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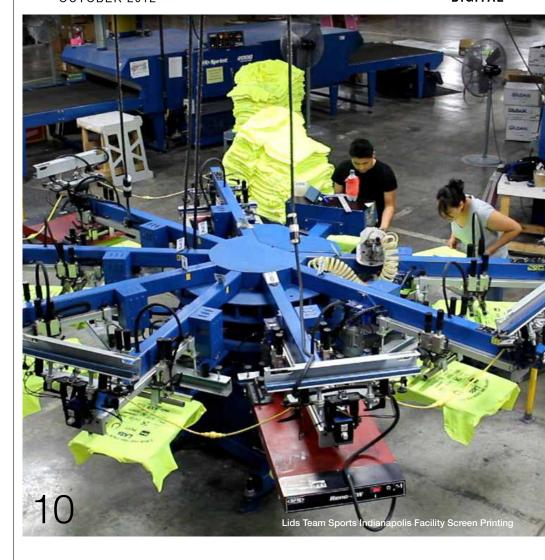
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TEAM BUSINESS



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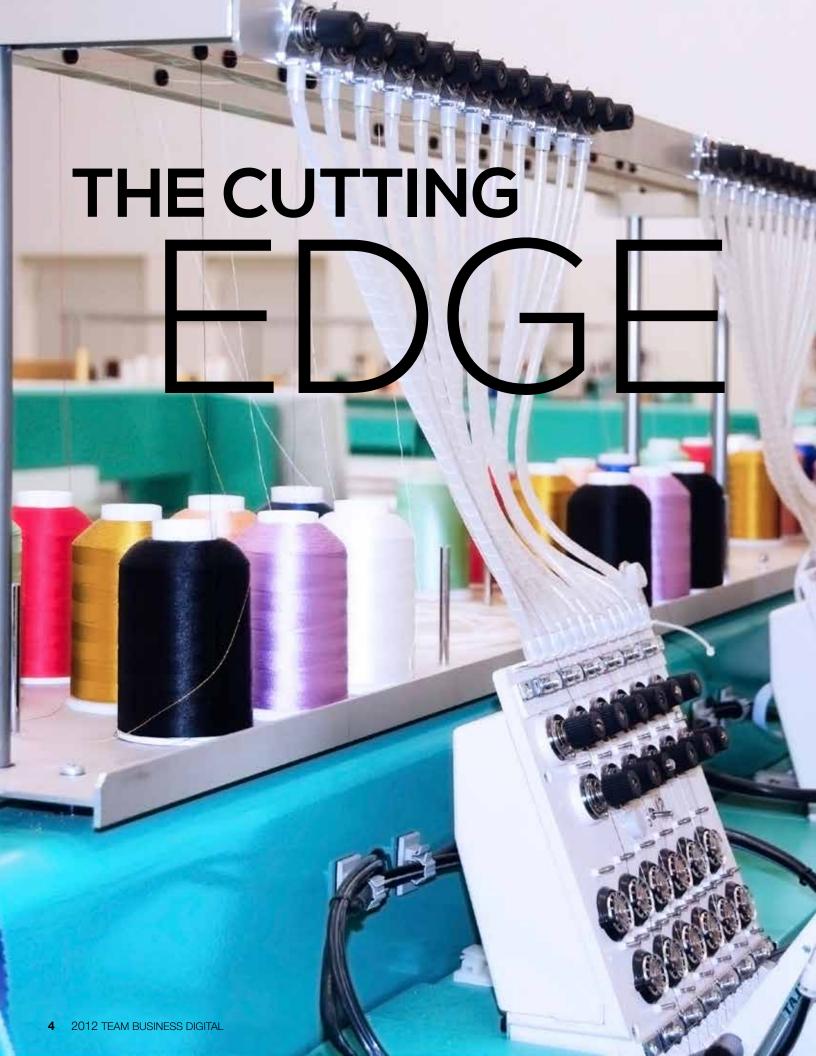
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TEAM Business explores the newest decorating technologies and machinery impacting team dealers

By Fernando J. Delgado

he next time you turn on ESPN and see the latest uniforms that Nike has created for the Oregon Ducks or the most recent interpretation of the University of Maryland's uniforms by Under Armour, pay close attention to the colors and designs of the jerseys. You just might see those styles again at a field near you, on a young football player who wants to emulate the look of the players he also saw on TV.

The influence of hot uniforms on young players is not lost on team dealers. Understanding the technology behind the newest uniforms is an important first step for a dealer to better connect with customers.

"Technology has dramatically changed the industry in the last six or seven years," said Rich Hartley, vice president of sales at The Graphic Edge, a custom screenprinter and embroiderer based in Carroll, IA, that offers uniforms and teamwear among other clothing products. The Graphic Edge is a 200-plus employee operation which runs 10 automatic and seven manual screenprinting machines, four number machines and 54 heads of embroidery. With so many moving parts and overhead costs, technological developments in decorating and embellishment machinery are essential to improving the bottom line for operations like The Graphic Edge, as well as team dealers with in-house decorating capabilities.

"We no longer print with film positives, we use laser jets, which is direct-to-screen digital technology," explained Hartley. "Currently we're burning about 800 screens a day, so you need to build efficiencies into production. We acquired screens, we acquired a screen printing reclaiming machine, and we use custom software that runs throughout the facility, which is paperless in all of its production. There's a laptop computer at every workstation, accompanying every automatic, manual, screenprinting and embroidery machine, and even heat presses."

"Technology has dramatically changed how we store art and process orders," said Hartley. "We don't have to use huge file cabinets to find old paperwork for re-orders, it's all done digitally." Technology has advanced fabrics as well. "The moisture management properties of garments have drastically changed, both what we sell and what's available," he observed. "I've been in this industry for about 25 years, and a long time ago, no one wanted to wear a polyester t-shirt. Now, that's normal. With the growth of certain companies like Under Armour, product offerings have changed substantially. There's a lot of good product out there right now."

Processes used to turn new fabrics into the newest, most stylish uniforms that team dealers are selling also rely on technology. Bruce Perryman, owner of Embroidery Unlimited, is a leading expert in various decorating techniques and surveyed the landscape of team uniform-related production processes. "What I'm seeing is that sublimation is coming on as a very strong market. Screenprinting will always be around, but that comes on the lower end of the spectrum. With embroidery, you're talking about tackle twill, and those kinds of appliques," observed Perryman. "Placement is getting kind of funky because most teams either emulate a professional team or a college team. Nike is very influential because of the very creative college uniforms that they do. Stahl's does a great job in putting together product for the marketplace in terms of team decoration. Everybody has an eye toward the retail market and the major sports teams."

Metro Athletic in Minneapolis, MN, is an example of a team dealer that lacks in-house decorating, but that nevertheless relies on decorated uniforms and apparel as a significant part of its business. "We don't do it in-house, but we do all of it – a lot of screenprinting, a lot of embroidery, a lot of tackle twill, and sublimation's playing a huge role right now," said Ryan Wenkus, sales representative for Metro Athletic. "When it comes to uniforms themselves, a lot of the decorating is happening at the factories that are making those uniforms."

Whether a team dealer decorates in-house, contracts out to independent decorators, or orders decorated pieces directly from vendors, staying on top of the newest technologies used in some of the core decorating processes is essential in understanding the newest teamwear options and, ultimately, keeping customers happy.



ohn M. Strotbeck, founder of Boathouse Sports, provided *Team Business* with an inside look at his company's manufacturing facility in Philadelphia, PA, and shared his extensive expertise with sublimation.

"Digital sublimation, when we got into it, there were maybe three companies in the country producing uniforms using digital printers and digital print heads," recalled Strotbeck. "Today, everybody's trying to figure out the sublimation trick. And it's a very difficult process because there are so many variables that can affect the quality and saturation of color in getting the final image."

Boathouse, which started as an apparel company specializing in the rowing business, expanded to outerwear in 1990, outfitting everyone from the NFL to U.S. Soccer. "As a company, we realized that being a little bit of something to everybody wasn't the right place to be," Strotbeck said. "So we redefined ourselves." The company now produces outerwear, uniforms, training gear and accessories for specific sports. Lacrosse currently represents one of Boathouse's primary markets, along with football, basketball, soccer, wrestling, and other team sports.

Boathouse entered the sublimation business because Strotbeck felt the company could make a lighter, faster, better uniform. Sublimation lined up with its ability to produce small runs of a highly customized product, providing a "tremendous" amount

graphic value at an affordable price point. The sublimation learning curve for Strotbeck and Boathouse was challenging, as the company's rejection rate reached as high as 45 to 50 percent during its first 18 months in sublimation production. "Along the way, we learned all the things the impact the quality of sublimation – everything from air conditioning units 100 feet away, temperature, to barometric pressure. It's still very tricky from an execution standpoint," he said, adding that the company currently has a rework rate for sublimated items of about 6 to 7 percent, whereas all other Boathouse items have a re-work rate of just one percent.

According to Strotbeck, who is a walking encyclopedia of all things sublimation, the method has taken a gradual trip from a niche process that only a few companies dabbled in to a hot, widely available decorating category of its own with a multitude of vendors trying to get a piece of the pie. "The reputation of sublimation when we first started doing it six years ago, was that of a low quality alternative," he stated. "But with the advancement in performance fabrics - specifically polyesters, since sublimation must be done with polyesters or polyester substrates – for sports in general, both the quality of the garment that is executed in sublimation and the sublimation itself have gotten remarkably better."

Something that both trained industry experts and everyday athletes buying the uniforms notice about sublimated products is the striking color and design options, features not available to the same extent with stock or traditional

Epson's Stylus Pro 7890 Sublimation System 24 Inch Printer for Sawgrass' SubliJet-E Professional Sublimation Printing System is designed for producing a high volume of high-end professional photo products where an 8-color configuration is preferred and image sizes up to 24 inches wide are required. Epson 7890 is part of a turnkey sublimation printing solution which includes Sawgrass' powerful and easy to use color management software and comprehensive PartnerPlus support. The unique combination of Epson's newest TFP print head technology, advance 8-color algorithm and the SubliJet-E Professional 8-color ink set makes the 7890 an excellent print engine for sublimation printing.



Alleson Athletic's Sublimated Full Button Mock Mesh Baseball Jersey is a sharp sublimated piece available in 4 styles and 4 fabrics. Pictured is the Reliant design, the most popular Alleson jersey design. MSRP \$76-\$84 (depending on fabric choice)



uniforms. "Sublimation is cool because you get more bang for your buck," said Embroidery Unlimited's Perryman. "You have better designs, and the colors are more rich. More and more people want to do sublimation because its outcome is stunning most of the time."

The Graphic Edge's Hartley believes in the staying power of sublimation. "From a uniform standpoint, when I see companies like Russell Athletic getting into sublimation, I know it's here to stay," he said. "We're selling a lot of uniforms with sublimation." Even though The Graphic Edge does not sublimate in-house, sublimated items have done brisk business with no signs of it slowing. "I think it's here to stay, and what's changed it dramatically over the past few years is the quality of the fabrics that are available," Hartley continued. "When it first started eight



or nine years ago, the fabrics available for particular uniforms were not that great or varied, but some pretty cool fabrics have been developed over the last two to three years. I think that's what's gotten some major uniform manufacturers into the sublimation business."

The entry of new players into sublimation is something that Boathouse's Strotbeck has certainly noticed. "The sublimation business over the past couple of years has exploded domestically," he said. "There are more inks available, there are more delivery systems, more printers, more papers, and there's more fabrics that are ready for print and being developed helping everybody get into the process."

So how exactly does sublimation work? "The beauty of our sublimation process is simple to explain, but hard to execute," Strotbeck said. "One, there's no limit to what you can do in a sublimated garment. Anything you can design that fits on the panels of the garment, anything you can design on Adobe Illustrator, or any picture, we can replicate." Strotbeck detailed incremental steps which include digital creation of a file, moving the file to the equipment for printing, and then printing inks through print heads that are an inch and a half squared and have 1600 nozzles. "Getting everything to work as the product moves downstream is a very complicated process."

Fabrications on the sublimation side have also moved forward, allowing vendors to offer new cutting edge uniforms and apparel and ultimately giving team dealers more options to offer to their customers. As performance fabrics started to become the default product in the team business, more and more mills began developing better fabrics.

"I think it's a little bit of everything – the ability to add colors without really changing the price could be a nice for some people, and it's a lot easier and a lot cheaper to fill in on sublimated uniforms than it is in traditional uniforms. Sublimation is as affordable as it gets in term of uniforms right now," Metro Athletic's Wenkus said, explaining that customers buying a sublimated uniform jersey could save as much as 25 percent compared to a traditional uniform. "To give an example, someone buying a Wilson sublimated jersey, for say about \$75, could expect to get the same jersey in tackle twill with numbers sewn on everything, but it may cost them about \$100."

Wenkus estimated that sublimated uniform sales represent up to 60 percent of Metro Athletics overall uniform sales, with baseball, softball, soccer, lacrosse, and football selling well, and the arrival of sublimated reversible lacrosse and basketball practice wear stimulating sales even further. However, he also said

that the demand for sublimated uniforms varies greatly depending on the selling area and the particular team dealer. "Some team dealer reps that don't sell many sublimated uniforms might say their coaches are traditionalists and they don't want to look at it. I think it comes down to whatever the salesman feels comfortable selling," he said.



mbroidery is an embellishment technique enhancing nearly all imaginable types of uniforms and teamwear, adding lettering, numbering, and graphics. And even though embroidery can capture fine details, limitations exist. Tiny embroidering can be hard to read, and coloring is limited to blocks. Despite the restrictions, technological advancements have made embroidery and even more precise decorative tool.

Ed Levy, director of software products and marketing for Hirsch International, a worldwide distributor of several leading textile machine brands such as Tajima and MHM, highlighted some relevant trends and machines that can help team dealers become more aware of additional decorating options for their selection of uniforms. "One of the things that's popular in many sports uniforms is tackle twill," Levy stated. "It's typical for doing numbers and names that go on the front or back of a jersey." Tackle twill allows embroiderers to replace stitching with material in the form of a solid number, giving the numbering a different look and also streamlining the process.

A prominent machine exhibiting break-through technology in embroidery, and a valuable tool for in-house decorators, is the Tajima Sumo Singlehead embroidery machine. The Sumo Singlehead is a large format embroidery machine, the first of its kind and ideal for large hockey and other types of sports jerseys in one hooping. "The Sumo is designed exclusively with teams in mind," said Levy. "It cuts down on labor because of the single-handling of the process. It allows name and number combinations to be done in one shot, versus having to do the name first, and then reconfigure the garment and do the number."

Team dealers have noticed another growing



trend in technology related to embroidery that is cutting-edge – literally. "One particular new technology being used more often by team dealers and manufacturers is the singlehead laser," said Levy. "Everything is done right on the machine with the laser. It's a really neat process."

"The latest technology for sewing appliqué on team uniforms is now being done with a singlehead or laser bridge machine," said Ed Balady, president of BITO, an Oceanside, NY-based company specializing in textile laser cutting equipment and embroidery digitizing software. "The big news is how much faster and easier it makes the appliqué process." He explained that with traditional appliqué application, the fabric has to have some degree of stiffness in order to be positioned for sewing. With lasercutting, almost any type of fabric can be used without a backing.

The laser cutting process begins with a singlehead laser bridge hooked up to a singlehead embroidery machine. Whether singlehead or multi-head, the process involves



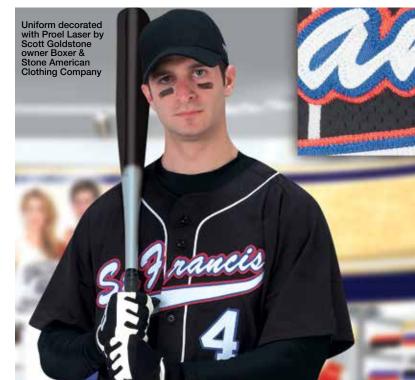
a laser-cutting unit built to work in conjunction with the embroidery machine. After programming, the fabric is cut and excess fabric is quickly removed. Next, the embroidery machine stage begins and the cut fabric is sewn down.

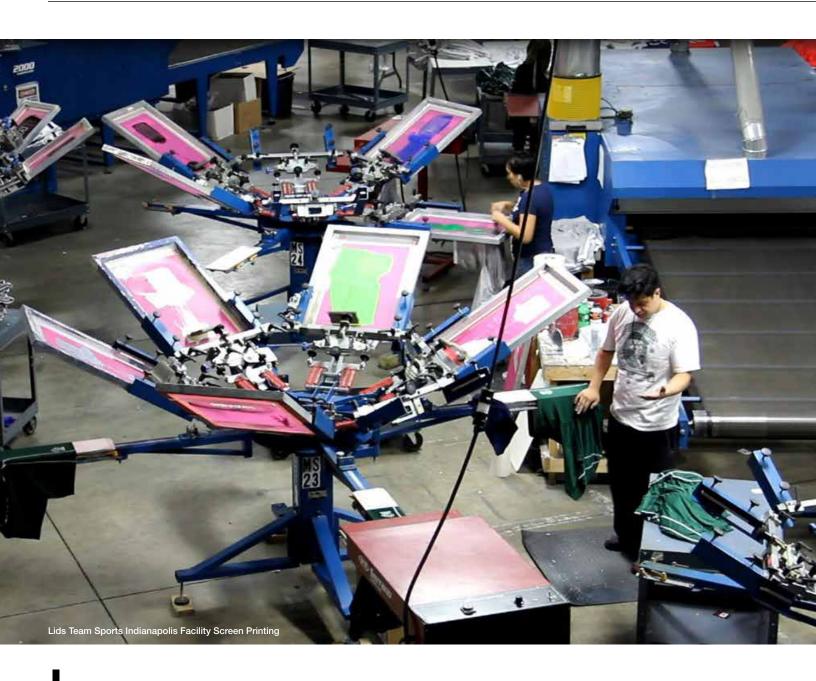
According to Balady, laser cutting enables decorators to produce more sophisticated appliqué designs up to four times faster than traditional methods, while "opening up the doors to a whole new world of decorating options that were not production friendly before." Laser cutting is being used for professional, collegiate and high school team uniforms, primarily basketball, football, baseball and hockey.

If a team dealer or manufacturer decides to start using a laser bridge used over a multi-head machines, then it's safe to assume the volume of their embroidery operations is massive, as the setup costs \$200K and up. The smallest laser bridge is meant for a minimum of 6 heads, with some of the largest operations using 30 or more heads. A singlehead embroidery machine with laser can be used to run 12 to 24 pieces in-house, bringing down costs for the dealer. Such a setup can run in the range of \$25,000, just a fraction of the cost of a laser bridge used with multi-head machines. Leading lasers available to dealers include Seit and Proel lasers. Seit lasers only work with Tajima embroidery machines, while Proel lasers, which are exclusively distributed by BITO, can work with any manufacturer of embroidery machine.

Boathouse's Strotbeck has noticed that the embellishment side of team uniforms and apparel has seen some interesting changes in recent years, particularly related to logos and images. However, he feels that embroidery's end result hasn't changed much in the past 20 years. "There's different thread types, textures, or embossing that can be done, but in general it's still the same thing," said Strotbeck. "Everything's done on automatic laser cutters these days."

Hirsch's Levy pointed out that hat embroidery has recently become more widely-used. Numbers, team logos, and personalization on hats are more prominent as customers are seeking out flashier headwear. Embroidery Unlimited's Perryman agreed, the intricacy of design has improved. "I've seen a lot of foam embroidery with hats, and placement of logos on hats tend to be shifting too," he observed. "The techniques aren't as mysterious or mystical, it's the degree of difficulty of the art and how it's completed in terms of technique. Some designs lend themselves to certain processes."





n many ways screenprinting is the tried-but-true staple of team decorating. While newer processes such as sublimation may be eyecatching and trendy, screenprinted items remain the best-sellers for dealers and offer a growing variety of options for teams and individual athletes to customize their uniforms, apparel and teamwear.

"Screenprinting is still a fundamental piece of the team business," said Boathouse's Strotbeck, who uses the process to produce basics such as t-shirts, performance t's, and jackets. "The biggest changes there have been inks that stretch, high-visibility inks, reflective inks. But for the most part, teams still want a sweatshirt with a nice basic screenprint on it."

For team dealers with in-house screenprinting, three levels of machinery will typically be used: manual presses, startup automatic presses, and full automatic presses. According to Joe Abreu, multimedia director for M&R, a leading manufacturer of screenprinting machines, the

price difference between a manual and automatic press is drastic, with a manual press varying anywhere between \$5,000 to \$30,000, while fully-equipped automatic presses with high-end digital features can exceed \$200,000. Given the price of higher-end automatic presses, they are usually only found in largest scale manufacturing operations, usually world-renowned brands or companies involved in high volume manufacture of licensed products.

"A manual costs significantly less than an automatic press and is ideal for doing short runs," explained Tyler Dummett, president of Workhorse Products in Phoenix, AZ. "Since some teams may need only 12 to 24 uniforms, that order is not really large enough to make it cost-effective to put it on an automatic press." Workhorse offers screenprinting machinery such as the Odyssey Manual 6 color/4 station Screenprinting Press and the Javelin Freedom Automatic Screenprinting Press. The general rule of thumb is that most in-house team

dealers will be using manual presses to run orders on 36 pieces or less, as it is not cost-efficient for a dealer to print less than 36 pieces per run using an automatic press. Starter manual presses can be purchased for as little as \$3,000, while full-featured manuals can run in the range of \$20,000-\$30,000.

For larger team dealer decorators, technology allows faster printing speeds made possible by automatic presses, evidenced by MHM's Synchroprint automatic screenprinters including the X-Type and X-Treme models. MHM presses are distributed by Hirsch Industries. "The MHM screenprinting machine is designed for speed and changeover,"



MHM's Synchroprint X-Type Automatic Screenprinting Press has a revolutionary AC indexing system and a high power AC electric printhead drive that translates into very fast printing speeds. The X-Type also features individual off contact front and rear adjustments, which are critical when printing high density or other specialty inks, separate squeegee and flood blade air pressure regulators which provide greater squeegee pressure control, and a time-saving preregistration screen system featuring the MHM pinlock.

said Hirsch's Levy. "It really shines because it reduces time in setup for a job." The X-Type's increased printing speeds are made possible by a state-of-the-art AC indexing system and a high power AC electric printhead drive. It also features a 20-by-23 inchprint for substantial coverage, while an oversize version offers a 32-by-40 inchprint area.

According to Workhorse's Dummett, an automatic press such as the Workhorse Javelin Pro is ideal for dealers and sporting goods stores when screenprinting league logos on large orders (several hundred) of team uniforms, or any runs of pieces numbering 36 items or more. However, automatics are not suited for printing team uniform numbers, since each number is unique to an individual player.

M&R offers an impressive line of screenprinting machines running the gamut of features and production capabilities. For any team dealers getting into in-house decorating, a match can likely be made with an M&R machine, from smaller mom & pop operations to larger regional and national dealers. "Some of the designs we see on shirts nowadays are radically different than they were 20 years ago, so screenprinting has advanced quite a bit," said M&R's Abreu. "If you're just starting out, your system needs to grow with you. There's more technical requirements to consider that are going to be important later on." He said a baseline M&R Sidewinder press is an ideal entry-level manual press for team dealers starting up an in-house operation. He also recommended the Chameleon manual production press for mid-sized team dealers working exclusively with short runs of 12 to 24 pieces.

For larger team dealers looking to ramp up production, M&R offers the Diamondback S automatic press as a great entry-level automatic option, and the Sportsman EXG automatic press, which is ideal for any size shop. "Short run screenprinting is expensive," continued Abreu. "It's expensive because you have numbering screens and numbering artwork – which are pretty much universal – in addition to a custom set of screens for custom logos. For 15 shirts, that dealer is going to generate a full set of screens that's going to be used 15 times and then they're done. Then the screens have to be reclaimed. That's all labor-intensive and time-intensive." According to Abreu, the cost and time involved in the process accounts for team dealers charging their customers per-screen setup charges and art fees up to \$50. "The goal for us at M&R is to build equipment that's very durable, and equipment that's going to be easily maintained," he concluded. \blacksquare



Workhorse's Odyssey 6-Color/4-Station Manual Screenprinting Press is a great way to get started doing short-run spot-color jobs and name drops without making a big investment. The Odyssey offers multicolor capability at minimal expense, and has a compact design and tubular steel construction along with features such as adjustable off contact, adjustable screen angle, and microregistration. On average, the press can output about three-dozen shirts per hour.



M&R's Chameleon DD Manual Screenprinting Press offers revolutionary two-tier design, unrivaled expandability, and rugged construction. Chameleon's expandability also allows manual owners to meet current color capacity needs with a Chameleon 4, 6, or 8-color press, with the option of adding future color capacity by expanding the Chameleon instead of purchasing a new press.



In keeping with the spirit of introducing new fabrics, Boathouse has also brought three-layer softshell fabrics into the team business market. "It's actually a fabulous fabric for the team business because it really matches what athletes want today, which is more technical fabrics that are a little closer fit and lighter in weight," noted Strotbeck. Stretch-light fabric, a single-ply stretch polyester with moisture wicking ability and some thermal-retention qualities, is another advancement in materials that Boathouse has introduced recently.

When it comes to new technologies involved in decorating processes, GroupeStahls' Chief Sales Officer Dave Wheatley strongly believes that heat printing is an essential technology for team dealers. "I say that everyone involved with apparel and uniform decoration should have at least one heat press," said Wheatley. "The fantastic value with heat printing is that you do not have to own your own cutters, transfer printers and the like. You are able to design custom products specifically for your clients,

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have them delivered, typically within a few business days, many times quicker, and apply with the heat press. No mess, no maintenance, no extra production space, just heat print it and deliver."

Stahl's offers the new Hotronix Air Fusion, the only auto-open, autoswingaway heat press of its kind. According to Ben Robinson, general manager of Stahls' Hotronix, in Carmichael, PA, the Air Fusion's fully threadable lower platen makes it much easier to put garments on and take them back off. Garments are positioned on the lower platen and can be rotated from front to back and side to side, making it easier to put heat-applied graphics faster. Threadability, a term coined and trademarked by Hotronix, also eliminates the need for pads and pillows and makes it easier to print garments with seams and zippers. Collars, buttons and seams can be positioned in different positions – for example, off the edge or underneath the platen - creating a smooth, flat surface. Ultimately, the heat press cuts down on production time and manufacturing errors.

Boathouse has invested in Heat Seal garment labeling, a technique based on heat pressing used for smaller orders, in cases when screen-

> machines, which are available as part of a digital process, also allow for more flexibility in design, as screenprinting is limited by the number of colors or order specifications. Weighing only 15 pounds, the machines

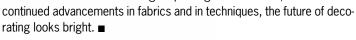
> printing will not adhere to the garment. Heat Seal

are easy to move and could prove to be a beneficial tool for team dealers undertaking small runs of decoration.

Digital direct to garment printing is another technology that has become more commonplace. More designs are being created on desktops and laptops than ever before, and the capabilities of new printers bring such dynamic designs to life. The Kornit 921 Breeze, offered by Hirsch International, incorporates the technology of Kornit's larger industrialgrade direct-to-garment printers with a unit that will work from any desktop or laptop computer. The Breeze is an entrylevel printer that allows the decorator to print lights and darks, and also has a built-in system that automatically applies pretreatment solution to the shirt inside the machine.

Another trend in decorating for the sporting goods market is combining more than one major process on a single piece, known as multimedia decorating. For example, screenprinting can be used for wording on a jersey, while applique can be embroidered on in the form of additional lettering or numbering to complement the other process, or vice versa. Combining processes even further diversifies available options in uniforms and apparel. Manufacturers such as Alleson Athletic are employing combinations of processes to produce items more frequently, and other vendors and team dealers will likely follow suit. "Multimedia creates more visual appeal and more dimension and texture to the design," said BITO's Balady.

Thanks to innovations in digital printing and software, in addition to



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