

LeBron James, Kevin Durant Help Spearhead NBA Popularity of Legs Recovery System

By Jared Zwerling, NBA Analyst

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To understand how NormaTec—a computerized massage machine that aids recovery in the legs, hips and arms—became one of the hottest health products in the NBA, start by looking at the man who sets most trends in the game today: LeBron James. And there was no endorsement connection, then or now.

It was late June in 2011, about two weeks after the Miami Heat were upset by the Dallas Mavericks in the NBA Finals, and James, according to his longtime trainer, Mike Mancias, "was determined to be No. 1 and wanted every possible edge in training."

That challenge gave Mancias an open mind as he ventured around the vendor area of the National Athletic Trainers' Association's Annual Meeting & Clinical Symposia in New Orleans, checking out the newer products on display for testing.

The one that really caught his attention was NormaTec's dual-legs unit. The company's CEO, Gilad Jacobs, told Mancias that he would design one for James with his trademark lion logo, to gauge his thoughts. Mancias, who monitors James' entire training regimen, was on board.

A few days later, in early July, while in Akron, Ohio—James' hometown—James went through a "hard workout day" leaving his legs "real sore," Mancias said. That's when Mancias felt it was time to introduce James to the NormaTec full-length boots, telling him, "It's better than a massage" for everyday treatment. James "loved them right away," said Mancias, who noted his flexibility, range of motion, delay in lactic acid and overall performance improved in the coming days.

"I'm always open to things that can help," James said. "I started using it, my legs started feeling better and I didn't stop. I started taking it on the road and everything. I mean, I think it's awesome."

About a week later that summer, the second-best player in the NBA, Kevin Durant, arrived in Akron to take part in "Hell Week"—what the two superstars called their intense training program together. In the mornings, they did strength and conditioning at the University of Akron, and in the afternoons, it was all hoops at James' former high school, St. Vincent–St. Mary.

One afternoon at James' house for lunch, he put on the NormaTec boots, which Durant hadn't seen before and wanted to try. "He loved them, too," Mancias said.

Soon after, Mancias got a call from Jacobs saying Durant ordered three NormaTec boots for his Oklahoma Thunder teammates. In addition, Chris Paul, Blake Griffin and Dwight Howard purchased them, as well as the Mavericks and the entire starting five for the Chicago Bulls. The Heat, who had been using older, flimsier compression machines—they have been around since the 1960s, but NormaTec is an advanced system with sequential pulse technology intended to speed up the recovery process—also followed in James' footsteps.



Courtesy of NormaTec

Amar'e Stoudemire

While Mancias said James had always eaten well and taken care of his body, he took his health and wellness routine to the "last degree" that summer, including jumping on NormaTec. In fact, James had never previously done any compression treatments—only through Nike compression tights during team flights and back-to-back games to help refresh his legs. But sensing that the lockout season's condensed schedule would require more daily recovery, James stepped it up a notch.

"I believe that the research we did during the lockout and during the lockout season, I think that helped the Heat win the championship and that helped LeBron perform at a peak level," Mancias said. "We did more research on nutrition, more research on supplements, more research on sleep, more research on massage—we got NormaTec, and it helped him recover. We just put everything together."

Nearly two years since the Heat beat the Thunder in the finals, Jacobs said every NBA team now owns at least a couple of pairs of the NormaTec boots.

"A lot of guys in our league are using it," James said.

Melissa Gasson, a New York-based massage therapist for the Knicks' Raymond Felton and Iman Shumpert, as well as some visiting NBA players and NFLers, said the product is "really good."

"I was at an expo where I was on my feet the whole time. I tried it on and really liked it a lot," she said. "I definitely took stuff home to show people, and actually some of my clients now have them. It gets the blood flowing, it helps with recovery, it does a lot of good things. There's more than one company that has compression, but NormaTec can create more pressure on the whole leg."

They're so in demand that seven teams—the Heat, Mavericks, Thunder, Boston Celtics, Brooklyn Nets, Houston Rockets and Phoenix Suns—now actually have NormaTec lounges in their practice centers.

"What was happening was athletes were coming in and hogging the tables," Jacobs said. "They weren't injured; they were just getting their massage on, getting their NormaTec flush on after practice. So we had to set up these little areas, kind of a Zen zone for them."

While NormaTec hasn't replaced team massage therapists, it's been a very helpful tool in player recovery, which has been a trendier topic in the NBA since the lockout season. With advanced analytics playing an increasing role in the league, more teams are creating positions for sports science and wellness coordinators, beyond typical athletic trainers and strength coaches.

Interestingly, when NormaTec was established in 2003—the Newton Center, Mass.-based company is named after Jacobs' grandmother, Norma—there was no sports arm. It was only a medical business. Jacobs' mother and NormaTec founder Dr. Laura F. Jacobs was a rehabilitation physician and Ph.D. bioengineer who saw a major need for effective treatment modalities for patients with circulation compromised by disease, surgery, trauma and radiation treatment.

"It's a true entrepreneurship story," Jacobs said. "She was sitting there and she just goes, 'How am I supposed to not try to help people when I know that I can potentially build something that can help them more?' And it started in our basement."

When Jacobs graduated from Pittsburgh with a bachelor's degree in business and communication—he was also a certified personal trainer—he saw potential in the sports industry.

"My mom said, 'Well, if you think you have the energy and the effort, and you want to make it happen, have a go at it,' " he said. "She said, 'Here's \$5,000 and two of our medical machines. Go see what you can do.' "

Jacobs said he "doggy paddled" for about two years until he struck gold in 2007 with the University of Florida football and basketball teams.

"We said to them, 'We think this thing is cool and you guys should try it,' " he said. "And they said, 'OK, you and the other 50 products that we received in the mail this week. Don't call us; we'll call you.' Two weeks later, they called me up. They go, 'Gee, this thing is freaking unbelievable. We need more of them and you guys got to really bring this forward because this is an awesome concept and an awesome modality for treating athlete injuries.' "

From there, Alabama, Texas and TCU and some pro teams came on board, giving Jacobs momentum to launch NormaTec's sports-medicine division from scratch. Since 2009, the privately held company with 25 employees has seen triple-digit growth, and these days it's receiving about 50 product requests per week.



Courtesy of NormaTec

Roy Hibbert

NormaTec is also represented well within the NFL, NHL, NCAA, U.S. Navy SEALs and U.S. Olympic team, and among the world's best triathletes, runners and cyclists. While Jacobs said the "real sales volume" originates from amateur athletes, the company's fastest and biggest explosion has come in NBA circles in the past two years. And Jacobs hasn't had to do any pitching, thanks to James and Durant putting things into motion.

"It's all been word of mouth from there," Jacobs said.

In fact, without having to offer any fees or brand-ambassador contracts, the game's best players have given shoutouts to NormaTec on Twitter or Instagram with a picture of them wearing the

boots—sometimes while they're watching television, on their computer or using their smartphone.

"You can't beat the visual," Jacobs said. "We have a lot of guys who call up and they're like, 'Man, I'm one of the only guys on the team that's top level that doesn't have a NormaTec, and all my guys are giving me s*** for it. I've got to go pick one up. Here's my credit card.' It's becoming a kind of status symbol. That's just been really cool to see."

In addition to James and Durant being active on social media, the growing A-list now includes Ray Allen, Carmelo Anthony, Chris Bosh, Kevin Durant, Blake Griffin, Roy Hibbert, Steve Nash, Rajon Rondo, Derrick Rose, Amar'e Stoudemire and Dwyane Wade.

"It's good. It definitely stops swelling," Bosh said. "As much as we run, I'm just trying to keep as much swelling out as possible. It's better than not knowing, having swollen legs and inflamed legs, and that hindering your process. As we get older in this league, it's the cool thing to buy stuff you can get treatment at home. It's always about treatment around the clock so you can play better."

Some players, like James, have three sets of NormaTec boots—at his house, the practice facility and for plane rides/hotel visits. They can be folded up into a portable roller case—some of the players on Team USA in the 2012 Olympics took them to London—and they come equipped with a battery pack for three hours of nonstop pumping. James also has two arm units, which he posted in an Instagram photo, but those are rarer in the NBA because they're mostly used to treat a specific injury (the MLB, for obvious reasons, is NormaTec's biggest market). The hip units are popping up more in the NBA.



Courtesy of NormaTec

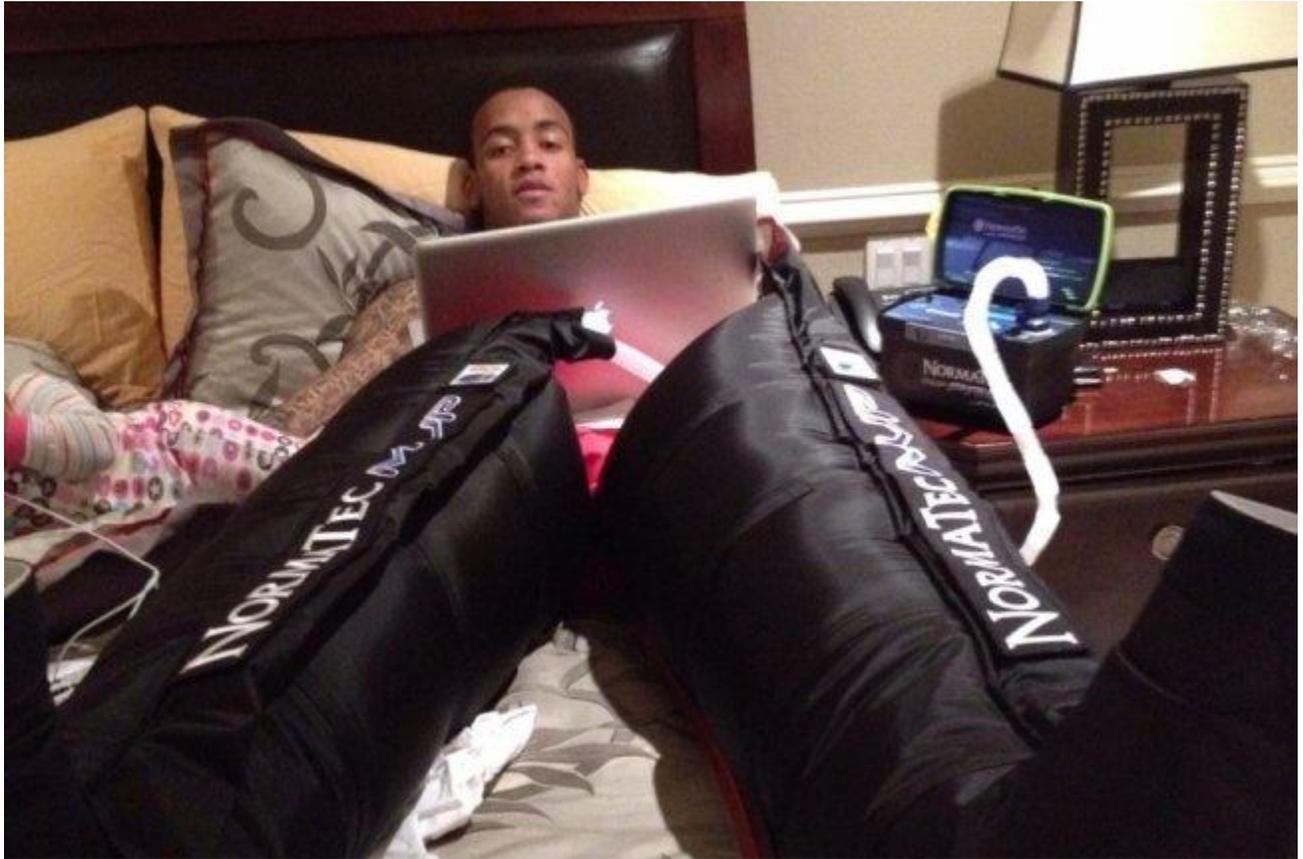
So how do the NormaTec boots work? The \$5,000 Pro version has two main attributes: one, the ability to focus pulsing on one of five zones (foot/ankle, calf, knee, quad and some of the hip); and two, precise levels 1-10 of pressure. After setting the variables, it does all the work for the player. It also features unique calibrated technology, meaning when you first put them on, they'll feel you out and custom mold to your legs.

Jacobs said most NBA players use the NormaTec boots from 20 minutes to an hour, sometimes three times per day (before shootaround, right after the game and then later at night at home). While some players apply the boots for about 10 minutes during halftime, Jacobs hasn't seen anyone yet on the bench pumping during the action. Jacobs noted that players can't overuse the product.

"From a different athlete perspective, it really depends on what you do. We don't have protocols," he said. "We find that the technology that we patented and developed and packaged, as long as it's applied to you and you're feeling like something's going on, you're good to go. You've just got to work it into your schedule, but you can't pump it too much."

Jacobs said many players, athletic trainers and strength coaches around the league have his cellphone number, and he makes himself very accessible—even at nights and on the weekends. So if someone requests a unit as late as the evening—simply providing a height measurement—he or she will have it the following morning.

"For an NBA player, if they want it, they want it yesterday," he said. "You've just got to be ready."



Courtesy of NormaTec

Monta Ellis

Building off Jacobs' strong network with the National Basketball Athletic Trainers' Association and the National Basketball Strength and Conditioning Association, many of those members, including Mancias, are on NormaTec's unofficial scientific advisory board. Jacobs said the response for NormaTec has been extremely positive.

"From what I've been told by the NBA athletic trainers, they've never seen a modality or recovery technique adopted by so many of their athletes so fast," he said. "We hear consistently that the guys are coming in asking for the NormaTec by name."

From his team of consultants, Jacobs has already taken into account two key pieces of feedback: one, reducing the bulkiness (they're now 30 pounds lighter); and two, creating a "turbo" button. That enables a player to pump in one zone a minute longer at 10 percent more pressure.

"It's like getting a massage and then focusing on one area," Jacobs said. "You hit that one spot and it feels really good. It's a mini-customization on the fly."

As Jacobs continues to evolve NormaTec's sports business—he's further targeting MLB and MLS, and exploring the expansion of recovery lounges in the NBA—he will carry the legacy of his mother with him wherever he goes. It's based on a pact he made with her, before she passed away last year from cancer.

"She was kick-ass and we really miss her—the foundation that she worked so hard to build for years and years and years," he said. "That spirit was one of the biggest things that she made sure that I had, and she made me promise her that we would always continue to help people. We would never make crappy equipment. We're not going to sit back on our laurels; we're going to push the envelope with whatever we're doing, however we're doing it."

James and Mancias know a thing or two about that.

Jacobs' Three Other Recovery Necessities

1. Massage

"It's a great personal one-on-one time with physical contact that can sooth the body and mind. The Celtics were one of the first teams in the league—if not the first—to bring on a full-time massage therapist in the '90s. (Former Celtics coach) M.L. Carr brought (Vladimir Shulman) in, and he still works there. Obviously cost is a huge factor, as is time—two things that the NormaTec addresses very nicely."

2. Sleep

"Often overlooked. Huge." (Mancias agreed, saying, "The biggest thing in recovery—you can have NormaTec, you can have pills, you can have all this other stuff—is sleep. During the lockout season, LeBron was in bed by midnight almost every night.")

3. Nutrition

"You can work out like a beast, but if you're not eating right, it's all for nothing."

Jared Zwerling covers the NBA for Bleacher Report. Follow him on Twitter and Instagram.