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Now, fans can keep eye on their favorite teams

By Darren Rovell

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Hats. Jerseys. Jackets. Foam fingers.

And now contact lenses. If you thought every piece of real estate on an NFL superfan was occupied, think again.

Coopervision, a hi-tech contact lens specialty company, is shipping officially licensed NFL Crazy Lenses to contact lens doctors across the country this week. The idea came 18 months ago from Dr. Mitchell Cassel, a contact lens specialist in New York City who provides unusual eye effects for the motion picture and television industries.

"Fans do just about anything to support their team," said Steve Gandola, marketing manager for the company. "Like they've painted their bellies in 30-degree weather ... this is just another zany, novel and safe way to support their team."

After getting the license for the lenses in February, Coopervision began designing the logos.

Gandola's company will introduce the non-prescription lenses in seven teams this year -- the Baltimore, Buffalo, Minnesota, Oakland, Philadelphia, St. Louis and Tennessee. There are plans to roll out all 32 teams -- including the Houston Texans -- next year.

"We started with the teams that the NFL said, from a merchandising perspective, would make sense," Gandola said. The lenses, which will retail for \$120 to \$150, come in a lens case with a football helmet on it.

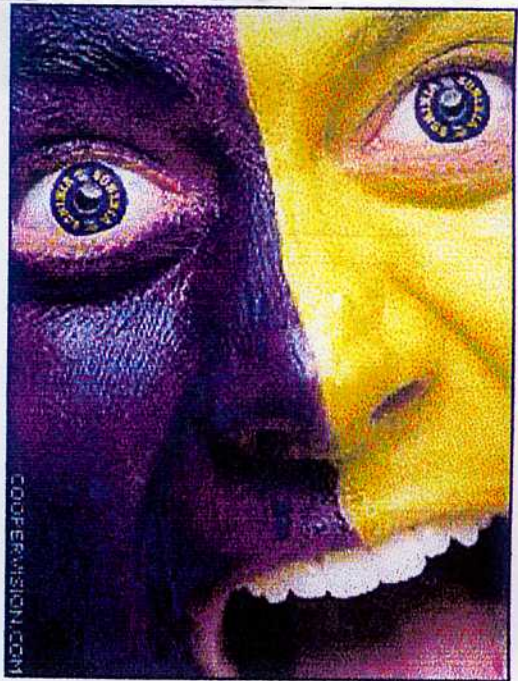
The logos circle the pupil, enabling wearers to have normal vision. The lenses won't be sold at stadiums -- because they are treated as a medical device, any potential wearer must be fitted by a contact lens specialist.

While initial production runs have been limited to 1,000 pairs per team, Gandola said he was "amazed that we've already been getting calls because we haven't really put anything out yet."

"NFL fans enjoy incorporating their favorite teams into their daily lives," said Susan Rothman, the NFL's senior director of consumer products, in a statement. "NFL Crazy Lenses offer an exciting and new avenue of team spirit."

Novelty lenses make up a small, but fast growing, portion of Coopervision's sales. Last September, the company unveiled the Crazy Lenses, which includes cat and wolf eye designs and black and red spirals. Ironically, the height of the novelty lens market comes around Halloween, which is just two weeks away.

The NFL has gradually been reducing the amount of its licensees over the years in order "to do more business with less business partners," said Brian McCarthy, the league's director of corporate communications. In 1994, the league granted 454 licenses, the most ever. For the 2001 season, there are only 247 licensees.



The eyes have it: Vikings fans can see purple and gold.