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Eight NGBs sign nutritional supplement brand

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A nutritional supplement manufacturer blessed by the U.S. Olympic Committee has signed sponsor deals with national governing bodies in eight sports, breaking through in a category long suppressed by connections to failed PED tests.

Sandpoint, Idaho-based Thorne Research has deals in place to sponsor U.S. national teams in gymnastics, rugby, triathlon, rowing, pentathlon, fencing, taekwondo and softball, with plans to complete more in both summer and winter sports in the coming weeks, said Tom Shepard, chief marketing officer and partner at 21 Sports & Entertainment Marketing Group, which represents Thorne.

The agreements vary slightly by sport, but all will deliver to athletes and teams Thorne products that have been cleared by the NSF Certified for Sport program, which offers independent testing of products and the facilities in which they are manufactured.

Thorne also will provide NGBs and their athletes with a Wellness FX program that offers customized dietary and workout protocols, which can be tweaked and tracked through blood tests, as well as nutrition-based education programs tailored to athletes in each sport.

Each deal is for two years, with an option for a two-year extension, taking them beyond the coming Rio Olympics. Thorne would not disclose financial terms.

Spurred by athletes' desire to use supplements, coupled with the fear that those supplements might cause them to test positive for banned substances, the USOC three years ago began a vetting process in search of a product line that it could recommend to competitors. It landed on Thorne, then worked with the company on a program that it could offer to the NGBs.

"The biggest problem with supplements in general is that the stuff geared for high performance tends to be spiked with some sort of drug to generate that performance," said Paul Jacobson, Thorne Research CEO. "What the athletes are most concerned about is banned substances. At Thorne, we have never allowed

anything on the banned substance list in our plant. Ever.”

Thorne’s primary distribution channel thus far has been through physicians who recommend the product to their patients. Working with the NGBs offers a chance to broaden that reach, increasing the brand’s exposure among athletes and their family and friends.

“They’ve chosen this strategy because, from an aspirational standpoint, this is it,” said Shepard, a former Visa marketing executive who structured the deals. “If it’s good enough for an aspiring Olympian, it’s good enough for Joe or Jill weekend athlete. It’s the concentric circle. When you look at a population base like [an NGB’s members] and how they influence those around them, that becomes a big number.”

USOC dieticians worked with Thorne to determine which of the company’s more than 400 products would be submitted for NSF certification and then made available to athletes. Six will be available initially — including an amino acid complex, a fish oil product and a vitamin D supplement — with the product line expanding to 19 by the end of July and 25 by January.

One of the Thorne products will have particular relevance for athletes headed to Rio: a probiotic designed to combat infection, which some say will be a risk for athletes competing in events in polluted waters, such as sailing, rowing, open-water swimming and triathlon.

Triathletes are an especially attractive target market for Thorne, because most already use supplements or would like to do so, said USA Triathlon CEO Rob Urbach. USA Triathlon’s membership of about 500,000 includes not only those building toward Rio, but the many “weekend” athletes who enter one or two events a year but train year-round.

“The supplement category has been a difficult category because of the perceptions of tainted products and potentially false advertising claims,” Urbach said. “The USOC was on a quest to find a supplement partner that they could trust, not so much for a sponsorship or licensing deal, but as a supply source to the athletes who didn’t want to risk ruining their career by using a tainted product.”

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