

Sports



The Indian designer Manish Arora used colorful images of Paris St.-Germain players in a recent collection, one of a series of collaborations between the club and a fashion brand.

At Paris, style few can match

PARIS

French capital's reputation as fashion hub helps city's team forge a new identity

BY ELIAN PELTIER AND RORY SMITH

A few days before Paris St.-Germain traveled to Liverpool in September to begin its latest quest to win the Champions League, Dani Alves and Kylian Mbappé stood on a stage in a starkly lit room in the basement of the Parc des Princes.

In front of them, a crowd of dozens of journalists, social-media influencers and fashion bloggers milled around, watching freestyle soccer players run through their dazzling array of tricks. The décor was industrial chic. Exposed pipes ran along the ceiling. Goal posts and basketball hoops had been arranged to create a representation of an urban ball court.

Dani Alves and Mbappé — alongside Wang Shuang and Marie-Antoinette Kato, members of P.S.G.'s women's team — were not there to play, though. They were there to stand, to pose, to model. For once, inside their home stadium, they were not the star attractions. All anyone cared about, really, was what they were wearing.

This was the unveiling of the latest in a line of ambitious collaborations between P.S.G., the perennial champion of France, and a fashion brand. Dani Alves and Mbappé were there to showcase Nike's new P.S.G. jersey: a sleek, black number designed by the company's Jordan Brand, with the club's crest redesigned to incorporate the famed Jumpman logo.

The team is wearing the new jerseys in the Champions League this season — a uniform for the conquest of Europe — but it exists because P.S.G.'s horizons have shifted far from the old world, onto soccer's emerging markets of Asia and North America, and the wealth that awaits within them.

"We go," the P.S.G. merchandising executive Fabien Allègre said, "where other clubs don't."

The connection between P.S.G. — the French capital's only top-flight soccer team — and the city's fashion houses is a longstanding one. The designer Daniel Hechter served as the club's president for five years in the 1970s, and is regarded as one of the driving forces behind the team's foundation.

It was Hechter who designed P.S.G.'s traditional look — a wide red vertical stripe, bordered with white, on a blue background — during his time as a club executive. Hechter based his creation on the red-and-white jersey worn by Ajax, the Dutch champion dominating European competition at the time with the great player Johan Cruyff.

Increasingly, though, P.S.G. is using both that bond and Paris's reputation as a global fashion hub to forge its 21st-century identity.

The ambition of the club's owner — Qatar Sports Investments, an investment arm of the Qatari government — to turn its team into a soccer superpower is well known. It has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in players in recent years, including the \$222 million deal that made Neymar the most expensive signing in history in 2017.

Its vision does not stop there, however.



Above, P.S.G. worked with the Rolling Stones on merchandise marking the band's visit to Paris. Below, Neymar, left, and Adrien Rabiot wearing Jordan Brand uniforms.



er. Even if it is aware that P.S.G. as a club might never have the same allure or history as Barcelona, Real Madrid or Bayern Munich on the field, it believes it can overtake anyone off it.

"Paris means fashion, style, creativity and energy," Nasser al-Khelaifi, the Qatari businessman who is the P.S.G. president, said. "We want P.S.G. to embrace those values that make the city so unique. Not everyone else can do this."

In plainer terms, Qatar Sports Investments has set out to make Paris St.-Germain cool.

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The partnership with Nike, and Jordan, is hardly the first step on the way. The club also has sponsorship deals with the likes of Levi Strauss and Beats. And last year, P.S.G. worked with the Rolling Stones and Nike to produce exclusive merchandise to celebrate the arrival of the rock band in the French capital. The clothes were sold at Colette, one of Paris's trendiest boutiques.

In 2017, the club was featured at Paris Fashion Week, thanks to a capsule collection by the fashion house Koché. In it, the company's creative designer, Christelle Kocher, used the team's jersey in a range of outfits lined with crystals, silk and muslin.

"Paris rhymes with style, with fashion, with glamour, and P.S.G. has the Eiffel Tower on its logo, so playing with

these concepts makes so much sense for them as a brand," Kocher said. "It is kind of obvious now, but it wasn't before P.S.G. made these partnerships."

This year, a collection by the Indian designer Manish Arora produced with the Chinese and Indian markets in mind incorporated colorful, heavily stylized portraits of players, including Mbappé, Thiago Silva and Edinson Cavani on T-shirts, jackets and dresses.

Cameos on the catwalk, though, are only one element of P.S.G.'s attempts to infiltrate the fashion world. The club has a team of four employees, managed by Allègre, working full time on brand diversification, searching for ways to help P.S.G. become something more than just a soccer team.

The club has established collaborations with more than a dozen designers and artists: brands like Afterhome, Maison Labiche and Blume, as well as Nick Fouquet, a hat maker based in Los Angeles, and Georges Esquivel, a shoemaker. The partnerships, Allègre said, are aimed largely at "American fans that may not know P.S.G. as a club but adhere to our project as a lifestyle brand."

That reputation has been created, in part, by the frequent sightings of famous faces like Naomi Campbell, Leonardo DiCaprio, Rihanna and the Kardashians — in the V.I.P. boxes at the Parc des Princes, P.S.G.'s stadium. Virgil Abloh, Louis Vuitton's artistic director, is a regular at matches.

Taking in a P.S.G. game has become fashionable, it seems, for any Hollywood star or prominent athlete visiting Paris. But the club's jersey and crest have be-

come something of a fashion statement for the A-list, too: Beyoncé and the British singer Rita Ora have worn pieces by Koché. Justin Timberlake wore a jacket emblazoned with the then-unreleased Jumpman logo at a concert in Paris in July, and LeBron James turned up for a Los Angeles Lakers game in a P.S.G. shirt last month.

P.S.G. insists all of that interest is organic. "Some stars want to come," Allègre said. "Others are invited."

To the deeply cynical soccer world, though, there is a fine line between Hollywood sheen and public-relations artifice. P.S.G.'s celebrity following has served simply to accentuate its reputation as somehow inauthentic, a plaything for the rich and famous, a passionately supported team turned into a high-end tourist destination.

For all that fans of the team worry that its soul has been lost, there is a sporting purpose behind the club owner's approach. The fashion collaborations and the celebrity appearances, the club believes, can have a genuine impact on its fortunes.

"Since we bought the club, we have tried to be even more different, more unique, more creative," Khelaifi said in an interview at the September event to unveil the Jordan Brand collection. "This partnership is going to bring us more fans around the world: fans who love basketball and soccer, who love fashion, who love Michael Jordan and who love Paris."

It is an approach that Kocher, at least, contends is working. Her collection, she said, helped the club "raise the prestige of the brand" and would convince those inclined to be scornful of soccer that the worlds could commingle. "I have had fashion fans who have told me that they would never have worn a soccer outfit, but this is kind of hip and almost desirable," she said. When she visited a luxury boutique P.S.G. opened in Tokyo this fall, she said, she noted that many of the lifestyle items had sold out.

Much the same happened with the Jordan Brand collection. The club's website had to be recalibrated to cope with a surge in demand once it went on sale, and snaking lines of fans eager to buy the gear formed outside P.S.G.'s store in central Paris.

Not everyone has been so positive. Many of the club's most ardent supporters were unhappy when Hechter's classic jersey design was jettisoned this summer in favor of a reimagined Nike design, worn in domestic games, that no longer boasts a plain red stripe on a blue background. The forays into high fashion are unlikely to appease them.

Qatar Sports Investments, though, will point to the end game. P.S.G. cannot rely on infusions of Qatari cash forever — it has twice flirted with severe punishment under the Financial Fair Play legislation of UEFA, Europe's soccer governing body, and disclosures on Friday raised new questions about its efforts to skirt the rules. So it has to find whatever way it can of closing both a financial and reputational gap on those clubs it believes to be its peers.

Real Madrid, Barcelona and Bayern have the advantage of history, of multiple Champions League titles, of galleries of former star players. P.S.G. is still playing catch-up, and must look to eke out whatever advantage it can. By conquering the world of fashion, by becoming a chic, aspirational brand, by appearing on the catwalk and the sidewalk, by seeing its players as models, it hopes it can begin to do that.

When zebras chat with Lions and Bears

N.F.L. officials and players have complex interactions, but game day is a gabfest

BY BILL PENNINGTON

The blitz is fierce and well-timed, slamming the quarterback to the ground. As a stadium crowd roars and defenders rise to celebrate, the fallen passer rolls onto his back and looks up at the first person he sees standing over him: a referee.

What does the quarterback say?

"Lying there, their reaction sometimes would be, 'Man, there's no way I could feel this terrible after a legal hit,'" said Gene Steratore, a longtime National Football League referee who retired in June.

Postponing a rules debate, Steratore would instead ask: "Are you all right?"

The exchange is just one example of the constant, if hidden, interplay between players and officials, a largely overlooked dialogue reserved for the few permitted to step onto an N.F.L. field.

"What happens out there is two human beings talking like any other two people would," Steratore said. "Why should the normal things in life stop just because it's the middle of an N.F.L. game?"

Indeed, players and officials say an N.F.L. game is a veritable gabfest, most of the chatter having nothing to do with penalties called or not called — or with football at all. An N.F.L. gridiron may be a pressure-filled workplace, but the 22 players and seven officials at its epicenter routinely maintain everyday conversation like employees at any other job.

"Sometimes with the officials, it's like you're talking to your neighbors," Baltimore Ravens safety Eric Weddle said. "You know, 'Hey, how's your family? Did you see that baseball game last night?'"

And perhaps not surprisingly, officials can get caught up in the excitement of the action like any spectator. Once, after a spectacular diving reception, Weddle heard a nearby official yelp: "Who! What a catch?"

"They have the best seat in the house," Weddle said, "so they react to a great play like a fan would. It's never indicative of any favoritism or bias. But they'll make little comments about what's going on in front of them."

Other players have heard similar unfiltered reactions.

"A great play is a great play for everybody on the field," Philadelphia Eagles guard Brandon Brooks said. "The officials see it and say so. We're together on that."

There is an inimitable bond uniting the two groups. On the one hand, the officials are meting out punishment; on the other hand, no game can be played without them.

"I'm always happy to see the officials," Washington guard Shawn Lauvaio said. "It would be anarchy without them."

To be sure, once the football is snapped to start a play, the stakes are raised, and the atmosphere intensifies. But the communication persists, often with more purpose and urgency.

"A ref will yell, 'Willie, watch it, don't push off there,'" Ravens wide receiver Willie Snead IV said, referring to a shove of a defender that might be offensive pass interference.

"He'll say, 'I don't want to have to get you for that next time. Go easy.' I appreciate the warning."

Snead also makes a point of introducing himself to each official before a game and to memorize the names of those he does not know.

"That way I never say, 'Hey, ref, which is disrespectful,'" Snead said. "I mean, they know my name, right?"

Several players said Snead's experience was typical: Game officials are continually advising them how to avoid penalties — telling defensive backs to stop grabbing at receivers, cautioning the offensive linemen to get closer to the line of scrimmage to avoid an illegal formation penalty, even reminding the kickers not to move before the snap.

"It's called preventative officiating," said Dean Blandino, a Fox Sports rules analyst who until last year oversaw officiating for the N.F.L. "The last thing anyone wants is a flag every other play. If you communicate, you can maintain control and let the players play, too."

Ahead of every game, the officials and players spend hours studying each other.

As part of their weekly pregame preparation, players are briefed on which crew of officials — there are 17 — will be working their next game. Coaches will delineate the crew's tendencies; the group might be inclined to call defensive holding, for instance, or be especially strict about intentional grounding. Players are sometimes tested on the officials' leanings.

At the same time, the officials are watching hours of videotape of the teams they are about to supervise, scouting the teams' propensities when it comes to formations and other football components, like trick plays. Good officiating requires split-second reactions and decisions, and the advance video work makes the officials better prepared for what they are likely to see.

During warm-ups on game day, players and officials will often informally mingle on the field. It's a chance for players to sound out the officials on certain maneuvers and techniques.

Deion Sanders, the Hall of Fame cornerback, was renowned for openly quizzing several officials about what he could get away with while covering receivers — and what would draw a penalty.

"Can I do this? What about that?" Sanders would ask, demonstrating various tactics.

The familiarity between the officials and the players does not prevent a certain amount of arguing when a penalty flag flutters to the ground — or when one does not. But in most cases, the dispute does not last long. Football isn't baseball; there is a clock running.

"A great play is a great play for everybody on the field. The officials see it and say so. We're together on that."

Joe Theismann, the former Washington quarterback who won the N.F.L.'s Most Valuable Player Award in 1983, recalled a time when he thought he had spotted a foul by a defensive player at the line of scrimmage. He turned to complain to referee Ben Dreith, who disagreed. There were no replay reviews back then, but Theismann knew that the officials went over tapes of their games days later.

"You're going to look at a replay and know you're wrong," Theismann recalled telling Dreith.

"Maybe," he recalled Dreith answering, "but here's what I know for sure. If you don't get the next snap off in 15 seconds, you're going to get a five-yard penalty. And that won't be very good for you, either."

Theismann laughed as he retold the story.

"I mean, a lot of that stuff was fun," he said. "I'm sure it still is."

Steratore, though, pointed out that officials had to be mindful of when and how to interact: The seconds after a punishing, if legal, sack was never a time for levity or a quarrel.

"Quarterbacks are human; it hurts," he said. "But after they got up and I knew they were O.K., I might sneak it in real quick that it was a legal hit."

"Some agreed and some definitely did not. But I would always tell every quarterback that I was there to protect them. I think they heard that."

A month after he retired, Steratore discovered that the communication between player and official can outlast the games. He walked to his mailbox and found a handwritten letter from Peyton Manning, the star quarterback who played 18 years in the N.F.L..

"He told me how much he enjoyed the games I was also in," Steratore said. "That's when you realize what a great experience we all share."



The referee Ron Torbert gave a hand to Houston linebacker Jadeveon Clowney. "I'm always happy to see the officials," one player said. "It would be anarchy without them."