NEWCOMERS: 2018 FIFA WORLD CUP

From June 14 to July 15 the eyes of the world will be on Russia as the 2018 FIFA World Cup rolls into town. *WSA* looks at some of the innovative products sports brands have developed ahead of the tournament.

The race to Russia

According to FIFA, football's governing body, the 2014 World Cup in Brazil reached a total of 3.2 billion viewers, more than 40% of the world's population at the time. This included more than one billion for the final, in which Germany defeated Argentina to become world champions for the fourth time. On this analysis, it is not hard to see why the leading sportswear brands see football's showpiece event as such an important marketing opportunity. Their race to develop innovative kits, boots and accessories is driven by not only a desire to help their sponsored teams and players perform at their best, but also by a need to catch the eye of this captive global audience.

The 2018 tournament takes place in Russia this summer, with 64 matches played in 11 different cities. Keeping with tradition, the host country will have the honour of playing in the competition's inaugural match. When the Russian players take to the field to face Saudi Arabia on June 14 at Moscow's Luzhniki Stadium, it will represent a clash of sponsors as much as a clash of nations; Russia will be wearing its adidas strip while their rivals will be decked out in the kit of rival sportswear heavyweight Nike.

Between them, Nike and adidas will serve as official kit suppliers for more than half of the 32 nations which have qualified for the 2018 World Cup. Nike may have been top of the tree in terms of team representatives four years ago in Brazil but this time around it is adidas that leads the way. The German brand will provide kits for 12 countries in total, including pre-tournament favourites Spain, Argentina and Germany, as well as lesser lights including Iran, Egypt and Morocco. A number of Nike's partner nations, most notably Chile, the US and the Netherlands, failed to qualify, reducing its presence at the competition. It is left with 10 teams, including five-time winner Brazil, Portugal, France and England.

The other major manufacturer in play is Puma, represented by Senegal, Uruguay, Serbia and Switzerland. The brand will be hoping to avoid the sort of intense scrutiny it faced at the European Championship in 2016 when a number of the jerseys it supplied to Switzerland ripped during the same



Adidas will supply kits for 12 of the 32 teams at the 2018 FIFA World Cup, including reigning champions Germany.

adidas

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match. It later blamed a defective batch of material for these failures. The kits of the remaining six teams are split between five different suppliers: New Balance, Hummel, Errea, Umbro and Uhlsport.

Cool solutions

In terms of technical specifications, a number of the manufacturers of this year's World Cup kits have chosen to focus on breathability and sweat wicking properties. Several have incorporated their own proprietary (and often unimaginatively named) cooling technologies or materials with the aim of ensuring that the body temperature of the players is regulated, allowing them to focus purely on their own performance.

Nike's teams at the tournament will wear Fast Fit Vaporknit kits, which feature the company's Vaporknit body-mapped knit fabric. It offers increased airflow by producing what Nike has termed a "duct-like effect". The knitted fabric on the chest and back panels of the jersey has an open-hole texture for better heat management and more efficient sweat release. "Engineered yarns" on the sleeves are designed to offer better aerodynamic performance. Away from the jersey, Nike has developed shorts with no outer seam so as to reduce friction and "increase range of motion".

Four years ago, adidas made its Adizero textile technology a prominent feature of its kits. This time around, much of the focus is on its Climachill cooling technology which helps to keep the wearer cool and dry. The kits of each team have been inspired by memorable designs from the past, with Germany's jersey paying tribute to the iconic 1990 World Cup kit and Spain's jersey a homage to the strip its players wore in the 1994 tournament. The jersey adidas has designed for the Japanese team is one of its most interesting, with inspiration taken from the traditional craftsmanship of the Sashiko stitching technique.

Puma describes the evoKnit thermoregulation technology present in its kits as "an enhanced moisture management and adaptive cooling system that helps create the perfect on-pitch body temperature". It features special cooling fins placed in key zones on the body which are engineered to act as channels to regulate heat. Its dryCell technology provides additional moisture management.

Aside from the 'big three' of Nike, adidas and Puma, the only other manufacturer to be supplying kit for more than one team is New Balance. Central American representatives Costa Rica and Panama are its two partner countries. With the incorporation of its NB Dry Technology, the brand has also chosen to focus on temperature regulation. The fabric used quickly wicks moisture away from the skin, keeping the players fresh and dry throughout a match.



Puma's four representatives at the tournament, which include Switzerland, will wear simple, away strips in white. The only difference between them will be the addition of design elements specific to each nation.

Puma

Best of the rest

Denmark returns to the World Cup this year after missing out in 2014. Its kits, designed by Hummel, are inspired by the uniform of the Royal Danish Life Guards, the leading infantry regiment of the country's armed forces. Hummel was keen to get input from the players when devising the technical aspects of the kit. The company reveals: "Hummel has involved the national team football players in the



Denmark's players were involved in the development of the kit that has been created for them by Hummel.

Runolfur Gudbjornsson/Hummel

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development of the jersey from the very beginning to ensure maximum comfort and performance for the players."

Among the points it took on board after consulting with the players was the importance of a tight-fit jersey. The version Hummel has developed for the players is known as TechPro and features a breathable material and optimised ventilation zones. A different material composition is used in the jersey designed for the fans, with quick drying the highest priority.

The remarkable rise of the Iceland national football team has captured the hearts of fans around the world. Two years ago, at the European Championships, the island minnows made it to the quarter-finals before valiantly succumbing to eventual finalists France, an incredible achievement for a nation with a population of less than 400,000 people. Italian manufacturer Errea has given a nod to the country's unexpected and rapid rise in its marketing campaign for the Iceland kit, launching it beneath the slogan 'Legends are born without warning'. The appearance of the jersey is inspired by the natural beauty of Iceland, with references to ice-covered landscapes, volcanoes and geysers.

UK-based sportswear and football equipment supplier Umbro had no team representatives at the last tournament in Brazil. It has gone one better this time, with Peru set to wear its kits in the country's first World Cup appearance since 1982. The brand is expecting increased sales of its jersey; its representative in the South American country, KS Depor, was quoted by local press as saying it expects to sell up to one million in 2018 as a result of Peru's qualification for football's premier international competition. It sold around 125,000 in March, with KS Depor predicting that sales will peak during the competition itself when Umbro opens pop-up stores in five cities.

The final manufacturer represented in Russia will be Germany's Uhlsport. In 2014, the company was forced to dismiss complaints from the Iran national team over the quality and quantity of kit it had provided. It will hope the feedback from the Tunisia team it is supplying this time around will be more positive.

World at their feet

When the World Cup comes around every four years, spectators in the stadiums or watching on television are often met with the curious sight of a player wearing a jersey bearing the logo of their country's strip provider but boots carrying the logo of a different brand due to personal endorsement deals. Perhaps this goes some way to explaining why boot designers often opt for more flamboyant colours, considering this to be the best way to ensure the attention of those watching is drawn to the players' feet.

Nike's recent boot releases have included two updated versions of its Mercurial boot, first developed 20 years ago. The thinking behind the design of the Mercurial Superfly 360 and



Back to the future for the official match ball

The adidas Telstar football, the official match ball at the 1970 FIFA World Cup in Mexico, is an important piece of World Cup history. As well as being the first ball to be decorated with the iconic black and white panels many now associate with a classic football design (the idea was to make it stand out for those not lucky enough to be watching on a colour television), it was also adidas' first attempt at creating a World Cup ball.

For the 2018 tournament, the brand has come full circle with the introduction of the Telstar 18, which it describes as "an exciting re-imagining" of the original design. The 32 stitched panels (12 black and 20 white) of the 1970 Telstar have been replaced with six textured panels, thermally bonded together to increase aerodynamic performance and aid shape retention. Adidas has also developed a new carcass to increase the ball's durability and its resistance to different weather conditions.

The most modern twist for the Telstar 18 is the incorporation of an NFC (Near Field Communication) chip that allows consumers to interact with it using a smartphone. This technology does not offer any useful performance data to the players and teams using the ball, but those purchasing it will have access to exclusive online content and information, some of which will be unique to that individual ball.

The extensive testing of the ball involved players from the national teams of Argentina, Colombia and Mexico, as well as from major club sides such as Manchester United, Real Madrid, Juventus and Ajax. It took place at a variety of altitudes and in a wide range of weather conditions and temperatures to ensure it would be capable of meeting the demands of modern football.

Roland Rommler, who heads up adidas' soccer hardware department, said: "The original Telstar is one of the most iconic footballs of all time and one which changed football design forever, so developing the Telstar 18 while staying true to the original model was a really exciting challenge for us. The new panel structure and inclusion of an NFC chip has taken football innovation and design to a new level and offers both consumers and players a completely new experience."

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the Mercurial Vapor 360 was that even the slightest foot slippage inside the boot can be costly when playing in matches at such a high level. As a result, Nike set about making fit the focal point of its efforts. Both models see the whole foot wrapped (hence the 360 in the name) using the company's Flyknit material. This was made possible by what Nike called a "major advancement" in the technology, which centred around a new knitting process. It has embedded its proprietary ACC (all condition control) technology in the yarns of the uppers of these boots, which the company says offers a softer feel without affecting the material's ability to cope with the elements.

The stud design of the new boot is inspired by the paws of the cheetah with studs precisely placed on the forefoot and the heel to promote traction at speed.

Perennial rival adidas has also chosen to bring an upgraded version of one its iconic boots to Russia, releasing the Predator 18+. It is expected to be worn by players including France's Paul Pogba and Germany's Mesut Ozil, nearly 25 years after the original Predator was first designed by former Australia and Liverpool footballer Craig Johnston.

The Predator 18+ has a Primeknit collar which gives a supportive fit and naturally expands to the shape of the foot. The upper features what adidas calls 'Controlskin', a ribbed zone designed to give the wearer better control of the ball. A new hybrid stud top configuration has been developed to offer better rotation and traction.

Sam Handy, vice president of design for adidas Soccer, states: "When designing the Predator 18+ we wanted to create the most innovative boot on the market while staying true to the very ethos of what made the Predator such an iconic boot. We wanted to create a boot for those players who control the game through a killer touch or defence-splitting pass."

A late addition to the adidas boot offering came at the end of May with the introduction of the X18+, which it says is designed to maximise speed. The boot's technical details which include a laceless upper, an updated lightweight outsole and a 3D-moulded heel, are all intended to increase stability and control during rapid acceleration. In Russia, it will be worn by leading players that include Brazil's Gabriel Jesus, Uruguay's Luis Suarez and Egypt's Mohamed Salah.



The Tekela 1.0, a brand new model, is one of two designs that New Balance has introduced ahead of the World Cup. It is designed for the game's playmakers.

New Balance

A perfect fit

Puma's Future 18.1 boot, to be worn by players like French star Antoine Griezmann and Germany's Marco Reus, features the brand's Netfit lacing technology. This innovation was originally developed for running shoes but has now been applied to football boots. It allows for multiple lacing options, so that the wearer can fasten them however they like without affecting the fit. Puma has combined this with an evoKnit sock and specially crafted striking zone to create what it calls "one form-fitting textile base layer". Other notable features of the Future 18.1 include a lightweight and reactive outsole and a stud pattern consisting of a mix of conical and bladed studs to aid traction and stability.



Without any kits to supply, Under Armour has been able to focus all its attention ahead of the tournament on its new Magnetico boot which it says does not need to be broken in.

Under Armour

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Nike's Mercurial Touch Elite goalkeeper gloves extend from the wrist up to the lower forearm, a marked difference from the traditional glove design.
Nike

New Balance's boot offering ahead of the World Cup includes one new design, the Tekela 1.0, and one upgrade of an existing model, the Furon 4.0. The Tekela 1.0 is designed to offer increased control and manoeuvrability. It has a full-foot upper with stitched bands across the surface to give the wearer better touch and feel of the ball. New Balance says it has been developed with the game's playmakers in mind. The Furon 4.0, on the other hand, is geared towards speed. It incorporates New Balance's FantomFit technology, which comprises an upper engineered by fusing a lightweight mesh with a more supportive layer, and an enlarged, laceless contact zone that helps the wearer to strike the ball with greater precision.

Although US sportswear manufacturer Under Armour is not supplying jerseys to any team at the tournament, its boots will be worn by a number of players, including Switzerland's Granit Xhaka and England's teenage sensation Trent Alexander-Arnold. The marketing campaign for its new Magentico boot includes the slogan 'fits true to your form'. This refers to Under Armour's claim that these boots do not need to be broken in before the wearer takes to the field. It says this is achieved through its Formtrue technology, which involves a flexible upper and toebox that "instantly" form to the shape of the foot for a customised fit. With explosive movements an important part of the sport, Under Armour has added a special "charged" cushioning system designed to absorb impact and offer quick responsiveness. A mix of bladed, rounded and conical studs is used to make it easier to make quick changes in direction.

'Changing the game' for goalkeepers

In the build-up to the World Cup, media coverage about the release of new kits and boots seems to be endless. One notices, however, that while the creative midfielders and star attackers take much of the spotlight (even rugged central defenders sometimes get a mention) very little attention is focused on an often-underappreciated class of footballer, goalkeepers.

"Goalkeeper gloves, much like the players who wear them, have often been overlooked," Nike said as it unveiled its new Mercurial Touch Elite goalkeeper gloves. While kit and boot designs have continued to advance, much less time and effort has been dedicated to the evolution of this essential part of the goalkeeper's kitbag. Nike is aiming to make this a thing of the past, claiming to be "changing the game" with its new glove offering.

"Nike designers began the creation process by throwing out all assumptions about what gloves are supposed to have simply because they've always had them," the company explains when discussing the development of its new gloves. This included those assumptions such as straps, bulky finger padding and an unnecessarily high number of components.

It drew inspiration and ideas from the gloves it has developed for other sports such as baseball, American Football and golf. The Mercurial Touch Elite gloves have reduced bulk (Nike says they are 33% lighter and 47% thinner) and stiffness, and a flexible wrist cuff that extends up the lower forearm. On first sight, this cuff, which replaces the strap found in more traditional goalkeeper glove designs, appears very unusual, but it has been designed to offer the wearer enhanced mobility and comfort. Nike has said each glove requires 66% fewer components than its previous models It has incorporated its ACC technology into the palm to improve performance in wet conditions.

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