



EASTON LACROSSE: THE MAKING OF...

HOW ONE OF THE SPORTING GOODS INDUSTRY'S BIGGEST MANUFACTURERS MADE THEIR ENTRY INTO LACROSSE

After dominating the baseball bat market for so long, Easton's emergence as a viable manufacturer of hockey sticks proved they could branch into other sports. When the California-based company set its sights on lacrosse, they went about making their entrance into the sport in a unique way — bringing in a team of three guys who'd already started their own brand to help lead the development of Easton Lacrosse.

When Doug Appleton, who played at Brown, and Curt and Blake Kim, brothers who played at Albany, started up Talon Lacrosse, their goal was to create a line of high-quality lacrosse equipment that honored the roots of the game. From their wooden shafts to plastic end caps that incorporated Native American imagery, Talon's identity grew along with their profile in the sport, and in the sporting goods world.

In January, 2010, Easton announced that they'd acquired Talon and were bringing on Appleton and the Kims to lead the newly formed lacrosse division. It was a corporate/start-up combination that hoped to combine the best of each company, particularly Easton's resources with Talon's familiarity with and love for lacrosse.

"Talon's lacrosse product knowledge and passion for the game combined with Easton's R&D resources and distribution channels provide foundation for Easton's entrance into a growth market for sporting goods equipment," Easton-Bell Sports president and CEO Paul Harrington said in the announcement.

The group then spent two years getting ingrained within the Easton culture, feverishly developing and fine-tuning a product line and conceiving a marketing strategy that effectively told the Easton story. Throughout the process, their passion seemed to lead the way.

As industrial designer Genia Harbinova refers to them, the "three crazy lac guys" got started by creating several different handles with four different materials, the Launch and Stealth heads and the Stealth line of protective equipment. But it was Easton's landmark Raptor helmet, which hit store shelves in November, that Easton hopes will be a game-changer.

DEVELOPING A LINE

The development of the Easton Lacrosse product line wouldn't have been possible without the countless synergies created under the Easton-Bell umbrella. But the Easton lacrosse product offering — including the Launch head, the Stealth equipment line and the highly anticipated Raptor helmet — also wouldn't have come to

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•The Saint Andrew's Scots, whose Director of Lacrosse Operations Casey Powell, debased the much-anticipated Raptor helmet in game action at the Fort Collins, Colo. Classic last April.

fruition without the presence of Appleton and the Kim brothers.

Early on, Appleton and the Kims put on a presentation for the Easton team, detailing the history of the lacrosse helmet and its evolution from the bucket-style construction of decades past to the various incarnations seen on the field today.

"We brought the nuggets of information about lacrosse helmets that needed to be communicated," says Cort, referring to Easton's ambitious endeavor into lacrosse helmets. The team was introduced to features that matter most to lacrosse players: protection, peripheral vision, comfort, weight, style and — of course — tilt.

Given free reign on her first lacrosse-related assignment, Harbutova fervently sketched about 20 different designs while being introduced to the sport. When she was finished, Harbutova laid her mockups on a table for the Easton team to assess.

"Everything she put down on paper was a potential home run," Blake says. "We were wondering which one to choose. There was a lot of discussion about which direction we should go."

The Raptor's development was also driven by the

research and development resources encompassed by the Easton-Bell brand, which collectively produced about 10 million helmets in 2010. The Dome — the company's Helmet Technology Center in Scotts Valley, Calif. — is where about 40 Easton-Bell employees are devoted to developing the next advancement in helmet technology for a range of sports, including football, hockey, baseball, cycling, snow sports and motocross.

"We were coming at it from the bike or snow-sports perspective," says Mike Lowe, vice president of the Helmet Technology Center. "We were looking at what we could do to apply the weight savings that we accomplished with other helmets and how we can do that for lacrosse with an EPP product ... We wanted the helmet to just disappear, to be as light as possible and as high-end as possible — something you just have to have."

Innovation has been the crux of Easton's efforts since entering the lacrosse equipment industry 18 months ago. It began with the release of the launch head, which allows players to adjust the throwing angle of the head via the patented Reflex Technology.

Now, Easton's endeavor into lacrosse, and specifically lacrosse helmets, is being bolstered by the parent company's vision and embrace of the sport, all the way up to the executive level.

"What you're seeing here is our commitment to head protection," Harrington says. "We're consolidating our research, our designers and our engineers into one place to be able to share ideas across sports in the areas of both performance and protection."

DEVELOPING AN IDENTITY

The hallmark of Talon Lacrosse that Appleton and the Kims brought with them to Easton was a desire to combine product innovation by incorporating new technology and materials and paying homage to the origins of lacrosse. One early example of the way in which they brought that to Easton was offering the launch head in a wood-grain finish, which helped to tie a new brand to the longstanding history of the sport.

Communicating the quality and innovation in their products was essential as well, so Easton filmed about 30 videos that introduced fans to the



(Left, Far) Blake Kim, Brett Queen and Casey Powell, Easton Lacrosse and lacrosse coach of the Easton Lacrosse team. (Middle) Michael Evans, Casey Powell, and Brett Queen, all of whom have shaped the future and shape the vision of Easton Lacrosse.



people tasked with creating the heads, gloves and helmet, took viewers behind the scenes of their state-of-the-art testing facility, and showed their goods from design to completion.

Easton also brought in players that embody the game's best values to help support the effort consulting on product development and getting the product in front of players. In Casey Powell, they signed up one of the game's greatest players of all-time whose wealth of experience is nearly unmatched and brings instant credibility. In Brett Queen, they got a dynamic personality who embodies the spirit of having fun while playing the game. Former Johns Hopkins defender Michael Evans represents the strong work ethic and toughness with which Easton wants to become synonymous. On the women's side, former Northwestern star Danielle Spencer represents access, power and a new type of player that works

well into Easton's identity. They were all on hand at the Play for Parkinson's fall ball event in Alexandria, Va. last October, talking to fans and showing the product.

Another point that Easton emphasized from the outset was capturing the excitement for its new brand of lacrosse equipment. Nowhere was that more clear than in launching the Raptor helmet. After stinking out teaser photos that showed parts of the helmet for weeks last spring, Easton debuted the full in action on Saint Andrew's (Fla.) players at the Konaia Minolta Big City Classic and had a room with dozens of helmets for fans to hold and try on five months before the Raptor even went on sale.

It all adds up to a level of buzz that, heading into their third year, Easton Lacrosse has shown to carefully manage and astutely utilize. But as they develop their next line, what's next for Easton is about more than just lacrosse equipment.

DREAMING CRAZY

As Easton looks to introduce innovative products to the market, the company is also engaging in a first-of-its-kind outreach program titled Dream Crazy, an initiative aimed at showing how people can improve their lives through sports.

A campaign including representatives from Easton's lacrosse, hockey and baseball divisions, the company is sending athletes on bus tours throughout the country in search of stories of how sports are being used to help people overcome adversity and pursue new opportunities. The athletes are looking for a way to illustrate the sports landscape in terms of competitiveness, but also compassion.

For former University of Virginia and MLL/NLL defender Zach Heffner, an Easton Lacrosse Dream Crazy ambassador, the first stop on his trip was the Native Vision Camp in Shiprock, New Mexico. There, Heffner and Iroquois legends Sid Jacques and Alf Jacques taught a group of Native American youths — many of them members of the Navajo Tribe, and many of them underprivileged — about the game of lacrosse and how it can improve their lives.

Many of the children said they had heard of lacrosse, but had never seen a stick. Jamieson, Jacques and Heffner encouraged them to use lacrosse as a way to create a better path for themselves and a game plan for their lives.

Throughout the course of the day, Heffner connected with Colin, an 11-year-old Navajo boy who lost his brother Gavin in 2007 and told the former Cavalier star that he's since been looking for a way to make himself happy in the wake of his brother's death.

"To realize sport can fill a void in our lives is pretty heavy," Heffner said. "But that revelation coming from an 11-year-old, that's just mind-blowing."

"Dream Crazy is about connecting with people, and there's no better way than being out there and engaging with them and sharing these great stories," Appleton says.

Appleton and the Kim brothers say they don't want to forget how much lacrosse has done for them, and Dream Crazy is proof of their determination to celebrate and give back to the sport.

"We don't want to lose sight of where we came from," Appleton says. "We want to be able to use our position in lacrosse to let people pursue their dreams and improve their lives."

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