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Tailgating goes extreme

The drive for premium experiences has reached outside the stadium gates, and that has several companies looking to cash in

By **Don Muret**, Staff Writer

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Tailgating is no picnic in sports.

The business of pregame hospitality today requires an ever higher degree of premium service as corporate clients and college donors grow accustomed to more luxury at the game. Across the sports landscape and especially in football, where tailgating plays a pivotal role in the game-day experience, big league teams and colleges have stepped up their game to provide greater hospitality options outside the stadium walls.

As the quality level of pregame options rises, it's no longer enough in some college markets to offer catered meals and tent space. Like the pros, schools compete against the couch at home, and to keep sponsor and donor revenue streams flowing, athletic departments are finding creative ways to add value to tailgating.



The renderings show an example of the "tailgate mansion" that will be in place at Georgia Southern this football season.

Photos by: Gameday Solutions

The newer trends focus on turnkey operations to provide worry-free, all-inclusive hospitality, leading to entrepreneurs such as Tailgate Guys, Block Party Suites, Boxlife and GameDay Traditions filling a niche in the college space.

Shipping container retrofits outside stadiums, starting last season at Texas Tech and expanding this year to Dallas, are designed to elevate pregame hospitality by providing the same comforts of home in a pregame setting.

"The viewing experience at home keeps getting better and we need to differentiate the on-campus experience," SMU Athletic Director Rick Hart said.



Pop-up solutions on the premium side meet the demand of die-hard fans who may show up for the party with no intention of attending the game. Providing a premium tailgate experience for those willing to pay for it in some ways transcends the game itself.

Auburn extends the premium hospitality element to Friday nights before games with Cafe Jordan Hare, a five-course meal served on the football field by a local restaurateur. It's

part of the school's strategy to keep the stadium sold out through additional perks given to season-ticket holders.

"Making people feel special, that hasn't changed," Auburn Athletic Director Jay Jacobs said. "That touch of the heart, soul and emotion is something we continue to build on. That's what we sell every game — we sell emotion."

The same upscale trends, which have been evident in the pros, are only growing more pronounced there. CAA Premium Experience, for example, has expanded its pregame hospitality packages to include celebrity chefs, live performances by national acts represented by CAA, and former NFL stars rubbing elbows with guests.

Those ultra-premium packages run \$15,000 to \$25,000 a game depending on the event and are no longer restricted to the Super Bowl and Final Four. They're now commonplace for regular-season games as well, said Robert Tuchman, president of CAA Premium Experience.

The additional perks are designed to keep valued partners coming to the games and, in the long run, keep the relationships intact for the companies investing in sports hospitality.

"It's so much harder to get people out to events than wanting to spend time with their family," said Tuchman, a 20-year veteran in corporate hospitality. "Corporations are all vying for time to spend with clients, and that's why each experience has to be enhanced ... especially with social media today.

"Sometimes there's no need to see clients, but everyone knows the real relationships are built face to face, and that's what's going to win the business," he said. "We're getting asked from our clients to make it even more of a [special] situation."

An idea takes off in Auburn

At Auburn University, deep in the heart of SEC country, the school profits from a strong partnership with Tailgate Guys, a game-day hospitality company founded seven years ago by Auburn graduates Parker Duffey and Michael Otwell.

Since the founders signed their alma mater as the company's first client in 2009, the firm's roster has grown to include Florida, Texas A&M, Georgia Tech and the Chick-fil-A Kickoff Game. The

Texas Longhorns, their newest client, signed for the 2015 season.

Tailgate Guys touches the NFL, too. Last year, the firm produced off-site events for the Atlanta Falcons. For this season, the company has expanded its role to managing the team's Fan Zone, an outdoor hospitality space next to the Georgia Dome, said Duffey, the firm's president.

College football remains its core business, though, where it supplies white-tent hospitality for large groups. Auburn remains its biggest operation. Tailgate Guys hosts about 300 groups a game outside Jordan-Hare Stadium on game days, spanning 25,000 to 30,000 people.

For its deals with the five individual schools, the company shares revenue with each institution, Duffey said.

Tailgate Guys' hospitality packages at the low end cost \$400 to \$600 a game for sandwiches and drinks. The high-end price of \$10,000 a game covers full-service catering, temporary flooring, lighting, a sound system and multiple televisions.

"We've had groups fly in specialty fish out of Hawaii," Duffey said. "We did a Thanksgiving dinner [at Texas A&M] last year ... with chandeliers in the tent. It's amazing, when people can get creative, what they can do."

Since the company's inception, business at Auburn has grown exponentially. Over the past seven seasons, the total number of tent hospitality packages has grown from 79 to 450, numbers covering both full-season and single-game tent sales, according to the school's figures.

Auburn athletic department officials would not release financial numbers. But that particular piece of the game-day business has grown by 260 percent since Tailgate Guys drove its first tent stake in the ground, said Scott Carr, Auburn's senior associate athletic director for external affairs.

Tailgate Guys sets up an office on campus to do business and handles all client relationships without putting a burden on the schools. The firm provides everything from coolers of ice and koozies to personalized signs for corporate sponsors to display their brands.

Everything is turnkey. For groups that buy tents and bring some of



An upstart company called Tailgate Guys has plugged into the tailgate culture at Auburn. The school's premium options extend beyond game day to Cafe Jordan Hare (below), which offers dining on the football field the day before the game.

Photos by: Auburn University



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ROBERT TUCHMAN
CAA PREMIUM EXPERIENCE

their own tailgating supplies, Tailgate Guys dispatches “bellhops” to help customers unload their gear and pack up after the game, Duffey said.

Tailgate Guys does not include game tickets in its packages but works closely with university partners and can put its clients in touch with the right contact to buy tickets, if necessary.

In the past, pregame hospitality has been an expense for universities responsible for booking pregame hospitality and providing services to clean up after tailgate parties. That’s all changed now with companies such as Tailgate Guys taking over that role.

“We take something that’s typically been a liability on game days and build it into an asset,” he said. “We have a proven model that generates revenue and provides organization and controls in a system that’s traditionally been chaotic with no accountability.”

Texas A&M has seen its partnership with Tailgate Guys grow to a point where its share of revenue will approach seven figures for the 2015 season, said Mike Caruso, the school’s associate athletic director for events and game operations. The school is one of the company’s fastest-growing accounts, Duffey said.

Tailgate Guys met the increasing demand for pregame hospitality, for both ticketed patrons and Aggie fans without tickets who just want to soak in the game-day atmosphere. Half the business comes from the school’s corporate partners, Caruso said.

“It all started at Auburn, and we heard they had great success there,” he said. “We were out shopping and looking for something like this, a company that could provide tents, TVs and generators.”

Their deal has reached the first of two one-year extensions after the original three-year agreement expired.

Since 2012, the first year of the deal, Texas A&M has seen continued growth in the six-figure range, Caruso said. A significant amount of those dollars come from fans who can’t get tickets to games at newly renovated Kyle Field, which has a new post-renovation capacity of more than 100,000.

“Now, the trend is to go tailgate without tickets,” said Andrew Wheeler, Learfield Sports’ senior vice president of the South region, where the company holds Texas A&M’s multimedia rights. “We have a bunch of sponsors that are only interested in setting up outside the stadium to entertain clients.”



CAA Premium Experience is finding traction for its ultra-premium packages.

Photo by: CAA

Every season, as tailgate space shrinks on the A&M campus and officials search every nook and cranny for new spots, they take inventory of hospitality tents, typically in the second quarter of a midseason game. They've counted up to 20,000 people tailgating without game tickets. Many of them are Tailgate Guys clients and they're happy simply having access to a tent with tables and chairs and a satellite dish, hanging out next to the stadium where they can still hear the roar of the crowd.

"They've got everything but the seat inside the stadium," Caruso said. "It was the impetus for us going with Tailgate Guys, because it's grown to a higher level. We need to have that suite environment outside as well ... for those who want the full experience."

Shipping containers and mini mansions

SMU Boulevard brings a fresh look this season for tailgating outside Gerald J. Ford Stadium. On game days, a half-dozen shipping containers themed in blue and red, the Mustangs' colors, will sit along the main thoroughfare for pregame hospitality.

Learfield Sports signed a deal with a new company called Block Party Suites. The 500-square-foot units accommodate 30 to 40 people. The portable suites are equipped with furniture, two 55-inch satellite televisions, Bluetooth-enabled speakers, a fan system and custom signs. Dallas-based entrepreneur Adam Ward leases the containers to Learfield for \$3,000 to \$5,000 a unit for every home game. In turn, Learfield sells those spaces for \$21,000 to \$45,000 for season packages, or \$3,500 to \$7,900 for single games.

The high-end price for a single game for 40 people covers game tickets, catered food and an open bar. Early in the sales, two of the five portable suites were sold for the season and a third unit had been reserved for multiple games, Ward said.



Block Party Suites converts shipping containers into tailgate space for groups of 30 to 40 people.

Photo by: Block Party Suites

The containers are one way for Learfield to "up its game" and boost inventory to help sell sponsorships, said Dustin Nichols, former general manager of Mustang Sports Properties, the firm doing business with SMU. Nichols signed the deal before leaving Learfield.

"For us, it was an opportunity to take what was already a very good setup in the Boulevard and make it a little bit better for corporate VIPs," Nichols said. "The corporate clients want something where they can show up, hang out, go to the game and be done with it. It's a little more higher end with corporate signage connected to the unit so you can brand it. It's not just a flag."

For SMU, Block Party Suites provides an option for large groups that the school did not previously offer, Hart said.

The school conducted surveys to find out how SMU could make it easier for all fans to attend more games, and officials believe the containers are one solution.

“Three years ago, there was no public gathering spot and the Boulevard was reserved for only the Mustang Club [donors],” Hart said. “As we began to expand our fan base, we wanted to find ways for everybody to experience the Boulevard.”

The trend isn’t limited to the pros and power five conference college ball.

After one year at college football’s top level, Georgia Southern has gone one step beyond the shipping container.

This season, the Sun Belt Conference school will showcase the “tailgate mansion,” essentially a tiny home with high-end finishes containing every amenity imaginable for the tailgating connoisseur.

Tim Watson, partner in GameDay Traditions and a home builder in Hilton Head, S.C., developed what he calls the ultimate tailgate suite. His firm signed a deal with Learfield’s Georgia Southern Sports Properties to set up the tailgate mansion near the corner of one end zone at Paulson Stadium.

GameDay Traditions Suite Experience



The agreement is a three-way partnership in which the school receives a share of revenue, said Kris Draper, Learfield’s on-site general manager. The tailgate mansion, available at a cost of \$5,000 a game, sold out one month after it was put on the market.

Take a tour through Gameday Traditions' miniature tailgate mansion.

“We’re always looking for something new to expand revenue, Draper said. “We’ve done the white tents, but the profit margins aren’t that great. This model should be better for the bottom line. It’s a new way to expose fans to new experiences.”

The portable building has hardwood floors, granite countertops, stainless steel appliances, a private bathroom, a touch-screen entertainment system tied to five televisions, exterior lighting, high-end outdoor furniture and a beverage refrigerator mounted outside the unit. In southeast Georgia, where early-season temperatures can reach 95 degrees with 100 percent humidity, the best amenity of all could be the mansion’s air-conditioning system.

GameDay Traditions provides local catering. There is no bedroom. It’s strictly a game-day buy, starting at 8 a.m. through midnight. For night games, the mansion stays open a bit later.

Watson’s research over the past two years showed there were opportunities for high-end pregame hospitality. He discovered college football fans spend two-thirds of their time outside the stadium on game days but 90 percent of the revenue tied to those patrons is generated inside the facility.

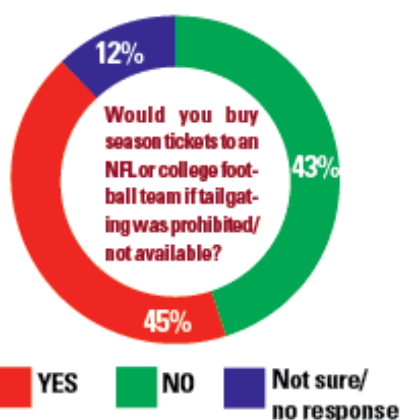
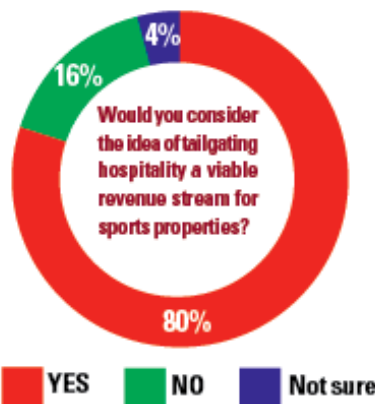
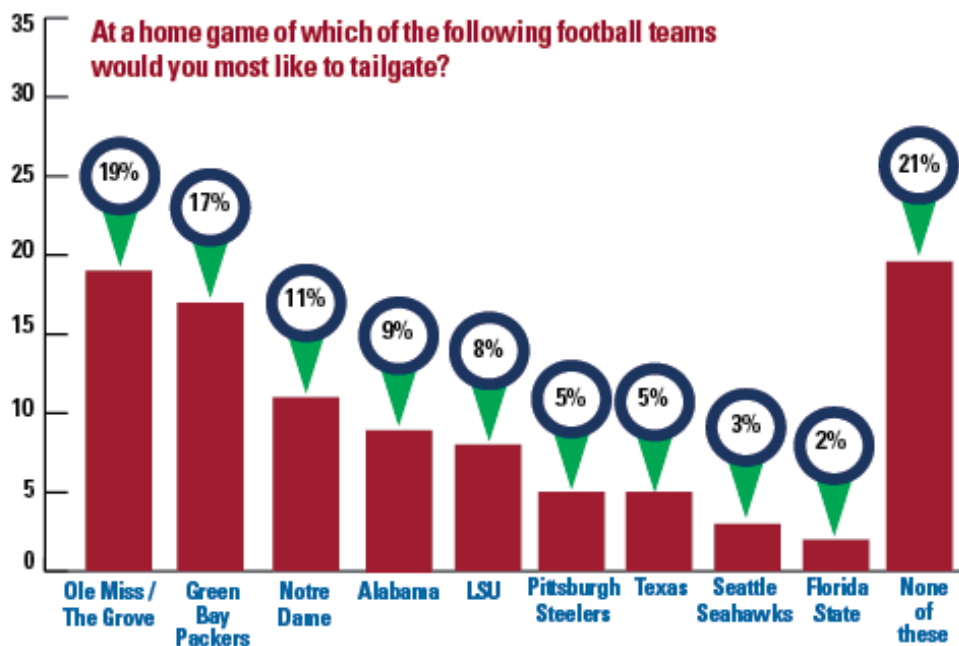
His wife, Kris, is a Georgia Southern alum and a former tennis player at the school, which led to Watson

contacting school officials to see if they were interested in the tailgate mansion.

“Even at a small school like Georgia Southern, there is demand and a market for that high-end tailgate,” Watson said. “Frankly, we see [buyers] getting to the point where Mom stays in the suite during the game in the air conditioning. Maybe everybody doesn’t go into the game.”

TURNKEY SPORTS POLL

The following are results of the Turnkey Sports Poll taken in July. The survey covered more than 2,000 senior-level sports industry executives spanning professional and college sports.



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