

# FAKED OUT

Counterfeit racquets are becoming more prevalent, and causing headaches for manufacturers, retailers and consumers.

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**T**hink of it as the tennis industry's evil twin. With all the positive things going on in tennis—programs to encourage play, a boost in 10-and-under tennis and tennis in the schools, new technologies to help players improve—there's also a dark side. In this case, it's the proliferation of the counterfeit racquet business.

Knockoff racquets, built cheaply, painted to look like the originals and often sold through online auctions or other sites at significant discounts, are making their way into the consciousness of retailers and manufacturers, and into the hands of players.

Jolyn de Boer, executive director of the Tennis Industry Association, estimates that worldwide, legitimate racquet manufacturers are losing \$30 million a year because of the problem. "But it's not just manufacturers who suffer," she adds. "Tennis retailers are losing hundreds or thousands of dollars in sales, and consumers are getting an inferior product that may well turn them off to playing tennis. In a down economy, consumers often are looking for lower-priced bargains, and they may not be as diligent in researching a product or sales outlet."

Because budget racquets have a low profit margin and are readily available, it's the more expensive high-end racquets that are commonly copied and sold illegally. Stories abound, and generally it follows this theme: Customers buy equipment online, then discover they've been duped.

## Too Good To Be True

"The vast majority of counterfeit racquets are purchased through Internet auction sites," says Steve Vorhaus of Rocky Mountain Racquet Specialists in Boulder, Colo. "And typically what happens is people will come in to us with a racquet they've bought that way, and they don't like the way it plays or they don't like the string on it, and they want it restrung, and we have to tell them it's a knock-off. But all they saw when they were buying it was the price. Everyone loves to brag about getting a deal."

The auction site eBay contains buyer- and seller-written guides on how to tell the difference between legitimate racquets and knockoffs. YouTube even has instructional clips showing side-by-side comparisons. But, say all the experts, the biggest red flag to a consumer should be the asking price.

"If the deal sounds too good to be true, it usually is," says Jon Muir, worldwide general manager of Wilson Racquet Sports and president of the TIA. "Consumers may think they're getting a good deal on a new or used racquet, but if the racquet they're purchasing is counterfeit, chances are they'll spend more in the long run. If they're avid players, the fake frame probably will break soon, or it

just won't feel right so the player will end up junking it. Then they'll have to buy a new, legitimate racquet in the end."

Bruce Cook, a former online racquet seller, believes that auction sites should have specialists vet listings before they are posted. "I feel like more has to be done," he says.

According to Mike May, director of communications for the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, counterfeiting racquets goes all the way back to the sport's first big boom. "We have a photo taken in the 1970s of our president, Howard Bruns," May says. "He had been shopping in Taiwan, and he found a racquet in this fly-by-night retail stand. The racquet face had the big W on it, but when you looked at the logo, it said Wilsom." He laughs. "Wilsom. We still have that photo hanging in our office as a reminder of what's going on out there."

In some instances, it takes a trained eye to see the differences between a counterfeit racquet and the genuine item. "To an unknowing consumer, the cosmetics on a frame may look so good they can't tell it apart from the real thing," says Gordon Boggis of Prince Sports.

Consumers should only purchase a racquet from an authorized, reputable tennis retailer. Also, avoid online sites or sellers based out of China. "If someone is trying to sell you a racquet at an incredibly low price, there's a good chance it's a counterfeit frame," adds Muir. "It's an illegal activity and we need the tennis consumer to be aware of this growing problem. Only buy from reputable dealers and websites."

But retailers say that customers often view efforts to promote brick-and-mortar operations as an attempt to make them pay more. A dealer with a web presence, or one offering a number of auctions on a well-known site, can give a would-be buyer a false sense of security.

## Building a Better Counterfeit

According to Paul Davis, owner of Princeton Sports, a retailer with two stores in the Maryland area, counterfeiters' skill is evolving to the point that bad merchandise can be difficult to spot, even by those who work in the industry. "We sent out a demo racquet the other day, and when it came back, it wasn't playing well. I sent it to the manufacturer for a replacement and they called to tell me it wasn't a real one," says Davis. "Obviously the person we sent it to had switched it for a counterfeit racquet, but the fact is that I couldn't tell the difference, and I work with them all the time. That's how bad this is."

Many counterfeit sports equipment operations originate over-

seas, where commerce is largely unregulated, and where reprisals from disgruntled customers aren't likely. Differences in cultural attitudes toward counterfeiting combined with low levels of intellectual property rights enforcement in certain countries all contribute to the problem. China, in particular, is rife with counterfeiting operations. And while the proliferation of e-commerce didn't give birth to the market for counterfeit goods, it has made it easier for unscrupulous dealers to broaden their sales base.

"It's relatively easy to set up shop in China and not be bothered by law enforcement," de Boer says. Some estimates indicate that more than 20 percent of all goods on the Chinese market are counterfeit, and the production, distribution and sale of fake products is getting more sophisticated every year.

Because counterfeit racquets are made cheaply, sellers can price them significantly below retail price, then throw in free shipping worldwide. Many consumers find it impossible to resist.

"Customers often call asking us to match a great price they've found on the internet, often below our cost," says Brad Blume of the retailer TennisExpress in Houston. "When we check out the website, we find the url has only been registered for two weeks. Most authorized dealers have been in business for years."

## Consumer Dangers

Counterfeit merchandise is nothing new, adds Vorhaus. "Guys in trench coats have been selling Rolex watches for \$20 on street corners in New York for years. The problem is that this is a smaller industry, so it hits us harder."

But tennis racquets are only part of the problem. According to May, the SGMA commonly sees counterfeited apparel such as T-shirts, hats and jerseys sold in connection with major sporting events like college bowl games, the Olympics and the Super Bowl. Davis says personnel in his stores have noticed an increase in knockoff ski bindings attached to skis



the arm and body when the racquet strikes the ball.

"These knockoff racquets just aren't going to work the same way as the real frames," notes Eric Babolat of Babolat. "The inferior product and construction can cause harm to a player, and can definitely affect his or her enjoyment of the game. Also, the fake racquet won't have the durability that legitimate manufacturers build into their products."

The TIA, whose board of directors includes representatives of the major racquet manufacturers, has instituted a campaign to combat the growing counterfeit business. The TIA has set up a website where retailers and consumers can report counterfeit frames and websites that appear to be selling fake products. The site also provides tips to help identify bogus sites and equipment, and has a list of reputable sites and dealers to buy from. (At tennisindustry.org, click "Racquet Alert" at the top of the page.)

"All of us in this industry are pulling together to bring awareness and to help shut down this kind of illegal activity that hurts everyone—manufacturers, retailers, consumers and players," says de Boer. "We all have a stake in cleaning up this kind of abuse." ▶