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Buffalo Wild Wings, Restaurants Score with Football Season

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One sure-fire sign of football season: You pull into a crowded parking lot thinking that it's a weekend flea market—only to discover it's actually a tailgate party.

Another sign: You pull into your local fast food joint and the wall-to-wall theme is NFL or NCAA football.

Consumer hunger for football—and the sport's seasonal pairing with food and drink of all kinds—is hardly lost upon the nation's major fast food, fast casual, and casual dining chains. That's why, between September and January, dozens of the nation's most familiar restaurant chains will find one way or another to link up with college or pro football.

To name a few:

- Papa John's recently re-upped its NFL sponsorship—and is featuring Super Bowl winning quarterback Peyton Manning in its new ads.
- Buffalo Wild Wings recently renewed its NCAA sponsorship and—at the same time—handed out 55,000 fantasy football kits to attract NFL football fans to host fantasy drafts in its restaurants.
- Stevi B's Pizza Buffet, a regional fast-casual pizza chain, is partnering with Dr Pepper to give away two free tickets to the SEC Championship Game.
- Zaxby's, a regional chicken chain, is rolling out "Zaxby's Fanz of Flavor," an interactive college tailgate experience, this football season



During the football season Buffalo Wild Wings tries to appeal to both pro and college football fans. BUFFALO WILD WINGS

“The (football) fan base is so huge and crosses almost all demographics,” explains Rob Prazmark, CEO 21 Sports & Entertainment Marketing Group. It’s an annual, six-month traffic-builder, he adds.

But Robert Thompson, senior vice president of marketing at Papa John’s, says there’s more to it. “Sport brings people together and so does food. It’s synonymous, in a way.” Thompson says that the NFL link boosts both the Papa John’s brand and its sales.

Papa John’s ranked as the most recognized brand among avid NFL fans, according to the NFL sponsor awareness survey conducted by Turnkey Intelligence for SportsBusiness Journal.

The football season also is a big driver behind Papa John’s plans to introduce a major, new menu item in October, Thompson says.

Paul Swangard, professor of sport brand strategy at the University of Oregon, says brands that are disciplined in their approach to NFL of NCAA football, “Are absolutely getting a return on objectives.”

Consider: several former pro football players, including Manning and running back Jerome Bettis, have even invested in their own Papa John’s franchises.

Manning, who also owns 32 Papa John’s stores in the Denver area, is starring in a new, football-themed Papa John’s commercial this season. In the spot, instead of quarterbacking, Manning is seen baking cupcakes on game day. The ad promotes the chain’s new offering of two medium, two-topping pizzas for \$6.99 each.

And football defensive end J.J. Watt, who became a Papa John’s spokesman last year, is featured on his first, national, NFL-themed pizza box.

Papa John’s partnerships with both the NFL and some of its most familiar players, “Are a big differentiating factor for us,” Thompson says. That’s why Joe Montana and Archie Manning also are Papa John’s brand ambassadors.

Papa John’s sponsorship of the NFL, as well as its links to NFL players “puts them on the map and were game changers for the industry,” Prazmark says.

Meanwhile, during the football season Buffalo Wild Wings tries to appeal to both pro and college football fans. Its NFL fantasy draft kits resulted in an average 55 fantasy football draft parties per restaurant in July and August, says Bob Ruhland, vice president of North America marketing at Buffalo Wild Wings.

Beyond that, Buffalo Wild Wings sponsors the NCAA’s Citrus Bowl.

“We consider ourselves an iconic sports brand—and the NCAA provides us the legitimacy of authenticity that we’re looking for,” Ruhland says.

But like all team sports, football has its limits: the season ultimately ends.

“One of the challenges is that football doesn’t have a 365 day platform,” Swangard says. “QSR marketers need to understand how it fits into a broader, integrated strategy for year-round consumer engagement.”

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