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# Made Locally, INNOVATING GLOBALLY

After more than 120 years in sports equipment, Kookaburra Sport continues to lead the way in innovation, producing Australian-made, world-class products.

Images by Estelle Judah Photography

“What’s been our saviour and been at the forefront of our business is the fact that the product has stood up and the quality of the product has been significantly superior to what’s been imported.”

- Brett Elliot

**B**rett Elliot, Group Managing Director of Kookaburra Sport, worked for some big names in the UK before taking on the UK branch of the family business. He ran Kookaburra UK for 15 years before moving back to Australia to run the global business.

Kookaburra has a strong presence in the UK as the company was an official supplier for the 2012 Olympics. “The London Olympics approached us and said they were considering using a blue pitch, which was a first for international hockey. So we worked with them to develop a fluorescent-yellow hockey ball. We have been supplying the Olympic hockey balls since the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, and we have supplied the hockey ball for all Olympics and all international hockey events since that date. That was primarily on the back of my uncle and father who invented and developed the Dimple hockey ball.”

Brett returned to Australia to bring Kookaburra Sport’s focus on the growing international markets, particularly in Asia. “One of the primary jobs for me is to take the

brand throughout the subcontinent. In the past few years we have opened up a distributorship for Pakistan and Bangladesh, we’ve been working with Sri Lanka, and we’ve started up a business in India.

“There’s been a significant push in those countries, but in addition to that we have been working hard in some of the existing international markets that we have and drawing a lot more focus on them. So we’ve been working closely with our customers in South Africa and moved ourselves up to be the leading brand in South Africa; and the same in New Zealand. There are other emerging markets in cricket at the moment in the northern states of America and Canada, so we are also working at trying to develop our product and brand in those markets.”

Stepping into the role and expanding his responsibilities to the international arena, Brett notes the competitiveness of the market and the challenges that stem from that. “We acquired a company called Alfred Reader in the UK, which was a fairly significant turning point for our business. That was in 2002. So I

guess one of our key challenges was the integration of buying a new business. We have had pretty positive year-on-year progress since I joined, so from that perspective, it’s never been too stressful. Probably our biggest challenge has been remaining at the forefront of our industry; remaining leaders of our industry when we are constantly challenged by very cheap imports from the subcontinent.”

With the high Australian dollar and an influx of cheaper imports, Kookaburra Sport has had a domestic focus on product quality. “We manufacture our product in Melbourne, so we are working very hard to improve the efficiencies and quality in our manufacturing process. In addition to that, we are working closely with our customers to try to build business plans and strategies to meet their needs and also our own.

“All manufacturing industries in Australia are constantly under pressure from foreign imports, and over recent years the periods of the high Australian dollar have probably put manufacturers under greater strain than ever. What’s been our saviour and >



been at the forefront of our business is the fact that the product has stood up and the quality of the product has been significantly superior to what's been imported. We have been able to develop our processes and mechanise our processes to produce a very consistent product, which has enabled us to withstand the pressures of those cheaper imports."

*"Our partnership extends beyond normal customer/supplier transactions and is based on close cooperation. This ensures the quality, consistency, and innovation goals shared by both companies are realised. Joint investment in leather research ensures Kookaburra and Packer Leather stay ahead of the competition." - Andrew Luke, Technical Director, Packer Leather Pty Ltd*

To maintain premium quality and global competitiveness, Kookaburra Sport works in partnership with its key customers. "At the moment we are working closely with Cricket Australia and our tannery in the development of a pink cricket ball for a day-night test-cricket game. So we are working with them and doing trials in Sheffield Shield level cricket to ensure that the ball meets the standards and criteria involved in a day-night test match.

"For us, it's very much about listening to our customers and trying to work with them. We have a vast depth of experience in the business because it's in the same Thompson family. The company is 123 years old and still in the same family hands, so the knowledge is passed down from one family member to the next, and that's meant that the business has subsequently been able to retain a lot of the knowledge and unique characteristics of making cricket balls."

Kookaburra Sport has had a supplier arrangement since 2009 with Packer Leather for the supply of superior leather hides used to manufacture cricket balls. On this partnership, Brett says, "Working closely with the Packer management, we have established a very concise specification for the supply of leather to meet our rigid R&D requirements to maintain the quality of our cricket balls."

The production of the day-night Test cricket ball is a project where both companies are in close contact to monitor and research the best way forward to make this possible. "We enjoy a good working relationship with Packer Leather and are confident that together we will achieve the best ball possible."

Kookaburra Sport has a long and proud legacy in Australia and the UK as a family-run business. "It was Alfred Grace Thompson that was the founder of the company in England. He moved out to Australia and his sons then took it

on and it's been predominantly in the Thompson hands since then. The Elliots came in from my side because my cousin is a Thompson."

As a family business, the company has been built on primary values that have served Kookaburra Sport for more than a century. "We are customer focused—we see ourselves as an innovative, modern brand—but with traditional values. We are profit focused, but our primary values are about being innovative and producing quality products."

Innovation is paramount to Kookaburra Sport's ongoing success, and this has been made possible through the company's extensive R&D department. "Sometimes my accountant thinks we overcooked this side of our business, but it's why we are still making cricket balls in Australia today; because of that investment. We employ a whole team of engineers and chemists, and they work hard at developing the machinery, the processes, and the materials that we use. We put the innovation of the product up front, and that's why we have been able to develop things like the Dimple hockey ball and produce machine-stitched cricket balls. We are the only company in the world that's been able to fully mechanise the process of manufacturing a cricket ball."

Throughout its history, Kookaburra Sport has always had a strong association with the professional players of the games it represents, and promotes the brand through these brand ambassadors. "We have a program in place which identifies some of these players at quite young ages and we support them through their careers. We take someone like Ricky Ponting, who we signed at the age of 13, and he has been an ambassador of our company for years.

"We do that globally. We have the players in Australia that you would know, like Glenn Maxwell, but we also have Ian Bell and Josh Butler in the UK, and AB de Villiers in South Africa, and we selectively target players that we believe reflect our brand values,



and we target players that we believe are the best at what they do in their sports."

Online technology is continually changing the way manufacturers distribute and market their products. Kookaburra Sport is in the process of launching a new social-media-based website to embrace the movement in online commerce and communication. "We sit in a difficult position, in that we don't supply consumers direct, but we obviously want to market and communicate our products, so we were developing a lot of connections. In order to do that, we are developing connections and content through allowing people to access our site and, through our site, get direct access to updates from some of the professional players and ambassadors that we sponsor.

"We recently offered an experience on our website where there are links going through to the Australian women's hockey captain and she gives a day-to-day update on her experiences in the Hockey World Cup, which happened recently. So we are trying to develop content on our websites and through our social-media platform that I think is not a bombardment of information, but more targeted—adding value and experiences and a connection to the players and ambassadors that represent the brand."



As the official supplier of hockey balls for international hockey, and with the company's long history with international cricket, Kookaburra Sport has a promising future in the global marketplace. "We continue progressing in internationalising our brand and continually working on ways to improve our processes of manufacture to ensure we remain a competitive Australian-made product.

"One of the greatest excitements and opportunities for us is the development of the subcontinent market. With the combined population of Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, it's about 1.5 billion people, but the most exciting thing is that it's the fastest growing population in the world and every one of them is a cricket fanatic. So there is a great platform for us to be able to expand and develop our business." ●

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# Australian Performance Leather

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Proud to partner with Kookaburra Sports

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