



NUMBER ONE FAN

Team sports pet apparel has the potential to be a staple seller for retailers.

BY SANDY ROBINS

Sandy Robins is an award-winning multimedia pet lifestyle expert, author and pet industry spokesperson. Her work is visible on a variety of print, digital and TV platforms.

America is a nation of sports fans, though the revenue earned is not only from ticket sales in stadiums and arenas around the country. A large portion of sales comes from fan support in the form of team apparel merchandise worn at games as well as at home, on the couch, in front of the TV. Due to the fact that we have such a strong emotional connection with our pets, this "alma mater" effect often includes the family dog, making team sports pet apparel an equally lucrative niche market.

Collegiate Properties

Since 2008, the main business for pet apparel manufacturer All Star Dogs, Inc. in Marlboro, New Jersey, has been licensed sports products.

"With over 5,000 colleges and universities in all 50 states, there's a team in nearly everyone's backyard," said Elan Ovadia, vice president of sales for the company. "Overall, for us, the collegiate properties are the most popular nationwide."

"Over the last five years, we have acquired the licensing rights to over 200 new properties and several new leagues, effectively doubling our licensing program," Ovadia said. "Our retail footprint is very strong in the pet specialty market, but it has also grown tremendously in the sporting goods and campus bookstore channels, too."

"Because our manufacturing is U.S.-based, we are able to produce licensed pet gear for not only the Big 10 teams, such as Notre Dame, Ohio State and Penn State, but also teams and universities that are on the second and third tier of NCAA divisions," he added. "And, in fact, we sell as much team apparel that represents such teams like North Dakota State, TCU and Baylor, too."

NASCAR and the NFL

With the closing of Hunter MFG, a former competitor in the pet sports apparel market, All Star Dogs was able to acquire the exclusive license to manufacture NASCAR pet gear as well.

"We are always looking to add new teams and licenses to our portfolio," Ovadia said. "Product innovation is a top priority for us and we like to keep things fresh by debuting new designs constantly. Several new deals are in the works and we plan to add four or more new products to our lines during 2017."

In 2012, Hip Doggie, a manufacturer of high fashion for small canines, formed a partnership with Little Earth Productions to design a collection of National Football League (NFL) pet apparel and harnesses in line with the sports license that Little Earth Productions had acquired.

"Little Earth approached us because it was looking to develop high quality and unique NFL products that would differentiate it from what was currently being offered in the market," explained Sue Kim, Hip Doggie president and CEO. "Our partnership also extends to distribution of the merchandise."

"Our NFL puffer vest is our top seller," she said. "The line also includes a hoodie, which can be worn year-round, as well as a harness vest that is often purchased in conjunction with our NFL retractable leash."

There is also a knitted ski hat that has a built-in stretch scarf that allows the hat to stay on without fuss. It's available in three sizes, making it suitable for dogs both big and small.

Growing Portfolio

Pets First, based in New Jersey, originally started in 2004 by manufacturing character licenses, such as SpongeBob and Disney favorites, before adding about 60 NBA sports licenses as well as some colleges to their portfolio.

Then, in 2014, the company bought Sporty K9, a company well established in the pet retail space with NFL and MLB (Major League Baseball) licenses for pet wear.



"This acquisition made us the country's largest sports-licensed pet product company," said Mark Sok, national sales manager for Pets First Company.

Pets First currently boasts a vast library of officially licensed apparel and products that are sold through pet retailers and specialty gift shops. This includes licenses with nearly 50 of the top colleges in the country, including Iowa, Michigan State, Ohio State University and the University of Southern California.

Big Breeds

"Currently, jerseys and collars are our most popular items, followed by T-shirts, bandanas and leashes," Sok noted. "In the past couple of years, we've seen a dramatic shift in size purchases."

When we produced merchandise ranging from X-small to large, medium-sized apparel used to be our most popular size. However, retailers

started lobbying for even bigger sizes, so we added XL jerseys and then last year we extended our lines to include XXL sizes, too. And we will be adding more XXL sizes starting with our MLB apparel this spring."

Ovadia concurred with Sok, endorsing a growing market for sports apparel for bigger dogs.

"There's no question that pet owners are as likely to gear up their mastiff as they are their beagle," Ovadia said. "You'd be amazed how many photographs we get of 200-pound dogs wearing our apparel."

The "alma mater factor" extends beyond dogs joining family members on the couch at home. Now pet owners can occasionally attend special sports days for dogs in stadiums across the country, which means the market for canine sports apparel (and accessories such as collars and leashes) continues to expand.

"Dressing your dog in a team jersey—whether you are at home or at a tailgating party—is another great way of enhancing the human-animal bond," Ovadia said. **PA**