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Style

A Championship Season for Sports and Fashion

With fans as consumers, everything blends into one big business opportunity.



NEW YORK ISLANDERS

New York Islanders merchandise at a team store at UBS Arena.

By VANESSA FRIEDMAN

Last Sunday, as Lionel Messi and the Argentine national team stood on the podium in Qatar with their World Cup trophy, the general mood was one of joy and admiration, though in some corners of the internet a few viewers had noticed a detail that had them raising their eyebrows.

Why had the gold statuette arrived on the field in a logo-bedecked steel-toned Louis Vuitton trunk?

The same reason that before the final game, Qatar had hosted what was billed as “the world’s biggest fashion show,” with looks by more than 150 different designers from 50 countries, all of it orchestrated by the former French Vogue editor Carine Roitfeld.

When it comes to cultural influence, fashion and sports have increasingly teamed up to be a force in the game.

Both offer a shared language spoken across the world, communicated in an instant. And in 2022, the relationship reached a new level, one driven by the tangles of social media, the growth of influencer and sneaker culture, and a pandemic-spurred shift in cultural consumption. Something more essential has been going on. When you start looking, the connections are everywhere.

Just about a week before the World Cup began, the New York Knicks announced that they had named Ronnie Feig, otherwise known as a founder of Kith and a “legend of streetwear culture,” as their first creative director.

And just a few weeks before that, the

Arizona Coyotes of the National Hockey League announced that they had appointed Rhuigi Villaseñor, the founder of the Los Angeles men’s wear line Rhude, as their creative strategist, a job he got not long after he became the designer of Bally, the Swiss luxury brand.

The news came in the wake of Serena Williams announcing that she was stepping back from tennis and onto the runway as the opening model in the Vogue World show; Tom Brady introducing Brady, his brand of lifestyle casual wear created with Jens Grede (the man who is behind the Kim Kardashian Skims line) and designed by Dao-Yi Chow, formerly of the Public School label; track and field’s Allyson Felix introducing her brand, Saysh; Ferrari holding its first fashion show on the official schedule at Milan Fashion Week; and Michael Jordan’s

brand choosing to open its first concept store in Milan rather than Chicago.

As to why, well, “it’s a fashion capital of the world,” Craig Williams, the brand’s president, told WWD. “People come here because they are thinking about what’s new, what will be hot a year or two from now, And when we think about the impact we want to have with consumers, in the industry, in streetwear, and in culture too, there are a lot of synergies between our aspirations and everything Milan represents.”

Mr. Grede said: “It comes down to the intersection of commerce and entertainment. They have converged.”

The Language of Influence

Mr. Villaseñor said his deal with the Coyotes would allow him to get his hands on everything from, potentially, “the campaigns to the color palette of the arena, the drinks, the lighting, the logo and the design, including outside the stereotypical merchandise program to dressing the team on both a street and formality level.”

And not unlike what he is trying to do in reinventing Bally, where he added some louché razzle-dazzle to the Alpine ephemera. “If you really dissect it, it’s about honoring the heritage and amplifying it,” Mr. Villaseñor said.

That’s the sort of fashionspeak traditionally found in design ateliers, not weight rooms. But, said Scott Malkin, an owner of the New York Islanders, it’s not the only connection. Mr. Malkin is also the founder of Value Retail, a group of luxury outlet malls in Europe and Asia, and this year he broke ground on a new shopping village next to the recently opened UBS Arena in Elmont, N.Y.

Sports and fashion are both, he said, “about creative energy married to execution,” about managing talent that often doesn’t easily fit into a rigid structure and that has to evolve as society does. They both deal with a relentless schedule and can have enormous psychic impact and reach, he said, and both love to talk about the “curation of experience.”

And they are both about branding, at the macro and micro level.

What is a brand, after all, except a collection of values encompassed by a name or a logo or an object? It’s a symbol that represents heritage, know-how, beauty. Or it can be excellence, aspiration, power, grace and activism, all the adjectives that attach to athletes. And sometimes it can mean handbags or sneakers.

“People really care what a brand stands



NEW YORK ISLANDERS

A leather jacket for sale at the Isles Lab..

for,” said Tory Burch, who has merged her main line and sport line and who this year created the winner’s jacket for the Billie Jean King Cup. “And brands are very focused on building their communities.”

One way to do this is through shared live experiences that generate deep emotional connections. Another way is through individuals who represent the citizenry of the brand.

It’s a virtuous circle of group identification, flying the flags of their allegiance. Only they aren’t flags, they’re clothes.

This is how the whole concept of the so-called brand ambassador began: The celebrity became the personification of the brand, a shortcut to knowing what it stood for, because, as Mr. Grede said of Mr. Brady, you knew what the person stood for. (Or thought

you did; sometimes, as with Kanye West, there are surprises.)

But while the idea may have originated with traditional Hollywood stars and starlets, it has now fully moved into sports. From basketball and tennis to soccer, football and even baseball — think of Joc Pederson (currently with the San Francisco Giants) and his pearls — and hockey.

“Anyone who understands who they are and what they are showing the world at a deep level attracts influence,” said Jerry Lorenzo, the founder of Fear of God, who this year expanded to Fear of God Athletics, a performance lifestyle line made in conjunction with Adidas, which will be introduced in 2023.

And influence sells product.

The Brandification of Everyone

Sports stars have long understood the role of image making in extending and ameliorating fame, ever since René Lacoste put a little alligator on his the left breast of his polo shirt and Stan Smith put his name on some kicks. Athletes like Joe Namath with his furs exploited the potential of camera appeal for burnishing an on-field reputation in the television age.

But, said Mark Shapiro, the president of Endeavor — which owns multiple fashion weeks around the world and the Ultimate Fighting Championship as well as modeling and sports representation arms — it was really “Michael Jordan who changed it all when he started coming to news conferences fully decked out in a custom-made suit and tie.”

Even before Mr. Jordan started his line with Nike, he understood the leverage that dressing to complement his play could provide, and he created a model that has been emulated by David Beckham, Odell Beckham Jr., Venus Williams, Russell Westbrook, Roger Federer and Naomi Osaka, to name a few. As Mr. Brady said in an email, “he paved the way for most of us.”

Athletes realized that by branding themselves through what they wore, they extended their performance beyond the action and, Mr. Shapiro said, “opened the door to the next step in their career.” They gave themselves a profile independent of their platform.

That led to draft days that function like runway shows, with neophyte athletes using their moment in the spotlight to brand themselves even before they join a team. The walk from car to changing room on game

day was transformed into a daily photo op, which gave rise to such Instagram accounts as LeagueFits, BlitzFits and Slam x Kicks, which track athletes’ fashion choices.

“In the era of social media, when Instagram moves product and the camera is always on, the legend gets made on the field,” Mr. Shapiro said. “But every other waking moment is an image-making performance about what you are wearing, the products you use and how that gets shared.”

While the rise of social media has circumvented the old power structures of fame, allowing direct communication between stars (and those who would be stars) and fans, it has also led to audience fragmentation. As Ben Affleck said at The New York Times DealBook conference, speaking about his new production company, Artists Equity, created with Matt Damon, the reason there aren’t megamovie stars any more isn’t because actors are less charismatic or less talented but because the viewing public has been niche-ified, divided into evermore specific interest groups.

It comes down to the intersection of commerce and entertainment.

Mr. Grede agreed. Celebrity, which can now be achieved purely through social media, “may be the only unfair advantage in consumer culture,” he said. “Skims benefited from that, and so does Brady. He is an enterprise the same way Kim Kardashian is an enterprise.”

Mr. Brady currently has 13 million Instagram followers; Mr. Beckham, 76.4 million; and Ms. Williams, 16 million.

“People, especially young people, find inspiration more broadly and more readily in their sports heroes and their fashion brands than they do in other industries,” Mr. Malkin said. And both sides want to profit.

The Trophy Lifestyle

“Individuals are now intellectual property,” Gerry Cardinale, a backer of Artists Equity, said at the DealBook conference. It is probably not a coincidence that the first film from their production company will focus on is the birth of the Air Jordan brand.

Mr. Grede said the direct-to-consumer model had forever shifted the landscape in terms of individual opportunity. Previously, an athlete or celebrity was dependent on one of the handful of sports clothing megabrands to distribute their lines. Not any more. Now they can profit from their own brand equity, rather than lend it to another brand, be it Nike or Dior.

At the same time, “teams are wising up to the idea the brand is also the star,” Mr. Grede said. “And the team is a lifestyle brand.” “Lifestyle” being the operative word. It’s why Mr. Malkin created Isles Lab, a store featuring luxury hockey merchandise masterminded by a team with roots in brands like Burberry that, he said, sells a \$995 cashmere Islanders blanket and a \$2,500 varsity jacket, among other things.

Teams come with a ready-made fan base and any community gravitates toward advertising its identity and membership via merchandise. And there is no reason that merchandise has to be a generic screenprinted logo T-shirt in a thin fabric. Indeed, tickets to big games are so expensive — sitting courtside has become such a luxury signifier — that it is striking that the clothing that symbolizes allegiance hasn’t kept up. Which is where designers come in.

That’s why, said Clara Wu Tsai, an owner of the Brooklyn Nets and New York Liberty, who attended Mr. Villaseñor’s Bally debut, odds are good that his appointment at the Coyotes and Mr. Feig’s at the Knicks will become a trend, not an oddity.

And if teams and athletes are looking to luxury as a strategic model, then it is only a matter of time before luxury starts looking at teams and extending their brands into the sports arena in a more entrenched way. Not just as sponsors, but owners.

Indeed, this year rumors were rife that LVMH was interested in buying AC Milan. LVMH denied it, but you can understand where the idea came from. Just consider the synergies: LVMH could situate one of its luxury hotels, filled with its products, next to a stadium; its designers could create special collaborations just for the team; the designers could fill their front rows and marketing campaigns with LVMH athletes.

“Absolutely, they could own a franchise,” Mr. Grede said. Which means in 2023 and beyond, the playing field could be irrevocably changed.