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**PART 2: MADE IN
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SEE PAGE 52





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Trends 8

Girls Are Playing Team Sports — Big Time; Everyone Wants In – Or Out – Of the Team Business

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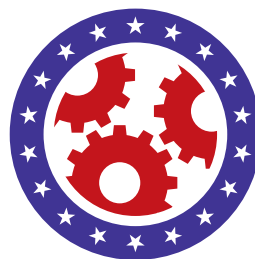
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**MADE IN
AMERICA
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TEAM INSIGHT

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Girls Got Game

A first-hand account of a weekend watching girls play basketball.



I spent 12 hours in a high school basketball gym this past weekend with more than 100 girls, ages eight through 16. It was noisy, hot, crowded and full of controversy and competition.

And I loved every minute of it. Well, except for the one irate mother who believed I had it out for her daughter.

By way of explanation, I referee basketball during the winter and as luck would have it, just as I was putting together this special Girls’ and Women’s Sports issue I was assigned a host of youth girls’ games in the heart of hoops season here in New Jersey. It gave me an unparalleled opportunity to view our editorial subjects up close and personal.

After I had time to digest all that I had seen – and was able to stop the ringing in my ears from all of the screaming young girls do when they play team sports – I came up with a few observations.

- There is no longer girls’ gear and boys’ gear. The girls have all of the same equipment as the boys do. These young girls were decked out in the latest — knee pads and leg sleeves, shooting sleeves, moisture wicking baselayers, warm-ups with their names on the back and team bags to carry it all. That’s good news for team dealers who view basketball as a steady, but low volume business because of the lack of “stuff.”

- Under Armour sneakers are in

vogue. Of course there were a bunch of Nike and Adidas on their feet, but this is the first season I remember seeing so many kids wearing the UA brand. I asked a few girls why and they said they liked the brand. None knew of Steph Curry.

- Girls are predictably more concerned with how their uniforms fit. I observed more than one mother in a pre-game frenzy adjusting, wrapping, tying and then even sewing a uniform so her baby looked good on the court. (From my experience with boys in any sport, as long as the shirt has a number on it and is the same color as the rest of the team, they are good to go. Girls, not so much.)

- Basketball at the level I saw last weekend is definitely more of a team game on the female side. Rarely does one player dominate and, even if she does, she usually uses that domination to set up her teammates. It was a pleasure to watch.

Sure, these are all generalizations based on my own observation, but they speak well of how girls approach team sports at a certain level — in this case, a step above recreation, a step below AAU. But it heartened me over that long weekend to see young girls running, sweating, winning and losing ... just like the boys.

As a parent (I have a long-since-grown-up daughter) and a coach and administrator of youth sports I have worked long and hard to give girls the same athletic opportunities as their brothers. I hear all the time from my young-at-heart wife that there were few opportunities for her to play sports when we were in high school in the 1970s; in 2016, there is a whole weekend of basketball games offered to girls of all sizes, shapes and skills.

And as the snow melts those indoor games will give way to softball and lacrosse, and then summer leagues in every sport. Then comes soccer in the fall and then we start with basketball all over again. All will have an equal numbers of boys and girls playing on fields and courts across America.

I will be a part of a lot of it, refereeing from the middle of the action or catching a game from the bleachers. Nothing against the boys, but I prefer watching the girls because of the spirit and pure sportsmanship. Now if only I can get that ringing out of my ears. ●

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Girls Are Playing Team Sports, Big Time

The numbers tell the story of female participation at all levels.



By Mike May

The numbers tell the true story of girls' and women's sports in the U.S. in 2016 — and the narrative is a good one. The results of research from the Sports & Fitness Industry Association (SFIA), National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS), National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and the National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) reveal a dozen statistical trends that tell the tale.

1. There are six team sports where more than 50 percent of the participants are female — cheerleading (76 percent), gymnastics (75.3 percent), court volleyball (59.5 percent), fast-pitch softball (60.2 percent), swimming on a team (54.3 percent), and grass volleyball (50.3 percent). *Source: SFIA*

2. The top five most popular team sports in the U.S., which have the

largest overall number of female participants, are basketball, outdoor soccer, court volleyball, gymnastics and fast-pitch softball. *Source: SFIA*

3. Between 2009 and 2014 there have been increases in female participation in 19 sports, while there has been a decrease in female participation in just five sports. *Source: SFIA*

4. There were 3,287,735 girls who played high school sports in the 2014-15 school year. For comparison purposes, there were 4,519,312 boys playing high school sports during that same time period. FYI: The number of girls playing high school sports in the U.S. has risen every year since 1988-89. While overall participation in high school sports by boys is up since 1988-89, there have been a few years where participation has actually declined, most recently from 2013-14 to 2014-15. *Source: NFHS*

5. In the 1971-72 school year, there were 294,015 girls and 3,666,917 boys

playing high school sports in the U.S. Since then, participation in high school sports by girls has risen by more than 1000 percent, whereas participation in high school sports by boys has risen by a mere 18.9 percent. *Source: NFHS*

6. In addition to seven adapted sports, girls are playing high school sports on teams in more than 50 different sports. *Source: NFHS*

7. From a participation perspective, the top 10 most popular sports for high school girls are, in order, outdoor track and field, court volleyball, basketball, soccer, fast-pitch softball, cross-country, tennis, swimming and diving, competitive spirit squads and lacrosse. *Source: NFHS*

8. While track and field and volleyball have the most female high school participants, with 478,726 and 432,176, respectively, basketball and outdoor track and field rank one-two on the list of the number of

high schools that have the most girls' teams, with 17,653 and 16,309 high schools, respectively. *Source: NFHS*

9. The five states with the most girls playing high school sports are, in order, California, Texas, New York, Pennsylvania and Illinois. Six other states — Ohio, Michigan, New Jersey, Minnesota, Florida and Massachusetts — have at least 100,000 high school girls playing high school sports. *Source: NFHS*

10. Female participation in college sports (Divisions I, II and III) has grown considerably in the last 30 years. During the 1981-82 college season, there were 4776 women's college teams representing 64,390 female athletes. By the 2013-14 school year, those numbers had grown to more than 10,000 women's teams representing more than 205,021 females. Overall participation in NCAA sports by women has risen every year since 2001-02. *Source: NCAA*

11. In the 2013-14 academic year, four women's NCAA sports fielded more than 1000 teams — basketball (1101 teams), volleyball (1064 teams), cross-country (1061 teams), and soccer (1022 teams). *Source: NCAA*

12. Thirteen varsity collegiate sports for women are offered by NJCAA member schools. Since the 2003-2004 school year, the only sport that did not grow in terms of participants and the number of teams was swimming and diving. The sports that showcased growth were basketball, bowling, cross-country, golf, half-marathon, lacrosse, soccer, softball, tennis, track and field (indoor and outdoor) and volleyball. In the 2014-2015 school year, there were 22,573 NJCAA female athletes competing on 1716 teams. In the 2003-2004 school year, there were fewer athletes on fewer teams — 17,485 competing on 1452 teams. *Source: NJCAA* ■

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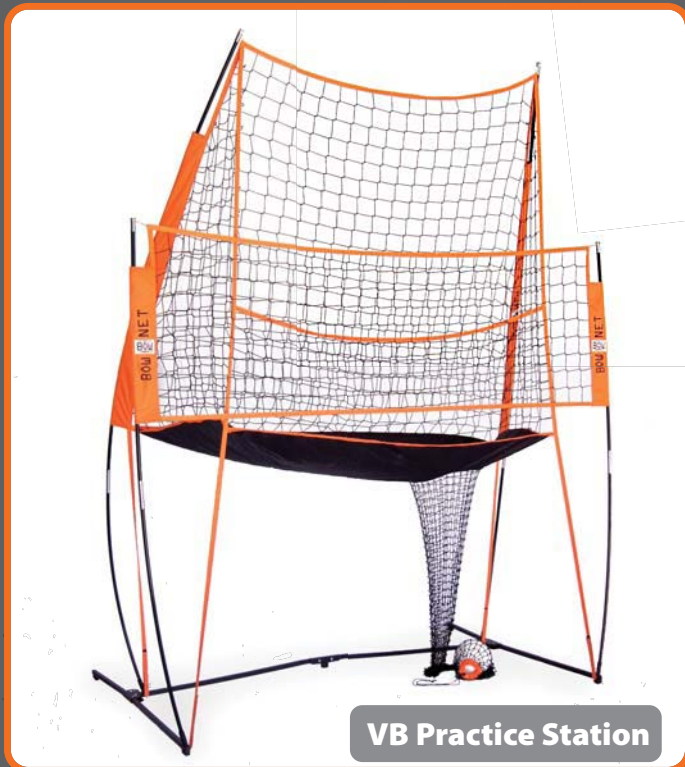
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Everyone Wants In – Or Out – Of the Team Business

The first few months of the year were full of developments.

By Michael Jacobsen

The year in team sports started out with a flurry of activity as the strong got stronger, the weak went away and still others positioned themselves to solidify their positions.

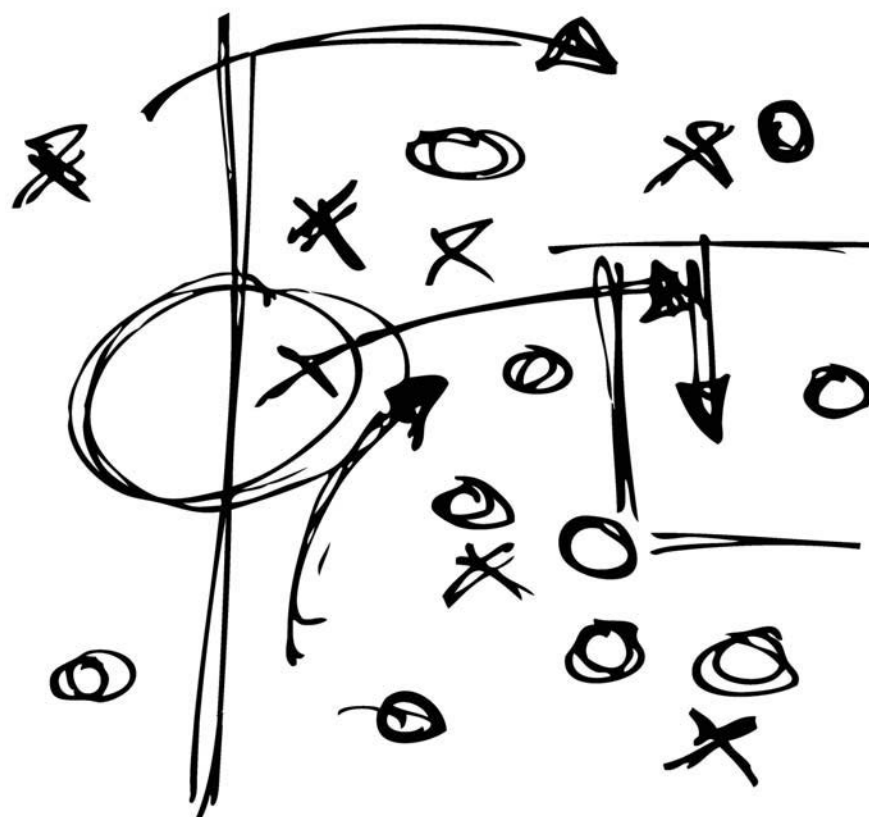
The biggest news came when **BSN Sports** continued its march toward a true national network of team dealers with the acquisition of the Lids Team Sports business from Genesco's Lids Sports Group. BSN chairman and CEO **Adam Blumenfeld** will serve as CEO of the combined entity, as Scott Molander, who headed Lids Team Sports' operations, joins BSN with all of the division's other employees.

Based in Indianapolis, Lids Team Sports was perhaps the chief rival for BSN in assembling a network of team dealers throughout the country, but its efforts paled in comparison to the moves BSN has made in the past few years. Now, the addition of Lids Team Sports to the BSN platform significantly enhances BSN's reach into every zip code.

"The combination of BSN Sports and Lids Team Sports is excellent news for our employees, our vendors and, most importantly, for our customers," says Blumenfeld.

Genesco chairman, president and CEO **Bob Dennis** explains that the decision to sell Lids Team Sports was part of a larger strategic plan to focus on its core retail business. "The transaction ... allows Genesco's Lids Sports Group to sharpen its strategic focus on its core business, giving full attention to execution and realizing the growth potential in retail and omni-channel."

In a couple of much smaller moves early this year as well, BSN last month completed the acquisition of **Idaho Sporting Goods** (ISG), a team dealer in Boise, ID, since 1954 selling in Idaho and northern Nevada. That followed an earlier acquisition of



Jerry's Sporting Goods, a 20-year old team dealer in Wichita Falls, TX, to increase depth in Texas.

"With the addition of ISG, we have added over 360 sales professionals in the last 12 months," points out Blumenfeld.

Bankruptcies, Closings and More

Meanwhile, also early this year two significant team dealers based in the South filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection

First was four-year old **Titan Team Sports**, a Duluth, GA, team dealer headed by CEO and majority owner D. Lynn England. Titan, formed in 2012 through the merger of Lee Sports, Colter Sports and S&S Sports, each of Georgia, owes creditors more than \$5.4 million and lists assets of \$6.36 million. The company, which added Athens, GA-based Bulldog Sporting Goods as an affiliate in 2013, owes its principal lender, the Bank of North

Georgia, more than \$4.57 million that includes \$1.67 million from a small business loan. Meanwhile, buying group Sports Inc. is owed more than \$659,000. Titan's top unsecured trade creditors include Brine Sports (\$57,337), Warrior Sports (\$32,579), Performance Lacrosse Group (\$24,827), DeLong (\$20,981), ProJoy Sportswear (\$16,805), STX (\$15,207), New Balance (\$10,322) and Mizuno USA (\$10,322).

At about the same time, **Team Express**, which operates six team-focused websites from its San Antonio offices, filed as well. The former Southwest Baseball Supply was purchased three years ago by CEO Mark Marney, with T&J Investments currently owning more than 10 percent of the firm that operates teamexpress.com, baseballexpress.com and footballamerica.com, among other websites.

The debtor owes its top 16 trade creditors more than \$16.6 million,

led by Easton (\$3.8 million), Louisville Slugger (\$2.55 million) and Nike (\$1.89 million). In court documents, the company cites troubles with a new enterprise resource planning system for prompting its bankruptcy filing.

On the positive side of the ledger, **Lax World**, a specialty lacrosse retailer based in Baltimore, recently acquired Denver-based lacrosse specialist, **Breakaway Sports**. The deal will grow the combined company to 14 locations nationwide, expand its online presence and warehousing and broaden the reach of its team sales division from coast to coast. The combined company will have stores in Washington, Colorado, New York, Maryland, Virginia and Georgia.

In recent buying group news, **Athletic Dealers of America** added two new team members — **Compass Athletics**, Woodward, OK, and **Sports Locker**, Grove, OK.

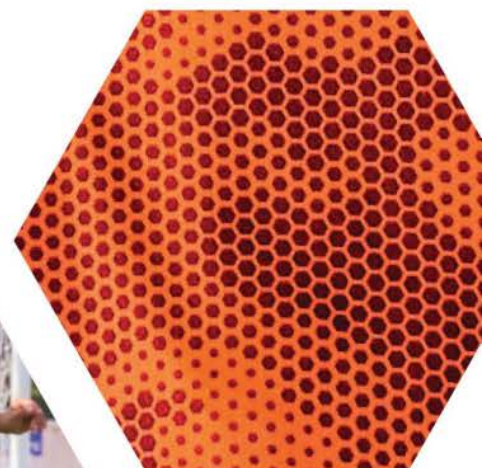
The Big Boys Chime In

Meanwhile, the financial problems of retail giant **Sports Authority** have been played out in the press, but less noticed was the decision in late January to slash 100 jobs, mostly from its Englewood corporate headquarters. Among those let go were 16 people in the team sales division. The 450-store chain has at least \$643 million of debt.

The layoffs were part of a "balance sheet restructuring" aimed at reducing the debt load, the company said.

Looking to capitalize on the financial woes of its leading rival, the industry's Big Dog, **Dick's Sporting Goods**, in January launched Dick's Team Sports HQ, an all-in-one platform that will offer youth sports leagues across the country three key services — online registration and team/league websites, custom uniforms and FanWear and access to donations and sponsorships.

"We're excited to offer this first-



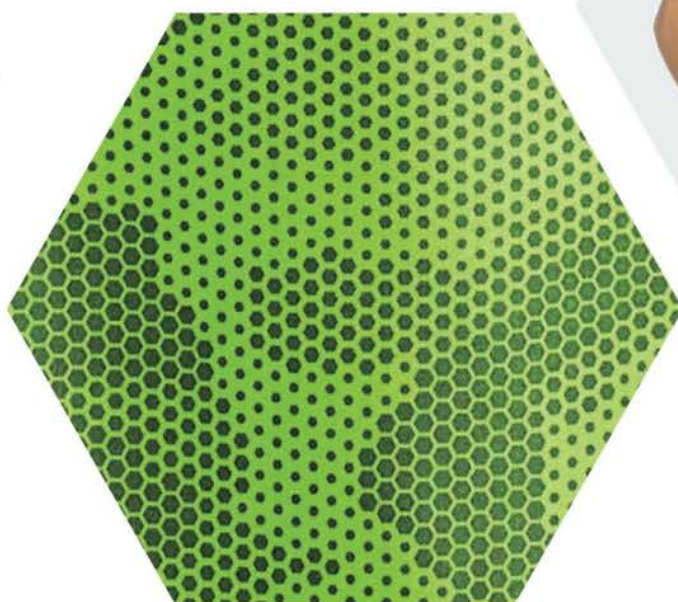
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of-its-kind platform to the youth sports community,” said Dick’s executive VP & CMO **Lauren Hobart**. “Dick’s Team Sports HQ will be able to deliver an unparalleled service to youth teams and leagues, allowing coaches to focus on developing their athletes.”

The league management software will both facilitate and simplify the registration, scheduling and communication processes for league organizers and coaches. League administrators will also be able to use the online

tools to design gear specific to their league, allowing coaches and parents to order uniforms and FanWear from their league website.

Finally, with the unveiling an aggressive move this year to control its own destiny, mega-brand **Under Armour** is apparently not counting on its retail partners to fuel its growth,

UA plans to open 200 stores in 2016, according to founder and CEO **Kevin Plank** in a keynote speech at the annual National

Retail Federation conference recently. Plank did not disclose what mix of formats those new 200 stores would comprise.

UA currently operates 144 factory stores, which sell more affordable workout gear than is found at department stores, online and sporting goods retailers. The company also has 29 stores known as “brand houses” — larger than the factory stores and featuring its best collections. It also has an estimated 127 shops inside major retail partners. ■

NOCSAE Reveals New Standards



Furthering its mission to assure the safety of sports equipment, NOCSAE recently unveiled standards for a number of athletic equipment products. The new standards include the first chest protector performance standard for commotio cordis, as well as advancing football helmet standards to address concussion risks and youth provisions.

The new NOCSAE chest protector standard applies to baseball and lacrosse, where catchers and goalies are typically the most vulnerable to commotio cordis.

“Scientists have pinpointed the exact cause of commotio cordis, including the critical moment of occurrence in the cardiac cycle and the required threshold to prevent the injury,” explains NOCSAE executive director Mike Oliver.

“These findings have allowed us to create a chest protector standard that will significantly reduce, if not eliminate, the risk of commotio cordis.”

NOCSAE voted to advance the chest protector standard for

commotio cordis to proposed status, meaning the standard will remain open for public comment until January 2017, at which time it will be eligible to be voted on as a final standard unless modifications are recommended.

At the same time, the NOCSAE voted to move its proposed pneumatic ram test standard to final status. This standard includes new tests that create and measure rotational accelerations, a crucial first step in improving the ability of helmets to address the risk of concussion.

NOCSAE is working to revise its football helmet standard to incorporate the pneumatic ram test for rotational accelerations. In response to public comments, a new proposed football helmet standard was approved that incorporates rotational accelerations in the pass/fail specifications and includes provisions for adjusted pneumatic ram impact velocities for helmets that manufacturers label as youth helmets.

In addition, NOCSAE voted to move several proposed standards to final status, including standards for field hockey headgear and balls, and revisions to NOCSAE’s corrosion testing standard.

The Circle Closes

The drawn-out and sordid saga of Circle Sports and its business practice of inflating invoices and forging fake bids from competitors came to a close last month when the final player in the game

was sentenced to probation after cooperating with the government.

David Drill, who was president of Circle System Group, based in Easton, PA, faced a maximum five-year sentence after pleading guilty in 2008 to conspiracy to commit mail and wire fraud. Two other former executives of the company pleaded guilty to similar charges and were sentenced last year.

An indictment alleged the company created fake price quotes from competitors that Circle would then undercut to win contracts. It also alleged Circle inflated invoices to reimburse itself for money it had donated to the schools’ fundraising and charity efforts and for gifts it had given to school officials.

The company also allegedly sent schools monthly statements that looked like invoices, leading many schools to pay the same invoice twice. Prosecutors alleged the company reaped nearly \$1 million in overpayments this way.

Former Circle CFO Mitchell Kurlander had already been sentenced to more than three years in prison in connection with the scheme. His father-in-law, Alan Abeshaus, the company’s CEO, received probation and home confinement.

Drill won’t have to pay restitution because the other defendants have satisfied those requirements. Drill had contended that he wasn’t involved in, and didn’t benefit from, the double-billing part of the scheme. ■

IN THE NEWS

comings and goings

Leonard To Headline NSGA Conference



One of boxing’s most beloved and successful fighters, Sugar Ray Leonard, will launch NSGA’s 52nd Annual Management Conference & 18th Annual Team Dealer Summit on May 23,

2016, at the Westin Hilton Head Island Resort & Spa in Hilton Head Island, SC. The premier sporting goods industry event runs May 22-25, 2016.

Leonard will discuss the steps and sacrifices it took to achieve his Olympic gold medal and professional boxing dreams and will share stories about his journey from athlete to entrepreneur and the qualities he believes help achieve greatness not only in the ring, but also in the business world.

For more: www.nsga.org/conference.

Little League In Two Deals

Little League Baseball and Softball recently entered into an expanded exclusive partnership with **Easton Baseball/Softball** to run through the 2022 season. Under the partnership, Easton will continue to be the Official Team Equipment Supplier to Little League Baseball and Softball, with support provided to all nine Little League World Series (LLWS) events.

In a separate deal, Little League and **Russell Athletic** extended their partnership as the official uniform provider to the Little League World Series, supplying all on-field apparel and licensed souvenirs. The contract runs through 2020.

Last year Russell and Little League collaborated to introduce a local league uniform ordering option — LittleLeagueUniforms.com — that allows teams to customize uniforms complete with the Little League Official Patch.

Performance Health Team Formed

Performance Health has created a Sporting Goods Division dedicated to team, retail and specialty sporting goods. The unit includes Cramer, TheraBand, Perform Pain Reliever, TheraPearl and Active Ankle and it will be led by VP-sporting goods **Neal Fink**.

“We are making professional brands — the same brands used in high school, college and professional locker rooms — available in other settings such as sporting goods retail,” Fink says. ■

Female Athletes Gather on Capitol Hill



Members of the NGWSD Coalition gather at the White House for a roundtable discussion, including Women's Sports Foundation president Angela Hucles (far right) and CEO, Deborah Slaner Larkin (front row, fourth from right). The coalition was there to emphasize the need to provide equal sports opportunities for women.

A coalition of athletes and leaders in the women's sports community spent a day on Capitol Hill to celebrate the 30th annual National Girls & Women in Sports Day (NGWSD) on Feb. 3, a national observance recognizing the extraordinary achievements of girls and women in sports.

The NGWSD Coalition met with government leaders on Capitol Hill, focusing on issues surrounding equal access to sports and strategies to overcoming barriers, particularly in underserved and minority communities. The briefing panel included champion athletes, Title IX experts, members of the President's Council on Fitness, Sports & Nutrition (PCFSN) and WNBA's Washington Mystics head coach Mike Thibault and guard Natasha Cloud.

Nationally, thousands of sports educators, coaches, athletic directors, recreation directors, association members, sponsors, students and parents came together to participate in local events to celebrate this year's NGWSD theme, "Leading the Way."

"We want to acknowledge that progress has been made in gender equality in U.S. sports. However, it remains uneven. It is urban communities and girls of color who are being left behind," said Angela Hucles, WSF president and two-time Olympic gold medalist in soccer.

"The statistics on access to resources and compliance with Title IX are alarming and should spur policymakers to pass legislation ensuring all young athletes have ... access to athletic opportunities," Hucles said. "It is past time for all athletes to enjoy the physical and emotional benefits sports bring." ■



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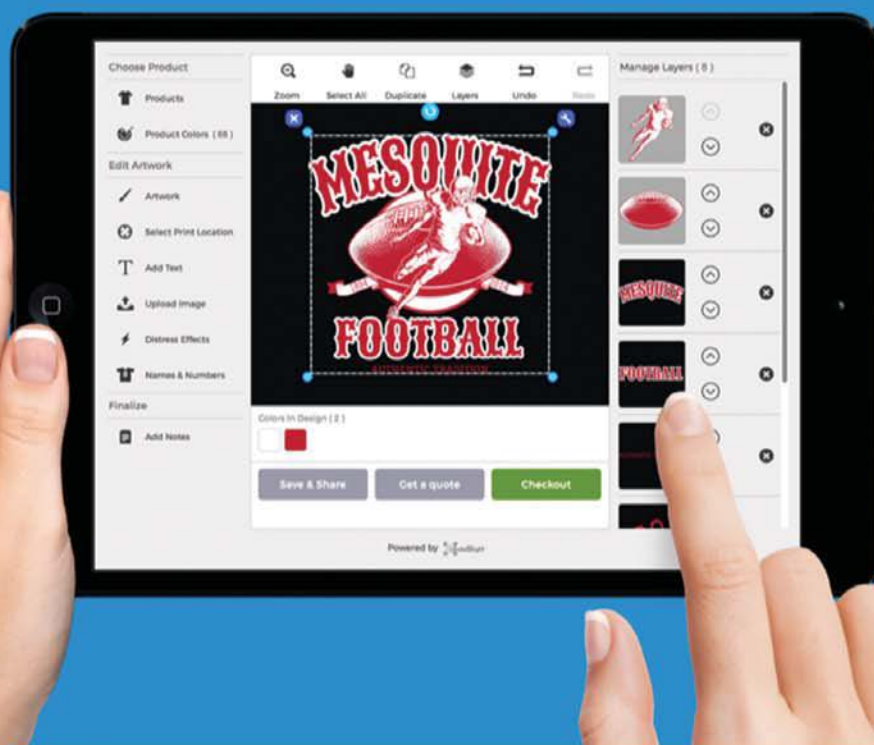
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Travel softball teams, which always involve multiple families, have bigger budgets than high school teams.

**DOC CLAUSSEN,
COACHES CORNER**



THE GIRLS OF SUMMER

DEALERS AND VENDORS MAKE A PITCH TO ONE OF THEIR MOST PASSIONATE CUSTOMERS.

By Mike May

Fast-pitch softball – the kind played by millions of girls from first grade to semi-pro – has never been stronger. And, most feel, its best days are ahead of it. Now if that pesky IOC will only make the right decision!

“Fast-pitch softball is in its prime and one of the few sports still increasing in participation,” says **Chelsea Stinson**, softball marketing manager at **Rawlings Sporting Goods**. “Last year, not only did the National Pro Fastpitch League grow, but the NCAA Women’s College World Series was more highly viewed than the Men’s (baseball) College World Series. That is testament to both increased participation and popularity of the sport in general.”

Other major vendors certainly agree.

“We see softball as an incredible opportunity and a sport that deserves our attention,” adds **Jay Helmick**, VP-sales and marketing at **Baden Sports**. “Similar to baseball, there are youth, select, collegiate and pro softball teams allowing players to play throughout their lifetimes.”

Another interesting observation is that the growth of fast-pitch softball is having a positive trickle-down effect on its slow-pitch softball cousin, as older players are transitioning to slow-pitch from the fast-pitch game they had been playing in high school and college.

“Apparently, the (female) players want to continue playing some type of competitive softball and many are very surprised to find such a high level of competition now being played at the slow-pitch level,” notes **Don Cooper**, category sales and marketing director, USA, at **Combat Sports Group**.

For instance, the Derby Girls slow-pitch softball team, sponsored by Combat, which won the USSSA Women’s Worlds in 2015, had seven players who played NCAA Division 1 (fast-pitch) softball, four other players who played some level of college (fast-pitch) softball and one former National Pro Fastpitch (NPF) player.

“The other interesting fact is the number of

female athletes we now see playing at the over 50, 55, 60, 65 and 70-plus slow-pitch worlds,” states Cooper. “The numbers are growing every year and the quality of the play is amazing. I have been involved in the game (of softball) for more than 20 years and I personally think the women’s game is headed in the right direction.”

Now, he adds, “it would definitely be nice to see the Olympics add diamond sports back, but even if that doesn’t happen, the Girls of Summer are growing, amazing and are here to stay.”

“Fast-pitch softball continues to amaze me,” says **Abe Key**, president and CEO of **Pony Baseball & Softball**. “It is one of Pony’s shining stars as registrations are on the rise.”

Around the Horn with Dealers

While the sport of basketball may rule the state, in Indiana the top two selling sports for **Coaches Corner Sporting Goods** in Terre Haute, IN, are actually baseball and softball.

“Travel softball is huge and high school softball is big, too,” says store manager **Doc Claussen**. He points out that travel softball teams, which always involve multiple families, have bigger budgets than high school teams.

“We sell everything to travel teams, from head to toe,” adds Claussen. “Our local travel players are ages 7-18. And, we do get some six-year olds who are playing with older girls.”

One spending trend that Claussen likes is towards top-dollar high-performance softball bats, even for the seven and eight-year olds. Local softball (and baseball) players also like to visit his store to buy fielder’s gloves because his inventory is so large.

“We have more gloves in our inventory than most Dick’s Sporting Goods outlets,” Claussen boasts.

In Columbia, MO, girls’ softball is a strong and steady source of business for **Red Weir Athletic Supplies**. The youngest customers are age seven, while the oldest players are 18.

According to president and owner **Mike Weir**, travel and high school girls’ softball teams are buying everything, from uniforms, cleats, socks and hats to gloves, bats, helmets and protective

gear. Also a big contributor to the bottom line: sublimated and customized uniforms.

In Lima, OH, fast-pitch softball is all the rage.

“We sell softball to 30 to 35 high schools in the greater Lima area,” says **Dan Kirian**, co-owner of **Lima Sporting Goods**. “We sell everything to the girls — game uniforms, socks, bats, game balls, cleats, gloves, hats and spirit packs.” He also does an equally strong business with local recreation leagues.

While many team dealers are losing business to Internet outlets and big-box stores, Kirian says that his willingness to visit the schools and provide personal service is the key to his success.

“The schools and the coaches seem to like the service that we provide,” notes Kirian.

While Lima Sporting Goods is busy selling softball to local schools and recreation leagues, its business with local travel team is not as strong. Kirian admits that unless he knows the coach through a local high school, he is not as well connected to the network of local travel softball teams.

In West Virginia, softball is probably the biggest sport for girls.

“Girls are busy playing softball in local recreational leagues, at school and on travel teams,” says **Larry Foster**, owner of **Spartan Sporting Goods**, Beckley, WV. “Our local rec softball leagues are popular in West Virginia. Our coaches are serious about the sport of softball and they are very safety minded, too.”

That translates into softball teams ordering uniforms, bats, hats, socks, batting helmets, batting gloves and various accessories such as sunglasses and eye black. Teams are also buying field equipment, such as protective screens, home plates and the bases from Spartan. The one weak area continues to be cleats, since players are using the Internet to view and buy their softball-specific footwear.

“The online inventory is bigger than my warehouse capacity,” admits Foster.

Out west in Spanish River, UT, selling softball keeps **MVP Sports** owner **Scott Ringler** busy. In Utah, the age of the players ranges from 6 to 18.

“Teams are buying uniforms, socks, balls, bats,

hats, gloves, cleats, helmets, batting gloves, catcher's gear and lots of field equipment," he says, with customization and sublimation popular with the uniforms, with a trend towards more conservative colors.

In Harbor City, CA, just south of Los Angeles, the girls' fast-pitch business continues to be a strong and steady business for **Kim Karsh**, owner of **California Pro Sports**.

"Teams are ordering uniforms, a matching visor and custom socks," he says. "Younger girls playing in youth/recreational softball leagues like personalized jerseys with their names on the backs."

Karsh adds that the older girls playing travel ball prefer jerseys that are customized and sublimated.

Despite the impact of the Internet,

in the sales process require a different strategy.

According to Coaches Corner's Claussen, girls are walking into this store to buy softball bats, while boys are buying their baseball bats online. Ten years ago, Claussen says the opposite was true.

"I have found that when dealing with boys' baseball and girls' softball, I use a similar approach," says Lima Sporting Goods Kieren.

"Girls make quicker decisions," points out Red Weir Athletic's Weir.

"I see no difference at all between selling baseball to boys and softball to girls," admits Spartan Sporting Goods' Foster.

"Girls are more picky," says Ringler, of MVP Sports.

There does appear to be differ-

"If you're a manufacturer and you're not addressing those athletes, you won't have them using your products for very long," Cooper points out.

"Surprisingly enough, both baseball and softball players are very like-minded in their requirements and expectations of gear," says Rawlings' Stinson. "The minor differences are brand loyalty, exposure and, of course, fit.

"As for brand loyalty, we track trends," Stinson adds. "It seems as though young females are more performance-based than they are brand loyal. This is a good thing and tricky for us manufacturers as it really pushes us to stay ahead of the curve."

"There are always going to be different product design preferences to account for in development, but ultimately, everything comes back to quality and performance. That's what every player wants," adds Baden's Helmick.

Inside the Numbers

According to the Sports & Fitness Industry Association (SFIA), there are 2.4 million fast-pitch softball players in the U.S. While participation in many team sports has been on the decline in recent years, participation in fast-pitch softball has been steady in recent years, down only slightly from 2.5 million players in 2009.

The SFIA research reveals that 60 percent of all fast-pitch softball players (1.4 million) and 78 percent of its core players are female. The SFIA also reports that a 35.8 percent of all female fast-pitch softball players are in eighth grade or below, with another 18.7 percent in high school. When combined it means that 54.5 percent of all female fast-pitch softball players are younger than 18.

Fast-pitch softball is a sport with a passionate following, as 1.3 million of its players are core participants, defined as those playing more than 26 days, and the majority of those are under age 24.

The four most popular regions of the U.S. for girls fast-pitch softball participation are the West (California, Washington and Oregon); West South Central (Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Louisiana); Middle Atlantic (New York, Pennsylvania and New Jersey); and South Atlantic (Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, District of Columbia, Maryland

and Delaware).

While slow-pitch softball ranks as the third most popular team sport in the U.S., what's not so great is that its position in the team sports realm is on the decline, as there were as many as 9.2 million slow-pitch softball players in the U.S. as recently as 2009, of which 3.45 million of them were females.

The good news about slow-pitch softball is that 61 percent of its current 7.1 million players are classified as core players (those who play at least 13 or more times a year).

The High School and College Report

At the high school level, fast-pitch softball is played by 364,102 girls on 15,115 teams in 49 states (just 1425 boys play on 70 teams in seven states), according to NFHS. The only state that does not have girls' high school fast-pitch softball is South Dakota.

The NFHS reports that fast-pitch softball is the fifth most popular high school sport for girls, behind outdoor track and field, volleyball, basketball and soccer. The top five states for girls fast-pitch softball participation are California, Texas, New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania.

"Softball has grown at the grassroots level," says **Sandy Searcy**, director of sports at NFHS. "As these students matriculate to high school, their desire to be a part of their school team and community make the high school team the next logical step. Coupled with (fast-pitch) softball's inclusion into the Olympic movement for a short time, plus increased television coverage at the high school and collegiate levels, interest in the sport has drastically increased."

The game of slow pitch softball is also played by girls at the high school level, but the numbers are significantly lower – 9789 players (on 507 teams) in five states — Oklahoma, Mississippi, Georgia, Ohio and Arkansas.

Meanwhile, at the college level the NCAA reports that female participation in college softball has grown considerably in the last 30 years or so. During the 1981-82 college season, there were 7465 girls playing on 416 college softball teams. By the 2013-14 school year, those numbers had grown to 997 women's collegiate softball teams with more than 19,000 players. ■

"My fast-pitch softball business is heavily skewed to young and teenage girls."

DENNIS CALLISON, EAST VALLEY SPORTS

Karsh says he has a strong business selling cleats, gloves and bats, with Mizuno his most popular cleat brand. His top-three brands for fielder's gloves are Mizuno, Rawlings and Easton, while Easton and Louisville Slugger lead the hit parade.

In the desert southwest of Mesa, AZ, **East Valley Sports** is selling softball every month of the year. "We're always selling softball," says owner **Dennis Callison**. "It's awesome for business. My fast-pitch softball business is heavily skewed to young and teenage girls."

When high school and travel teams come shopping at East Valley Sports, they are buying pants, jerseys and practice shorts. He does sell other softball-specific items, but he loses much of that business to online outlets and big-box stores. "We do have a wall of cleats, but we are selling less and less," adds Callison. "It's not what keeps our doors open."

Boys are From Mars ...

The difference between selling boys' baseball and girls' softball has always been a subject for much discussion among team dealers. Most now say the two markets attract their equal attention, but differences

ences when dealing with varying age groups among females.

"Younger softball players are more observant of color, while older girls focus on performance," says Karsh, of California Pro Sports. "Younger girls may want a glove with black and pink or a bat painted with blue and teal. Older girls are more conservative with the choice of colors. They simply want to blend in with the rest of the team."

Another interesting boys versus girls debate is how the parents respond to the needs of their children.

"Dads will always buy their daughters whatever they need and want," observes East Valley Sports' Callison.

The girls' business has become easier, most dealers observe, because the leading manufacturers are now catering as much to women playing softball as they have been to the baseball crowd.

"Dealing with girls playing softball is different than selling to boys who play baseball," notes Combat's Cooper. "The manufacturers are really starting to understand it and address it. For many years, the female player was ignored, but now the female athlete demands, expects and deserves products designed for their needs."



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A Fast-Pitch Pitch from Rawlings



Mike Zlakat
President and CEO, Rawlings

“It is not only good for the brand, but incredible for the sport. The Olympic Committee definitely has our vote.”

With its heritage in baseball, Rawlings Sporting Goods is branching out with a significant commitment this year to expanding its presence in the world of fast-pitch softball. The investment is not only in product development, but in brand strategy as well.

The company’s fast-pitch softball product line has historically been produced by its sister brand, Worth. Now, the fast-pitch product line is transforming under the Rawlings brand. Rawlings’ president and CEO Mike Zlakat sat down with Team Insight correspondent Mike May recently to discuss what this transformation entails and what the team market can expect from the Rawlings family of brands in 2016 and beyond.

What kind of new product commitment is Rawlings making this year in both fast-pitch and slow-pitch softball?

We’re looking to leverage our product innovation and expertise as well as our on-field authenticity into the sport of fast-pitch softball. With the mirroring of baseball and softball both in youth and professional participation, as well as the sales distribution channels, we can better streamline our business and focus by becoming the dominant diamond sports brand.

Is the emphasis more fast-pitch or slow-pitch?

This launch is 100 percent focused on fast-pitch. Rawlings’ sister company, Worth Sports, is strong in slow-pitch and will remain active in that sport.

Since the product will not be available until August 1, what kind of promotional efforts are being done this spring and summer to publicize its upcoming arrival?

We have several pieces in place to create buzz leading up to the August inventory date. We’re working to strengthen, adapt and create new partnerships to elevate and shine light on the Rawlings softball brand. This includes activating our advisory staff at the collegiate and pro levels, seeding products to our dealer base and by working the grassroots/events circuit. Product demos will play an integral role in our efforts.

What product innovation and technology can we expect?

Rawlings has always been heavily focused on creating technologically advanced products, but over the past year we’ve really stepped up our game by expanding our regime of product engineers and industrial designers. We’re confident that our innovations will provide a competitive edge unlike anything seen before, especially as seen in the new Quatro bat we’re developing.

What kind of presence does Rawlings have in the college softball game?

This year, we are previewing the Rawlings softball brand with our top seven advisory programs — Oklahoma, Tennessee, Notre Dame, Oregon State, Mississippi State, Penn State and Georgia Tech. While serving as ambassadors of the Rawlings softball brand, they will be able to provide invaluable product feedback.

Is Rawlings prepared for more global demand of fast-pitch product if softball returns to the Olympics in 2020?

We would most certainly welcome that opportunity. It is not only good for the brand, but incredible for the sport. The Olympic Committee definitely has our vote.

What kind of response are you getting from the retail community (traditional retailers and team dealers) about this new product line?

We’re currently in the process of informing our customers and partners about expanding the Rawlings brand into fast-pitch softball. For the most part, the response has been overwhelmingly positive and the decision considered a no-brainer. We are taking the time to connect, explain and receive any questions our dealers may have while reassuring them that this should be a win-win for everyone. ■



Going for the Gold Again?

This summer, the International Olympic Committee will meet in Brazil to vote on which sports to add to the Olympics for the Summer Games in Japan in 2020. The sports of baseball and (fast-pitch) softball are a combined package and there’s a strong sense of optimism that both sports will make the cut and will return to the Olympic family in four years. Equipment makers would be delighted to see the game regain Olympic status.

“We have been a long-time supporter of the Women’s National (Fast-pitch Softball) Team, even throughout the non-Olympic years,” notes **Rawlings’ Chelsea Stinson**. “We understand the importance it has to the softball community and if it’s back in the Olympics, it will mean a lot more to the game. More girls will be watching, there will be more interest in the game and participation in the sport will follow.”

“We’d love to see softball back in the Olympics,” agrees **Baden Sports’ Jay Helmick**. “International fast-pitch has been on our radar for a couple of years, which is why we recently received ISF approval. We have some exciting technology in our development pipeline that will make a huge impact in the game prior to 2020, so the timing (of an Olympic return) could be perfect.” ■

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The Softball Grassroots Report

Overall, the grassroots of softball in the U.S. are in fine shape. The governing structure of softball in the U.S. is somewhat similar to baseball in the U.S. Just as USA Baseball is recognized as the official governing body for amateur baseball in the U.S., the Amateur Softball Association (ASA)/USA Softball is the leading governing body of softball in the U.S.

"ASA/USA Softball has the task of catering to all ages, male or female, recreational or competitive," says

they graduate from college or high school. The men tend to gravitate towards the slow-pitch divisions since the majority of male athletes come from a baseball background."

To a large degree, girls who play softball in the U.S. tend to play fast-pitch. As time goes by, a few stay in the sport of softball and transition to slow-pitch.

"The ASA/USA Softball has a membership of over 2.4 million people and more than 160,000 teams," reveals Cress. "Of those numbers,

them to be and a sport for them to play."

While the ASA's reach is truly coast-to-coast, there are other governing bodies of softball that focus exclusively on the youth, such as Pony Baseball & Softball and Babe Ruth Baseball & Softball.

"We have competitive fast-pitch softball for girls from age four to 23, but the majority of our players are nine to 16-years old," notes Pony's Abe Key.

Key adds that when Pony first started softball in 1976, 75 percent of the girls' were playing slow-pitch. Today, 75 percent are playing fast-pitch.

Babe Ruth Softball, which was started in 1984, is designed for girls ages four to 18 with a focus on participation in local leagues. Babe Ruth Softball is played in almost every state in the U.S. and in Canada, with the majority of leagues on the East Coast.

Babe Ruth's mission is to provide every aspiring female athlete the opportunity to play softball and to have fun.

"When Babe Ruth League established Babe Ruth Softball, it was designed to offer the same benefits and fun experience as its counterpart — Babe Ruth Baseball," says Babe Ruth's Steve Tellefsen. As in baseball, Babe Ruth Softball leagues operate within registered geographical boundaries that ensure community play and provide the player an identity.

According to Ron Radigonda, executive director of the Softball Division of the International Baseball/Softball Confederation, women and men in 130 countries are playing fast-pitch and slow pitch softball. And, more will probably start playing fast-pitch softball if the IOC adds the sport to the Summer Games in 2020.

Despite being excluded from the Olympics in 2012 and again this year in Brazil, Radigonda reports that the sport of fast-pitch has been able to maintain its high level of popularity since it was last an Olympic medal sport in 2008.

"Attendance and participation in our big World Championship events proves that fast-pitch is a very popular global sport," adds Radigonda. ■



A Softball Leading Lady Speaks Out

One of the leading figures in women's fast-pitch softball is **Michele Smith**, now the lead color commentator/analyst for ESPN's coverage of the sport. She is a former member of the U.S. women's national softball team and played a leading role as the U.S. won gold medals at the 1996 and 2000 Olympic Games; three gold medals at the World Championships in 1994, 1998, and 2002; and two gold medals at the Pan American Games in 1995 and 1999. In other words, with seven gold medals in her possession, her credentials are second to none.

"The sport of fast-pitch softball has definitely grown in the last 20 years or so," recalls Smith. "The Olympic years (1996, 2000, 2004 and 2008) made a big difference. Since the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, there's been a little lag in interest. If the sport regains Olympic status for the 2020 Olympics in Beijing, it will give another spark to the sport."

Besides having the Olympics as a dream to chase, the emergence of new technology has made the game more exciting to play and interesting to watch.

"As the bats and balls have improved, it has created some safety concerns, which has led to changes in helmets, helmet faceguards and the development of defensive faceguards," notes Smith.

One of the trends affecting the emergence of fast-pitch softball is travel ball. While the purpose of travel ball is to expose each player to more coaching and competitive opportunities, some players appear to be playing too much softball, which is not a good thing.

While travel teams spend a great deal of money with the retail community and team dealers, those expenditures can be viewed as a short-term gain and a long-term loss for the sport, if you ask Smith. ■



"The ASA/USA Softball has a membership of over 2.4 million people and more than 160,000 teams."

ASA/USA Softball's Craig Cress. "Whether you're eight or 80, ASA/USA Softball offers the opportunity for people to play or umpire the game they love at a variety of levels."

Whether you are young or old, experienced or inexperienced, male or female, if you want to play softball, the ASA is the place to turn.

"What's great about softball is that there are so many different levels and options for people to participate," adds Cress. "For females, they tend to gravitate towards the fast-pitch divisions. We have more and more females participating throughout high school and college and then continuing into recreation (both for fast- and slow-pitch) once

about half are youth girls playing on fast-pitch teams, while about five percent of the girls are members of youth slow-pitch teams." At the adult level, team participation is the exact opposite, with more teams playing in the slow-pitch division versus fast-pitch.

While millions of females are playing, the ASA is well aware that it must continue to push and promote the games.

"We're always looking to grow the game, whether as the grassroots or competitive levels," says Cress. "A big focus is on growing the game at the grassroots levels and keeping it in the forefront of people's minds that there's a place for



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The Travel Ball Debate



“Fast-pitch softball faces some of the same challenges of other team sports with an emphasis on playing on travel teams at younger and younger ages.”

MARTY MACIASZEK, NSGA

While getting significant concentrations of young girls to focus on the sport of fast-pitch softball as pre-teens and teenagers may be good for business, in the short term that singular focus on one sport often leads to the softball players getting mentally and physically burned out at a relatively young age. This leads to them too often abruptly quitting the sport, which is bad for the softball business in the long term.

“Fast-pitch softball faces some of the same challenges of other team sports with an emphasis on playing on travel teams at younger and younger ages,” says **Marty Maciaszek**, director of the **Team Dealer Division of the National Sporting Goods Association**.

“This can lead to drops in participation in a few ways. Children who don’t make travel teams may drop out, rather than play in a recreational league, and pursue other sports,” he points out. “Other chil-

dren who have been involved in travel programs from a young age can get burned out on the sport and stop playing by the time they reach high school. In both cases, the recreational league opportunities to develop and improve, or play a less strenuous schedule, are not as available as they used to be and, as a result, there are fewer children participating in fast-pitch softball.”

“I played three sports in high school and I highly suggest that each softball player be well rounded when it comes to playing sports,” advises legendary softball pitcher and two-time Olympic gold medalist **Michele Smith**, who played field hockey, basketball and softball in high school.

“Too many young players are all-in beginning at age eight and then get burned out and quit the sport by high school,” Smith says. “All athletes need down time, an off-season, and a break from the sport. That will keep you moti-

vated, fresh and hungry when the next season begins.”

If you don’t like Smith’s opinion, ask another expert.

“I think, hands down, that you need to play as many sports as possible,” says Jessica Mendoza, a two-time U.S. Olympic softball player and now a baseball and softball analyst for ESPN.

“For me, I would have picked basketball at an early age,” she adds. “Obviously, that would not have worked out the way it did. Softball ended up being the sport that was for me.”

And with year-round play comes year-round parental involvement, which keeps those sports fans from playing the game themselves. That is most definitely not good for business.

“More and more adults put the focus on their children and their activities and tend to get away from the recreational side of things (for themselves),” points out **Craig Cress**, executive director of **ASA/USA Softball**.

While there are many detractors of travel softball, ASA/USA Softball has a duty to provide a venue to play softball for all levels of passion.

“What’s great about our sport is that there are so many levels that athletes can participate in,” says Cress. “From recreational, league or championship play, there’s something for everyone.”

One of softball’s governing bodies has taken the traditional travel softball model and made a slight adjustment to it.

“Travel ball is a big competitor for any sport and Babe Ruth League is not against competition, just elite competition that doesn’t accommodate the needs of all players,” says **Steve Tellefsen**, president of **Babe Ruth Baseball & Softball**.

In 2013, Babe Ruth League officially launched Xtreme Fastpitch as a division of Babe Ruth Softball so there would be a place for everyone, ranging for those on a rec level to those who seek a higher degree of competition. Xtreme Fastpitch is a competitive softball division that takes on an elevated feel of organized softball. ■



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MISSION C.H.E.E.R.

DEALERS CAN SELL CHEERLEADING IF THEY CHOOSE TO ACCEPT THE SPORT.

By Nancy Baeder

Enthusiasm for cheerleading waxes and wanes among team dealers. This spirited bunch with specialized attire presents unique challenges and opportunities, with success closely linked to working with vendors that provide the trending styles and branded merchandise the girls crave. It also requires a level of commitment to keep up with the girls. As cheer becomes a funded school sport in more states, is it becoming more dealer-friendly? Or will cheer remain mission impossible?

It depends on how dealers define their mission.

Cheer is not a static marketplace. Those that actively pursue cheer put dedicated resources behind an organized sales and service model. By all accounts, **Denver Athletic**, Denver, CO, has the right formula to be successful. With **Stacy Biggs** firmly ensconced as its cheer and dance director, business continues to thrive.

"The cheer business is great," enthuses Biggs. "We are growing every year with new schools, gyms and recreation programs" and Denver Athletic recently added Sarah DeVore to its sales staff. The team handles all uniforms, spirit wear, shoes and accessories for cheer and dance.

At **Lee's Sports**, Nashville, IL, cheer is a level business year-to-year. "We've been selling cheerleading for 20 years, everything from uniforms and shoes to warm-ups and body suits," says owner **Mike Borowiak**. "We don't sell a whole bunch because I don't pursue it actively, but people come to us because they are loyal to us."

John Waroe, owner of **Turf Sporting Goods**, Las Vegas,

NV, has been selling cheer for years, but no longer believes the odds are in his favor. "In my estimation the cheer business is ever-changing and not for the better. Our prices are constantly undercut, both by vendors that also sell online and fly-by-night companies in and out of southern Nevada. We have so much pride in everything we do but there is no loyalty. Cheer is not even five percent of our business now and I will not continue to go after it."

Enthusiasm is also fading at **SAI Team Sales**, Louisville, CO. "In my estimation, cheerleading is more specialized, more fad-ish," says owner **Bob Leman**. "Margins have shrunk from where they used to be, primarily because many of the companies that offer cheer also sell online, making it more difficult to make money. We still offer it, but we're phasing out of cheerleading."

To Cheer or Not to Cheer

Many team dealers have chosen not to make cheer part of their mission.

"We don't do cheer because it is so very specialized that you need someone to service it year-round and keep up with the trends," says **Jimmy Van Epps**, president and sales manager for **Bumblebee Team Sports**, Nicholasville, KY. "If we could find that person, I believe we could be very successful."

Van Epps has had great success servicing club volleyball, a specialized sport that requires a similar investment of time to understand. "Like cheerleading, club volleyball is a tight-knit community that requires you to speak their language. They know exactly what they want and they are willing to spend for it," says Van Epps. "We have learned a lot along the way. It has required us to put in place the cor-

rect infrastructure to handle the decorating, ordering, packaging for dressing 100-500 players in a quick turnaround.”

Cheerleading is not in the cards at **Brine’s Sporting Goods**, Sudbury, MA. “Cheer is specialized in much the same way that hockey has become specialized. We do not have the resources to take it on,” says owner **Maura Allen**. “Among other hurdles, cheerleaders are not funded like other sports and they are constantly raising funds for uniforms and competitions.”

The funding issue may be changing, however, as one by one states are making cheerleading a sanctioned school sport. This has potential to change the cheer dynamic in the schools.

“Many schools and teams will be budgeting more money towards cheerleading, including dollars for practice space, equipment, instruction and coaches,” says **Graydon McCrite**, brand manager, **EMC Sports/ Eric McCrite Company**.

B-R-A-N-D

“We believe that the recognition of cheerleading as an official team sport in the state of California will impact style trends in the cheer market,” adds **Annika Risher**, product manager for **Teamwork Athletic Apparel**.

Cheerleading is big business with big brands. Large numbers

of girls participate, when you include high school sideline cheer squads, plus the JV squads, scholastic competition squads, middle school feeder programs, recreation leagues, gyms and cheerleading camps. This year-round sport requires athleticism and rigor, a far cry from 10 girls on the sidelines during football and basketball season.

“Cheerleading is a team-driven and customer service-driven business. If you commit to the sport, it blooms via customer relationships, and like every other sport the right brand does all the work for you,” says **Tate Chalk**, chief executive at **Nfinity Athletic**. “Cheer is nothing to be afraid of.”

In fact, choosing the right brands can make or break you in cheerleading.

Though Varsity Cheer continues to suck up much of the market, dealers have an increased arsenal of strong team brands and channels available for cheerleading, and the vendor support to make it easier.

“We absolutely provide the support necessary to help dealers succeed in

the cheerleading market,” says **McCrite**, a major distributor of cheer brands to dealers.

Denver Athletic offers a full lineup of brands to provide the right mix. “For uniforms, we mainly use Motionwear because they provide a large number of options and great customer service. This year we’ll also be selling new Under Armour cheer uniforms, which is very exciting,” says **Biggs**. “For camp and practice wear, we use Bella, Next Level, Motionwear, Under Armour, Soffe, Boxercraft, Pennant, Expert and Blue 64.”

“Expert is a new vendor we are excited about this year,” adds **Devore**. “They are an activewear company and their fabrics have wonderful properties.”

“Brand is everything in every sport,” says **Borowiak**. “At times it seems counterintuitive, but if we offer a \$5 T-shirt and a \$20 Under Armour T-shirt, teams choose Under

Armour, no matter the income level of the family.

Brand is a priority for them.”

He finds vendor cheer offerings more trend-friendly.

“These days vendors provide the styles and fits the girls want, so it’s much easier for dealers like me,” says **Borowiak**.

Junior high and youth football cheer squads typically wear a crop top and skirt. “Stock uniforms from Alleson and Augusta Sportswear give the girls the athletic look they want in a tasteful cut,” he says. “Typically we do an embroidered design in one color. Another good option is sublimated tackle twill that gives you three or four colors on the uniform.”

Though he doesn’t do much at the high schools, where Varsity reigns, he likes Alleson custom uniforms for schools he services. “It’s true that cheerleaders order a lot of extra stuff, but so do the football players,” says **Borowiak**.

Turf Sporting Goods finds it helpful to have samples on hand for the girls to try on for the youth and middle school cheer he serves. “We buy from Teamwork Athletic and that gives us the ability to get one and print it the next day,” says **Waroe**, who has embroidery and tackle twill decorating onsite. “With cheer, you can’t invest in inventory because the styles are always changing with new colors, including neons and other colors that are not traditional team colors.”

What’s Trending in Uniform Styles

School cheerleading uniforms must deliver comfort, athletic fit



Where Does Cheer Fit in the Team Game?

In the spectrum of all sports, cheerleading’s fit is still uncertain. At issue are the competitive aspects of cheerleading, though few question the athleticism and rigor required of its athletes. The question that has been asked for decades may be getting an answer of sorts, just not for the reasons you might think.

In fact, the safety risks inherent in cheerleading are leading many states to reclassify cheer as an official school sport. That’s because by definition official sports requires stricter rules regarding practice location, facilities and other safety measures, coaching certification requirements, access to athletic trainers and other medical staff, and administrative program oversight. Official sport status also means that some funding for equipment and resources would come from schools.

Recently in the news, California became the latest state to include cheerleading in interscholastic sport. New legislation dubbed C.H.E.E.R.S (California High Schools Expanding Equality Respect and Safety Act) requires the state to develop guidelines, procedures and safety standards for high school cheerleading by July 2017. Goals include developing guidelines for competitive cheer programs that schools

can implement, meeting the standards and compliance with Title IX. Meanwhile, the NCAA continues to classify cheerleading an athletic activity rather than a sponsored sport. Many in the cheer community believe that a new discipline called Stunt more closely meets the NCAA definition of a sport, with its focus on the technical, athletic and competitive components of cheer.

“Stunt is a cheerleading-inspired sport that wears volleyball-inspired clothing. It’s already big already in Texas, North Carolina, New York and Florida,” says **Tate Chalk**, founder and CEO of **Nfinity Athletic**. “The techniques, moves and skills of Stunt make it consistent with the definition of a sport according to Title IX, and the idea of making it an NCAA sport is beginning to get some legs.”

As for cheer’s Olympic dreams? They keep getting bumped further out, to 2020 or 2024. The biggest challenge is finding the space between gymnastics and dance. From an international standpoint, the proper governance and guidelines have to be put in place, and there are many sports in line to become part of the Olympics Games. ■



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and a traditional look.

"Think All American cheerleader. Clean lines, perfect fit and a uniform that shouts school spirit," says **Bob Wilson**, president of **Motionwear**. "We see schools transitioning to fabrics that provide flexibility and comfort and still have the athletic look."

Less is more for school uniforms, "The high school girls want comfort and simple, usually teams order a crop top and skirt with an athletic look," says Borowiak.

Denver Athletic sees cheer uniforms trending toward more collegiate and simple. "Most of our teams order the one-piece shell/liner combo rather than the tradition-

al shell with a liner underneath," says Biggs.

"I've noticed more detail in cheer uniforms, especially in the type of piping or braid," says DeVore. "Classic, simple designs will always be preferred for some coaches, but more coaches are looking for a uniform to help their teams stand out. As far as lines, I am seeing more curves and arches instead of the standard sharp corners."

In the all-star market, glitz and glamour prevail. With fewer uniform regulations, all-star is much more flashy with sparkle, elaborate prints, pop colors and pizzazz color lines. Shorts and capris often win out over skirts.

"All-stars always have more details than a school cheer uniform," says DeVore. "Cut-outs are big this year, whether in the shoulder, sides or back."

"All-Stars are always looking for the one detail that makes their uniform stand out from all the others," says Wilson. "Things like strappy backs with rhinestone logos, dye sublimation to give that extra edge and comfort."

Shoes, Campwear and Accessories

Sublimation is more prevalent in cheerleading. "The days of the traditional stock cheer uniform are almost gone, replaced by fashion forward sublimated cheer and dance uniforms that need to look good both on the sidelines and in competition," says Risher.

Cheerleaders do a lot of fundraising and online team stores are a great way for dealers to get in on the action. Setting up team stores with camp wear and practice pieces can be a revenue booster. Styles are trending to bright colors and combination fabrics and cheerleaders have always loved glitter to stand out.

"Most schools don't require that the camp and practice wear be in school colors," says Wilson. "This allows the squad to choose the bright neon muscle tank and fun print short to stand out as a team while attending camp."

Performance fabrics lead the way for campwear and practice pieces. "Cheer and dance teams want their camp and practice wear to be comfortable and affordable in flattering styles," says Risher.

"Teams definitely like the breathability of poly blends more than 100 percent cotton," says Biggs. "Each team is very unique with their annual selections. We're putting together our Spring 2016 offerings for camp/practice wear and there's a lot of variety, including fitted tanks, loose tanks, fitted Ts, unisex Ts, fitted shorts, track shorts and skorts, all in several different fabrics and colors."

Think quality over quantity. "Coaches look for apparel that is comfortable year-round," says DeVore. "More teams order leggings and capris than ever and track shorts are still in as long as they allow the athlete to move."

Borowiak includes glitter prints

for the girls and regular screen-prints for parents in his team packs. "We usually include an Under Armour hoodie and T-shirts, along with Gildan T-shirt, hoodie and sweatpants printed down the leg," he says. "For shoes, it's mostly Adidas, but also Kaepa and Zephz. And we like to include a bag, either from Holloway or Augusta Sportswear, unless they specify Under Armour."

Bags are a great accessory for every athlete, and cheer is no exception. "We actually sell more bags than shoes. Bags bring more personality than white shoes can deliver, so the girls will own two or three different bags," says Chalk.

New Reasons to Cheer

New product lines with increased design support from team vendors make cheer easier to service and sell.

Teamwork Athletic is upping the ante on customer service in 2016 with decreased lead times and increased dealer support services, including a new online designer.

Its expanded sublimation line include new items in its ProSphere line and a complete line of full sublimation activewear, including training pants, tights, sports bras and various active tops and shorts.

Motionwear is focused on the very specific needs of cheer, with fashion-forward design options, custom online uniform designers, performance fabrics and timely delivery. For 2016 look for two separate catalogs, one for school, one for all-star.

Nfinity offers new spandex, new shoes and new bags. Its Titan high top sneaker, offered in black and white, is very trendy. Nfinity also offers a color-coordinated spandex line, in an athletic fit, including sports bras, shorts, tanks, jackets, hoodie, T-shirts and socks in both a sparkle and team colors.

Look for two new cheer shoes from Kaepa, in women's and youth sizes. Its CheerUp shoe offers shock absorption, sleeker profile and high performance outsole for maximum grip and traction, making it great for tumbling. The Stellarlyte shoe is formulated for tumbling and stunting on specialized spring floor and blue mat surfaces. ■

C-O-P-Y-R-I-G-H-T?

What parts of an article of clothing can be copyrighted? Is a cheerleading uniform not a cheerleading uniform without stripes, chevrons, zigzags, and colorblocks? Those questions are behind an unsettled part of copyright law that may be headed to the U.S. Supreme Court.

The case, brought in 2010 by Varsity Brands, alleges that Star copied its cheerleading uniforms. Initial rulings favored Star, essentially saying that the designs made the garment recognizable as a cheerleading uniform, and as such were part of the function. Recently the 6th Circuit Court of Appeals overturned that ruling, stating that graphic designs are separate from the function of the garments and thus can be copyrighted as original art.

The complex legal issues will take time to unravel. "We all have to be patient because the ruling depends on what the Supreme Court decide," says Graydon McCrite, brand manager at EMC Sports.

How the law is resolved could have implications for competition in the marketplace beyond cheer uniforms. "If at the end, this is left to stand as is and if the copyright submissions are deemed valid or not challenged, it seems there could be little room for any competition in the market. That's never a good thing," says Bob Wilson, president of Motionwear. ■



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Back in the 1980s and '90s, Wilson Sporting Goods spearheaded a marketing initiative to build the “brand” of tennis. Its single goal was to increase participation in the sport and Wilson, which at the time held a more than 50 percent market share in the tennis business, figured that if more people played tennis, all companies – including itself – would benefit.

It is the “rising tide raises all ships” philosophy of building a brand. Today, that strategy is exactly what the leading cheerleading company in the country, Varsity Cheer, is following as it looks to not only grow the game, but to benefit all major players along the way.

With a dominant hold in the cheer business as a direct seller – a position that includes camps, competitions, television contracts, uniforms and gear, the latter of which makes Varsity the ultimate challenger to the team dealer channel – Var-

needed to increase participation in cheerleading – just as Wilson did with tennis years ago – will benefit every link in the supply chain, including the team dealers who remain hesitant to go head-to-head with a behemoth like Varsity Spirit that bypasses the team dealer channel. Yet he understands the challenges dealers face.

“First of all, there is a very demanding customer,” he says, pointing out the obvious – cheerleaders can be a difficult sell. Style, performance, fit and service are the four legs that form the base of the cheer sales pyramid. The one leg – fit – is perhaps what scares dealers most.

“If you make one mistake you have 12 mothers in your store demanding a refund,” Webb says. “There is a fashion element, a customization element and, like I said, a very demanding customer.”

Varsity Cheer worked for years to become the dominant factor in cheer and it did so, as its brethren in the soccer specialty and lacrosse businesses have done, by filling a void neglected

longstanding relationship.)

But more beckons Webb as he attempts to continue to redefine the “sport” of cheer. Today, as he defines it, cheer consists of three components.

1. School cheerleading, the traditional team-oriented squad that performs at football and basketball games, which remains the foundation of the business.

2. All-Star and Club Cheer, which offers a more athletic opportunity to compete in tournaments and competitions and is unaffiliated with schools.

3. Stunt Cheer, a designed stunt competition that blends school spirit and competition. Stunt removes the crowd-leading element and focuses on the technical and athletic components and is viewed as an opportunity for colleges and high schools to meet strict Title IX requirements.

It is this latest version of cheer that excites Webb these days. The Title IX connection is the key. “We believe stunt cheer perfectly aligns with the competitive requirements of Title IX,” Webb says, who admits there is a chicken-or-the-egg scenario at work.

“The wheels grind slowly, but we need enough critical mass in Stunt to go to the NCAA with a convincing argument for it,” he says. “We have to start building it everywhere.”

He has had discussions with the NCAA about making it a development sport and scholarships for Stunt are the next vital step. “When that happens, the sport will explode,” Webb says.

Meanwhile, at the high school level the NFHS supports the Stunt cheer concept as well. Its efforts are helped by the fact that Stunt is positioned as a spring sport, allowing girls who cheer in the fall and winter to participate.

Webb strongly believes there are significant opportunities for team dealers to benefit from the rising tide of increased cheer participation, particularly in camp wear and servicing the smaller markets not reached by the likes of Varsity Cheer. There remains a huge market for cheer and the potential for growth is there as traditional numbers remain stable and new disciplines take hold.

There remains one final frontier, a Holy Grail Webb has been working towards for years: Olympic participation. The various cheer organizations have been going through the IOC process for the past decade and they have even created an International Cheer Federation to spearhead the effort. Webb admits there are still hurdles to jump, but who better to make that leap than athletic cheerleaders taking their sport to the next level?

“We are seeing cheer now as more popular than ever at the high school level,” Webb says, stressing that cheer at the club level has only been in existence for 15 years and has already made a significant impact. “Now, Stunt is the next great expansion,” he says, and he urges all members of the supply chain to jump on the pyramid.

And the future? “It only gets better from here,” he says. — *Michael Jacobsen*



sity Cheer will certainly benefit from more girls – and boys – cheerleading.

But just as with tennis a generation ago, when all brands benefitted from the rising tide of new players, the cheer business as a whole – and the team dealers who choose to, and as a result compete with Varsity Cheer – will sell more skirts, shoes, poms and campwear as more people jump on the pyramid.

Jeff Webb certainly agrees with that.

“Our mission is to grow cheerleading,” says Webb, who, as CEO and founder of Varsity Brands, certainly knows what he is talking about. Varsity Brands is the leading academic/achievement and cheerleading company in the world. Now owned by Charlesbank Capital Partners, the three brands under its umbrella – Herff Jones, which sells class rings, caps and gowns; Varsity Spirit, the cheerleading arm; and BSN Sports, its team dealer network – now have combined sales in excess of \$1.2 billion.

Webb sincerely believes that making the effort

by the traditional team channel.

The company took shape when Webb, at the time a yell leader at the University of Oklahoma, started Varsity Spirit in 1974 as an organizer of overnight summer training camps for high school and college cheerleaders in the Southeast and Midwest. It was a time when cheer was evolving into a more athletic activity and the traditional wool uniforms and saddle shoes of the times couldn’t keep up. There was demand among the campers for more athletic-inspired uniforms and Varsity moved to supply that demand.

“We were determined to keep the school leadership aspect of cheer and expand it into athletics and entertainment and that changed the face of the sport,” Webb explains.

The camp business expanded into sponsorship of national competitions and cheer championships and, eventually, a television deal with the fledgling ESPN network. (Varsity Spirit today remains the oldest broadcast partner of ESPN, with 14 hours broadcast every year in a

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PLAY LIKE A GIRL!

FOUR KEY SPORTS – BASKETBALL, LACROSSE, VOLLEYBALL AND SOCCER – SCORE FOR DEALERS.

By Tim Sitek

Team dealers who ask the question, “Where would my business be if it weren’t for girls’ sports?” have a simple answer — just about half of what it is today. With that in mind, dealers across the country talk about four key girls’ sports and how they are impacting their businesses.

Hoopin’ It Up, Girl Style

Women’s basketball remains a core category for team dealers. While it may not have the big-ticket hardgoods sales of football, baseball and softball, those limited sales opportunities are offset by the

sheer number of girls’ teams and players who hit the hard courts with uniforms, practice jerseys, shoes, socks, bags and more.

“Women’s sports have always been a major player for us,” says **Todd Gundlach**, president of **Badger Sporting Goods**, Madison, WI. And while other sports may be bigger than women’s basketball, “Every dollar counts,” he adds.

And it’s tougher to get those dollars because of the intense competition among dealers, big-box stores and Internet sellers. Throw in the big bucks shelled out by the major shoe companies to elite hoops programs and it gets even tougher, Gundlach says.

Sure, Badger sold more uniforms 15 to 20 years

ago when there was less competition. Plus, it didn’t have to compete with the shoe companies that give away product to top-tier teams.

He does take issue with the freebie mentality of the big brands, especially since “basketball is the most brand-conscious of any sport. The issue and problem is they give away product and extras to the coaching staff. In my opinion, if a teacher at the high school level also coaches, they shouldn’t be given free goods.”

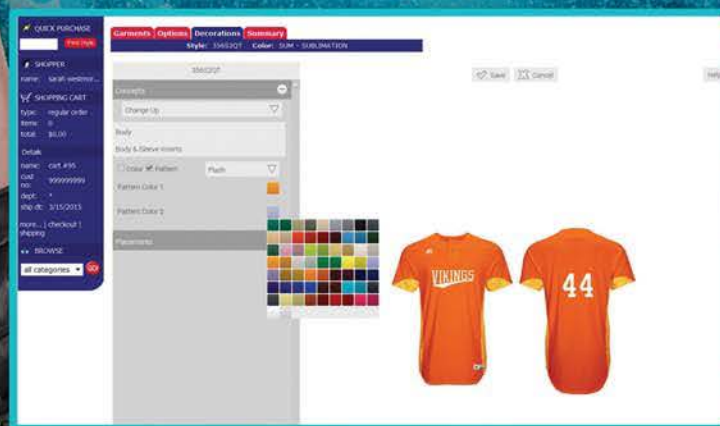
But Gundlach and his eight roadmen traveling Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan still find a way to get it done. “We’ve had to enter that game of finding ways to include free products simply because of the shoe companies.” The end



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result: "Our business is still good with basketball uniforms."

Basketball is a growing market for **Champro Sports**, Wheeling, IL, says national sales manager **Marty Spellman**. The company has expanded its line of uniforms to take advantage of the sheer size of the women's business.

"We've introduced a number of women/girl-specific fit/cut basketball uniforms that have been well received," Spellman says. "We now have five or six options for women instead of two. Dealers like the price points and looks."

Plus, Champro carries a number of related products – basketballs, bags, ball racks, accessories, officials' gear and more – to cater to the big crowd of basketball players. "We've tried to become a one-stop-shop for our dealers," Spellman says.

The school market keeps sales bouncing for Badger, Gundlach notes. Badger also does well with the youth market, where he sees growth and potential among female players.

"Kids love to play basketball," he explains. "We do well at the youth level, whether it be T-shirts or basketballs."

Champro has seen solid sales gains in the middle and high school business. It also has experienced growth in the AAU/travel team category.

And while AAU programs for girls' travel teams are strong, Badger simply hasn't found a way to crack that business. Part of that simply is trying

"It's nice when you are working with the women's team. They value the service more. The boys often shop strictly on price."

AARON KARSH, CALIFORNIA PRO SPORTS

to find the buyer, who often isn't the coach, Gundlach notes. "There are so many people involved in AAU programs. They often just want to make money. They will find product on the Internet or wherever they can to get the lowest price and more than cover their costs after receiving fees from the players."

Instead, Badger has found success by catering to schools and the youth organizations with active girls' programs. The school business gets an extra kick from a wealth of softgoods. "It's common that you have three avenues — practice, game and travel," Gundlach says. "It wasn't something that you had years ago, so that's nice. It's been good for us."

His only wish is that suppliers would do a better job with user-friendly uniform builders. Badger relies on its in-house graphics designer to mock up uniforms, but that takes time since there often is back and forth over many days. A strong uniform builder would allow a coach to build a uniform and send it to the dealer, cutting precious time needed to fill an order.

In today's world, time remains a big challenge, Spellman knows. Budget-strapped schools and time-starved coaches often wait until the last minute. Suppliers such as Champro have responded by expanding their stock offerings.

"The industry has gone from the dealer stocking it to the vendor carrying it. Dealers are willing to pay more for the at-once orders. We've adjusted to this," Spellman says.

Spellman also knows dealers face stiff competition from the Internet. "There is a limitless supply of places offering uniforms. It becomes a price battle, but the end user really doesn't know what they are getting or if they will get it on time. It's just another challenge for team dealers. Dealers have to play up their service and their standing in the community. Those are all pluses that dealers must use."

Girls Stick To It

Lacrosse continues to gain popularity across America and women are helping to move the fastest game on two feet forward. Such growth is occurring across the board, from youth to middle schools, from high school to the collegiate ranks.

"It's actually as good, if not better, than the men," reports **Aaron Karsh**, of **California Pro Sports** in Harbor City, CA. And it's firing on all age levels in California, which has become one of the country's fastest-growing markets for lacrosse.

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in his area and middle schools are adopting the sport since the women's game minimizes contact, Karsh adds. Even better, as a school-sponsored sport many of the costs for equipment and uniforms are covered. In high school, every school with a men's team has a women's team. There are close to 85 high schools playing in the team dealer's market and 78 of those schools are within a two-hour range, says Karsh, lacrosse manager for the retailer and team dealer that covers Southern California with five roadmen.

The sport's social dynamic add to its allure, explains **Ed Saunders**, director marketing for **STX**. Plus, many parents don't fully understand the sport so they don't live vicariously through their children's participation (as they do in other sports these parents played when they were younger). Those factors drive participation.

"There is a freedom to just play in women's

"In my opinion, if a teacher at the high school level also coaches, they shouldn't be given free goods."

TODD GUNDLACH, BADGER SPORTING GOODS

lacrosse that doesn't exist in some of the more traditional team sports that are popular among American females," Saunders says. "The market for women's lacrosse is robust." He believes that the best days for women's lacrosse are still to come.

"The NCAA recently published its annual study of participation growth by sport, in which women's lacrosse was number one above all others," Saunders says. The growing popularity of women's lacrosse at the collegiate level bodes well for the future.

"We are seeing the addition of major Division I college programs in non-traditional markets like the Southwest, which we believe is representative of interest and demand for the sport. Having USC and Arizona State competing at the highest level will only serve to foster more visibility for the game in new communities," he says.

Even better, the first women's lacrosse semi-professional league (UWLX – United Women's Lacrosse League) will start this summer. "The enthusiasm is off the charts. It is a very interesting time for women's lacrosse. As many team sports are lagging in participation, we believe women's lacrosse is only just coming into its heyday," Saunders says.

Karsh agrees that the increased exposure will boost participation in women's lacrosse, especially when the PAC-12 launches its women's lacrosse league next year. "That will open eyes for the youth players" in his area, and the television coverage will boost awareness, Karsh notes.

Lacrosse still isn't nearly the top sport for California Pro Sports, Karsh says, trailing the big four of baseball, football, basketball and

soccer. But it continues to grow sales at a 10-15 percent clip. It didn't hurt that a competitor closed its doors, leaving California Pro Sports as one of a few retail stores catering to the LAX crowd in its area. Needless to say, he calls it extremely important to California Pro Sports, which nearly splits its retail floor space for men's and women's products.

"It's nice when you are working with the women's team," Karsh adds. "They value the service more. The boys often shop strictly on price."

He's also seen a shift in preferences between men and women. A couple of years ago, women wanted flash with bright colors. Now, the ladies want black and gray. Surprisingly, the boys now lean to flashier colors on their sticks and helmets.

The women prefer to add some panache in accessories, especially with Junk headbands. The colorful headbands took hold after a rules change that required matching compression shorts with their kilts.

Additionally, he can't satisfy demand any more with just a couple of lines, as hardgoods gain momentum and suppliers differentiate. He no longer can just carry long-time suppliers such as Brine, STX and Warrior, but now has added Under Armour, Epoch and other sticks.

"The cool thing about lacrosse is there is something for everyone. The kids come in and ask for something specifically based on their play, budget or social connections," Karsh says.

Yes, that ups the pressure as inventory increases, Karsh knows. It's a major challenge especially with lead times needed by suppliers.

"Lead times for hardgoods are always the biggest challenge," Saunders says. "A lot of teams don't realize that they need to be getting their orders in by mid-summer of the previous year to have timely arrival for that initial February tryout/practice. Or, coaches are just so fatigued by season's end, they don't really want to think about it."

Saunders suggests team dealers work closely with sales reps to plan. "We believe that by working closely with our team sales reps, who are better networked than anyone in women's lacrosse, team dealers can overcome the traditional between-season procrastination with a coordinated, pre-planned assortment presentation that takes the work off the coaches' plates," he says.

Saunders is certainly upbeat about the sport's future. "We are generally very positive about the prospects for women's lacrosse. Media visibility will continue to increase and developments at the elite level will drive interest across more grassroots platforms in new regions.

"That said, like all team sports, women's lacrosse needs to be cognizant of the rising cost of participation directly tied to specialization," Saunders says. "It's great to see the college coaches association taking steps to

mitigate the negative effects of early recruiting. De-emphasizing the college scholarship madness at earlier ages will help maintain a healthy recreational level through early adolescent age groups, as long as the sport's administrators can keep up with demand for coaches, facilities and officials. All good problems."

A Spike In Volleyball Business

Volleyball is decidedly a sport played by women. That's not to say there aren't a good share of men playing in high schools and clubs across the country, but the numbers and growth greatly favor the female side.

Every state reports that girls play on teams at the high school level, compared to only 24 states with programs for the boys, according to the National Federation of State High School Association's (NFHS) 2014-2015 participation survey. The numbers correspond: 432,000 girls compared to 54,000 boys who play high school volleyball.

And dealers and suppliers point to an equally, if not more, important part of the business: women's club volleyball.

"It's growing," says **Brad Downer**, VP-sales for **Team Sports Inc.**, Holland OH, of the women's volleyball market. He attributes the sport's





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growing popularity to its evolution, especially with the continued growth of club volleyball. “We have very large clubs with up to 600 girls playing.”

Yes, the high school business remains important, but the club business brings quantity and quality. “It’s better than going to a high school where you may have 15 players on the varsity team.”

But high school teams can be the catalyst. “High schools are still important because it trickles down, since many of the volleyball coaches are heavily involved in the clubs either as coaches or on the board,” Downer notes. In fact, a high school coach sits on the board of a huge women’s volleyball clubs and it happens to be one of Team Sports’ biggest customers.

Consequently, Team Sports reaches out to both the high school and club markets. It also upped its concentration on the club business, which helped it double its volleyball business last year.

The collegiate and high school programs are a big market, notes **Ashley Moore**, sales manager for volleyball at **Porter Athletic**. Throw in the growth in the club market and interest in sand volleyball and “the potential market for women’s volleyball continues to increase,” she notes.

Women’s volleyball ranks as the second most

“Girls that were cheering for Michelle Akers or Mia Hamm when they played are now organizing and running their own clubs and leagues specifically for women.”

CRAIG NOWAKOWSKI, STEFANS SOCCER

popular sport at the high school level, says **Mike Puccini**, senior director of diamond and volleyball for **Mizuno USA**. “The interesting transition driving many discussions in the industry is the upward tick of younger volleyball players ages six to 12, as well as the increased interest in beach at the youth level,” Puccini adds.

Many factors are driving interest, Puccini notes. More high schools are adding programs, which builds on its own momentum. More colleges offer volleyball scholarships and colleges are adding sand volleyball programs. Plus, the upcoming Summer Olympics in Rio will further increase interest since it’s one of the most popular sports at the Summer Games.

Moore adds that “opportunity, visibility and advocacy” drive participation. “The strongest and most effective sport promotion is through an ath-

lete’s personal experience.” Opening up avenues across the spectrum – recreational to competitive – give players more opportunities. And as clubs become more competitive and recruit, kids often start playing at a younger age to make the grade.

Needless to say, volleyball’s stature is rising for Team Sports. “I can’t put a number on it as it relates to our overall team business, but it’s definitely part of our focus,” Downer says. “It’s becoming a more important part of our business.”

While Team Sports doesn’t do a lot of men’s volleyball business, that segment is also growing. “We deal with the high-end clubs,” he says, and just as with the women’s club business, the men want the best. “They aren’t shy about paying for it,” he says.

Team Sports doesn’t sell a lot of volleyball hardgoods, but occasionally sells a system, Downer notes. Of course, uniforms are a key part of the business, he says. Kneepads are also part of the uniform. Spirit wear dramatically extends the sale. “We have doubled our business with customized sites,” Downer notes.

Those sales should keep growing, too. Both Moore and Puccini believe women’s volleyball will continue to gain popularity thanks to the Olympics, youth programs and the expanded presence of beach volleyball.

Ruling the World’s Game

The women’s soccer market certainly got a big boost from the spectacular run of the national team in last year’s Women’s World Cup. A strong market just got stronger, and the benefits of the team’s presence and profile should make an even bigger mark in years to come.

To find out just what impact the U.S. women’s team had on the business, *Team Insight* spoke with one of the industry’s top soccer specialty retailers and team dealers about the present and future state of the women’s market.

Stefans Soccer Supply started in the mid-1960s as a men’s clothing store in one of Milwaukee’s ethnic neighborhoods. Its founder and namesake saw an opportunity when the local die-hard players kept trying to find soccer gear. From extra space in the basement, Stefans Soccer Supply was born, quickly taking over the entire shop as demand and its reputation grew for this unique specialty store.

Today the third-generation soccer specialist operates four retail stores – three in the Milwaukee area and one in Madison – along with a team division from its headquarters and warehouse in New Berlin. Currently, the soccer specialist has five salespeople working team and club sales. And it has a comprehensive Web site that lives up to its billing: “For the serious soccer in you.”

Craig Nowakowski, retail leader, team sales rep and the third generation family member to move Stefans forward, gave *Team Insight* his take on the women’s business.

TI: How is the overall market for women’s soccer?

Nowakowski: Overall, I think it’s a strong market that is growing each year. With the success of

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the U.S. Women's National Team (USWNT) since its inception and particularly with their recent World Cup title, it's hard to argue that women's soccer players aren't the most popular female athletes in the United States. That has served as a great catalyst for young girls to get involved in the game as both players and as fans. And through the lens of our soccer specialty business that means both team and retail sales.

What factors are driving participation?

Obviously, the USWNT is a huge factor for the young girls to get involved and for current players the team serves as a powerful form of motivation. Brandi Chastain scoring her penalty kick to win WWC '99, pulling off her jersey and celebrating in her sports bra, became an iconic image, Carli

Lloyd's hat trick in this past WWC will go down as one of the most impressive feats in World Cup history — men's or women's. Those moments cannot be bought and the reach of their impact is hard to pinpoint.

How have these moments impacted the business?

Without a doubt they drive girls to play and to keep playing. That drives participation further than some people think, since girls that were cheering for Michelle Akers or Mia Hamm when they played are now organizing and running their own clubs and leagues specifically for women. We have a women's soccer club in Wisconsin with more than 2000 women registered. "Soccer Mom" no longer refers to a woman carting the kids around to games and practice; increasingly,

it's going to be mom driving to her own practices or games.

What are the challenges that team dealers face and where are the opportunities for these dealers?

In theory the challenges aren't all too different from those on the men's team side — if they were handled completely independent of each other. The challenge really comes when working with soccer clubs that have both boys' and girls' teams, and the vast majority do. The difficulty comes with offering and working with girls'- and women's-specific sizing in addition to traditional youth and adult sizes. Rather than having to book home and away jerseys for a club in youth and adult sizes, dealers are seeing the need to offer youth, adult, girls' and women's size runs,

A View from Inside the Beautiful Game

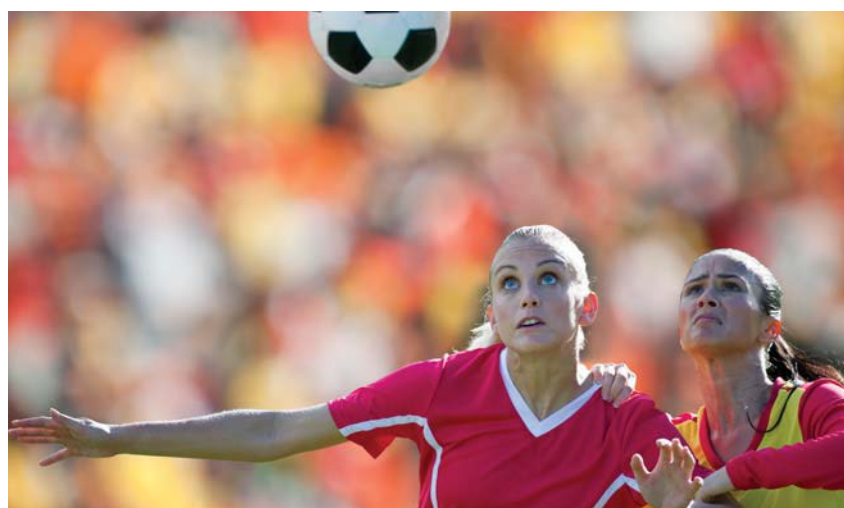
If anyone knows soccer, especially women's soccer, it's **Lynn Berling-Manuel**. She has played a major role in covering the sport as editor, associate publisher and then CEO of *Soccer America*. She also served for eight years as the chief marketing officer of the American Youth Soccer Organization (AYSO). With nearly 500,000 players and 70,000 coaches, AYSO is the biggest youth soccer club in the world.

Those credentials led to the latest chapter in her storied soccer career when she became CEO of the **National Soccer Coaches Association of America (NSCAA)** last July. She is the first female to lead the NSCAA in its 75-year history and one of the few women in the world to lead a major soccer organization.

Berling-Manuel's 30-plus year career in the soccer game gives her a unique perspective on the sport from many angles. Soccer is alive and well in the United States, and the women's game is leading the charge thanks to the success of the recent World Cup victory. The sport's best days are yet to come, Berling-Manuel notes in this interview with *Team Insight*.

How is participation faring in women's soccer and what are the factors that impact this participation?

Berling-Manuel: Soccer for girls and women is doing great. It recently surpassed softball as the third most popular team sport for high school girls. According to an analysis by the



ESPN website FiveThirtyEight.com, it could reach the top spot within the next decade. Girls' club soccer participation is up 37 percent in the last 20 years, while participation in high school soccer programs also has seen a boost of 45 percent between 1999 and 2014.

What is soccer's allure for young girls?

The creative and fun nature of soccer lends itself to a great experience for female athletes. It's a player's game, with the player herself making the decisions in the moment. Once the game is underway, the best coaches really take a step back. Certainly the success of the U.S. Women's National Team has also spurred the growth of the girls' game. In fact, the United States' recent win in the FIFA Women's World Cup final was the most-watched soccer event in the history of American television.

More than 23 million American viewers watched the Fox Sports broadcast, significantly more than the 17 million-plus viewers who tuned in to watch the men's final a year before.

What's your outlook for participation, including the challenges and opportunities?

The NSCAA is a membership association of coaches, so we don't keep stats on player participation. But it is coaches that really help determine if a player's soccer experience is a great one — or not. We estimate there are about 500,000 soccer coaches in the United States, from professionals to parents that come out to coach their six-year-old for a season.

What impact have you seen from the U.S. Women's National Team winning the World Cup?

It's still early to know if soccer registration numbers were specifically

impacted by last year's World Cup victory, but girls are nearly half of all soccer players. When America won the World Cup in 1991, there were just more than 120,000 girls playing high school soccer. By the time the U.S. won in 1999, there were more than 250,000. It is now approaching 20 percent of all high school female athletes — about 375,000. Now that's impact.

Does the sporting goods industry do a good job in serving the needs of female soccer players?

It's getting better. The industry has long been innovative in apparel and shoe designs for females, but now we're seeing more. At the NSCAA Soccer Coaches Convention in January — the largest soccer trade show in North America, with the 2016 event hosting more than 6300 coaches and 11,000 total attendees and featuring more than 370 companies — technology and sports science saw a lot of customization to the individual athlete and girls seem to be at the forefront of this trend.

Why should team dealers pay more attention to soccer, specifically women's soccer, in 2016 and beyond?

It's a big category with a lot of loyalty to companies that take it seriously. These players will also be the next generation of coaches, administrators and other decision-makers in women's soccer. Can any team dealer afford not to pay attention to it? ■

effectively doubling the amount of styles they need to bring in to service a club. Add in jackets and pants with the same options and you can see how this can get challenging, particularly when booking large clubs in advance of their tryouts. It makes forecasting and booking an educated guessing game.

Any niche markets that are strong?

The opportunities on the apparel and accessories side of business are great. From stretchy yoga pants for spirit wear or training to custom headbands for clubs or teams, these are examples of items that don't have a market on the men's side and there are plenty of women's-specific options like this out there.

What impact did the U.S. Women's Team's success in the World Cup have on participation in your area?

We'll begin to get a better feel for participation this coming fall since tryouts in our state were before the tournament. I can't imagine it not helping the younger girls get excited to try soccer for the first time or inspire current players to keep playing. We hope to see the rise not only in the girls' and women's numbers but also the boys' and men's as well.

And how about on the business side?

It was great to watch customers getting excited to follow and cheer on the USWNT. It wasn't just women and girls by any means, either. Men, young and old, supported the women with their money as well. That being said, it does not gener-

ate sales similar to what the Men's World Cup does, but that's perfectly fine; nobody expected it to. Sales were definitely stronger than in the previous tournament in 2011 and that's the trend that we hope continues.

What's your outlook for participation?

My outlook is great. The sport is very well rooted with women and that should continue to grow with the USWNT inspiring another wave of girls to get involved. For example, the women's World Cup is barely 25 years in existence. Plenty of high schools didn't have a girls' soccer team not too long before that and some even after. As the girls playing today grow up to have families of their own, their daughters will follow in mom's cleats. ■

Going At It Hard in Volleyball

Admittedly, team dealers probably focus their efforts on selling soft goods and balls in the volleyball market. But they may be a missing an opportunity by bypassing hard goods. Yes, it's a challenge, notes Ashley Moore, sales manager of volleyball for Porter Athletic. But it's a challenge they can overcome and turn into sales.

"The biggest and easiest challenge to overcome is the confidence to speak knowledgeably about the sport of volleyball and necessary equipment and products that coaches seek," Moore says. Part of the problem is just that many of the male roadmen were never exposed to the sport.

"Volleyball at the high school level is a predominately female sport,



as evidenced by the number of girls' versus boys' programs. With the sporting goods industry being predominately male, volleyball

was likely not an extracurricular school activity for many sales representatives. Therefore, we stress the importance of product training

and customer support for team dealers," she says.

"In my sales experience, the best way to sell your product is to be an expert and an advocate, which is difficult without personal experience or training," Moore adds. "The opportunity for a sales representative to connect with a volleyball coach is high, as direct competition is likely to be low."

But, she adds, volleyball coaches are not called upon as often as other higher profile sports, such as football, which means that the only person asking the volleyball coach what his or her equipment needs are is the athletic director. Reaching out to the girls' volleyball coach is a great opportunity to increase volleyball sales and strengthen the overall relationship with school accounts," Moore says. ■



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BOLD NEW GIRL

By Nancy Baeder

New athletic pieces designed to more precisely meet the needs of women athletes articulate performance, fit, comfort and style in the team business in 2016. Understanding what girls want and the metrics behind their purchase decisions may alter the way dealers approach this segment.

"Women's athletic apparel is definitely an evolving segment in an evolving marketplace," says **Jimmy Van Epps**, president and sales manager at **Bumblebee Team Sports**, Nicholasville, KY. "The industry has undeniably transitioned over the past few years to increase female offerings across the board.

"This industry is a microcosm of a very competitive world," he adds. "As a dealer, you limit your success if you try to do business the same way you always have with women's athletics."

Two major trends have created a new lens through which women purchase their apparel. First, now that more girls grow up participating in team sports and other athletic pursuits, they have definite ideas about what they want. As a result, manufacturers across the board are increasing the size and scope of offerings to cater to these particular performance needs.

"Style and culture play into all sports business, but perhaps even more into women's sports," says **Ryan Brown**, senior director-lacrosse and **Adidas** team. "The female athlete demands performance and style in her gear."

Simply put, female athletes bring a new attitude. "The girls who are in athletics these days are different from 20 years ago. They start playing young and they play athletics all year. They are in better shape because they train all year," says **Bob Leman**, of **SAI Team Sales** in Louisville, CO. "They know what they want."

"Historically, girls have been underappreciated in sports," adds **Maura Allen**, owner of **Brine Sporting Goods**, Sudbury, MA. "Now the girls are getting a lot more attention and they are demanding more respect

and are not taking a back seat."

Vendors are on notice. "Girls want their uniforms and clothing in specific cuts for better fit. It's definitely improving, but we would like to see more petite and tall sizes offered," says Allen. "Every girl isn't 5-5. Put a regular skirt on a tall girl and it's too short. Put one on a short girl and it's too long."

The push is on to re-imagine the products girls wear. "Women's softball pants have always been designed through reverse engineering. Companies take a man's pant, shrink it and pink it," says **Sean Murphy**, CEO of **3N2 Sports**.

Lifestyle Meets Sports

The second major trend reflects the lifestyle choices of these female athletes, who have fully embraced the comfort, fit and versatility of their athletic clothing,

"Activewear has become everyday wear and a workout outfit must transition well to post-workout activities. A flattering, stylish fit is a must," says **Chris Kollmeyer**, product development manager for **Teamwork Athletic Apparel**.

Demand for crossover apparel is huge, with women's activewear now outpacing the overall fitness apparel industry. That hoodie? It better be trendy and comfortable enough to also be worn on the street.

"As team dealers we need to bring the right product mix to the table," says Van Epps. "The fact that female athletes want to be able to wear their team apparel and warm-ups as fashion clothes is influencing the buying decisions of the coaches and club directors."

Full Support

Vendors have reacted strongly to the new paradigm with new women's lines in a range of price points, including but not limited to female-only products such as sports bras and leggings.

"Designers and product managers not only listen to female athletes, they are the female athlete. The industry now looks to former collegiate athletes to turn their athletic experiences into functional and stylish products that perform well on and off the field," says Van Epps.

"We are seeing a lot of development for females in

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MARKET.



Women's athletic apparel (clockwise from top left): tops from Holloway; Adidas Derby Tank; Nfinity style in tops and bottoms; Adidas Twist top.

team outerwear, T-shirts, jackets and sweats. In fact, manufacturers are creating new female products designed for women only," he adds, pointing to a new Adidas twist on the quarter-zip for girls that is very popular.

"We actually had guys ask if it was available in men's sizes. It wasn't. I think it's safe to say that's a telling new phenomenon."

If female athletes are finally being taken seriously, that means getting the same attention as the guys when it comes to their performance needs.

"We want her to feel confident and comfortable in our product, so we really focus on delivering performance and style in all of our designs," says **Kelly Cortina**, VP-women's apparel at **Under Armour**. "It will feel real and authentic to the life she lives. At the end of the day, we want her to know that Under Armour gets it and we

are rooting for her."

"It's definitely easier to find the styles and performance features the girls are looking for," agrees **Leman**, who caters to girls' sports in schools, recreation leagues and travel teams. "While we still sell more to guys than girls, it's only because we have higher participation rates in the boys' sports."

Options are necessary to target different age groups and price points.

"We strive to offer as many options as possible within a team's budget," says **Allen**, who outfits girls' recreation teams for soccer, softball and lacrosse, a rapidly growing sport for women. "It can be a struggle for whoever is charged with picking out the uniforms, because we find that eighth grade girls don't want to wear the same style as second graders. Want to kill a style? Have a toddler or a mom wear it."



Latching on to style-right trends are Under Armour Stripe Tech Quarter-Zip (left) and performance fleece vest (center) and Teamwork Prosphere Foxy sports bra and capri.

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The bar is being raised as more companies offer improved styles and fits. "The expectation is the perfect combination of performance and style," says **Brad Sullivan**, director of marketing at **Holloway**. "The female consumer appreciates the finer details that are built into a product. They want to look good, but they also demand fabrics that perform."

Girls Say Bring It On

"Female athletes are excited to hear options. Our sales representatives approach female sports with a completely different mindset," says **Van Epps**. "For example, often football or baseball coaches give our sales reps a purchase order and say 'just do something similar to what we did last year and make sure we have it before the season starts.' We ask the coach questions about the order, but they usually respond with 'whatever you think.'"

"Contrast that to a girls' team and if you're paying attention, you'll see the devil is in the details. Precision is a good word to keep in mind when working with female sports and no detail is too small," says **Van Epps**.

"Sizing is always a major concern

and we provide size runs for coaches to help with sizing concerns," he adds. "With some customers, size runs have turned into sizing days. In this case we send multiple reps to a practice to help advise on fit, material composition and other apparel and footwear questions."

Vendor reps are a great resource to help dealers take competitive advantage. Engaging early with vendors can provide an early look at new products and increase competitive advantage.

Van Epps gets in samples of new products way ahead in order to determine the season's hot products and make them available. "We meet with our basketball and soccer teams five months ahead in order to get their feedback on new items and the carryover items," he says. "Every year there usually emerges a trend between the schools, two or three pieces that the manufacturer has done a great job designing, and are very popular pieces."

Comfort Is Queen and Brand Rules

The market for girls' athletics is in a constant state of churn to improve fabrics, fit and functionality and combine it with innovative design, new styles and on-point

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color combinations. But at the end of the day, it better be comfortable or it won't sell.

"Overall they want a comfortable, more athletic fit, but it depends somewhat on the sport," says Leman. "What the girls want varies from team to team."

"It may sound counterintuitive, but many female athletes will choose fit and fabrication over style. Comfort is queen when it comes to the female market, second only to functionality," says Van Epps. "This doesn't mean that style isn't very important in female sports, but for the style to be considered, it has to be functional first. Male sports are the opposite. The guys go with the style first; if it looks good to them, then they'll just roll with the fit and fabrication."

Fit and comfort go hand-in-hand. "The fit of the uniform is more important on the girls' side. Many times we are ordering in April and the uniform will be worn in September," says Allen.

"Parents come in here with 11-year-old girls who want their uniform to fit perfectly. I try to be customer service-oriented and our challenge is to help them anticipate growth so the parent doesn't have to buy a second uniform."

Today every brand is being repositioned to more closely align their image with the desires of the female athlete. "You can expect to see Under Armour continue to build innovative product that give her the performance and style she deserves," says Cortina.

Adidas is also making big moves responding to female athletes. "Adidas has increased its women's team offering by 50 percent in 2016, with more styles, colors and fit options in both apparel and footwear products," says Brown. "Team dealers will see new sizing options, decoration options, fabric options, accessories and promotions."

"It's all about the brand," says Allen. "Girls all want the big brands, Nike, Adidas and Under Armour, and they do a lot of fundraising to get what they want."

At SAI Team Sales the top brands are Adidas, Under Armour and Russell.

"We sell a lot of Russell uniforms. For spiritwear, the coaches and

girls request particular items, such as an Under Armour sweatshirt, and we find it for them," says Leman. "Our online practice packs typically include a travel bag, a uniform for travel (this is a warm-up if the coach picks or some combination of pant/shirt/top if the girls pick) and some combination of T-shirts and shorts, and shoes."

On Trend in 2016

Fashion naturally continues to be a vital component of women's wear. "Over time, as athletic wear has become more mainstream, we need to blend form and function so that it's not a trade off between having performance and fashion, but rather these attributes should complement each other," says **Mike Chen**, GM at **Tonix**.

Van Epps sees more functionality in girls' products. "Vendors are putting thumbholes in the sleeves, instead of the girls cutting slits, and adding technology pockets," he says. "We also see a lot of mixed materials, particularly in outerwear. This might be a woven polyester top and soft knit polyester bottom." Leman finds that vendors no

longer offer as many pre-sell items and limit the production of certain items. "Vendors offer fewer lines, but the options within the offerings is greater," he says. "For example, in girls' basketball there are two or three lines instead of six or seven, but there are more color options and decorating enhancements within that line. This is so they can turn the item more quickly, because coaches these days do not have long timelines," says Leman.

While Allen sells predominantly stock uniforms, she sees a lot of variation in team orders. "Boys will get sublimated. Girls prefer screen-prints. Half the girls want shorts, the other half want skirts," says Allen. "Overall I think that women want to look a certain way, whether or not they are playing a sport."

Color is a big focus. "Sometimes all you see are pinks and pastels for women. News flash! Some girls don't want pink. In the team market, youth programs and high schools, we want town colors," she says.

"We've sold a lot of mint green in the last few years and we have noticed that light grey and charcoal

have replaced black."

Allen sees things calming down in terms of all the colors and designs. "Lacrosse was wild and colorful for a while, but lately a few of the sublimated uniforms are so simple that it would be more cost efficient to do a stock uniform that looks like sublimation," she says. "It was fun to be creative for a while, now people seem to be looking for simpler designs, basic looks. We see retro styles from the '70's and '80s making a comeback."

Follow the Money

Dealers and vendors alike can count on female athletes as a source of revenue growth for the immediate future.

"I don't think spending is a male/female thing anymore. Rather, success gets you more dollars," says Allen. "In football, a winning team gets more gate dollars. Here in Massachusetts, winning softball teams, field hockey teams and lacrosse teams that stand out and draw a crowd, all draw the dollars."

"We have many female sports programs that outspend their male equivalents and the gap has continued to widen over the past 18 months," says Van Epps. "With the right female ath-leisure product mix, many of the female-specific team items double as fan gear, booster club apparel and online team store items for other females throughout the organization."

"If female sports don't spend as much as male sports, the problem isn't the budget," he adds. "More likely it's the products being offered and the way sales representatives are presenting them."

Even the people writing the checks have changed, Van Epps points out.

"The responsibility has shifted to the booster clubs and their credit cards, where it used to be a purchase order from the school. We know they will go online if the local guy doesn't do a good job for them," says Van Epps.

"The good news is that it's still a high touch business. The customer wants to see and feel the product, something the online guys can't do. It's one of the reasons team dealers won't go away. We've weathered a lot of storms." ■

Tonix ladies polo hits the trend-right look for 2016.



Forecast: Put Some Comfort On

Move aside comfort food. The women's apparel industry is literally being transformed by performance clothing that fits well, feels good and looks good. Give up comfort? Girls say, "I don't think so."

Vendors continue to make sizable investments in women's athletic apparel to deliver clean lines, flattering fits, breathable fabrics, ease of movement and exciting new color palettes. They know comfort and performance drive sales.

"I believe we will begin to see style and culture play an even more important role in female athletics in the coming seasons," says **Ryan Brown**, of **Adidas**.

In 2016 Adidas is showcasing product innovations such as Pure Boost X, Primeknit Select and Adidas athletics. Pure Boost X is a running shoe engineered specifically for the female athletes' running movements. Primeknit Select is a women's seamless collection that uses revolutionary body mapping technology to caters to the fit and fabrication women demand in compression apparel.

Under Armour is offering options that fit leading market trends. "We want her to feel confident and comfortable in our product, so we really focused on delivering performance and style in all of our designs," says UA's **Kelly Cortina**.

This season Under Armour is excited about bras, bottoms and versatile layers. "We're offering great options that can be worn to and from practice, classes, and hanging out," says Cortina. Two of her newest favorites are the UA HeatGear Armour Crop and the UA Fly By Short. These bottoms pair back to some of its best top layers, such as the UA Performance Fleece Vest and the UA Stripe Tech Quarter-Zip.

Also new from Under Armour this season are the UA Armour Mid Bra and UA Armour Mid Bra with Cups in new colors and prints, and bottoms showing flattering silhouettes.

3N2 is also blurring the line between design and function. New



Under Armour leads the way with fashion and performance in its new styles.

fully custom sublimated compression shorts are designed to provide slimming lines and reduce muffin tops and are available in a range of colors and design patterns.

Holloway recently released a collection of female styles.

"Holloway is laser focused on the female market, providing a variety of fits, including ladies' and junior sizes in classic, semi and compression fits," says **Brad Sullivan**.

Tonix keeps its focus on polo staff shirts and outerwear for travel

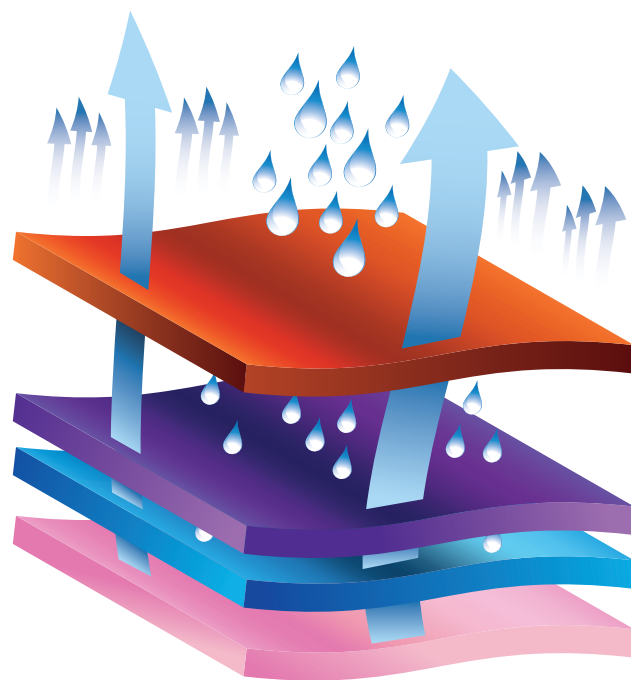
and sideline. The Ladies' Space Dye tank is on trend, with its Space Dye pattern built in team colors and infused with performance.

"We are offering several new ladies' athletic polo shirts with an adjusted placket that delivers a more feminine appeal," says Tonix' **Mike Chen**.

Teamwork Athletic Apparel is infusing its women's apparel with style, comfort and fit elements. "While some of our designs are available across both men's and women's styles, we put a lot of effort into creating designs specifically for our female audience," says **Chris Kollmeyer**. Its new ProSphere activewear line, for example, includes a selection of trendy designs for women and girls. ■

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2016 EDITORS' PICKS



Remember when girls had to be satisfied with sized-down versions of the stuff the boys used and wore? No longer. There is no shortage of new products designed specifically for female athletes and these pages showcase our editors' picks for the best new girls' products for 2016. **No “shrink it and pink it” here!**



1. The **3N2** NuFIT Knicker is the original yoga-inspired fast-pitch softball pant, designed specifically with the female form in mind.

2. **Mizuno** Sublimation offers 39 colors and 25 jersey pattern options as well as the ability to completely customize a jersey.

3. The Extreme Digi Camo Softball Uniform from **Champro** is available in a full-button or racerback cut with printed digi camo shoulder inserts. The pant features digi camo side inserts, waistband and pocket accents.

4. The printed Evolution from **High Five Sportswear** is a modern take on classic style lines.

5. The **Adidas** women's custom Bison uniform is a fully sublimated uniform system with a superback silhouette that allows for a female athlete's shoulders to move freely.

6. The cheer jacket with off-center zipper is paired with **Motionwear's** capris, while an embellished bra top features fabric lettering surrounded by clear rhinestones and the shorts feature contrasting flatlock stitching.

7. ProSphere from **Teamwork Athletic** is a full line of custom sublimated activewear, including

a variety of tops, tights, shorts, sports bras, tanks and hoodies in performance fabrics.

8. **Alleson Athletic's** women's fit Fastpitch low rise has a relaxed fit open bottom pant. The women's fit Fastpitch Jersey is a solid color plaited knit body with contrasting pin dot mesh inserts and modified neck placket.

9. The Artillery Angled Jacket from **Holloway** features Temp-Sof fabric, a colored heather performance fleece with high mechanical stretch and a birdseye flecked surface and brushed back for added warmth.

10. The Women's Sleeveless Henley with Contrasting Stretch Mesh from **A4** is moisture wicking, odor resistant and stain release.

11. **Cliff Keen's** Women's Racer Back Singlet is fully sublimated and made with Compression Gear fabric, with a racer back cut and a higher inseam for easier mobility for female wrestlers.

12. **Holloway's** Space Dye Tank features 100 percent dry-Excel Micro-Interlock, a polyester knit with wicking and odor-resistant properties, and comes with all-over space dye printed pattern made up of true team colors.



TEAM / GIRLS' NEW PRODUCTS



1. Augusta Sportswear's faux full button jersey Winner Jersey has a 100 percent polyester Propelit micromesh wicking knit body with polyester/spandex wicking pinhole mesh panels.

2. The Powers women's fully sublimated jersey features a three-quarter-inch self material V-neck with hemmed armholes. The short features a multi-needle two-inch gripper elastic waistband with drawstring.

3. Inspired by McDavid's Hex Leg Sleeves, the TEFLX Dual Density Volleyball Knee Pads provide resistance to the rigors of the court.

4. Sock Guy's lacrosse sock designs with a taller eight-inch cuff feature a honeycomb padded foot bottom.

5. Badger's Sublimated Calf Length Tight features a covered waistband and no side seam.

6. The softball Surehitter from Markwort accurately simulates the motion of a real ball.

7. The women's DNAmic collection from Skins, with its Dynamic Gradient Compression, features three technical fabrics.

8. The Under Armour Cushion No Show Tab sock features cushioning to protect high-impact areas, along with ArmourDry for moisture management and ArmourBlock.

9. The Exult 500 head from STX was designed for midfielders with its C-Channel technology that increases the stiffness of the sidewall.

10. Dalco Athletic custom digitally printed megaphone decals are water- and fade-resistant.

11. Rawlings' Heart of the Hide softball glove features Dual Core position-specific technology, Horween leather and Thermo-Formed wrist padding.

12. The Zamst EK-1 is a light compression knee support with flyweight fabrication and ventilated poly-knit construction to enhance cooling and breathability.

13. The Wave Lightning Z2 volleyball sneaker from Mizuno features a parallel wave plate that creates stability for lateral movements.

14. Through seamless Primeknit structuring, the Adidas TechFit Primeknit Select Bra has an engineered knit with mesh zones for increased breathability.

15. Marbella women's sunglasses from Under Armour Eyewear feature ArmourSight lens technology that delivers up to 20 percent more undistorted peripheral vision.

16. Red Lion's Fast Break basketball sock is part of its Sport Ball Crew collection for 2016.

17. The two-loop bow design from Softe Accessories features fashion prints and the Pony-O holds hair during strenuous activity.

18. Softe's Ranger Short is inspired by the U.S. military and was developed for extreme training with quick-dry technology and virtually weightless nylon.

19. Pizzazz Performance Wear's Pro Comfort Fit sports bra features four-way stretch in a racer back.

20. The Jugs Changeup Super Softball Pitching Machine can change speeds without the hitter knowing. It throws fastballs up to 70 mph and changeups at speeds as low as 44 mph.

21. The Gotta Flurt Disco II dance sneaker, distributed by EMC Sports, features more bling and sparkle along with a cushioned insole and durable rubber outsole.





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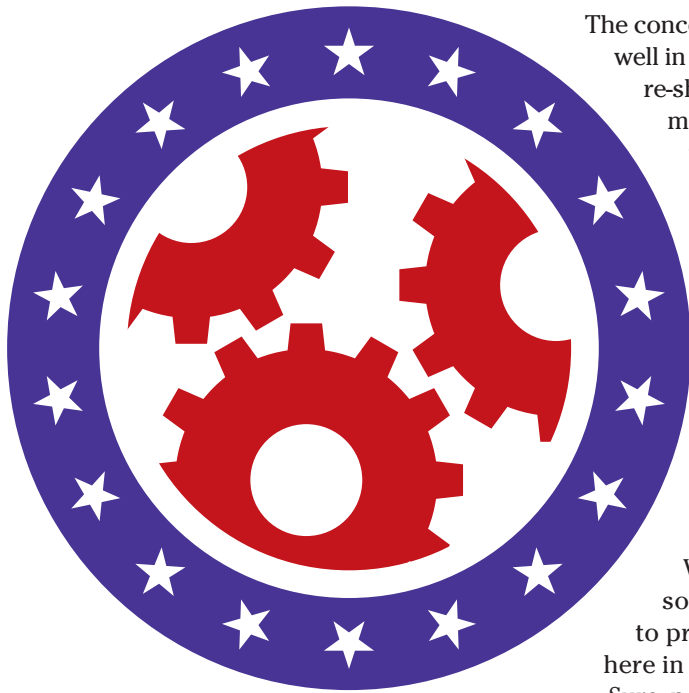
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MADE IN AMERICA STORIES

Companies Tell Us Why Domestic Manufacturing Is Alive and Well in 2016.



The concept of “Made in America” is alive and well in the world of team sports. Some call it re-shoring, as companies return to domestic production when they realize the advantages outweigh any other benefits they may have achieved by making their products overseas.

Others never left, having built their companies over generations on the strength of their commitment to domestic manufacturing that has allowed them to survive in an increasingly challenging global business environment.

Either way, the team sports business has a host of Made in America success stories – from the footballs Wilson has always made in Ohio ... to sock companies that remain committed to producing their top-of-the-line products here in the good, old USA.

Sure, no team dealer can remember the last

time a coach or athletic director placed an order simply because a vendor’s products were Made in America. The reasons these products sell are more subtle — rapid turnaround and delivery, quicker response time to complaints or problems and improved quality, not to mention the simple act of supporting local communities.

Basically, it is better product and better customer service that keeps MIA relevant.

So we thought we would run the idea of Made in America up the flagpole and see who saluted. We asked vendors to the team sports business to tell us their own Made in America stories and why they continued to make products in the U.S.

The response was overwhelming. The following pages tell the stories of these companies, while at the same time telling the story of domestic manufacturing in 2016. Enjoy Part 2. Part 1 appeared in the January 2016 issue of *Team Insight* and the final installment will run in the May issue.

A Blaze of Patriotism

History: Blazer Manufacturing was founded in 1974 and its manufacturing facility is in Columbus, NE, with a sales office in Fremont, NE. Blazer manufactures an array of athletic equipment, with an emphasis on metal fabricated equipment. Owned by Kirk Diers and Brent Ogle, Blazer is a leader in track and field and volleyball equipment.

Made in America: Almost everything it sells is manufactured in Nebraska — hurdles, pits for track and field, track spikes, volleyball standards, ball racks, and soccer goals.

Why MIA: Blazer has increased its domestic manufacturing in recent years and plans to continue that trend. “We find that by manufacturing it ourselves we can control the quality of the product and lead time to our customers,” the company says. “Domestic manufacturing allows us to create products that our customers value most. In addition, manufacturing ourselves



supports local job growth and we are very passionate about that.”

Pros and Cons: Pros — better quality control, faster time to market, supports domestic job growth. Cons — “Maybe a cheaper price for some products so we can hit a price point for a customer. The issue with that strategy is that the quality and service will suffer and our brand

perception will suffer, as a consequence,” the company feels. Also, sourcing certain products is easier because they may be readily available and at a competitive price.

Selling MIA: Blazer’s “Made in America” message is highly promoted in its catalog and on its website. In addition, it identifies every individual product that it manufactures

domestically.

The Sales Pitch: “Our customers value the long-lasting, high-quality workmanship we provide. You can find a cheaper hurdle, standard or ball rack, but it will only last you a couple years. We make products that last 20-plus years.”

Does It Matter? Blazer’s slogan is “Because Value Matters” and it believes value is not just the cheapest price. “Made in America matters to a good portion of our customers. It is the quality and service you get for your dollar. If dealers want products that will be made well and quickly and products that are long lasting and low-maintenance, they value American-made, Blazer products. If they want cheap products for cheap prices, then that is their choice. Our employees take pride in what they make and we stand behind what we do here at Blazer.”

Going Forward: Blazer plans to increase its domestic manufacturing. ■

“Even the price difference between buying here and from another country has become relatively insignificant.”

Lee Tarnoff, Red Lion

The Lion Roars

History: Standard Merchandising, Camden, NJ, is the manufacturer and distributor of Red Lion products. It has been manufacturing in the U.S. since 1922 and in 1978 it expanded from its New Jersey base, opening a knitting plant in Reading, PA, to knit headbands and wristbands and it has also been knitting socks in Reading for more than 40 years, during which time the facility has grown to seven times its original size. In December 2015, owners Lee and Jeff Tarnoff sold a majority stake to LongWater Opportunities, a private equity firm that focuses on investing in U.S.-based manufacturing companies. The Tarnoffs retained a minority equity position.

Made in America: All of Red Lion knit products (socks, headbands, wristbands, leg sleeves) are knit in its factories in the U.S., along with some cut and sew sports accessories.

Pros and Cons: Pros — rapid delivery and turnaround, easy com-



munication, higher quality, easier problem solving, quick response, greater assurances of fair adherence to labor laws, environmental issues and treatment of employees, technological advantages, and the ability to offer quick lead times.

Selling MIA: Red Lion lists Made

in the USA on all of its catalogs and electronic sales literature. Made in the USA is also listed on all packaging materials and on its web.

The Sales Pitch: “We always try to point out the advantages of buying in the USA,” says Lee Tarnoff. “Even the price difference between buying

here and from another country has become relatively insignificant.”

Does It Matter? “It should matter, if you love and support our country,” says Tarnoff, pointing out that an improved economy with more employment helps all Americans. “It’s especially natural for a team dealer to understand pulling for your own team because that’s the business they deal with every day,” he says. Moreover, Red Lion’s short lead times and ability to act quickly when something is out of stock can’t be replicated by a competitor offering products that are made overseas, he adds. “Team dealers in particular have to deliver products timely to their customers due to the nature of getting a team or league order and having to get the products in time for the team picture.”

Going Forward: Standard Merchandising is in negotiations to build a new, larger headquarters and manufacturing facility and is investing in new equipment. ■

A Continental Shift

History: Continental Sports, whose warehouse, administration and production facility is in Englewood, CO, has been distributing and manufacturing sporting goods for 35 years. It is currently the licensee for Reusch soccer (U.S. and Canada) and Reusch ski products (U.S.), and owns the Olympus rugby and vici soccer brands.

Made in America: Continental manufactures its higher end textiles for Reusch goalkeeping and Olympus rugby in the U.S., with recent growth in sublimated Reusch goalkeeping jerseys and shorts and custom Olympus rugby uniforms and short fueling expansion.

Why MIA: Continental Sports has manufactured product in the United States for 25 years and, while there were some tough years in manufacturing recently, the business has increased the past three years, according to Continental CEO David Banning, “mostly due to our investment in sublimation printing,



including uniform building software. The increase is coming in areas that overseas factories are starting to lose interest in — smaller custom orders.”

Pros and Cons: “The pros of manufacturing in the U.S. are the control of quality and most of all, the ability to turn smaller amounts around in a

timely manner,” Banning says. The cons, however, include additional cost for inventorying raw materials, new printing and sewing machinery, software and labor.

Selling MIA: Continental hang tags all of its MIA products, notes them in catalogs and presents them to dealers and customers at trade shows.

The Sales Pitch: “Our largest Made in America pitch is the American jobs that are created – or saved – by our purchasing raw goods, software and manufacturing,” Banning says. “The secondary pitch is the quick turnaround we can offer when compared to overseas manufacturers. This is especially important in the rugby market, where the top end uniform tends to be small, custom orders.”

Does it Matter? “Made in America should matter to both dealers and customers with the American jobs that are saved and created,” Banning says, adding that manufacturers still must be competitive with the cost of imports to make the case.

Going Forward: Continental will continue to pursue higher end, custom products in both the soccer and rugby markets. “Our quick turnaround and high quality should continue to win market share away from overseas producers,” Banning says. ■

“By manufacturing in the U.S. we are able to eliminate variables in overseas shipping and meet quoted delivery days.”

Gabriela Ryan, Champro

Real Champs

History: Champro Sports, located in Wheeling, IL, manufactures performance equipment and apparel.

Made in America: While it utilizes factories around the world for most of its products, Champro now manufactures a majority of its new Juice line of full dye sublimated team apparel in its suburban Chicago factory.

Why MIA: Champro has been manufacturing the Juice team apparel for the past year and the initial success of this Made in America product is attributed to its ability to offer 10 business day lead times and high-quality product.

Pros and Cons: “Manufacturing in the U.S. allows us to produce fully dye sublimated garments in 10 business days or less,” says product manager Gabriela Ryan. “We know that absolute dependability in delivery is critical in the custom uniform market and by manufacturing in the U.S. we are able to eliminate variables in overseas shipping and



consistently meet quoted delivery days.” She admits it is a challenge to manufacture domestically at a price that the market will bear, but the company has made a significant investment in automated equipment to balance higher labor costs. “The result is that our Juice Express 10 business day lead time program has had a very successful launch.”

Selling MIA: Champro promotes its U.S. production as a higher level of service, which it provides via faster delivery. “Our sales representatives also do a good job of promoting our suburban Chicago factory and we include a ‘Proudly USA Made’ logo with all of our Juice marketing,” Ryan says. “We’ve received a positive response from

our customers and are constantly looking for other products that can be viably manufactured in the U.S.”

The Sales Pitch: Champro wants its customers to buy Juice Express garments because it offers the competitive pricing, quality and service, with the added bonus is that they are simultaneously supporting U.S. manufacturing.

Does It Matter? “We value creating quality jobs in the Chicago area and we think our team dealers and their customers can appreciate that,” Ryan says. “We also know that customers want a short lead time. Because we manufacture domestically, we can ship our Juice fully sublimated garments as fast as anyone in the industry.”

Going Forward: The successful launch of manufacturing Juice Express garments in the U.S. has led to plans to double capacity in the first half of 2016. “We feel like we’ve only scratched the surface of what is possible,” Ryan says. ■

Wrestling With America

History: Legendary wrestling coach Cliff Keen brought his wisdom to the table when he started Cliff Keen Athletics in 1958 and for more than 50 years the company has been making custom wrestling singlets and warm-ups from its base in Ann Arbor, MI.

Made in America: Cliff Keen has been making its custom wrestling uniforms in the U.S. for decades and while it has not increased the amount of products made in the states, it has seen its overall production numbers increase.

Pros and Cons: “An obvious disadvantage is cost,” admits senior VP Chad Clark. “Everything here costs more and the cost of doing business in the U.S. continues to increase every year.” However, he adds, the pros include greater control over production, quicker turn times and the ability to turn on a dime. “Customers want speed, they expect speed, so manufacturing here in the U.S. gives us better ability to control



our speed of production,” Clark says.

Selling MIA: Cliff Keen does not actively promote its Made in America capabilities. “It’s probably something we should do more, but I think most of our clientele knows

that we’re an American brand,” he says. “In fact, we’re an original American wrestling brand.”

The Sales Pitch: “We simply let them know that our custom wrestling uniforms are made here in Michigan and that this inside con-

trol gives them dependability and reliability when it comes to ordering their wrestling singlets or warm-ups from Cliff Keen,” says Clark.

Does It Matter? “It does matter to team dealers because they want reliability and value,” Clark says. But one of things they value, he believes, is a brand that takes great pride in its Made in America story and its ability to employ American workers manufacturing a product they can take pride in. “They also want a brand, and people, who will be there when they need them, who will get product out to them on time.”

Going Forward: Quite simply, says Clark, to keep on keeping on. “We’ve made huge investments in equipment, software and people to increase our speed and cut down on lead times and it’s paying off,” he says. “We rarely misfire on a quoted lead time. Our commitment to this has fortunately not gone unnoticed by our team dealer customers.” ■

“Made in America is about much more than where the bucks are spent for a purchase order.”

Brown Abrams, FiberLok

That's a Lock

History: FiberLok, Fort Collins, CO, was founded in 1979 by CEO Brown Abrams. In 1985 it invented its flagship product, Lextra flock-textured heat applied graphics, and in 1992 relocated from St. Louis, MO, to Fort Collins. In 2012 it introduced TackleKnit heat applied graphics.

Made in America: Lextra and TackleKnit Textured heat applied products are all MIA.

Why MIA: The market has not changed in terms of the options available for team/club branding — there are plotter/die cuts, plastic transfers, embroidery and the new category of textured, non-embroidered graphics. “We can not innovate without intimate contact with the machinery, materials and processes used to make our products,” says Abrams. “We can not provide on-demand service to customers from off-shore locations. We design and develop innovative machinery and we could only do



that with production located in the U.S. and with competent machine resources located here to support our efforts.”

The Sales Pitch: FiberLok's products are both invented and made in the U.S. “Considering that most of the (embroidered) heat applied graphics trade is offshore, FiberLok has been swimming against the tide,” Abrams says. Yet that allows FiberLok to better service the

needs of domestic soccer clubs. In addition, multiple patents covering its inventions have helped it to maintain and protect the Made in USA aspect of what it does.

Does It Matter? “Made in America is about much more than where the bucks are spent for a purchase order,” Abrams says. “It is about being able to manage the evolutionary development of technology to help insure that our business as

domestic producers will remain relevant and viable by staying in close contact with the technology.” Also, with domestic manufacturing dealers end up getting better service and can actually have some input into the development of new product opportunities as they evolve. He points to a recent customer who came to FiberLok needing an elastic, heat-applied textile graphic for numbers on a new highly elastic football jersey. The result: Its TackleKnit elastic version that stretches up to 300 percent with 96 percent recovery that could only have been developed with close collaboration with all players.

Going Forward: “There is no other reality for us than to produce here, in close proximity to our customers, in order to stay on top of the technology,” Abrams says, along with its “corresponding ability to use new technology to come up with products that solve problems for our customer-partners.” ■

They Got Game

History: Game Sportswear, Yorktown Heights, NY, has been family owned and operated since 1974, when it began as a contractor for larger brand name manufacturers such as Starter. Game became its own brand when these large brands took their production off-shore. Game emerged into the wholesale wearables and imprints market in the 1990s with a small line of sportswear, outerwear and workwear apparel, all Made in America. Since then Game has diversified its line into both imported as well as American-made products. Today, close to half of sales come from domestic manufacturing.

Made in America: Game manufactures its entire line of award jackets domestically, as well as its custom nylon, satin and oxford award jackets and pullovers.

Pros and Cons: “We can unequivocally say we have the highest quality control and continuity



of finished USA-made products,” says VP-marketing Andrea Cancellieri. “No one makes a staple garment as well as the company that designed it.” Game is also providing jobs for more than 90 families. Cons are simple — cost, cost, cost. “Everything from labor and location to raw material is exponentially greater than those overseas,” Cancellieri points out. “Production waste or errors



and even returns take more of a toll on a company that makes its products domestically.”

Selling MIA: Through advertising in trade magazines, blanketing the country with well-educated sales reps, branding its garments and producing other marketing materials, Game draws attention to its USA-made garments. Game also uses social media to reach unions and municipalities requir-

ing MIA apparel. Game also labels its MIA products clearly.

The Sales Pitch: Game's pride is in its consistent and fast delivery of exceptional MIA garments.

Does It Matter: “Unfortunately, when times are tough, and the cost to buy domestic is higher, even if it is a minor difference, it does not matter. Sometimes, cost is the only driving force behind a purchase,” says Cancellieri. “The times it does matter is when the customer is educated and can appreciate the importance of good materials, consistency and longevity of a product. Soon the realization sets in that the price difference between \$190 for a better quality USA-made jacket versus a \$175 imported jacket becomes much less important, and the value and quality between them are leagues apart.”

Going Forward: Game is committed to manufacturing in the USA as long as it is in business. ■

PRODUCT SHOWCASE / ADVERTISEMENT

Game Sportswear



Hoodie

Built to perform on and off the field, the Style Adult 8460 Endurance Poly Hoodie features 100 percent polyester performance fleece and color contrasting details. Adult S-3XL in five colors.

Rawlings



Softball Helmet

The Velo two-tone home helmet with softball mask attached features Heat Exchange that rapidly vents cool air due to exclusive Cool Flo XV1 technology. Also: wrapped jawpads for increased comfortability, multiple mask compatibility and meets NOSCAE standard.

Under Armour



Jersey

Under Armour's Power Alley Jersey is made of a soft, lightweight knit fabric that delivers the perfect balance of comfort and performance. Its Signature Moisture Transport System wicks sweat, while anti-odor technology keeps gear fresher, longer. The jersey includes breathable mesh insets at the shoulder and along the back.

Motionwear



Backpack

The 4854 Silver Backpack from Motionwear features lightweight, nylon material, extra large zippered main compartment with padded laptop sleeve, three additional zippered compartments, two water bottle holders and one grab handle. Dimensions: 19 x 13 x 9-inches. motionwear.com

Teamwork



Long Sleeve Tees

New Spectrum long sleeve raglan tees from teamwork offer quality template driven sublimation in only five business days. Available in men's and women's styles in a wide selection of designs. TeamworkAthletic.com

Porter



Volleyball System

Porter's Powr-Sand volleyball system is perfect for NCAA and high school play. This semi-permanent system includes an in-ground sleeve component and removable standard for security or removal during the off-season.

Stahls'



Rip-Away Appliqué

Stahls' Rip-Away Appliqué is a patented process that combines Stahls' heat transfer materials and your embroidery equipment, achieving exclusive looks on fanwear and more.

Combat



Baseball Bat

Maxum is the most revolutionary bat line Combat has created to date. Maxum Senior League features up to 40 percent larger hitting surface than competitor models and a Maxum Sweetspot. All models in the line offer the Lowest Swing Weights Combat has created ever. Maxum Senior League bats come with 500 Day warranty.

Badger



Ladies' Tights

Ladies' Sublimated Calf Length Tight in polyester/spandex moisture management fabric from Badger has five exclusive patterns and size range from XS to 2XL. Features a three-inch covered waistband, multi-needle stitching and no side seam. www.badgersport.com

Champro



Hybrid Duffel Pack

Champro combined the capacity of a duffel bag with the functionality of a backpack. Rugged, water resistant fabric keeps gear dry and the extra-large main compartment is big enough to hold all gear. The top flap contains a zipper pocket big enough for your wallet, keys and phone. The bag comes in five team and two optic colors. champrosports.com

Sisu



Mouthguard Case

The Sisu Case from Sisu is made from antimicrobial material and armed with a built-in ventilation system that inhibits growth of bacteria during storage.

Bison



Height Adjuster

The new Electric ZipCrank Goal Height Adjusters from Bison install between the backboard and support to allow rim adjustment from official 10-foot to eight-foot heights, a popular solution for youth basketball leagues and multi-purpose facilities. bisoninc.com; 800-247-7668

A4



Softball Top

The new women's sleeveless Softball top from A4 with breathable stretch mesh features 100 percent poly Interlock and 91percent poly/9 percent spandex contrast. It is moisture wicking, odor resistant and stain release. Available in six color combinations.

Reusch



Keeper Gloves

The know-how and expertise from Reusch comes together in this explosion of power. The Reusch Pulse Deluxe G2 Ortho-Tec 36 70 900, developed with the highest standards of fitting, technologies, materials and detail solutions, is its top-of-the-line goalkeeper glove made for world class goalkeeping performances. reuschusa.com

Nokona



Ball Glove

The S-200 from Nokona is the number one selling travel ball glove on the market. It is part of the Alpha Select series, which is built with virtually no break-in needed, using the highest-quality leathers so that youth and young adult players can perform at the top of their game. A position-specific, lightweight, durable, high-performing glove for club and elite players.

3N2



Softball Knickers


The 3N2 NuFIT Knicker is the original yoga-inspired fast-pitch softball pant, designed specifically with the female form in mind. Its innovative, fit-meets-function design is not only unquestionably stylish, but has been awarded a patent for its unique performance utility. This is a product that is a true differentiator for dealers.

Sisu



The Official Mouthguard of National Lacrosse League, Sisu Guard is a slim profile mouthguard that offers 50 percent more protection. Custom fit, remoldable Sisu Guards allow players to talk and breathe naturally and stay hydrated during the game. Mention Team Insight for additional discount.

Porter




Backboard Padding
Porter's Pro-Pad is a durable pad manufactured with a tough molded urethane skin that is painted in the mold with a color matched urethane paint to provide the exterior with uniform colored appearance. Meets all competition requirements of the NBA, NCAA, NFHS and International requirements of FIBA.

Richardson Cap



Tri-Color Cap
The extremely popular G112 Tri-Color is getting a facelift. One of the best-selling caps in the Richardson Cap lineup, the 112 is now available in new Tri-Color options.

Richardson Cap



PTS30 Cap
The popular new style from Richardson Cap is the PTS30. It features laser vented panels and was specifically designed to be the most lightweight and breathable performance cap on the market.

Old Hickory



Baseball Bat
Old Hickory's model MT27 is the official bat of MVP Mike Trout. The MT27 features a long barrel and sweet spot, thinner handle and perfect balance. The MT27 is available in maple, birch and ash. The MT27 can be customized to each player's exact specifications or ordered as a stock bat, finished in Mike Trout's color scheme, including his name engraved on the barrel.

OS1



Light Brace
From OS1st, this award-winning product has sold millions of units world-wide and is the number one selling light brace in the running and sports market. Incredibly effective at relieving the pain of Plantar Fasciitis, chronic arch and heel pain, and swelling in the foot, FS6 can be used for resting therapy and over-night for morning pain relief from the first day. Five colors and five sizes. www.OS1st.com

OrderMyGear



OrderMyGear Online Team Stores
We simplify product selection for you and your coaches, automate building online stores for every team, and make order processing easy. On average, our dealers see their team sales jump more than 30 percent after using OrderMyGear. With more than \$100 million in sales and 100,000 stores behind us, we have the experience to help take your business to the next level. OrderMyGear.com; 214-945-4000 for a free trial.

A4



Fleece
The N4237 Color Blocked Tech Fleece is a 100 percent polyester fleece, 8.3 ounces per square yard with a Micro Mesh lined hood. The Hoodie is odor resistant, stain release and moisture wicking. Available S-3XL in six color combinations.

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Cam Had His Shield On: The result didn't turn out the way he envisioned, but at least Cam Newton looked good and was protected during his unsuccessful Super Bowl 50 debut with his Under Armour Football Visor. Eyeking, the exclusive licensee of Under Armour Eyewear, provided the Under Armour Visor, which came in handy as Cam was sacked seven times in the Carolina Panthers loss to the Denver Broncos early last month.

United Delivers From New DC

United Sports Brands began shipping last month from its new distribution center in Fountain Valley, CA. The 120,000-square-foot facility, which handles the company's Shock Doctor, XO Athletic and Nathan brands, features a streamlined shipping process across all brands. The new facility also serves as home to the company's executive sales, marketing and product development teams.

In other news, USB recently named **Daniella Gasaway** as its director of marketing communications, where she will lead corporate and brand public relations, events, creative production and the global integration of brand initiatives for Shock Doctor, McDavid, Cutters and XO Athletic brands. USB also recently added **Aaron Lowenthal** as social media specialist.

Corpus Forms Firm

Rey Corpuz, who has worked for years for many sporting goods companies, has launched **RISE Talent Acquisition**, a personnel recruitment and executive search firm with a

focus on companies in the sporting goods, active lifestyle and fitness industries. Corpuz began his professional career in 1991 as an inside sales rep for Wilson tennis. He then went on to managerial and executive positions with Russell, McDavid, Cannondale, Champro and Mitre. In recent years, he returned to Wilson to oversee the football business for protectives, accessories, apparel and uniforms.

Personnel Moves...

- **Steve Bobowski** has joined **Stahls'** as VP-sales, responsible for overseeing the overall sales efforts of all the GroupeStahl companies. Bobowski was previously president of Equity Management, a trademark licensing firm, and before that, president of Riddell.

- **Eastbay** has named **Mark Watts** as director of national field sales, with responsibility for the Eastbay Team Sales professionals across the U.S. Watts has been in the sporting goods industry for more than 25 years and was national director of sales for Alleson Athletic since 2011. Prior to that,

Watts was regional director of sales for Schutt Sports.

- **Colleen Courtney** has been named manager of sponsor relations, research and social media for **PHIT America**, working alongside founder Jim Baugh as PHIT America strives to overcome the country's inactivity pandemic. Courtney's primary role is providing the organization a consistent presence on social media. She is based in the PHIT America office in Silver Spring, MD, which it shares with the Sports & Fitness Industry Association.

Sisu Partners With USA Field Hockey

USA Field Hockey has named **Sisu Mouthguard** as the official mouthguard of the organization. The partnership kicked off in February. Powered by Diffusix technology, Sisu Mouthguards deflect impact forces and absorb shock impact.

Stahls' Video Gets Creative

A new **Stahls'** TV video showcases ways for team dealers to stand out in the team uniform arena with a fresh approach to number styles

that creates standout looks, easily and economically. In the video, **Stahls'** TV educator **Josh Ellsworth** explores ways to combine pre-cut numbers and letters with pre-spaced numbers for unique, two-color appeal. Step-by-step demos take viewers through positioning and applying numbers for innovative color effects.

currexSole Expands Activepro

currexSole, a European insole brand known for sport-specific pre-fabricated insoles, has expanded into the U.S. with its Activepro model designed for cleated sports such as soccer, football, baseball and lacrosse. The Activepro is engineered to fit precisely with cleats to provide comfort and fit.

Combat Launches Builder

Combat, a manufacturer of baseball and softball bats and apparel, has launched the **Combat Custom Uniform Builder** that allows teams to create and order their own uniform designs. Use of the builder and design is free when choices are made from any of the 15 templates and 20 original designs. More elaborate designs are also possible through the builder. ■

Obituaries

Ken Fischer, 79

Industry veteran Ken Fischer, Sr., of Framingham, MA, died January 10, 2016, at the age of 79. Fischer attended the University of Southern Mississippi and played two seasons in the Chicago Cubs minor league system and in 2014 he was inducted into the Southern Mississippi M Club Sports Hall of Fame. Fischer began his sporting goods career with Krenzien & Associates as a sales representative and was a national sales manager for Ajay Enterprises and a VP-sales for Diversified Products. In 1970 he formed his own rep firm, KAF Associates, which he ran successfully for 27 years. Fischer is survived by his wife of 58 years, Carolyn, and his three children; Ken Fischer, Jr., Lori Fischer and Dianna Fischer-Schipke.

Wade Hulett, 74

Jerry Wade Hulett passed away unexpectedly at home on February 17 at the age of 74. During his long career he worked with, among others, the Wayne Watson Company (Russell Athletic rep), the Pete Buckley Company and Buck's Warehouse. Hulett and Buckley worked with Bert Couch of East Tenn Mills in the development of the interlocking nylon double knit stirrup sock for baseball; he also developed the adjustable elastic baseball belt name Buck's Belts. In 1979 he and four partners started DHS Sales Agency as a rep agency. Hulett is survived by his wife, Marlene, and two sons, Jerry and Craig, and four grandchildren.

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A4