

NBA | THE UNSEEN GEAR

Padding softens blow

Basketball players are using more protective wear

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These days, basketball players are prepared to jump ball and take a fall.

Many NBA and college players wear thigh pads and chest pads beneath their loose-fitting uniforms, and their numbers have steadily risen. The quaint sport that Dr. James Naismith introduced to pass time in the winter has evolved into a full-contact sport requiring full-time protection.

"In the paint, basketball is very physical," Orlando Magic center Dwight Howard said. "You've got elbows flying, bodies flying, crashing, people fighting for position. I don't think people see all of that. That's why a lot of people have been wearing those."

He pointed to teammate Mickael Pietrus, who was sliding into a flak jacket before a recent game.

The padding pioneer was Shaquille O'Neal, whose 7-foot-1, 315-pound frame provides ample room for bumps and bruises. O'Neal had worn girdlelike protection for a while, but when he joined the Miami Heat five seasons ago, he consulted with Ron Culp, then the team's longtime trainer, on how to best nurse a bruised rib while continuing to play.

Culp considered having O'Neal wear a bulletproof vest, but it restricted movement and weighed too much. Culp then approached Kevin O'Neill, head trainer of the NFL's Miami Dolphins.

After witnessing the contact O'Neal absorbed, Culp said, it was only natural to consult a football team

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about protection.

"Basketball is the most physical noncontact sport in the world," Culp said. "There's a conundrum: You're putting 10 oversized people in an undersized place and telling them to run as fast as they can and jump as high as they can and to not get hurt while doing it."

Soon, the Heat's Dwyane Wade started wearing the padding because he "bounces off people like he is on a pool table," Culp said.

O'Neal, now with the Phoenix Suns, said, "I'm a trendsetter, baby."

The game's most dynamic players, those who draw the most attention and absorb the most contact, are regular users.

LeBron James, Kobe Bryant and Amare Stoudemire are among those who don padding during games.

The extra cushioning provided by padded compression shorts and a tight-fitting padded V-neck undershirt goes mostly unnoticed. But players are convinced that these special undergarments can prevent injury.

"It works," Philadelphia 76ers forward Thaddeus Young said as he held a protective shirt. "It depends where you get hit at. You want to protect some of the things in your body, and I've gotten elbowed a couple times in my ribs and they tend to be hurting for a while.

"This gives me a little more peace of mind."

Because of the demand, McDavid, a manufacturer of protective sports equipment based in Illinois, modified its NFL gear for basketball use.

The NBA is happy as long as no one sees the extra padding.

"Whether they're wearing padded or nonpadded compression gear, they can't be visible while they're at a standstill, and the compression tanks can't be visible under the jersey, as well," said Stu Jackson, the league's executive vice president for basketball operations.

But that makes it tougher to market to younger players.

"That's the hard part of the product, that nobody sees it," said Rey Corpuz, McDavid's marketing director, who estimated that basketball padding for all ages could become a \$15 million to \$20 million business for his company. "It's designed specifically not to be seen at the NBA level."

Other companies, including Nike and Under Armour, have also developed protective padding for basketball players.

"We really see this as the new modern-day uniform system," said Todd Van Horne, a Nike creative director. "You're not just using the jersey that's wearing the number on the outside. The players are bigger; they're stronger. They're more competitive."

So are the companies that have entered this burgeoning apparel category. McDavid sued Nike and later adidas, citing patent infringement, and is seeking to have them cease manufacturing padded undergarments.

The popularity of the garments for basketball has been a coup for McDavid.

"If you go back into the 1970s, guys are wearing knee pads," Corpuz said. "Padding isn't outside of the culture. Our biggest challenge was changing the mind-set of the average basketball player that padding was already there."

Still, some players bristle at wearing body pads, fearing that they might restrict movement or questioning the need for them in the first place.

"Those guys who use them bang a lot," veteran New Jersey Nets guard Keyon Dooling said. "They get the ball a lot more than me. Over the years, I've learned how to avoid being hit by the big guys."

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