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# Light gets comfortable with SportRobe

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By *Kyle Stack*  
 Special to *ESPN.com*  
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The tailored suits and fashionable denim found in every professional sports locker room are beginning to share space with a simpler material and garment: the terry cloth bathrobe. Only, this isn't the robe Tony Soprano wore when he waltzed down the driveway to pick up the morning newspaper in "The Sopranos." This one comes with logos licensed by the NFL, NBA, MLB, NHL and 34 colleges.

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*Courtesy of Matt LightSportRobe investor Matt Light models one of his customized products.*

[SportRobe](#), which makes the robes ranging in price from \$100 to \$200, has emerged as a popular choice not only with rabid sports fans but also among athletes.

New England Patriots left tackle Matt Light is one of the company's chief fans, which he should be, given his role as a SportRobe investor. Light has initiated word-of-mouth marketing by wearing a Patriots robe, with his surname and No. 72 on the back, inside the team's locker room at Gillette Stadium. His teammates have taken notice.

"One time I wore my robe, Chad [Ochocinco] was like, 'Oh man, I got a Bengals SportRobe, I love these things,'" said Light, a three-time Pro Bowler and one-time All-Pro, in a telephone interview. "So we ended up getting him a Patriots one."

Light and SportRobe founder Matt Frost explained that athletes ranging from [New York Jets quarterback Mark Sanchez](#) to [outfielder Johnny Damon](#), in his stints with the Detroit Tigers and Tampa Bay Rays, have bought robes for their teammates.

"Light was instrumental in helping us get them into different NFL [locker rooms]," Frost said over the phone.

Light joined the company in 2009, three years after Frost devised the idea for the product. Frost was vacationing in Orlando in August 2006 when he suddenly struck up an idea for a bathrobe jersey.

"I went to my hotel room, threw on a bathrobe and watched SportsCenter," said Frost, who is in the entertainment industry. "I thought how cool it would be if the bathrobe was of my favorite team with my name and number on the back. And I literally just started drawing it out."

To test his idea, Frost had several number and name patches stitched onto regular bathrobes at Gerry Cosby & Co., a sporting goods store formerly in the lobby of Madison Square Garden which has since moved to a nearby location.

Building off that momentum, in 2007 Frost met and signed a deal with [McArthur Towels](#) to buy an allotment of robes and the licensing rights to use the New York Yankees' logo on them.

"I remember I wrote a check for \$40,000," Frost said. "I was freaking out in my head, like, 'How am I going to make this work?'"

The robes were successfully sold on consignment at Yankees team shops in New York City. In 2010, [WinCraft](#), which holds more than 300 licenses in the sports world, bought McArthur. That set the stage for SportRobe to purchase a wide range of licenses for terry cloth products.

Light came into the picture a year earlier. After witnessing Patriots wide receiver Wes Welker wearing a SportRobe in the locker room one day in '09, a robe which Frost had sent Welker, Light discovered he had an indirect connection to the company. The brother of one of Light's close friends is a friend of Frost and acted as Frost's attorney in drawing up SportRobe's operating agreement.

Light and Frost were introduced. Light was enamored with the company and presented various public relations and marketing ideas to Frost. Light also made a monetary investment in SportRobe, although he wouldn't reveal to what degree. "More of my involvement is time [spent]," said Light, whose three NFL contracts since his rookie year have totaled more than \$42 million, according to Spotrac.com.

"I saw this as an opportunity to jump in with something that is unique and exciting," Light said of what drew him to SportRobe. "You can differentiate from everything else yet be closely related to sports."

“



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” -- *Matt Light*

Light's duties during the season consist primarily of public relations, such as doing interviews for stories like this, but he said his involvement in the company extends to helping form marketing, budget and product-expansion plans. After the 2011 campaign, he expects to strategize with Frost and SportRobe COO Lonny Sweet to make headway that wasn't possible for most of 2011 as the NBA and NFL experienced work stoppages.

That means customers can order a bathrobe with the name and number of any active NBA player, yet cannot do the same for the other sports. (The NCAA doesn't permit apparel licensing for its athletes.) SportRobe contacts each customer who attempts to order a robe with the name and number of a player for whom it doesn't hold a licensing right.

SportRobe is in the process of acquiring player-licensing rights for the NFL, NHL and MLB players' associations as well as team rights for additional colleges. A NASCAR tab exists on the company's website and the statement "Coming Soon" is listed on the page. Frost declined to comment on SportRobe's relationship with NASCAR.

The company worked out a deal with baseball great Mickey Mantle's family to sell robes representing his 1952 and '56 jerseys. The felt material on the "7" and the interlocking "NY" are modeled after the original jerseys, Frost said.

Light and Frost are convinced that consumers will purchase their robes instead of authentic jerseys, if left with a

choice between the two. Given that authentic jerseys in the four major sports often range from \$200 to more than \$300, it seems that SportRobe's \$170-\$200 range for its customized robes could gain appeal as an alternative to jerseys. That depends on the sport, said CNBC sports business reporter Darren Rovell.

[\[+\] Enlarge](#)



*AP Photo/Winslow Townson* Patriots offensive tackle Matt Light has helped bring SportRobe into more team locker rooms.

"I don't think that's the case for the NFL," Rovell said of SportRobe becoming a replacement for authentic jerseys. "I do think that could be the case for the NBA out of all the leagues. Even though you're inside, I think that it's hard to wear NBA jerseys. And so I think that presents a better opportunity for them."

Rovell added that while he thinks SportRobe is a good idea and serves a niche, it'll have a difficult time becoming a replacement for jerseys.

The \$100-and-under prices for replica jerseys could pose a threat to SportRobe. Sweet said the company experienced double-digit sales growth from 2008 to 2010 and expects similar growth in 2011. Frost said replica robes are in the works, and their prices will be similar to each sport's replica jerseys. Replicas are less expensive to make and thus have lower retail costs, because the names and numbers are typically screen-printed rather than stitched. (Non-customized robes sell for \$100-\$160 on SportRobe's website.)

Also in the works is a line of women's robes, which Sweet said would be "pink and more tailored." SportRobe is also exploring possibilities in children's robes, women's shower wraps and men's terry cloth shorts.

The focus now is on jump-starting the robes it has available. Light said the company ships 50 to 100 robes some weeks, yet inconsistency has been a common thread. "We should be able to get to a point where we're moving 200 to 300 robes a week," Light said.

While Light, Frost and Sweet are adamant that online sales will continue to compose most of the company's sales, the appeal of sporting goods stores, team pro shops and college bookstores is understandable.

"Where our margins will come from is keeping it mainly online-based and trying to work out deals with some of the bigger sporting goods store chains," Light said. "That's a volume deal."

Rovell expressed the need for consumers to touch and feel the products. "In order to sell well, you have to get

Middle America. Bathrobe turnover ... I mean, people wear their bathrobes for 15 years," Rovell said. "There is a challenge online that in order for it to be \$180 good, I think ... you could have an advantage by [having customers] feel it."

Likewise, the comfort of a terry cloth bathrobe is apparently what more and more pro athletes desire as their \$500-plus suits hang in their lockers.

*Kyle Stack is a freelance writer in New York City who contributes to ESPN The Magazine.*

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