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**LOCAL CLOTHIER HAS PASSION FOR FASHION, SPORTS**

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Before suiting up for today's NFL conference title games, several players will suit up with the help of a local clothier. Jonathan Smith, a resident of Nichols, owns and operates Bespoke Carolina, a custom clothing company based in a small office beside his farmhouse in western Horry County. It's not exactly the fashion capital of the universe, but Smith outfits some top professional athletes from his home in the country.

"I've always been a country boy at heart, and now I can live in a rural setting," said Smith, 46, who started his business in bigger cities before returning to his former hometown in 1998 with his wife, co-worker and high school sweetheart, Mary. "My office is beside my house, so it's a nice commute to work.

"At first I was like, 'How can I do business in Nichols, South Carolina?' But it got to the point where I could live anywhere because so many of my clients were out of town. I had to fly to them anyway, so I can fly out of Myrtle Beach or Florence as easily as Charlotte or Atlanta."

Among the players who will arrive for today's games sporting Smith's threads are New England's Tedy Bruschi, Richard Seymour and Mike Vrable and Philadelphia's Sheldon Brown and Lito Sheppard, just to name a few. Smith says 75 percent of his 400-500 clients are the bulky boys of the NFL, the lean and slender centers of the NBA and the diamond studs of Major League Baseball.

"You get these big linemen and linebackers, it's very difficult for them to find clothes that fit them because their chests and biceps are so massive," Smith said. "You put a regular jacket on them and they just about bust out of the sleeves.

"You've got these big guys who have never been able to find clothes that fit them all their life. They go through high school and college, then all of a sudden they get to the NFL and they can afford nice clothing that fits them. They love it."

As does Smith, who also dresses some of the Grand Strand's movers and shakers in addition to the NFL's heavy hitters. It's a dream job, but one that took a quarter-century to come true.

"I've always had a passion for sports and clothing," Smith said. "This job is the perfect marriage between the two."

Passion for fashion

After leaving his native South Carolina for a cross-country career in the clothing industry, Smith got his first taste of tailoring for athletes in the 1980s in New Orleans for several Saints, including Georgetown native Jumpy Geathers, current Carolina Panthers assistant coach Sam Mills and current Atlanta Falcons head coach Jim Mora Jr., the son of then-

Saints coach Jim Mora Sr. In fact, Smith's first NFL client, 45-year-old kicker Morten Andersen, still is playing.

But his biggest break didn't come until he broke out on his own in 1990. He left his national-chain employer of more than a decade, moved to Atlanta from Hartford, Conn., and started his own custom-clothing operation.

"I was ready to go out on my own because I wasn't able to do the things I wanted to do," he said. "I got up one day in March and it was 18 [degrees] below zero. I said, 'This ol' boy needs to move back down South.'"

Smith crossed into sports circles almost by accident. One of his clients was the owner of the Checker's fast-food franchise, for which former Atlanta Falcon/Brave Deion Sanders did commercials. Sanders told the restaurateur that he liked his look, and Smith soon hit the big time with "Primetime."

"Deion bought 20 suits at \$1,000 a pop from me that day. "It was the biggest single sell I ever made," Smith recalled. "I was filling out the order form and he told me, 'I've got this thing figured out: If you look good, you feel good. If you feel good, you play good. If you play good, they pay you good.'"

In a word-of-mouth business, Smith couldn't have asked for a better mouth than Primetime. Although he no longer designs clothes for Sanders (Deion wanted free suits in exchange for free advertising), Smith doesn't deny the positive impact he had on his business.

"Deion did 'The Arsenio Hall Show' and he wore a navy-blue gangster shirt with 'Primetime' on his collar. He was good to go. He came out and Arsenio went nuts. He got on his knees and started bowing down to him. He gave him his chair and said, 'Here, you host the show tonight. You look too good.'"

"Everybody always talked about how good Deion looked, but he never picked out a thing. I did all that. But he promoted me and introduced me to a lot of people, and I'm grateful for that. That's what really got the pro athlete business rolling."

Sanders turned late friend and former Chief Derrick Thomas onto Smith, who flew to Kansas City to deliver the goods. Thomas' house was filled with NFL players, and the trip turned out to be a real cash cow.

"All of these players are at his house playing pool and having a good time, and I'm selling suits like a madman," Smith recalled. "The phone rings and Derrick asks me to answer it. I asked who was calling and the guy says he's Hank Williams Jr. I think it's a joke, but Derrick takes the phone and it's him."

"Next thing I know I'm going to see Hank in Paris, Tennessee. We got eight inches of snow so I spent some time at his place. He showed me the museum of all his father's stuff, then he asks if I want to hear his new album. I thought he was going to pop in a tape, but he picks up his guitar and plays every song for me. It was a great time."

Soon Smith was outfitting all sorts of entertainers and athletes - from MC Hammer to the entire starting lineup for the Atlanta Braves. He also reunited with his high school sweetheart and started Bespoke Carolina in Charlotte.

Bespoke, an old English term that means "custom made one at a time," also is a reference to his word-of-mouth success.

"I do no advertising; it's all referral," Smith said proudly. "They're going to tell people if you do a good job or bad job, so what they say is what you're after. If you do a good job, your reputation is solid."

## Culture of clothing

Vince Lombardi might roll over in his grave if he walked into an NFL locker room and saw what players wear these days. The smelly rows of lockers have become a fashion-show catwalk for today's high-paid athletes.

"It's funny because it's become a competition," Smith said. "Some guys on every team have a reputation for being Mr. GQ. It's like a contest to see who dresses the best. I get calls all the time saying, 'Did you see the suit so-and-so was wearing? I have to have one like that.'"

It doesn't fit the stereotypical jock, but the fashion game has come a long way in the sports game. Not all players are on board with the trends, but the list of those who are is growing.

"You still have that element," Smith said. "I'm in the Patriots locker room and I've got Tedy Bruschi, Richard Seymour, Mike Vrable, guys who like to dress. While I'm working with them, guys will come by and snicker because they're good to go in jeans and a sweatshirt."

Free agency, soaring salaries, stricter team dress codes and the increasing culture of dressing to impress are best friends of Smith's business.

"In the world of free agency, guys don't stay with the same team anymore," Smith said. "Every year one of my guys will go to another team and tell their new teammates about me."

To some players, it's all about dressing to the nines. To others, it's all about not getting fined.

"The typical dress code for an NFL player is when you get on the bus to go to the stadium or the airport, you have to be in a coat and tie," Smith said. "They are professionals, so the teams want them to look professional."

"Some teams have a more relaxed dress code, but most teams require a coat and tie. I'm definitely pro-dress code. I believe 'Casual Friday' should be stricken from the books."

For many pro athletes, it's a matter of function over fashion. Forget the metrosexual trend; some myths about men being stylistically-challenged are true.

"My clients buy from me for one of three reasons: 1, men don't like to go shopping; 2, they don't have time to go shopping; and 3, most men can't color coordinate," Smith said. "Wives love me because I put together complete outfits. They don't have to ask, 'Honey, does this look good together?'" It does.

"I have 4,000 fabrics to choose from and I completely coordinate every outfit. I incorporate about 30 different measurements into an actual suit, not just their chest and waist, but [also] their posture and a lot of other things. I ask a lot of questions, 'Who do you interact with?' 'What kind of image do you want to project?' 'Are you hot-natured or cold-natured?' The end result is a happy customer."

Smith's business hasn't missed a beat since relocating to Nichols. A catchy toll-free number (1-877-SUITMAN) and a satisfied customer base are all he needs to base his flashy business in a not-so-flashy town.

A recent mention in Sports Illustrated also gave his business a boost. Smith's workload actually has increased thanks to a booming business community on the Grand Strand. It's not the same sleepy, sleeveless, Southern town he grew up in.

“My business has actually expanded since I moved here,” Smith said. “I didn't realize there was such a professional business community. It's changed a lot since I lived here.”

Mary keeps the business going smoothly while Smith spends most of his time on the road. With two grown children, Matthew, 23, and Jessica, 20, it's a lot of work for a two-person team, but they get it done in the stitch of time.

“Mary runs the office, and I do all the measuring, fitting, styling, coordinating, selling and customer service,” he said. “But I have a shop I contract the work out with. I can't sew.”

No need to as long as the big men with big money keep rolling in. His suits, with an average price tag of \$800 to \$1,800, are his biggest seller, although he also designs casual clothing. Sorry, ladies, but Smith's threads are for gentlemen only.

“I try not to do women's clothing,” Smith said. “It's a whole different ballgame.”

But whether he's measuring mammoth football players or suiting up local lawyers, Smith still loves what he does. And, most of all, where he's doing it.

“Moving home has been a tremendous blessing,” Smith said. “I'm truly blessed that God allows me to do something I really enjoy and make a living at it. That is the secret to success.”

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