Dressed to the Nines: Using Fashion Theory to Explain Athlete Apparel Choice

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Many factors go into creating and sustaining a championship caliber athletic program at the college level, but recruiting top athletes may arguably be the most crucial factor impacting success (Vallée & Bloom, 2005). Bergman and Logan (2013) recently found that the quality of a football team’s recruiting class could be a key determinant in the team’s chances of being invited to a lucrative bowl game. Further, their research indicated that a five star recruit could be worth up to $150,000 in expected profits from participating in a BCS bowl game (Bergman & Logan, 2014). Other recent research has shown that up to %80 of a football team’s success in the Big Ten, SEC, or Big Twelve, can be attributed to the success that the team has recruiting top players based on their high school rankings (Caro, 2012).

Coaches spend most of the off-season, and a substantial amount of time during their season, recruiting athletes to play for their program. Top BCS programs place such high emphasis on courting top recruits that certain staff members focus solely on recruiting year round, evidenced by the growth of Director of Recruiting Operations and Recruiting Coordinator positions on football staffs. When incorporating travel, lodging, and food for recruits, coaches, and families, several power five athletic departments spent over $1 million during the 2014-15 academic year (Brady et al., 2015a). Recruiting budgets for schools at the BCS level range from around $80,000 to $1.3 million, and schools that spend more on recruiting tend to see positive returns on their investment both on the court or field and on their financial bottom line (Brady et al., 2015b).

With the imperative on winning championships in order to thrive financially as an athletic department, recruiting high caliber athletes must be a priority. Research has shown that many factors determine where a prospective athletic recruit will choose to attend school, and coaches should take advantage of each available resource (Doyle & Gaeth, 1990; Gabert, Hale, & Montalvo Jr, 1999; Judson, James, & Aurand, 2004). Among other factors, coaches will focus their recruiting pitch on facilities, playing time, and coaching style in addition to institution specific items such as location, academic rankings, and academic major options (Huffman & Cooper, 2012; Kankey & Quarterman, 2007; Klenosky, Templin, & Troutman, 2001; Letawsky, Schneider, Pedersen, & Palmer, 2003; Schneider & Messenger, 2012). Influenced by athletic departments such as Oregon and Maryland, the emergence of a new trend in athletic uniforms and apparel may produce another important factor related to college choice of prospective student-athletes.

This presentation will examine the influence that equipment and apparel contracts of an athletic department have on the recruitment of student-athletes.

Review of Literature

With athletic factors playing a significant role in the recruitment of student-athletes, the growing emphasis on athletic apparel and uniforms should alert coaches to their recruiting potential. Minimal empirical research has been conducted on the link between the apparel contracts of an athletic department and recruiting student-athletes. Myriad anecdotal evidence exists, however, showcasing the importance of uniforms, shoes, and apparel and recruiting top prospects. A recent YouTube video displaying Indiana’s new football uniforms has over 300,000 views, and according to an assistant coach, was produced “purely as a recruiting tool” (Crabtree, 2013).

The influence of apparel contracts on recruiting student-athletes can best be examined through the use of fashion theory. Fashion has been defined as a social process in which members of a particular social group adopt a certain way of behaving with regard to clothing preferences (Sproles, 1979). Several constructs combine to influence individual’s fashion choices, including strength of a priori preferences, selective influence, group membership/conformity, and the desire to be current (Miller, McIntyre, & Mantrala, 1993).

According to fashion theory, a priori preferences for fashion tend to be relatively low prior to social interaction (Miller et al., 1993). Subsequently, social interaction leads to strong preferences for particular styles as a result of powerful symbolic meaning becoming attached to specific styles (Miller et al., 1993). For example, a workout shirt
made by Nike and a similar shirt made by Russell are functionally equivalent without previous knowledge of the two brands. However, the symbolic meaning within sports culture of Nike compared to Russell encourages athletes to prefer one brand to the other. In a similar manner, fashion theorists suggest that certain individuals carry a significantly broad influence within society through the use of mass media (Miller et al., 1993). Within sports, apparel companies attempt to use professional athletes to exert this type of influence over young, impressionable athletes, as they become consumers of fashion trends. Fashion theory also contends that fashion is driven in part by people’s natural tendency to form social groups (Miller et al., 1993). Deeply rooted in this societal concept is the idea that individuals choose groups of which they wish to be perceived as members of. One of the most observable ways to do so is to match the fashion trends of that particular group (Miller et al., 1993).

Although individuals are inclined to become a member of a societal group, fashion theory also posits that individuals desire a certain amount of individuality with regard to fashion choices. Miller et al. (1993) conceptualize this idea by suggesting that “when one is attending a party, it is deemed inappropriate to be dressed exactly like someone else, but also inappropriate to appear entirely unique.” Athletic apparel brands often use people’s individualistic desires as a marketing tool by allowing consumers to personalize shoes and clothing, and often offering college programs custom shoe designs and colorways that are unavailable to the general public. Finally, fashion theory suggests that individuals have a strong desire to be current with their fashion choices. To remain current requires individuals to constantly reevaluate their fashion choices as they relate to societal trends and meanings. A popular and well-known example occurred when the ‘Fab 5’ from the University of Michigan single-handedly began a fashion revolution by wearing baggy fitting shorts and all black shoes and socks. The fashion choices of Michigan’s five talented freshmen influenced the current trends in athletic fashion at the time, while also helping Nike establish itself as the leader in department wide apparel contracts.

A qualitative research design will be implemented to explore the influence on apparel on student-athlete school selection. Athletes from a wide range of sports will be interviewed until data saturation is achieved. Fashion theory and past college-choice examinations will be used to guide the semi-structured interview prompts. The results of this exploratory study will help inform administrators and coaches on the importance of apparel contracts and uniform and ancillary gear design. Anecdotal evidence suggests it is important to student-athletes but very little empirical evidence supports these claims. A plethora of funds is spent each year on new uniforms but the extent to which it actually matters to student-athletes is quite unclear. Avenues for future research within fashion theory and apparel choice will also be discussed.