

Neal Heard

by Silvia Bombardini



Fashion never shied away from borrowing freely from the wardrobes of athletes, yet for the longest time football kits posed a challenge to it. Not so now – loud, multi-branded and partisan by nature, football shirts fit right into the brash, opinionated, collaboration-driven fashion of our time. We can expect to see them on the runway more and more in coming seasons, as more and more designer labels enter the field.

Neal Heard (@nealheardtrainers), brand consultant and terrace culture authority, the newly appointed Creative Director of Meyba and author of *The Football Shirts Book*, had put together a major collection of these long before it was in vogue to wear any. Below, he tells us about how his obsession began, as well as how, historically, the football shirt as we know it did – of who sets the trends on the pitch, and of his own experience designing shirts for clubs.

Silvia Bombardini: In the introduction to *The Football Shirts Book*, you write this was 25 years in the making. But I guess you didn't start your collection thinking of how it would appear on the page, 25 years later. Most football fans in Italy start by buying the shirt of their favourite team – but I've heard that when you were growing up, wearing your own team's shirts wasn't so cool in the UK. Is that true? How did your collection begin then?

Neal Heard: Yes, that's a very nice way of putting it. It's funny but I didn't see myself as a collector – more someone who just bought and buys what he likes, not filling some collecting check list. This can seem odd for someone with over 200 rare shirts, but as I mentioned, from the beginning I just bought the shirts I loved. No, it's never been cool to wear your own club's shirt, not to the games anyway. It's semi-fine to wear it to 5-a-side games or around the house, but for those who see themselves as fashionable, then it's not the done thing to be seen the same as the great masses who wear their club's colours to the match.

S.B.: Football shirts of some sorts, I suppose, must be as old as football itself. Yet football shirts as we know them today – with instantly recognisable colours, and the tryptic of manufacturer's logo, sponsor and

club's badge – however much we like to think of them as timeless, are a relatively recent artefact. When and why did the football shirt emerge, and how did it develop into the cultural symbol it's now become?

N.H.: It's certainly true that football kits and colours are as old as football itself. It's always interested me how football, and hence football shirts are so tribal. In fact, I was going to open the book with a chapter on it, but it went another way. If you think of any city, country, town, even neighbourhood, humans have nearly always differentiated themselves by having an emblem or colour to represent their group, think emblems on shields, cities' arms, even countries' flags, it's always tribal. Football and most sports are tribal, it's us against them – and this is part of club colours and club badges. But football actually pretty quickly grew to literally need colours: when 11 men turned up to play against 11 men, it soon became apparent that some form of colour identification was needed to allow players to tell themselves apart from the opponent, and club colours were born.

The idea of external identification took longer to become a thing, from its birth in the late 1800s it took some time before even a club or team badge arrived on shirts. It wasn't standard until the 1930s. The external manufacturer's brand is even younger: first coming about in the mid-60s and only standard by the mid-70s. It wasn't until the late 70s and early 80s, besides, that having a sponsor's logo on it as well became the norm, and so it was then that shirts as we know them today came about.

S.B.: As much as in fashion, and in parallel ways, trends affect how football kits evolve through the decades – from the plain to the graphic, from the oversized to the skin-tight. In fashion, a trend might be started by a successful brand: take Gucci, bringing adornment back. Does anything similar happen on the field? Does a winning team's shirt set a design trend for other teams to follow the subsequent season?

N.H.: Yes, certain teams and certain kits have made their mark, but mainly it's brand manufacturers who set the trends design-wise. Admiral in the 70s were the first to really overtly alter team kits and colours to aim at the replica kit market. With the era of sublimation then, more kit designs came into play and brands like Le Coq Sportif played with watermarks and shadow stripes, and even necks and collar styles. Hummel also made a splash at this time, think of their iconic mid-80s Denmark offering. But the big change came in 1988 when adidas clad Holland West Germany in amazingly vibrant and striking kit designs, which opened the tin can of the brash patterns of the 90s.

S.B.: Like the baseball cap before it, the football shirt is headed to become a fashion staple. I remember how two years ago, several fashion professionals I know, including some I bet who've never watched a

football match before, were desperately after the Nike's Nigeria's World Cup kit. This could be the dawn of a new era. But do you ever worry that football culture might be commodified, and lose out if the shirts are worn solely for aesthetic purposes?

N.H.: It's certainly been interesting to watch the shirt being appropriated by non-footballing communities, from fashion catwalks to skate, to people who know nothing of the game or the team which they wear. I think it was only a matter of time before this happened, and it's taken jerseys to new audiences. The most interesting thing about that to me, is that football is nearly unique in that the sponsor plays a big part in the adoration of the shirt. American sports which have long driven off-field apparel fashion don't have sponsors, but I think it's very timely that football shirts are starting to drive it now – not despite but because of their overtly commercial angle. That's very much of our time.

S.B.: I know you've recently designed a kit yourself, for the 2019/20 Newport Country season. Would you tell me more about that experience, and what you've learnt about the fine line a designer must tread – between innovation, and the keeping of colours and styles that a team's fans attachment to could almost be described as superstitious?

N.H.: That's a very good point, and from my dealings with football-shirt design, I have learnt that it's not just as easy as a club letting you design whatever you want. Some clubs are quite old fashioned, or miss the point. And then there are The Football Association's rules and such, so design ideas can become diluted for sure. I think this is good: there is a respect for tradition and a clubs' colours are sacrosanct, and shouldn't be played with. But at the same time, I think designs should be freshened up as much as possible. I have recently become the Creative Director for football brand Meyba, and we aim to become the coolest football brand out there – but I am sure I will come up against some resistance from clubs. It'll be our job to persuade them that we know what we are doing.