



Image courtesy of Alex Bierens de Haan/Houston Astros.

Take Me Out to the Ball Game

Fashion overtakes fandom as design and style power sports apparel sales.

Sports apparel is ubiquitous, with names, brands and logos of professional sports teams easily identifiable by a vast swath of the U.S. population. From basketball, to hockey, to football and baseball, professional sports brands are fashion statements, demonstrating allegiance to a team, building community pride or standing out in another team's "house."

It wasn't always this way.

Once, sports apparel was limited to logo-bearing garments and jerseys that featured limited colorways, adhered to tradition and were primarily built for the male frame. Today's sports apparel caters to wider visual diversity, a drive toward personalization and community building, and a desire to respond quickly to developments during a given team's season. What hasn't changed: passion for the games.

To learn more about changes in sports apparel, and to gain a better understanding

of how garment decorators can better engage major (and minor) sports brands, THREADX 2019 featured a discussion with Gareth Breunlin, Director of Advertising and Design with the Chicago White Sox; Chris David Garcia, Creative Director with the Houston Astros; Ross Yoshida, Director of Graphic Design for the Los Angeles Dodgers; and, Michael Zulla, Global Art Director for Wilson Sporting Goods. riCardo | cresp0 of th13teen moderated the discussion.

The influence of fast fashion, a quick-to-market approach originally cornerstoned by retailers such as H&M and Zara, is pushing sports marketers and merchandisers toward an ever-evolving flow of concepts, designs and looks. This also gives the teams an opportunity to capitalize on mid-season developments: Which player is igniting fan passion with above-average hitting or exemplary pitching? Who's the crowd favorite?

"With the White Sox," said Breunlin,

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By Dan Marx, Director of Content Development, SGIA

It's Not Just a Job. It's a Passion.

For these sports merchandising pros, it's all about the love of the game.



"I got into this out of love for the game. I suppose I could make more money designing asthma brochures, but I'm a third-generation Dodger fan, and I have two passions in life: Design and baseball."

— Ross Yoshida, Director of Graphic Design, Los Angeles Dodgers



"Sports is like a religion, with family rituals, people getting tattoos, really strong emotional connections. It's the passion for the game that keeps me connected."

— Chris David Garcia, Creative Director, Houston Astros



"When we create content that changes a city — what they wear and talk about — it's really special. There's a new campaign every single season, and we have a passionate fan base."

— Gareth Breunlin, Director of Advertising and Design, Chicago White Sox



"I'm all-in on my brand. It's amazing to see the passion that comes to sports."

— Michael Zulla, Global Art Director, Wilson Sporting Goods

"we work to go far beyond the typical approach of MLB branding. We work to create 'ballpark exclusives' — items only available in the ballpark or during certain games — and work with local and national artists. We try to incorporate the look of streetwear. We also offer vintage looks." He added that this approach can expand to all sports, though for many teams, licensing requirements surrounding the brand can limit the use of outside creative.

Zulla, who views sports apparel through the lens of a manufacturer, shared that Wilson recently took a step out of its role as a manufacturer to use its brand as a powerful and known identifier. In the development of a new tennis apparel line, the company partnered with fashion retailer Forever 21 to offer stylish tennis clothing that takes advantage of the cachet of both brands' identities. "After more than 100 years," he said, "Wilson has become a fashion brand."

What Garment Decorators Bring to the Table

Garment decorators have a visceral understanding of the apparel industry — they live and breathe it — and they can use that knowledge to build their relationships with customers including brands and sports teams. Teams and other clients need to understand the options available to them. They want to know what the finished product will be like.

The Dodgers' Yoshida said, "There has been massive change in the past 10 years, and there is much more need for consideration of the feel and quality of the soft-goods, the processes used, and the quality of the finished piece." That knowledge is a definite value-add.

Garcia added, "Bringing ideation to the table is valuable among the partners we work with. For us, we're interested in the feel, cut and comfort of a shirt — not just the printing. It's really the experience of wearing the item."



Images courtesy of Chicago White Sox.



Images courtesy of Wilson Sporting Goods.

The panelists agreed garment decorators could benefit from stressing their capabilities — describing what they can do and its implications — over their past work. Creative partnerships in which the printer shares what's going on in the garment industry allow for innovation.

Getting Noticed

THREADX attendees wanted to know how their decoration companies could do better at getting noticed by brands such as MLB teams. Yoshida suggested all companies have someone on hand who can take good photos. "Show your product through good pictures. Not just a picture of a shirt, but of someone wearing it," he said. "Tell the story, give it context. This will increase traffic, social media use. Make it sexy or cool."

Garcia's advice was to the point: "Do what you're good at and work with other people who can get you there." He also added that if decorators want to get noticed by the major leagues, or any other major entity, "let us know how you're different."

Discussion moderator Crespo, a former marketing executive at toy manufacturer

Mattel, added that decorators should do all they can to, "Get it in the trade magazines of the industry you want to serve. Find ways to sneak your company's work out in front of others." This is a case where being the expert in your own industry allows you to represent your knowledge, as well as what the industry has to offer, to others seeking related services.

On Deck for Sports Apparel ...

In nearly every market served by garment decorators, change is a constant, and sports apparel is no exception. Zulla started the "what's next" discussion by sharing how Wilson Sporting Goods is "getting out of the comfort zone." He illustrated with examples of a custom line of tennis racquets — a concept that ties directly into the printing industry's ongoing drive toward versioning. Other examples included shoes, basketballs and footballs, produced in a new partnership with MCM leather.

For the White Sox, Breunlin said, the team is moving toward advertising products using players, their spouses and other people of note. In another example, he said the team is investigating working



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Image courtesy of Ross Yoshida/Los Angeles Dodgers.

with a member of the team who has expressed interest in launching a garment line.

Yoshida gave an example of how stadium exclusives have become full-time items in the team store. One stadium exclusive was a Dodgers-based partnership with Hello Kitty.

“Very popular. Some people bought a game ticket just so they could get the shirt — the game was secondary,” he said, adding, “Character tie-ins are popular, but we still want people to actually come to the game.” The team has also had great success tapping into the Los Angeles area’s many ethnic communities. One example is the highly popular, annual Filipino Night, for which special shirts and caps are created (and worn with great pride).

The Closer

For THREADX attendees, the panel discussion provided a unique view into an opportunity-rich area for the garment segment, and the panelists’ thoughts and opinions spoke to the desire for MLB brands to continuously engage the customers inside the stadium, in retail stores and through online sales portals.

And the MLB experience is just one segment of the “wide world of sports.” There’s a lot of opportunity of sports apparel merchandising on local, regional and national scales; in schools, colleges and universities, minor-league and major-league settings. The question is: Is your company ready to play in “the big leagues?”

SGIA’s THREADX conference, which will enter its third year in 2020, explores market trends and business development opportunities for garment decoration companies, and shines light on the needs, wants and behaviors of brand managers, print buyers and industry innovators. THREADX 2020 is scheduled for February 23 - 25 in Scottsdale, Ariz.

Dan Marx is SGIA’s Director of Content Development. With SGIA, he works with the graphic communications industry’s diverse knowledge base to raise awareness of trends and opportunities; and helps graphics communications companies and their customers identify and adopt new technologies and access lucrative market areas. In his more than 25 years at SGIA, he has authored numerous articles for industry publications worldwide, presented at a wide range of industry events, and served as an enthusiastic ambassador for new processes and opportunities.



Image courtesy of Wilson Sporting Goods.

