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Rugby protective and the law

Headgear and shoulder pads have become so entrenched on rugby fields that it is easy to forget that the first protective shoulder pads were only launched about twenty years ago when rugby coach Alan Zondagh obtained IRB permission to provide players with padded protection.

The products launched by Rugbytech in the early 1990's were soon followed by other brands. Nowadays, protective padding is so commonplace on rugby fields that some commentators claim that protective gear have change the pace and physicality of the modern game because players are more inclined to tackle so much harder.

Since the first protective items came on the market, the International Rugby Board (IRB) adopted strict rules on how much padding a rugby player is allowed to wear – mainly to prevent overly padded players from battering other, less protected, players and changing the nature of the game even more.

IRB Regulation 12 now stipulates that protective gear worn in all matches played under the jurisdiction of the IRB must have official IRB approval, which means that it had been tested and conforms to IRB specifications.

Implications for retailers

The IRB subsequently instructed referees to check all players wearing protective products to ensure that they display the IRB-approved logo. If not, they should ask the player to remove the garment before entering the playing surface.

For retailers the obvious implication is that by stocking non-IRB-approved protective gear, they would be selling products that could embarrass and make trouble for their customers. The IRB has also requested retailers to only stock protective gear with the IRB-approved logo.

It is, however, not so simple.

- Many top manufacturers pride themselves on spending a lot of money to ensure that every product in their range carry the stamp of IRB-approval, because that is what their customers would expect.
- But, the IRB-approval on every single item comes at a high price. Where retailers are aiming for lower price points, they do sell protective gear that has not been approved by the IRB. Most entry price points in house brands, for example, do not feature the IRB-logo.
- But not only house brands fail to conform.

Our cut-out-and-keep series to assist retailers with product knowledge

Words: FANIE HEYNS. Compiled with the help of Bruce Armstrong of Body Armour, international manufacturer of Canterbury protective wear, Brett Burgess of Canterbury SA, Kevin Jooste of adidas SA, Jaco Kirsten, of Orbit Sports, manufacturer of Stormforce protective wear, Damien Rudham of James Gilbert SA, Brett Trollip of Second Skins and the websites www.irb.com/mm/document/lawsregs/regulations/04/23/24/42324_pdf.pdf or www.irb.com/lawregulations/approvedequipment/index.html



Photo: Barry Aldworth
Backpagepix

"The irony is that some Springboks and a huge number of Super 14 players have been playing in *illegal* shoulder pad tops week after week," claims a supplier.

- There is no rule stopping retailers from selling products without the IRB-mark of approval on it. Many believe the policing of the IRB-approved stickers seems to have fallen away in SA, as it is left to the discretion of each referee to enforce the ruling, and it seldom happens.
- But, while the IRB has no jurisdiction over products sold by retailers, there could be come-backs from customers caught by a referee and asked to remove the non-compliant item. A case could be made that the Consumer Protection Act would allow them

to return the non-compliant items to the retailer and demand a refund, as the CPA says products sold must comply with all industry standards and regulations.

- If the protective wear is not IRB-approved, the retailer should therefore clearly state that it is not suitable for use in Rugby Union matches. A sort of, *use at your own risk* warning.

What does IRB approval entail?

- All garments have to be sent to a specific laboratory (at great expense) to be tested in accordance with the applicable rules, and the test results are then submitted to the IRB for approval.
- Upon approval the manufacturer will be registered for the specific product as tested and is then eligible to buy the IRB labels (at a further cost) to be inserted into each garment.
- Rugby manufacturers sign a liability agreement with the IRB, guaranteeing that every piece of protective wear made will be exactly the same as the original sample submitted for testing and approval.
- The official IRB cloth label must be sewn into each and every item of protective wear – providing the player with the security that every item they wear has IRB approval.

What is legal?

The IRB has stringent specifications for the protective gear worn by rugby players - especially to ensure that rugby union players do not wear body armour in the American football tradition.

- There are specific areas of a rugby player's head and body that may be covered with protection – while other areas must be uncovered to allow the player better visibility, hearing and freedom of movement.
- Rugby players may wear the following protective gear: headgear, shoulder pads that cover most of the key upper body areas (shoulders, biceps, sternum, collar bone, base of neck, kidneys) and forearm guards.
- Any protection must be consistent in its density, i.e. you cannot have a hard layer on the outside and soft padding on the inside. The reasoning behind this is that both the wearer and the other party feel the same effect of any impact: in other words, you do not pad up and use your head or shoulder as a battering ram.

Shoulder padding: The IRB spec- **To p32**



Rugby protective from p31

ifies that shoulder pads can be 10mm thick, but all other body padding may not exceed 5mm thickness.

- A player may wear shoulder pads made of soft and thin materials, which may be incorporated in an undergarment or jersey, provided that the pads cover the shoulder and collar bone only.
- No part of the pads may be thicker than 1cm when uncompressed and no part of the pads may have a density of more than 45 kg/cubic metre.

Body protective: On the rest of his body a player may not wear any item that is thicker than 0.5cm when uncompressed in any part, or is denser than 45kg/cubic metre – unless specified in IRB Regulation 12/Law 4.

- Where this overall thickness consists of padded material covered by fabric, 0.5cm is the maximum measured thickness for the combination of the uncompressed padding and the fabric.
- The fabric can contribute up to a maximum measured thickness of 1 mm on each side of the pad.

Headgear: a player may wear headgear made of soft and thin materials provided that no part of the headgear is thicker than 1cm when uncompressed and no part of the headgear has a density of more than 45kg/cubic metre.

- The chinstrap on the headgear must release or break under certain conditions, for example, if the headgear is grabbed from behind and pulled hard, the chinstrap must release in order to prevent the player being garrotted.

Features that sell

- Shoulder pads tend to sell better than headgear, but that trend could change at junior level. Certain schools are looking at making headgear compulsory for junior players and if this gets passed, this would obviously change the ratios. Headgear is already compulsory in Japan at schoolboy level.
- At the top-end features like moisture management, manufacturing quality and compression for improved fit are important factors in protective wear.
- Lower down the range price becomes more pivotal, and the fabrics become more basic, e.g. lightweight breathable mesh.

Displaying logos

Soon after headgear came onto the market, suppliers embraced the excellent *advertising* opportunities offered by a player being photographed or featured on TV with the brand logo emblazoned across his forehead, or peeping from behind his shirt collar.

Nowadays, providing players with branded headgear is no longer such an easy advertising opportunity. More often than not players are seen on TV with the brand logos covered.

This is because most official apparel supplier

contracts now include agreements about not displaying rival brand logos. And at the higher levels of the game there are several other limitations on the display of logos. The IRB, for example, prescribes the size of logos on international gear.

- Schools and clubs are fairly relaxed on this front, but they sometimes do try to restrict colours to conform to the traditional colours of the school or club.
- At provincial level it would depend on the team apparel supplier, and whether they can manufacture this type of protective product. If the official apparel supplier has protective gear, then players would need to cover up other brand names. If they can't provide protective, then the players can wear their selected or sponsored brand.
- Players at national or international levels are governed strictly by apparel supplier contracts and IRB rulings on how many logos are allowed to be displayed on a player. For example: Canterbury is the official apparel supplier for the Springboks and their sponsored players can therefore wear protective wear with one logo per item visible. i.e. Bryan Habana's shoulder pads may show one logo around the neck area, while Gio Aplon's headgear may show one CCC logo.
- At the RWC all protective wear had to be completely free of logos, even on the lining of fabric. A logo that was moulded into the earpiece of headgear had to be removed before the RWC.

New developments in ranges

Manufacturers have been striving to make protective wear that are lighter, softer and more comfortable, whilst making them perform better in impact tests. This has resulted in several innovations in protective gear.

Canterbury

Over recent years one of the major developments in protective wear have come from new lighter and more breathable fabrics that blend well with lighter protective moulds, which can withstand more force or pressure, says Brett Burgess of local Canterbury distributor Super-Brands.

There have also been developments in the rubbers used to make them lighter, softer and more comfortable, whilst making them perform better in impact attenuation tests, adds Bruce Armstrong of Body Armour, the international manufacturer of Canterbury protective gear.

Canterbury, for example, recently developed a new moulding system that allows 20% more full thickness padding in the same size pad than previously available. This is just about to go to the IRB for testing and will be available in the next generation of CCC protective wear.

Manufacturers use very different types and

qualities of rubbers in their protective wear, says Armstrong.

"All of Canterbury's headgear and the pads for the protective wear are made in their specialist factory in New Zealand, using the highest quality rubbers made in New Zealand, allowing absolute control over quality and consistency of performance."

Manufacturers have been striving to make protective wear that are lighter, softer and more comfortable, whilst improving performance in impact tests.

Gilbert

Morne Steyn has been wearing the Super 14 Charger and Jean De Villiers the new Zenon shoulder pad in the 2012 IRB World Cup.

Both shoulder pads use comprehensive padding systems to ensure complete protection of the key impact areas and the product is manufactured to withstand the tough physical contact that occurs at test match level, says Damien Rudham of local distributor James Gilbert SA.

The Zenon, new for 2012, features a com-

prehensive padding system in a stylish functional design with breathable mesh inserts. Additional padding has been applied over the sternum and biceps, while the compression fabric offers two-way stretch.

The Super 14 Charger offers comprehensive value for money. It features functional, all-round padding that covers the shoulders, back, sternum, kidneys and biceps in a breathable mesh top with an elasticated hem that finishes above the midriff to ensure freedom of movement.

Orbit Sports/ Stormforce

The new Stormforce IRB-approved headgear has been manufactured with a higher cut just above the eyebrows to give the wearer maximum vision – no headgear can protect the eyebrow area as this will interfere with the wearer's vision, explains Jaco Kirsten of local manufacturer Orbit Sports.

"Our Stormforce rugby headgear has been specifically designed and manufactured for our warmer conditions in the Southern Hemisphere as it allows for maximum airflow without doing away with any protection."

A unique feature is an elasticated chinstrap that allows free movement of the player's jaw, to increase comfort.

"The whole strip is made of flex- **To p34**