



An emphasis on player protection fuels the protectives business in 2017.

make intelligent decisions.”

It can be the difference between kids playing a sport or not, or athletes staying in the game or sitting hurt on the sidelines. It can also be the difference in getting the sale.

“Understanding and explaining the technical features and benefits of products in the sports protective space is key,” says **Laura Cleveland**, senior marketing manager at **Zamst**. “Focus on educating customers on proper injury protection and help them identify products specific to their needs.”

Player protection is available for every conceivable body part in a constant stream of new iterations. Products that improve athlete safety can be standalone or incorporated into athletic apparel. Most are individual purchases.

“There’s no doubt that it’s a growth category and I see it growing in sports that don’t traditionally have protective equipment. It’s an evolution as protective products become more comfortable as well as more functional,” says **Allen Krebs**, owner of **Kratz Sporting Goods**, Clarksville, IN. “The new kids coming in are buying lighter weight, more breathable options.”

The spotlight on long-term effects of impact-related injuries in professional and college sports is beginning to change behavior in school and youth team sports and parents are paying attention.

“Everyone is concerned about safety. There

SAFETY FIRST... AND SECOND

By Nancy Baeder

Safety concerns cast a long shadow on contact sports. “I want my kid to play but only if you can keep him/her safe.” Consequently the protective sports products category is growing and in flux, with new regulations governing student athletics, fresh innovation and new products for sports that have not traditionally used protection.

So the category presents an opportunity for team dealers to sell more protectives. The key is to determine the best way to capture what remains largely an individual sale.

“To support sales in this growing category, we make up a checklist at the beginning of the season

for athletes and their parents, listing items they may need for their sport. Do you have this? You may need that,” explains **Bobby Bulinski**, general manager, **Blanchette Sporting Goods**, Shelton, CT. “It gives folks a heads up and lets them know we have specific products available. There are a lot new rules coming out and parents want to take care of their kids.”

It’s smart to proactively address safety issues, explain the benefits of protective products and make recommendations, including product choice and fit. “Dealers that promote protective gear that enhances performance win customers,” says **Jim Caldwell**, executive VP at protectives company **Unequal**. “Advocate for sports safety by promoting products that reduce risk and keep athletes safer while they play sports they love. When you educate parents and players they can

are so many more products to choose from and we try to hit all price points so everyone can afford protection,” says **Karen Mallory**, owner of **Mallory Sports Supply**, Wood River, IL. “Parents feel the need to spend money to protect their kids. It’s increasingly common for them to come into our store to purchase a better helmet for football than the one provided by the league to get extra protection for their kids.”

The key going forward is to offer more protective, more comfortable, more lightweight products from trusted brands. “Keeping athletes in the game without sacrificing performance is everyone’s goal, so finding the right products that provide protection without hindering agility, speed and range of motion is critical and helps elevate the category,” says **Lauren Hinton**, senior product manager at **DonJoy Performance**.

SPORTS MEDICINE / PROTECTIVES

Traditional boundaries are being redefined as the category advances.

“It’s something we pay attention to. With all the new regulations in youth and school sports, new protective gear is becoming available wherever anyone can identify a need,” says Bulinski.

Serious About Safety

There’s little doubt that parents are serious about keeping their kids safe in every sport. “At the same time, it’s hard to know what the younger kids wear for protection versus the cool factor,” says Krebs. “For example, I suspect that wearing knee and elbow pads in basketball is more of a trend with the kids, unless they’re protecting an existing injury.”

Companies that specialize in protective products embrace the evolving nature of the category and its direction. They fall into several distinct categories.

• **Trusted brands are reshaping the category.** “Both Shock Doctor and McDavid describe this category in the context of the various products

to truly reduce risk of injury.”

• **Products are designed to prevent AND protect injuries.** “The definition of the protectives category has evolved from products that simply protect current injuries to products that protect and prevent future injuries,” says Cleveland. “The category can be segmented based on injury, body part or sport.”

• **Player safety is paramount in every sport.** “Traditionally this category included products such as football and baseball helmets, shoulder pads and catcher’s gear. Our brands continued to expand to incorporate new products,” says **Neal Fink**, VP—sporting goods at **Performance Health**. “Our definition of ‘protective’ has evolved over the last few years. With the increased emphasis on player safety, this broadened definition encompasses a greater variety of player safety issues.”

• **Function expands the protectives category.** “We define the protective category in a couple ways: one is impact and abrasion protection and the other is protection from other forms of injury,”

the benefit of it. “The key is to let them know it will be available in the online store,” he says. “We find that a kids will wait if they know it will be there.”

The goal is to grow business along with the category. “Dealers have an opportunity to promote a more holistic approach to player safety by including braces and supports and generic padding in their team shops,” says Fink.

Selecting and promoting the right brands is key to selling something as technical as the protectives category. “To emphasize the importance of safety and prevention, work with brands that are doing their part to advance the category both in terms of innovation and marketing,” says Bethea.

Shock Doctor, Mueller and Cramer are popular brands sold at Blanchette Sporting Goods. “Our experience with protectives is that it’s an individual retail purchase,” says Bulinski. “Although we set up team stores with OrderMyGear, it’s not an avenue we currently use to sell protectives because the stores are usually completed after practices are underway.”

Mallory Sports Supply also stocks protectives in its retail space. “We primarily service recreation leagues and feeder teams, not high schools, so the majority of protective products are sold out of our retail store, sometimes at the insistence or recommendation of the coach,” says Mallory. “For example, we stock Mueller neoprene knee braces for athletes and weekend warriors who are likely to need help getting a well-fitted brace. In general, customers are satisfied by fit and performance of these items.”

Mouthguards continue to be big sellers. “Mouthguards are still included in a lot of school budgets,” says Bulinski, who sells mostly Shock Doctor mouthguards. “Our sales continue to increase season after season in lacrosse, field hockey, some soccer and some baseball,” he adds.

“All of our schools provide mouthguards for football and 90 percent of the time we still order the throwaway version,” reports Krebs, who isn’t really seeing mouthguards used in other sports yet. “But I think it’s moving in that direction,” he adds. “Steph Curry wears a custom fitted mouthguard, which is out of his mouth more than in. Kids react to this.”

Heartguards and face protection purchases are increasing in softball and baseball.

“We sell lot of EvoShield heart protector shirts in our retail store, as parents take this safety issue seriously,” says Bulinski. “We also sell more face-guard batting helmets that are now mandated in Connecticut, as well as more fielder’s faceguards. Leg and elbow guards are also selling because the kids see it on TV.”

C-flap face protectors and elbow shields are strong sellers for Mallory. “In softball, more girls use fielder’s face masks to prevent injury, mostly the infielders and pitchers,” she says. “Coaches encourage or require their kids to wear faceguards and we stock them in our retail store. We also carry the Shock Doctor chest protector.”

“Little Leagues buy lots of EvoShield heartguard, along with wrist and elbow guards,” reports Krebs.



our brands offer, including protective cups and supporters, mouthguards and padded apparel — basically any item that serves primarily a protective purpose,” says **Gary Bethea**, category director at **United Sports Brands**. “We’ve seen over the years that some if not all of these essential products are identified as personal protectives and relegated to the athlete for purchase.”

• **Products are more comfortable and less intrusive.** “Protectives should protect. One thing is certain: Just because a name may sound protective doesn’t mean that it is,” says Unequal’s Caldwell. “We have always defined protectives as using patented, military grade technology in ultrathin, lightweight primary and supplemental sports gear

says DonJoy’s Hinton. “We develop soft and semi-rigid braces and supports to address the common conditions that hinder the athlete today.”

Dealers Protect Themselves

Kratz Sporting Goods sees its web store platforms as its biggest advantage over the places people normally shop. “We absolutely include protective items in our online team stores as extras. Why not? The kids often need more than one so it just makes sense to make them available,” says Krebs. “No mom wants to have to wash the pads everyday. The alternative is that they’ll go to Amazon or Dicks.”

Kratz prominently features a “Shop Local” theme on its site and Krebs believes people are recognizing

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BOBBY BULINSKI, BLANCHETTE SPORTING GOODS

“We also see an increase in facemasks, particularly for infielders.”

Elbow and kneepads are trending in basketball, along with padded shorts and shirts, and compression leg sleeves that serve a dual purpose of protection and compression. “I think that most kids wear them to look cool than for any functional benefit, although there is that too,” says Krebs. Trusted brands he sells include Adidas, McDavid and Champro.

Football protection is moving forward with more lightweight breathable protectives, but safety concerns continue to negatively affect numbers. “The attrition in collision sports and gains in the safer sports speak volumes. Protectives are key elements in the fight to keep and grow the great sports,” says Caldwell.

“More kids buy their own integrated girdles for sanitary purchases,” says Bulinski. He also sees more kids purchase eye shields for their helmets, armpads, elbow pads and gloves. “Because high school budgets vary, some kids buy their own rib pads and mouthpieces.”

New protective gear for soccer is focused on concussion risk. Headbands that absorb and disperse impact to prevent concussions from heading and collisions are showing up on pitches more often,

although it remains a work in progress.

“Protectives as a burgeoning category still have a way to go. In soccer, many of those in leadership at the national level believe soccer headgear is ineffective in protecting the head. They mandate shinguards and don’t urge parents to consider head protection,” says Caldwell. “Instead they ban heading for U11 players with no regard for the 70 percent of concussions coming from collisions and falls and other non-heading impacts.”

Nonetheless, parents are acting on concerns for their kids’ safety. “We are definitely selling more protective headbands, particularly the younger kids,” says Mallory.

“With all the press and media attention given to head injuries, without a doubt it’s the category of protectives that will continue to grow because of safety issue,” says Bulinski.

“The soccer headband hasn’t taken off. It’s still mostly purchased by people who have already suffered a concussion because of a doctor’s recommendation,” says Krebs.

Not Quite Standard

While progress is being made, protectives as standard equipment still have a way to go.

“Basketball and soccer both show an increasing

trend towards safety products, while high-contact sports like football and lacrosse maintain their traditional emphasis on them,” says Fink. “Ankle braces, in particular, have a large growth opportunity, especially in sports such as volleyball where most teams are becoming ankle brace compliant.”

It still depends heavily on the sport and common conditions as to whether or not protective gear has become the norm. “For certain impact sports, like football, protective gear and equipment is issued and required. For other agility team sports where there’s less impact and more joint injuries, protective bracing is considered the standard,” says Hinton. For example, for most volleyball and basketball players ankle bracing is essentially part of their uniform.

The use of protective equipment is becoming more widespread even when there is no mandate. “McDavid Hex has seen meteoric rise in popularity and usage during the last few years and although not mandated, it has dramatically changed the look on basketball courts,” says Bethea.

The bottom line? “Injury protective and preventive equipment has become more standard among athletes,” says Zamst’s Cleveland. ■

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