

Toronto team jerseys have become fashion statements

Licensed merchandise lets fans show their passion



Ana Robic, left, shares her Raptors fandom with her whole family. (CONTRIBUTED)

Fri., Nov. 4, 2016

Sports fans of a certain age remember him well. You know, that kid in school who strutted down the halls wearing a *real* Edmonton Oilers jersey. Number 99, no less. “Gretzky,” emblazoned in white (or blue) letters across his back. That jersey only appeared on special occasions.

Fast forward to 2016 and the jersey has become de rigueur for many sports fans. They’re no less special, but they’re everywhere. And team merchandise isn’t just for the ultra-cool kids anymore. Mark Blanchard, director of retail for Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment, explains, “Licensed merchandise has definitely shifted to more of a lifestyle fashion statement rather than just a fan souvenir piece to pick up at the game. Fans today are looking for exclusive, authentic and personalized products that are on trend in the market.”

THE REAL DEAL

Authenticity is a crucial factor, especially for longtime fans like Robic. “My parents have been season-ticket holders for almost a decade,” she says, “so I have had a variety of merch over the years.” She’s even taken her fandom to the executive level, where the real deal is a must. “It would be hard to walk into my office and not see that I am a fan,” she says. “I will usually wear a jersey or Raptors T-shirt if there’s a big game, even if I have meetings to run. Last year, I presented at one of our town halls to 300 colleagues wearing a suit with a Raptors tee underneath. I think it was a hit.”

A FAMILY AFFAIR

Showing fan pride has also become a family affair. “I have two or three tees, my husband has three shirts and a jersey and my kids both have new jerseys from last season,” says Ana Robic, an insurance industry executive and Raptors fan from Toronto. “We have probably six caps between us and huge red foam fingers and mini flags for when we go to the Raps games,” she says. “I also had a flag that clipped to my car in the post-season last year.”

That’s a demand that requires a lot of supply. But it’s all in a day’s work for the team at Real Sports Apparel. Known as the authentic store of the Toronto Maple Leafs and Toronto Raptors, this game-day beacon welcomes fans at Gate 1 of Air Canada Centre. Run by fans for fans, the shop has the largest selection of exclusive merchandise on the planet. And if you can’t make it to the arena in person, you can shop Real Sports Apparel’s selection [online](#).