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AMERICA'S GAME?

THE NFL'S VITALITY AND VULNERABILITY ARE ON DISPLAY AT ITS STADIUMS

ARENAS
THE NEXT
WAVE OF
DESIGNS

PROMOTER
TERRY BASSETT
MENTOR TO A
GENERATION

fees running as high as \$100,000 for the Rams and \$75,000 for the Chargers. By comparison, the Cowboys seat licenses ran as high as \$150,000. For the two most recently completed NFL stadiums, Atlanta Falcons' high-end seat licenses cost \$45,000 and the Minnesota Vikings' top price was \$9,500.

Rams and Chargers seat license holders get their money back after 50 years. The teams are the first in the NFL to adopt that model, Hibbs said. In the NBA, the Golden State Warriors are doing something similar, returning after 30 years seat license fees that were used to help pay for construction of Chase Center, their new San Francisco arena.

On a Thursday morning in late June, the premiere center is busy with prospective buyers. In Inglewood, the overall response among premium seat purchasers has been outstanding, Hibbs said, in large part because those deals give customers the rights to buy tickets for the 2022 Super Bowl and the 2023 College Football Playoff National Championship, two events already booked at the new stadium.

"The place to be, the 'see and be seen' aspect of Los Angeles is part of that, not unlike it is at Staples Center," Hibbs said. "The cachet of a certain club or courtside seat is more than just watching the Lakers. We have some of that here in Inglewood."

It's been 15 years since the Super Bowl last took place in Southern California, and that's another reason why interest is high, Demoff said. It's been much longer — 46 years — since the Final Four was played in Los Angeles, but Inglewood is making its bid, starting with the 2027 event.

"One thing we consistently hear is that the West Coast really hasn't had a stadium to go attract these national events," he said. "Now, between us and the new Raiders stadium in Las Vegas and the improvements [at University of Phoenix Stadium], we're hearing more about the West Coast."

The premiere center also plays host to prospective tenants for the district as project officials market that part of the business. The high-tech models for both the stadium and district show the boundaries set aside for mixed use as a shadow passes from an airplane flying over the property. Those lines will change over time as development progresses, Hibbs said.

The stadium has the flexibility to grow from 70,240 seats to 100,000 depending on the event. Apart from Super Bowl, the CFP and potentially the Final Four, the new stadium will host the opening and closing ceremonies for the 2028 Olympic Games. Officials are in negotiations to host WWE WrestleMania. The stadium is also in the mix for 2026 World Cup as FIFA narrows the final list of U.S. facilities for that event.

The stadium's footprint extends to a 6,000-seat performance venue next door, which sits under the same roof canopy as the bigger building. The smaller facility will be marketed as a midsize concert venue with the goal of booking 75 to 100 events a year. It will also accommodate esports' Los Angeles Gladiators, which Kroenke owns and are part of the Overwatch League.

The third element, the outdoor Champions Plaza, situated outside the south end of the stadium, will be activated by the teams for pregame tailgates on game days. On days when the teams aren't playing football, the vision is to host small concerts, farmers markets and other community activities. The plaza will be heavily landscaped with a water feature and a natural amphitheater. A year-round restaurant be accessible to the plaza and the stadium, Hibbs said. ■



HOSPITALITY'S NEXT FRONTIER

TAILGATE GUYS LEAD THE WAY AS NFL TEAMS ENHANCE GAME DAY BY THINKING OUTSIDE THE GAME

BY DON MURET

THE BUSINESS OF tailgating has become a new revenue stream for NFL teams beyond the corporate hospitality that some clubs run themselves outside their stadiums. Several teams now outsource that piece of

the game-day experience to vendors such as Tailgate Guys, which has six new deals in the NFL.

Tailgate Guys, formed in 2009 in Auburn, Ala., to fill tailgating needs in the college space, has agreements for the 2018 season with the Atlanta Falcons, Buffalo Bills, Houston Texans, Jacksonville Jaguars, Los Angeles Rams and Pittsburgh Steelers.

Tailgate Guys has about 30 clients in all, covering the NFL, college football, MLB's Texas Rangers, golf tournaments and soccer's International Champions Cup.

Its competitors include Block-party, which last year received a \$2 million investment from Live Nation to expand the concept to amphitheaters; IMG College's Tailgate Club; secondary ticketing providers such as Vivid Seats; and in Jacksonville, Fla., a firm called



FOCUS

Tailgate Guys will help the Atlanta Falcons create pregame atmosphere outside Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

everybody.”

The Steelers used Tailgate Guys for Kenny Chesney’s Trip Around the Sun tour June 2 at Heinz Field, one of three shows the team booked in 2018. The packages included concert tickets, which helped drive ticket sales and concessions revenue, Sacco said. Next year, Tailgate Guys will expand to all concerts at the stadium.

In Atlanta, Tailgate Guys is on the ground floor for activating the Home Depot Backyard, a new tailgating space next to Mercedes-Benz Stadium on a 13-acre site where the old Georgia Dome stood. The vendor already has a strong presence in the market with multiple SEC schools, and some of its initial sales took place with customers familiar with the brand from the college space, Duffy said.

“They’re already the expert, having some of the neighboring colleges a few hours down the road,” said Don Rovak, vice president of ticket sales and service for AMB Sports & Entertainment, parent company of the Falcons and Major League Soccer’s Atlanta United FC. “It felt foolish for us not to tap into their expertise.”

The Home Depot Backyard, which officially opens Sept. 16 for the Falcons’ first regular-season home game against Carolina, has room for about 75 to 80 groups a game, Duffy said. It’s been the leading NFL property in sales for Tailgate Guys in part because of the firm’s local brand recognition. In addition, AMB Sports made a conscious decision to keep the tent pricing affordable, following a similar path it began last season for concessions sold inside the stadium, he said.

The backyard will open about five hours before kickoff and close two hours after the game, Rovak said. Tailgate Guys also sells pregame space for MLS games for the backyard, which is scheduled to be activated year-round for a variety of special events. The backyard serves as an extension of the stadium with the same guest services and security staff working the area.

“We’re going to learn a lot over the next few months for how to maximize the space and what the customers want,” he said.

In north Florida, the Jaguars’ deal with Tailgate Guys is an exam-

ple of their entrepreneurial spirit under the leadership of team owner Shahid Khan, according to Chris Gargani, vice president of sales and service. The Jaguars play at TIAA Bank Field, one of the older stadiums in the NFL, and tailgating is the next step for a team that’s made a splash with end zone cabanas and pools, among other upgrades.

The Jaguars signed their deal after being approached by Tailgate Guys Chief Operating Officer Chip Howard, who previously was the University of Florida’s executive associate athletic director for internal affairs, Gargani said. Howard is familiar with the stadium from the annual Florida-Georgia game, which is played there.

Tailgate Guys markets to both Jaguars season-ticket holders searching for a permanent pregame hospitality space and the team’s overall database for single-game buys. The Jaguars found a strip of grass next to Daily’s Place, the practice field and amphitheater attached to the stadium. Depending on the package, about 20 to 30 tents can fit in the space, Gargani said.

In western New York, the Bills have a strong tailgating culture, and they were the second team to sign with Tailgate Guys after the Texans. The Bills reserve space on a youth football field next to New Era Field on the northeast side that’s already used for private tailgates for, among others, NFL Canada and team owners Terry and Kim Pegula.

“We’re (different) being in the suburbs with a lot of space around our facility compared with other NFL markets,” said Jon Latke, the Bills’ manager of corporate sales and business development.”

Tailgate Guys can fit roughly 25 to 50 tents on its portion of the field, Latke said. As of mid-August, the vendor had sold about a half-dozen of the larger packages for 100 to 200 people for the Bills’ regular-season home opener Sept. 16.

The Jaguars’ Gargani predicts more NFL teams will hand off this piece of game-day business.

“As a society, we’ve moved so much toward turnkey and paying for things and everything is automated,” he said.

As a fan, Gargani said, “I just want to cut somebody a check and show up and my stuff is done.”

Party Shack, which the Jaguars do business with as well as Tailgate Guys. Apart from those firms, some NFL teams such as the Carolina Panthers run their own pregame corporate hospitality villages outside their facilities.

Tailgate Guys co-founder Parker Duffy built a company in the heart of Southeastern Conference country whose investors include Teall Capital, an investment firm founded by Ben Sutton, former chairman and CEO of IMG College. In the past year, Tailgate Guys has made strategic hires as it looked to crack the NFL, including A.J. Machosky, its senior vice president of sales and business development. Machosky used to work for Vivid Seats, which ran NFL tailgates for the Rams.

“We quickly learned the NFL is a tight-knit community, so they’re all aware of what others are doing, which has opened some doors for us,” Duffy said. “We’re still learning a lot. There will be an evolution on that side of it, but there’s a higher level of corporate (entertainment) in the NFL than with colleges.”

Tailgate Guys runs a turnkey operation, providing white tent hospitality service for groups as small as 10 people and as big as 500.

For a single NFL game, prices run \$350 on the low end for the

Falcons’ least expensive package to \$7,750, which is the Texans’ most expensive setup, according to the Tailgate Guys website. Prices depend on a number of factors, including tent size, food and drink, furniture and televisions, among other amenities. NFL teams get a split of the revenue, similar to colleges. The cost of doing business varies by location, partnership structure and capacity, Duffy said.

In Pittsburgh, Tailgate Guys’ relationship with the University of Pittsburgh and Heinz Field, where the school and the NFL’s Pittsburgh Steelers play, led to expanding the business to include Steelers games and stadium concerts, said Jimmie Sacco, team vice president of stadium operations and management.

“We kicked it off last year with Pitt in cooperation with the university and they did a terrific job,” he said. “People loved it.”

The view doesn’t hurt in Pittsburgh. Tailgate Guys operates on the Great Lawn, between Heinz Field and the Allegheny River.

“As much as we’re all looking for new dollars, (Tailgate Guys) is more of an amenity,” he said.

“It’s another premium service to offer your fans. If you can offer someone reserved parking, a space to do hospitality and easy access to the building, it’s a win-win for