what uniform is he wearing? As part of the personal connection to sports, uniforms serve as the common icons that enter our minds.

Iconic American uniforms number in the few, but stand out above others as perfect examples of timeless treasures. They are rarely altered over generations, and if they are, fans have been known to rebel against the changes and persuade teams to revert back to the original, as seen through the Tampa Bay Lightning uniforms and explained in a later section. Each of these icons represents a city, a following, and a tradition.

Football Icons

The National Football League has grown to become one of the biggest businesses in the United States, and the biggest teams in the business are the ones that have sustained their position over the years and are represented by a large fan base not always directly located within the team's vicinity.

The uniform of the Dallas Cowboys has used the blue star on the helmet and blue, white, and gray to make their mark on the history of NFL jerseys.

Their huge popularity helped make the Cowboys a team with highly sought-after merchandise. That popularity spread far from the confines of the Dallas-Ft. Worth area, into all corners of Texas, a football-crazed state that obsesses over high school, college,

and especially pro pigskin. It even spread beyond that, as Dallas became America's Team.

The name of the team and the star logo are nostalgic connections to the region the Cowboys come from, paying homage to the rich history of the Lone Star State.

Some unique aspects of the Cowboy's uniforms help the Dallas team stand apart from other NFL squads, like the lacing system installed in the front collar. The laces connect the uniform to a player's shoulder pads underneath, preventing slippage and securing the uniform in place. Also, Dymo Tape labels, the imprinted indentifying stickers that are found on Cowboys helmets, are unique to the Cowboys, as they are the only team to consistently use this method of keeping track of which helmet belongs to which player, according to the Dallas Cowboys website.

Of course, no mention of the Cowboys can exclude their cheering squad, which has made its mark on the NFL scene as well. During the 1972 season, the Cowboys Cheerleaders would receive a "make-over" that led to an even greater uniform recognition, according to their website.

Tex Schramm, the Cowboy's General Manager at that time, used his television background to come up with an idea. Instead of choosing pretty models with good looks, as was the custom, Schramm decided to hire dancers, who were more athletic and in better shape than any model. The cheerleaders would become a glamorous, choreographed squad of accomplished dancers who created yet another visually appealing aspect of a football game, according to the Cowboys Cheerleaders website.

Fast forward to the 1976 NFL Championship, when a TV camera focused on one of the cheerleaders during a break in the action. She looked directly into the camera and gave the TV audience a wink, forever stamping the Cowboys Cheerleaders into the sports world's visual memory, according to a Football Babble article. The cheer squad would become, fittingly, "America's Sweethearts."

As the team continued its winning ways, the cheerleaders moved into the spotlight along with them. Soon enough, excuses to get the cheerleaders on screen beyond the sidelines of a game became common. Commercials, network television specials, and even a motion picture highlighted the girls in an unprecedented way, and their uniforms have become as iconic as the Cowboys'.

Those uniforms, carefully protected through trademarks to resist duplication, consist of a blouse, vest, and shorts. There have only been six minor modifications of the uniform since the squad was formed in 1972, according to the squad's website. The iconic cowboy boot was added in 1989, establishing yet another historic connection to the state of Texas.

Basketball Icons

Basketball uniforms are minimalist in the sports world, with only a sleeveless shirt and shorts comprising the whole get-up. This allows for a more limited design than that of hockey or football, in which uniform parts cover a player from head to toe. The NBA uses less material than other sports uniforms, but still leaves room for iconic designs. Two examples, the Los Angeles Lakers and the Boston Celtics, have uniforms that are unmistakable.

The rivalry between the teams added a lot to the image. Starting in 1959, when Boston met the Minneapolis Lakers in the NBA Finals, the competitive series served as the appetizer. Of course, more recent meetings in the 2008 and 2010 Championship games have revived the rivalry, after a long drought dating back to the 1987 Finals.

Again, a history of winning aided the popularity of the two teams' uniforms. Boston, with its 17 rings, and Los Angeles with its 16 trophies, represent 33 combined wins, more than half of all NBA Championships in history, according to NBA.com. The storied franchises have developed top talent over the years, dating back to the days of Magic Johnson and Larry Bird. More recently, the likes of Kobe Bryant and Paul Pierce lead the charge, and the Lakers and Celtics still remain among the top echelon of NBA teams.

The Revolutionaries

All clothing goes through trends, and athletic clothes are no exception. Since performance is so important to athletes, the professional sports leagues in America are developing uniforms that help players look good while hopefully playing good as well. Throughout sports uniform history, several watershed moments have advanced, enhanced, or vastly improved the materials, production, and style of jerseys. The uniforms or events that led to the changes mark the moments that, because of both function and fashion, are proven revolutionary because of their impact and influence.

Under Armour

As a primer, Under Armour is a company founded by former college football player Kevin Plank, who frequently had to change the heavy, sweaty cotton shirts worn under his football pads not only because of the smell, but also because of the lack of comfort, according to the company's website. So he used his sports-centered mind and invented a skin-tight synthetic material shirt that actually wicked sweat away from the body, and dried quicker than the average cotton, polyester, or blended fabric. Earnings for the company, which now produces a wealth of equipment from socks to gloves to duffel bags, increased by more than eighty five percent in its first five years of existence, according to their business website UABiz.com. Competition now exists from other major brands, but Under Armour can stake a claim as the innovators of modernized, high-tech performance wear.

Now college teams, such as recent NCAA Football Champion Auburn as well as Hawaii and South Carolina, have licensed Under Armour to handle uniform design and

production, proving the level the business has achieved. When their products are seen every Saturday in the fall, the national exposure increases awareness and popularity of a brand made possible through sports.

Retro Armour

Today, a retro uniform in professional sports is just as common as a new, forward-thinking uniform in that teams have at least one option that harkens back to their past. Retro uniforms, or game-used jerseys that are styled to mimic the look and feel of previously worn designs that particular team or franchise owned, are often worn in current-day games as a special promotional event.

This happens in virtually every sport, in both the professional and college ranks. As a case study, consider the University of Missouri Tigers, and their Under Armour (UA) brand baseball uniforms.

The Tigers' uniforms involve the same sweat-wicking technology that helped make Under Armour famous, with a look that mimics the old flannel uniforms worn previously. The fabric is called "Legend Gray," as named in an Under Armour promotional release, and it is standard double-knit polyester with a designed pattern that resembles the look and feel of the old flannel.

The Director of Baseball Operations at Missouri, Evan Pratte, explained the uniform's inception:

"The gray uniforms were a combination of our head coach [Tim Jamieson] and UA.

Mostly UA came up with the concept and we added to it with ideas from former Missouri uniforms."

The idea was to match the look of old time uniforms, “but perform as good as any uniforms they’ve [UA] made with their new age material,” said Pratte.

“UA was and is awesome when it comes to new ideas and being able to work together on something like this... Seems like UA comes out with something new every year to improve performance with making items lighter and function better and better.”

“Our head coach likes to be very much involved in the design of the uniforms and wants to make sure our players have the best possible options when it comes to uniforms,”

Pratte said. “The ole look good, play good saying really comes into play with him.

Coach Jamieson and the Missouri baseball program also appreciate the additional advantages to having a standout shirt on their teams’ backs. Recruiting benefits pay off when you wear a uniform that people start talking about.

“It’s a great recruiting tool for us as recruits see the uniform and like the looks and design,” said Pratte.

“If it helps us get us in front of more players, it’s only going to help us get better and better players into our program... The looks of the uniforms are just as important to help attract the best players we can find to help us win games.”

The relationship of fashion and function plays an integral role in the way a school like Missouri chooses their uniforms. Both performance and appearance are important, says Pratte, and the benefits are taken to heart.

The Hockey Goalie Facemask

Before such requirements were made because of seemingly common sense, professional hockey goaltenders were never forced to protect their heads and faces with anything more

than hair and skin. Taking a puck in the nose can do serious permanent physical damage, not to mention the mental implications. Who would want to skate back into the crease after getting their face sliced open with a six-ounce piece of vulcanized rubber?

Jacques Plante, that's who. The French Canadian goalie played for several teams during his 28-year career, most notably the NHL's Montreal Canadiens, with whom he won five consecutive Stanley Cup Championships. Needless to say, Plante was not a no-name hockey player.

He was the first to initiate the usage of facial protection in official NHL games, according to Plante's biography on the Hockey Hall of Fame website. Too many shots to the face had Plante rightfully worried about an extended career, and his investments in his sport paved the way for his invention. Using fiberglass molds, Plante constructed a thin protective mask with eyeholes and an opening for the mouth.

Early in the first period of a November 1959 game against the New York Rangers, Plante was struck in the face with an Andy Bathgate shot, severely cutting his face, according to The Vancouver Sun. Seven stitches later, Plante emerged from the locker room donning a flesh-colored mask and skated back to his position in net. He had worn it during practice but was dissuaded from wearing it in a game by Montreal coach Toe Blake. The backlash was strong, with mockery and contempt from opposing players, reporters, and even teammates and fans. The Canadiens went on to win 3-1, Plante defended his decision, and he wore the mask for the rest of his career.

Plante's style of leaving his crease to control the puck to his teammates and vocal help from behind the defense necessitated the mouth hole, and the eyeholes were an obvious necessity, but the rest of the face was covered.

Imagining a National Hockey League without goalie masks today is inconceivable. It was merely a matter of time before the speed and precision of shots became too much to manage with just skin and flesh, and Plante jump-started the mask enthusiasm in response to the developing skill of the league he played in.

Jacques Plante put a new face on hockey by placing a mask over his own.

The Faux Pas

Not every sports uniform design can be considered a success, or a representation of a tradition, or even a safe thing to wear. For every beautifully crafted concept and technologically-improved design, there are several mishaps that made it to the field of play, but either got the opposite reaction than intended, or was faulty enough to disappear as quickly as it showed up. And sometimes, uniforms are so far from what ‘looks good,’ that they are looked at as unfashionable. This unique section of American sports faux pas made its imprint on the history of uniforms, just maybe for the wrong reasons.

Cooperall Hockey Pants

Once called the “ugliest piece of sporting equipment ever used by a professional sport” by NHL Digest, the short-lived Cooperalls, full-length pants instead of the customary shorts and leggings combination, made their way to the Hartford Whalers’ and Philadelphia Flyers’ uniforms in 1981.

The pants looked odd, but were made by a popular and trustworthy equipment manufacturer Cooper. Opinions on style aside, they had a bigger issue than appearance that caused them to be vanquished from the league after the following season. Some players did come out with their fond opinion of the comfort Cooperalls provided, but it wouldn’t matter once the league saw a larger potential for injury.

The pants proved to be slicker than the traditional leggings, and friction loss can be a problem when players lose their footing on an ice rink, according to NHL Digest. If a

player got going fast enough and slipped, his pants would not slow him down enough to weaken the impact of hitting the boards, the net, or other players.

Skate, helmet, and even uniform designs may continuously change, but don't count on the length of hockey shorts ever increasing again.

Michigan Fab Five

When the proclaimed Michigan Fab Five team made its run, college hoops fans were introduced to an alternative style of baggy shorts, loose uniforms, and a difference marked by hip-hop music and counter cultural fashions. Trash talk, shaved heads, black shoes and black socks became the rebellious sign of the new kids on the block.

Juwan Howard, Chris Webber, Jalen Rose, Jimmy King, and Ray Jackson helped change the look of college basketball, and also provided the spark for a jump in merchandise revenue. A \$2 million total reached \$6.2 million in the two years after Michigan's Championship appearances, according to a USA Today article from 2002. Winning makes a difference, and though the team never finished off a Championship season, they left their mark on basketball fashion the only way they could: through victories.

The resulting affect was a fashionable statement that would change the appearance of basketball while changing the image of a black athlete at the same time.

The style of loose-fitting, baggy uniforms and shorts mirrored the hip-hop world and the streets that followed them. Young adults fit their slender frames into clothes three sizes too big, and Howard, Webber, and the rest of the Wolverines chose to do the same with their uniforms. Soon basketball uniforms were seen at concerts and in music videos, and the hip-hop genre seemed to return the favor, as reported in an ESPN.com article and

seen on television. Athletic wear in general became huge in the hip-hop domain, and the cultures mixed fashion, music, and sports at an unprecedented level.

Baseball Stirrups

The appearance of stirrups on the baseball diamond came about because of contentious reasons, and the story revolves around Napoleon “Nap” LaJoie, of the Cleveland Napoleans, and his unlucky injury.

As was common at the time, baseball players wore high-cuffed pants with high socks covering the rest of their legs. Sliding was an obligatory practice, and any exposed skin was in danger if it weren’t protected somehow. Socks were also a source of identification, as each team donned different colors to distinguish themselves from others.

Sliding can also be dangerous for fielders defending a play, when cleats make contact with ankles and shins as base runners reach a bag. So goes the tale of the invention of the stirrup.

On July 4, 1905, the Boston Globe reported that Nap Lajoie’s ankle met an opponent’s spike, and was cut through his socks rather badly. Following the injury, Lajoie became very ill, and team doctors diagnosed blood poisoning as the ailment. The Globe story stated, “some of the dye in his stocking got into the wound and infected it.” Lajoie was so sick he came close to death, and it was later reported by the Washington Post that the entire Cleveland team would be required to wear white, dye-less socks beneath their colored stockings “to avoid the possibility of blood poisoning.” These under-socks came to be known as “sanitaries” because of their hygienic function.

It is not even known if blood poisoning was the true diagnosis, or if the doctors were treating the injury to the exact specifications of the team, but whatever the case, they influenced other teams who wanted to avoid any chance of jeopardizing player health. As more teams adopted the custom, players began to complain about the tight fit of doubled socks. Eventually, though it isn't known exactly when, the toes and heel of the colored socks were cut off to make room for a look that dominated the professional league for generations.

The Future

As sports moves forward in the 21st Century, technology and creativity will influence uniform design more than ever before. Electronic data collection, state-of-the-art materials, and the potential for marketing and advertisement via uniforms are already upon us. The future of sports uniforms is now, as teams and leagues look for the best and most advanced attire available.

The willingness to try new things and trust different (and sometimes strange) styles of uniforms is what keeps the sports world moving forward.

Sponsorships

Baseball stadiums have forever been lined with branded signs and banners. It didn't take long to put them on hockey boards, either. Ever since sports became so heavily televised to the mass audiences, companies have strategically placed ads in highly viewed backgrounds and foregrounds. One of the most looked-at parts of sports, however, have yet to be touched with marketing flare.

One of the pillars of the four major professional sports uniforms is the lack of corporate sponsorships displayed as banners and logos plastered on the front and back. Joe's Garage and the Watering Hole Bar can appear on amateur uniforms as frequently as they like, but add an AT&T or Apple logo to a traditional symbol of a professional team, and fans seem to erupt in negative reaction.

Sure, a small brand logo or name will appear now and then, but all four professional sports in America have avoided the way of NASCAR and professional teams from across the pond.

Popular on European basketball and soccer uniforms, sponsor-stamped jerseys have helped teams generate extra commercial income. Due to some findings in a recent study, the American sports franchises may persuade their leagues to rethink the current rules against them.

Horizon Media spoke to the missed opportunity in its study on the potential revenue in selling off uniform space to company advertisements.

The press release on the report commented on the duration of time cameras are spent focused on players, and concurrently their uniforms.

The report considered number of detections (how many times a brand/sponsor is visible at each detection) and assigned an attribute score (a relative measurement of performance based on duration, size, isolation and source type) for each sport. This information then produced a dollar figure representing the advertising value of each team's jersey.

The combination of a top team and a top market gave the Yankees, a giant among exposure and ad rates already, could stand to realize more than \$13 million through uniform ads, according to the release.

Compare that to the modest Florida Marlins projected earnings of \$1.3 million if sponsors were allowed on their jerseys, and you grasp one of the main arguments of the traditionalists who would resist the change. Bigger teams would continue their dominance in revenue gains and the disparities could widen the gap between franchises, creating more problems than solutions.

Ultimately, the integrity of the traditional uniforms that have evolved into the current sets is what keeps them so appreciated and special to American sports fans. According to

Horizon Media's research, however, the almighty dollar could coax some to change their minds.

Tampa Bay Lightning

In February of 2011, the Tampa Bay Lightning began a design process that would develop a new uniform set for the NHL team. The uniform redesign was viewed as a rebranding attempt by the franchise, one that had dropped from the top of the NHL after a 2004 Stanley Cup win. Like many teams do, the Lightning struggled to maintain a steady and consistent team after their championship, and began to drift lower and lower in the standings as well as ticket sales, merchandise sales, and overall revenue. A rebranding figured into the efforts of overall improvement. And with that rebranding, a modernized, newly-conceived uniform was introduced to the public. Owner Jeff Vinik, who bought the money-losing team in 2010, used the rebranding to demonstrate his long-term commitments to improving the franchise and its product.

But not every redesign hits the right notes. As the first versions of the prototype were unveiled, fan response was negative due to the original aspects that were left out.

Team followers felt the rebranding was too drastic and failed to honor the history and tradition of a team that had found success in past seasons but still struggled to sell out games and cash in on merchandise at the levels of the NHL's top teams. The patented lightning bolt design down the side of their pants was nowhere to be found, and it represented a visual necessity in the eyes of the fans. Also, the customary black color that dominated previously designed uniforms disappeared, and fans spoke out about their disappointments through forums on the team's website.

The response from the team's Chief Executive Officer Tod Leiweke explained the process of feedback gathering and reacting on the part of the Lightning, and certain changes were made.

The new jerseys will be distributed to season ticket holders, with a special addition that hasn't been used in uniforms before. Each jersey given away will contain a small chip, which gives wearers certain discounts on concessions and merchandise at the Tampa Bay hockey arena. The incentives of owning a new Lightning uniform increased with the use of technology and innovation, according to the team's website.

History, tradition, and fan feedback incorporated into the final uniform version, and starting next season, the Lightning will be outfitted in a set representative of their franchise, their city, and most importantly, their followers. They're the ones who help the finances most, after all. They're the ones who pay for the tickets, the concessions, and the uniforms.

In-Chest Sensors

The NFL Combine is the ultimate tryout, where incoming college players go through a gauntlet of drills and workouts that produce measurable achievements in things like the 40-yard dash, the vertical leap, and the bench press.

But the Combine has routinely been criticized, especially in articles like Bleacher Report's NFL Draft 2011: Is the NFL Combine a Waste of Time? as failing to measure the attributes that really matter. Things that determine a player's overall impact on the field are sought after, and proponents question its validity.

As part of the technologically driven uniform design that has begun to surface in the world of sports, the NFL Combine debuted an intellectually sophisticated uniform in 2011 that helped professional team scouts determine specific data about the individual athletes that were auditioning for a spot on a team's draft board.

Developed by Under Armour and Zephyr, a data software company from Annapolis, Maryland, the Under Armour E39 compression shirt contains the same technology that made Under Armour famous, along with some vastly new technology that helps gather intelligence never before provided by a uniform, according to a news release from the company.

In the front and center of the specially made Combine uniforms is a removable sensor, about the size of a small yo-yo. These sensors contain multi-axis acceleration measuring devices, a processor and 2 gigabytes of storage. The information collected by the uniforms can be simultaneously connected through Bluetooth technology to smartphones and laptops so scouts can receive power and efficiency measurements from the athletes. Those measurements are able to make sense of movements along a vertical plane, dividing the body in a right and left half. Each side of the body can be detected as moving in, or out, of sync, according to Under Armour's website..

Consider a 40-yard dash, which would have been previously analyzed with 10-yard increments determining acceleration. Now the full 40 yards, down to each stride, can be used to see what parts a player excels in, and what parts need improvement.

Form and technique is especially important when being measured against fellow athletes that are competing for a job like at the Combine. Despite the arguments, much stock is

put into the results of the Combine drills, and the pre-NFL Draft auditions were a natural place for the debut of the in-chest sensors.

The release also reported another unprecedented move in which the NFL Network, who broadcasts the Combine, revealed the E39 results of several players to the television and Internet audience, allowing for a true insider's view of these young athletes.

NBA and Adidas

On September 22, 2010, the NBA released the newest version of their team uniforms, the NBA Revolution 30, created by Adidas. Not only did every team get a new tighter-fitting shirt and shorts set, but the entire league set a new standard for the future of uniform design and production as well.

Tiny pinholes in the jerseys help release heat and moisture from the areas most prone to both. The material of the uniforms is the Adidas' conceived ClimaCool, designed with performance, durability, and comfort in mind.

Also, the uniform numbers, formerly cut of cloth and sewn onto the front and back, were now made of mesh material, also full of holes and more breathable. Instead of sewing, the numbers were fastened to the uniform with a heat-sealing process, which helped make the seams lighter and prevented stitching from rubbing the players' skin, creating a more comfortable feel.

"They are the most technologically advanced uniforms that utilize breathable mesh numbers... an engineered mesh that works with the base layers of the uniform," said Christopher Arena, the Vice President of Apparel, Sporting Goods, and Basketball Partnerships with the NBA.

The specifics do the acclaimed uniforms justice. The weight was cut by 30 percent, and the ClimaCool fabric, made from 60 percent recycled materials, dries twice as fast as previous uniforms. It marked the first time an entire league used such environmentally conscious uniforms.

Function was most important when designing the NBA Revolution 30 uniforms. Arena said practicality should always be first on the list, regardless of the sport in question. “I’m not sure playing basketball with shoulder pads and thermal underwear, a sport coat and flip flops would make much sense,” he said. “Basketball players require a wide range of motion and a tank top and short are appropriate for that.”

When the league-wide change happened, concerns about keeping things the way they originally looked came about. The NBA and adidas stayed adamant about protecting each teams’ identity.

“I think if you look at each uniform in detail you will find that everything was preserved and we were very particular about that,” said Arena, “This change was more about the performance of the athlete and their comfort.”

That’s not to say the preservation of style didn’t come into play as well.

“On the design side, I believe that we are influenced by our past and what we remember or define as being classic,” said Arena. “Classic is really code for ‘What I remember when I was a kid... when things were simple and pure.’ Whether they actually were or irrelevant.”

The branding concept, much like that of the Baltimore Orioles, makes it to the decision table as well. Having consistent logos, colors, and styles that fans can remember are

integral to the recognition of a professional sports team. Changing it, for whatever reason, could be detrimental, says Arena.

“Because sports are relatively young,” he said, “the brands of our teams (uniforms being a core part of that) were established well before the recent concept of changing a uniform became vogue.”

Then there’s the case of moving backwards and reverting to a previous uniform concept. For example, the Detroit Pistons changed back to their traditional red and blue after experimenting with teal and orange. Arena thinks that’s a logical move.

“...When a team like the Pistons goes back to red, white blue, some would argue that’s who they always were and [they] never should have changed,” responded Arena.

He went back to the connection with the fan base as the main thing that makes a uniform ideal.

“A good uniform is defined by its ability to immediately communicate an emotion or feeling within the fan,” he said. “The emotion and feeling may differ for some but ideally centers around some of the core brand values of that team.”

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