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The concept of customisation is not new to the sporting goods industry. Whether at the local pro shop or the neighbourhood retailer down the street, sellers of sports equipment and apparel have historically dedicated significant time and effort getting the right product to the right customer at the right time. But while customisation has always been a component of sporting goods retailers and manufacturers value proposition, the industry has lacked the tools to offer custom fit and design to more than just the most serious sports enthusiasts. As Internet technology evolves, however, retailers and manufacturers are able to respond to more specific consumers demands with record speed.

As sporting goods retailers and manufacturers come to accept that they cannot produce and sell all products to all consumers, and mass marketing gives way to information-driven, direct and personalised strategies, retailers and manufacturers must build the capability in their organisations to tailor products and assortments to individual consumers, track their purchases, and offer complementary and relevant products and services. These consumer-focused organisations will graduate with the highest honours.

A compelling course of study

Consumers are tired of simply accepting what is offered, sacrificing features they want for ones they don't. They want more control over the products they buy, and their standards and expectations for sporting goods products are escalating to new levels. In fact, 36 percent of consumers surveyed for KSA's Annual Consumer Outlook said they are willing to pay 12-15 percent more for customised apparel and footwear. KSA predicts that over the next five to 10 years, customised products will represent 20-30 percent of sales.

Today's consumers are intelligent and savvy, and they expect products and services to be tailored to their specific needs. The Internet will become increasingly important as a direct-to-consumer channel for sporting goods sales in this demanding marketplace. In fact, it is predicted that by 2004, nine percent of all sporting goods retail sales will be transacted over the Internet

(Forrester Research, Inc., September 2000).

The Internet is a powerful tool; the first tool that allows connected organisations to interact with consumers in real time, creating the ability to collect massive amounts of consumer information. It is up to retailers and manufacturers, however, to develop the processes, organisational structure, and culture to learn how to transform this information into relevant customised product offerings.

Some successful scholars

Taking the lead from companies like Louisville Slugger, Lands' End and Nike, who allow consumers to design and personalise their own gear, sporting goods manufacturers can offer a new online model of supplier-customer interaction.

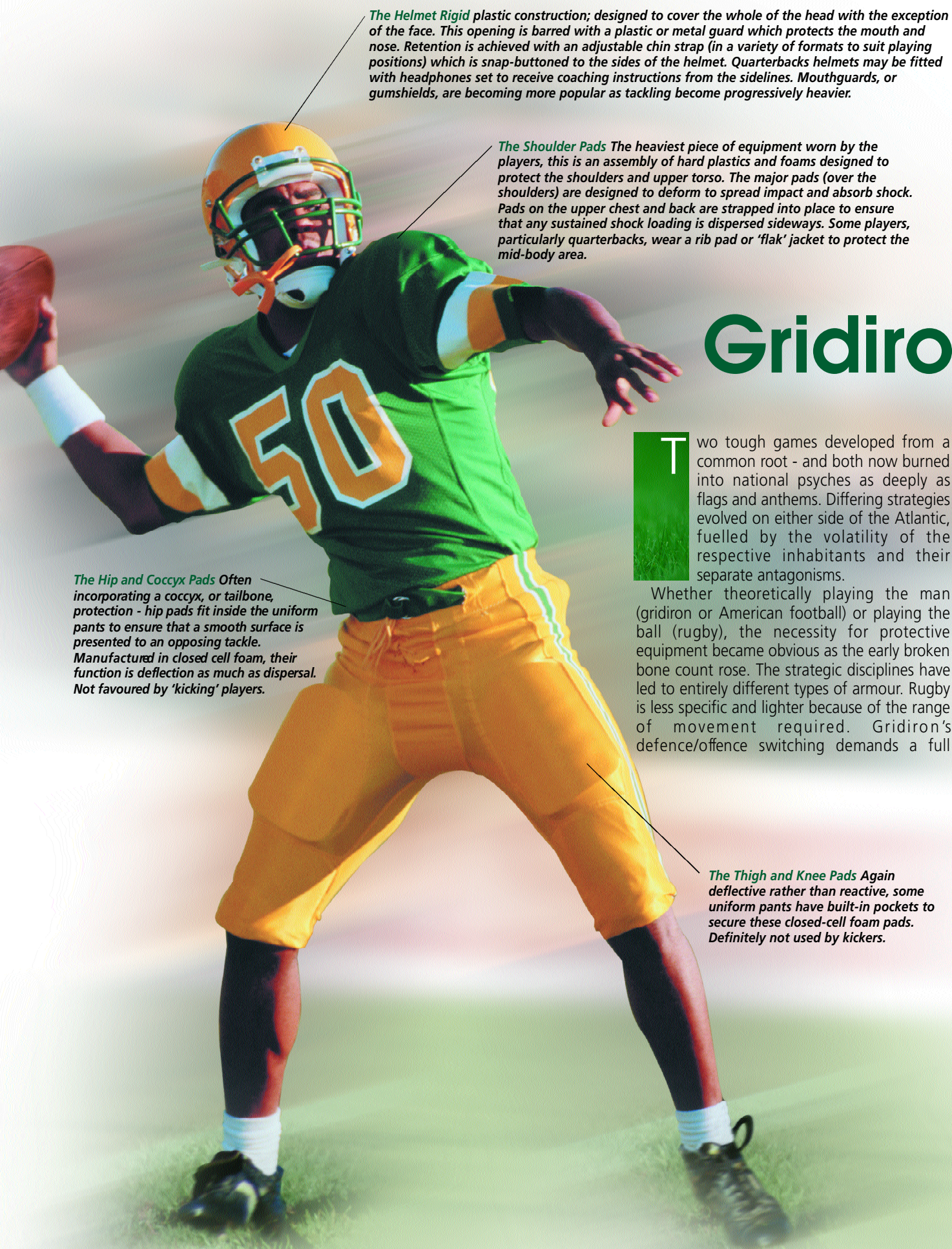
This model permits individual consumers to choose from a catalogue of various options for style, colour, components, price, and delivery, shifting the consumer into an active role. It also allows companies to gain a more intimate understanding of their consumers and, as a result, be better prepared to anticipate and meet their needs.

Sporting goods retailers and manufacturers can leverage the Internet as a customisation tool in three key areas, addressing consumers' demand for individualism (personalisation), sizing (fit), and aesthetic tastes (design).

Personalisation: This level of customisation allows consumers to express their individuality by augmenting or requesting specific changes to mass customised products. For example, the 116 year-old baseball bat company, Louisville Slugger, allows online consumers to personalise their bats by engraving their names, signatures, or even their favourite Major League baseball teams on their bats. 🏇

Todd Belveal

NIKEiD allows web-users to customise their own footwear.



The Helmet Rigid plastic construction; designed to cover the whole of the head with the exception of the face. This opening is barred with a plastic or metal guard which protects the mouth and nose. Retention is achieved with an adjustable chin strap (in a variety of formats to suit playing positions) which is snap-buttoned to the sides of the helmet. Quarterbacks helmets may be fitted with headphones set to receive coaching instructions from the sidelines. Mouthguards, or gumshields, are becoming more popular as tackling become progressively heavier.

The Shoulder Pads The heaviest piece of equipment worn by the players, this is an assembly of hard plastics and foams designed to protect the shoulders and upper torso. The major pads (over the shoulders) are designed to deform to spread impact and absorb shock. Pads on the upper chest and back are strapped into place to ensure that any sustained shock loading is dispersed sideways. Some players, particularly quarterbacks, wear a rib pad or 'flak' jacket to protect the mid-body area.

The Hip and Coccyx Pads Often incorporating a coccyx, or tailbone, protection - hip pads fit inside the uniform pants to ensure that a smooth surface is presented to an opposing tackle. Manufactured in closed cell foam, their function is deflection as much as dispersal. Not favoured by 'kicking' players.

Two tough games developed from a common root - and both now burned into national psyches as deeply as flags and anthems. Differing strategies evolved on either side of the Atlantic, fuelled by the volatility of the respective inhabitants and their separate antagonisms.

Whether theoretically playing the man (gridiron or American football) or playing the ball (rugby), the necessity for protective equipment became obvious as the early broken bone count rose. The strategic disciplines have led to entirely different types of armour. Rugby is less specific and lighter because of the range of movement required. Gridiron's defence/offence switching demands a full

The Thigh and Knee Pads Again deflective rather than reactive, some uniform pants have built-in pockets to secure these closed-cell foam pads. Definitely not used by kickers.

Gridiron v Rugby

Head Guard Heat formed closed-cell foam under a fabric outer covering - head guards are becoming more widely accepted. Designed to sit close to the skull, the soft structure protects with no more than an average suggestion of aggression.

The Shoulder Pads Multi-segment EVA or neoprene foam pads sewn to a close fitting bodice, the garment is said to support and protect across the shoulders and the back of the neck during close play.

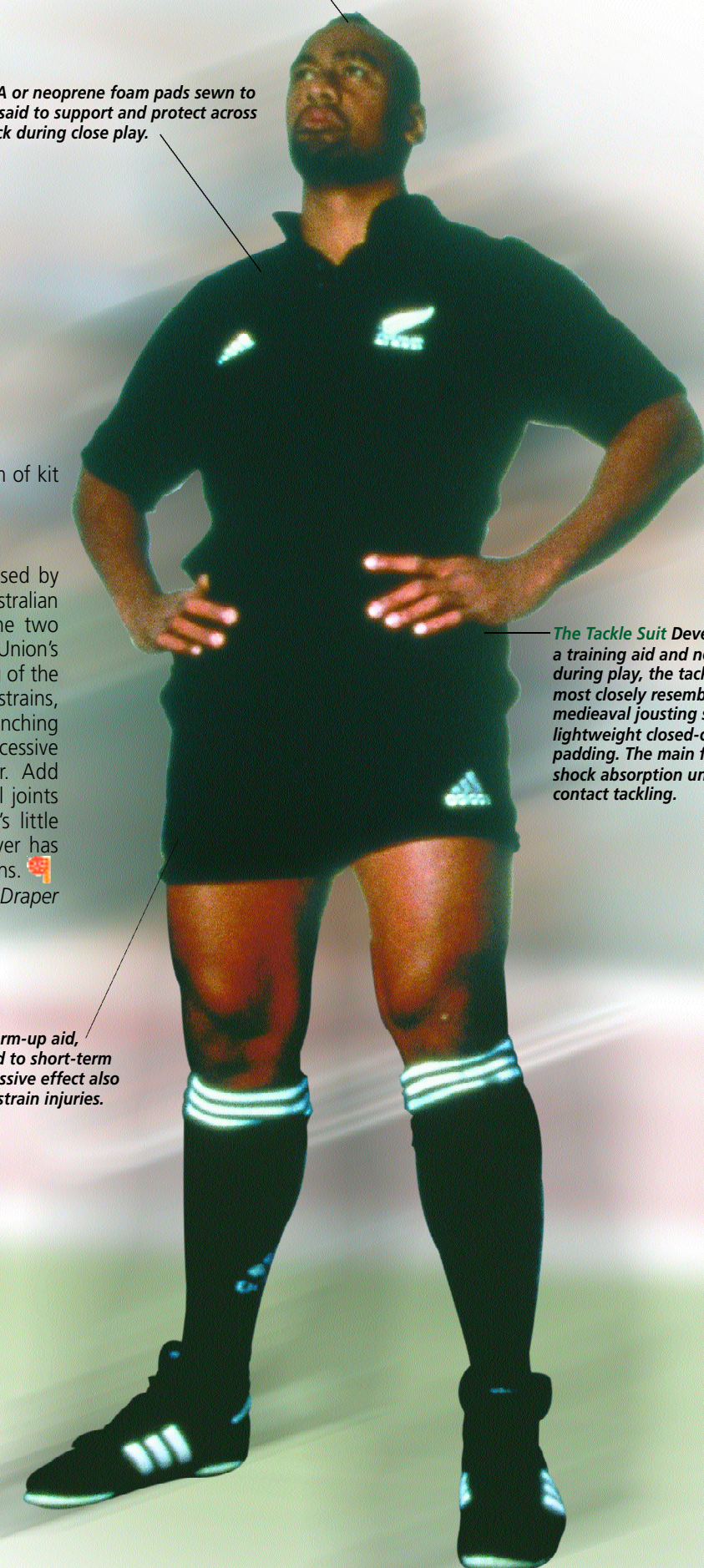
structure and a helmet - in itself an item of kit which could be regarded as a weapon.

Injury tally

Quite apart from the 'problems' caused by the other variants - rugby league and Australian rules - the reported injury tally for the two sports under review is significant. Rugby Union's carnage includes crushing and fracturing of the spinal column, concussion, severe back strains, muscle and ligament strain. The crunching tackles in American football make successive concussions an early retirement factor. Add those to the certainty of damage to all joints and the upper torso structure and it's little wonder that the 'playing life' of a player has allegedly dropped from 5.5 to 3.5 seasons.

Demyck Draper

The Spandex Shorts Initially designed as a warm-up aid, many players now wear these shorts as an aid to short-term power release during match play. The compressive effect also mitigates against hamstring, thigh and groin strain injuries.



The Tackle Suit Developed as a training aid and not worn during play, the tackle suit most closely resembles a mediaval jousting suit in lightweight closed-cell foam padding. The main function is shock absorption under full contact tackling.