



## **“Growing Up” with IPMBA: The Bratwear Story**

**by Sally Swanson**

*CEO and Founder, BRATWEAR*

Cops on bikes? What the heck? How did I get myself mixed up with this? I’ll answer those questions – and more – while I tell you a little story about my life these past 20 years.

It was 1989, and as the founder of FLASHWEAR, innovative workout wear for the sports enthusiast, Spandex® had become my passion, then my livelihood. It didn’t take long for word to spread around town about the lady who had experience with making clothing for active individuals. The cops must have done their detective work, because the first group to contact me was the Puyallup Police Department. Their bike team was getting ready to patrol the well-known Western Washington State Fair, and the uniforms they had been wearing just didn’t work. They tried clothing from Nashbar, Performance, and other suppliers of cycling attire, but it really didn’t come close to what they needed. Civilian cycling gear was fashionable, but everything had to be modified in some way to make it practical for patrol use, such as adding belt loops/keepers, pockets, etc.

The Puyallup guys had been wearing wool uniform duty shirts and baggy winter pants, because their chief required them to wear uniforms that closely matched their regular patrol uniform. Finding a bike shop that carried “French blue” shorts with a stripe down the leg was, well, you guessed it, impossible. As I think back to 1992, the only available fabric that matched their color scheme, I would now call “rubber pants” fabric. Only, it was for their shorts. Sorry, guys, it was the best available at the time.

High quality and good fit didn’t come cheap. Before high-performance fabrics were the “norm”, the prices were high, making the retail cost high, too. But compared to buying a wool shirt and pants to cut up into shorts, it soon proved cost effective to purchase good bike gear.

So, doing what I do best, I “sized” up the situation (and the guys, too). I watched how they performed their duties, measured their bodies, and developed the first generation uniforms: padded under-liner, outer shorts, and a vented shirt using Lycra mesh panels. One of the first things I had noticed was that they had to remove their duty gear, and practically their entire uniform, just to use the restroom. There wasn’t a front fly in anything! Thank goodness I made them some great Lycra mesh, padded undershorts...with a front fly.

So, they were all set in their new gear, and my parting words were, “don’t tell anyone where you got this stuff – I’m really busy doing my FLASHWEAR...” Well, they weren’t so good at keeping secrets. It couldn’t have been more than a week later when Stu Bracken and Gene Miller from Tacoma Police Department entered my shop. They said, “Hey, we see you can make stuff for our bike team. We’re desperate for new shorts”. Ok, here we go. Shorts. (At that time, they were pretty “short” shorts, 6” inseam or less, for the “average” guy.) How could I refuse? They returned shortly thereafter, saying, “if you can make these shorts, why can’t you make jackets and other things?” So I did. I made Goretex® seat covers, helmet covers, and hi-tech underwear for winter cycling.



Fast forward a few months. “Beat the Streets” needs vendor attendance. What could be better than strolling along the West Seattle waterfront, watching cops on bikes show off their skills? I still didn’t realize just how much of a need there was for good uniforms and gear. Again, I saw uniform pants cut off into shorts with no pads, wool shirts, heavy body armor with cotton canvas covers, cotton socks. I’m sure that’s where *Reno 911* got their ideas! And who can forget the “look” on *Pacific Blue*?

I heard it over and over again; no-one was listening to what they really needed. The more I listened, the more excited I became to make very high-tech gear that fit well, with lasting quality.

Then: “Viva Las Vegas-1992”. Some conference called IPMBA. I knew this would be the deciding factor about the cops on bikes uniform business. I gathered all I had, and headed east for an experience I will never forget. One of the most memorable moments was meeting Tom Woods, then a sergeant from Denton Police Department, and to this day, one very good friend. “Would you be able to modify some expensive uniforms we’ve already purchased” he asked. I replied, “Well, let me have a look. If I can do it at a price you can live with, I will”. I guess no one else offered ...and that was the start of a true relationship. I have attended every IPMBA conference since Las Vegas, and each year, I have met new attendees and new challenges.

Soon, FLASHWEAR became BRATWEAR, which stands for Bicycling Regulator and Tactician. Clever, huh? I was hooked.

In 1994, we were part of “Project Harmony”, sending bright red and black uniforms to Russia while IPMBA instructors did the training.

Later, with the mid-‘90’s influx of federal grant monies, we got to “design” uniforms for some special Community Oriented Policing program groups. They didn’t all have to follow the strict uniform colors/specifications, so we found ourselves making black-and-teal, black-and-fuchsia, and some great black-and-purple. (Of course, we labeled all of the colors “Police Purple”, “Police Teal”, etc.). For some departments, we color-matched their jackets to their police bikes. What fun we had.

Then came 1998, and the IPMBA Conference. What better place to have a conference than in your own hometown? As I recall, that was the year a medic from Olympia kicked butt up our hilly Tacoma streets. I was proud that several of the guys rode over to Bratwear during their training to have lunch, tour the plant, and meet all of our employees. Having my crew put faces to the names of those we made uniforms for was quite a treat.

The entire city was abuzz with all of these cops and medics. Sponsoring some of the hospitality events was most memorable! I’m sure those of you attending will recall your last night at the Swiss tavern, huh? I know Mike Goetz would!

The EMS groups coming on the scene opened up more color combinations, as well as slightly different uniform requirements. They needed some special pockets. They didn’t need the extra reinforcement areas for guns and other equipment that the cops needed. They weren’t concerned with stealth. Visibility was the name of the game for them. The brighter and more visible, the better.



But those white cotton tube socks were still around. A pack of 20 at Kmart, and the guys were good to go! Thankfully, that has changed, and high-performance, ankle-height socks are now the norm.

What has evolved over the years, or come full circle in some cases, is the question whether to be highly visible, or more stealthy. The debate weighs the concern for officer safety/visibility from motorists against the importance of NOT being visible to the bad guys. These days, we're seeing a greater demand for reflective prints and trims on all uniform pieces.

Today, we see about a 50/50 mix of two-toned shirts, either in polo style, or the traditional uniform-style shirt. The uniforms have great eye-appeal, and the fabrics function to keep the wearer comfortable.

To keep up with current "styles", shorts inseams are getting longer, and a little baggier all over. Keep in mind, though, that maneuvering on a bike is easier when your clothing has stretch, and fits your body well. If you want the "baggy" look, take care to wear a good, padded compression bike short underneath. Longer lengths may be stylish, but avoid having them so long that the fabric gets caught on the bike seat. Cotton should be replaced with hi-tech fabrics with good moisture-management, from your feet to your fingers, and all the way to your head. Your body will appreciate the extra care.

Over the years, I have enjoyed educating both new and seasoned bike cops about technical fabrics and functional uniforms. I do it not just to sell a product, but also to provide information that will help you select the right gear.

What hasn't changed since I started this business? Bike cops and bike medics still want to look good. They want to be comfortable in their uniform, no matter what the weather conditions. They still enjoy being measured for their uniforms (we joke that they pay extra for me to measure them)! I'm honored to have been a part of IPMBA since the "early" days, and I still get a rush putting you guys and gals into Bratwear. You all wear it well!

Trying to capture 1/10<sup>th</sup> of my experiences with IPMBA would take pages, and ages. And since that space isn't available (and I still need time to make uniforms), I'll just say to all of you: thank you for sharing your friendship and your biking experiences since I first joined you in Las Vegas!

Bratwear will continue to make the best uniforms by listening to you. We help you perform your jobs better, and that makes us perform our job better.

Happy 20th, IPMBA! Here's to all of us having incredible memories of those times, with hopes of many more to come.

*Sally has attended every IPMBA Conference since 1992, when she exhibited under the FLASHWEAR name. She can be reached at [sally@bratwear.com](mailto:sally@bratwear.com).*

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