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**SUIT UP -- S.C. TAILOR JONATHAN SMITH MAKES THE SPORTING
WORLD LOOK GOOD**

BOB SPEAR, Sports Editor

CORPORATIONS WITH headquarters at prestigious addresses hurl money at the NFL to associate their products with pro football and use the "official sponsor" designation.

Jonathan Smith operates on S.C. 917 near the Horry County community of Pleasant View and takes an opposite - but equally effective - path to display his services.

More than 100 players, including seven who will be in this year's Super Bowl, are walking billboards for the man who might be called pro football's tailor.

He labels himself a custom clothier and his sport utility vehicle's vanity license plate "BESPOKE," for his firm Bespoke Carolina, represents his total advertising. His name disappears among the jumble of Smiths listed in the Horry County phone book, and the business and advertising sections carry only a line of small type with a number.

That matters not at all; athletes know him. His roster of former and current clients ranges from Deion Sanders to Muhammad Ali, Hank Aaron to Richard Seymour, Harold Reynolds to Evander Holyfield and Joe Torre to Oliver Purnell.

"I meet a lot of interesting people," he said in a giant-sized understatement. "I never know who will be on the phone."

A passion for clothing. Rubbing elbows with the stars is a far cry from growing up in Columbia and Horry County, playing youth baseball at Carolina Children's Home and hop-scotching among four high schools.

When Smith started his first job after high school at B. Berry's in the Columbia Mall in 1977, he never would have dreamed of selling Ali suits or receiving a personal concert from Hank Williams Jr.

But, he said, "I always have been very passionate about clothing. Every dime I made on my summer jobs, I would go down to Main Street in Columbia and spent it on clothes."

The local store led to a job with a national custom clothing firm before he ventured on his own in 1990 and started cold in Atlanta.

There, he hit the jackpot.

"A gentleman I made clothing for owned Checkers hamburger franchises in Atlanta," Smith recounted. "He was enormous, about 400 pounds, and he had a passion for looking good. I was able to put clothing on him that made him look good, which is a challenge for someone that big.

"Deion Sanders was doing some advertising for him and commented on how good he looked. He set up a meeting, and I didn't know (the potential client) I would be seeing."

Sanders and Smith clicked instantly, and the athlete ordered 20 suits the first day.

"Talk about exciting; I had never made a sale that big," Smith said. "I took his measurements and we went through the styling and everything, and I asked him why he liked clothing so much.

"He told me, 'If you look good, you feel good; if you feel good, you play good; if you play good, they pay good.' "

Orders from champions. The Sanders quip became Smith's theme, and the connection led to Derrick Thomas, which led to Williams and Thomas' teammates on the Kansas City Chiefs.

Business boomed.

Soon, Smith's client list stretched throughout the NFL and also included members of the Atlanta Braves and such entertainers as MC Hammer.

Sanders created a sensation wearing a Smith-designed suit on Arsenio Hall's TV show during Super Bowl week one year, and Holyfield celebrated his winning the world heavyweight boxing title with a huge order.

"I made (Holyfield) a leather jacket with 'Heavyweight Champion of the World' and boxing gloves on it," Smith said. "He asked if he could get some more, and I said, 'Sure.' He ordered 75 at \$1,000 a pop. He wanted them for his entourage."

At the Super Bowl in Atlanta, Smith set up headquarters in a downtown hotel. There, he noticed a large crowd gathering, the signal that a celebrity had arrived.

"It was Ali, and I knew I could never get close to him," the tailor said. "I wrote my room number and a note offering a complimentary suit on my card and gave it to one of his bodyguards.

"Pretty soon, (Ali's) wife called and told me to come up."

Smith arrived to discover the former heavyweight champion stretched out on the bed.

"I thought he was asleep and said something like, 'What's up, champ?' " Smith said. "He looked up and said, 'You sound like Elvis, but you ain't as pretty.' "

Ali and his wife ordered 30 suits.

'Look' is competition. Smith and his wife Mary, who handles the administrative side of the business, operate Bespoke Carolina from an office beside their home in rural South Carolina.

"Bespoke" means custom-made, and a spinning wheel suggests the type of business. A suit to be delivered to Braves infielder Marcus Giles hangs on a rack, and autographed pictures of some clients occupy places on one wall.

"No (clients) come here," he said, laughing at the remote location. "All I need is an airport," and he journeys to Myrtle Beach or Florence for flights.

Clients include athletes and businessmen, and he feels fortunate to make his living at a job he loves.

In dealing with NFL players, he faces the obvious size challenges, but he also must make sure he does not duplicate the same suit on players on the same team. Selections can be made from 4,000 patterns that he constantly updates.

"A 'look' is competition, and they don't to get on the bus and see someone wearing the same suit," he said.

His largest client has been Packers middle guard Gilbert Brown, and his best customer baseball player Mo Vaughn.

Smith takes 30 measurements and once he has a client's fit and wardrobe analysis, he can fill needs with quick visits.

"A lot of men don't have enough time to go shopping and in fact don't like to shop," Smith said. "They don't want to try anything on, and it's very difficult for them to find something that fits.

"I do all the measuring, all the fitting, all the patterns, all the styling, all the selling, all the deliveries."

But he does "zero sewing." For that, he uses a specialty shop. "A fully hand-sewn suit would start at about \$4,000," he said. Fabric is cut with a laser to 1/10,000th of an inch.

In addition to individual sales, Smith offers packages, including one - for \$25,000 - that includes 16 suits and nine causal outfits.

That one is catered to NFL players - a different suit for every regular-season game.

After the Eagles and Patriots earned berths in the Super Bowl, Smith checked his clients' championship game orders.

"I'm waiting to hear," he said Monday, noting that "his" Patriots include Richard Seymour, Tedy Bruschi, Mike Vrabel and Lonie Paxton, and "his" Eagles include Sheldon Brown, Lito Sheppard and Ike Reese.

Perhaps defensive backs such as Brown or Sheppard could find suits off the rack, but the Seymour, at 6-foot-6 and 310 pounds, would struggle for an ideal fit in big-and-tall stores.

"Besides, the 'look' matters; they want a unique appearance," Smith said. "That's what I provide and deliver."

His expertise requires no advertising.