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## Ravens Fan Turns Tailgating Passion into Profession



(WESTMINSTER, Md.) - Ravens fan Jeff Hinton has been going to home games with the same four friends since the team came to Baltimore. The crew of five always arrives early for the tailgating festivities, and each member has a special role they play within the group: one guy cooks and the other four bartend.

This is tailgating Ravens style, and Hinton has spent 13 years perfecting the art: A fully stocked bar on a portable table, a grill that holds eight steaks that are flipped only by Ravens logoed grill tools, an array of Ravens chairs carefully arranged under their Ravens tent, all to be enjoyed while decked out from head to toe in officially licensed Ravens clothing. For the game against the Cleveland Browns, the cook prepared steak, cream of crab soup, crab cakes, and Caesar's Salad eaten, naturally, with Ravens plates and napkins.

Even for a dedicated Ravens fan like Hinton who was willing to put in the time, finding Ravens gear was hard. "There was nowhere," said the Sykesville, Md. resident, speaking of how difficult it was to find everything "in one place." That is when Hinton had his light bulb moment and decided to open his own store.

At first he went out on his own, opening a kiosk that sold Ravens merchandise like jerseys, caps, pencils, and other small-sized items, "but that wasn't doing it," said Hinton. "I wanted to provide for the 'whole NFL experience.' For me, I'm a tailgater, and I want to see tailgating equipment. Someone else may be a home theater person and their 'whole NFL experience' is having a line of Ravens recliners pointing at their big screen TV. I wanted a store that could provide for the 'whole NFL experience' however a fan wants to experience it."

To accomplish that, Hinton joined forces with Finksburg, Md.-resident Marc Heyman, who had encountered similar frustrations when buying a pool table for his home game room, and the newly minted partners opened HomeGamers. The one-stop shop located in the Town Mall of Westminster has a 9,500 square foot showroom showcasing full lines of licensed sporting goods merchandise for the NBA, NCAA, NFL, MLB and college teams. "I carry the other teams so I can sell year-round," explained Hinton, who explained that sales go up whenever the team is playing. The store also carries home theater and gameroom gear including items such as air hockey tables, arcade games, foosball tables, juke boxes, home bars and stools, and pinball machines.

Business has been brisk since they opened in March 2007 and they discovered they had found an underserved niche in the market, so they are expanding nationally through franchising. Their first franchise opened last week in Waldorf, Md. "We knew we had something great and we're glad other people think so, too," said Hinton. "We have already gotten inquiries from people about buying franchises because they recognize a need for a HomeGamers in their community."

What Hinton tapped into in his quest to find Ravens gear was a tremendous market with advantages enjoyed by few other industries. "Our customers are really loyal to their teams and will drive miles and miles to come here and buy their stuff," explained Hinton. The NFL has one of the most brand-loyal followings, and the tailgaters are arguably the most loyal of the loyal. "Everyday somebody is buying something for tailgating, although technically they could be using it to homegate," he said, referring to the phenomenon of setting up a room in the house with team colors to watch the game.

The tailgating movement has never been fully measured, but some of the numbers that have trickled out show the breadth of the industry: "More than 50 million people tailgate in America each year" according to the Tailgater Monthly magazine research, and 61 percent of them claim they tailgate five or more times a season. There was \$13.7 billion in retail sales of sports licensed products for the year 2007 according to a June 9, 2008, press release from the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association citing estimates by The Licensing Letter. Tailgating was named the number three NFL tradition of all time by the NFL Network. Only one franchised retail store serves this hybrid industry-HomeGamers.

But there is only one set of numbers Hinton cares about-the score. This week the Ravens trounced the Cleveland Browns, 34-3.

#### About HomeGamers

HomeGamers ([www.homegamers.net](http://www.homegamers.net)) is a franchised retail store catering to the needs of sports fans and those serious about their home theaters and game rooms. The 6,000-plus square foot showroom contains a full line of licensed sporting goods merchandise for the NBA, NCAA, NFL, NHL, MLB and college teams including such hard-to-find team logoed items as bar stools, barbeque grills, coolers, coozies, pool tables, pub tables and tailgating canopies. Products for the home theater and home game room include a wide array of air hockey tables, classic and new arcade games, foosball tables, home bars and stools, home theater seating, juke boxes, neon signs, pinball machines, slot machines, soft drink machines and specialty clocks. Headquartered in Westminster, Maryland, the retail concept was founded by partners Marc Heyman and Jeff Hinton in March 2007 who later partnered with Philadelphia, Pa.-resident Seth Richards. HomeGamers opened its first franchise location in Waldorf, Md. last week.

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Editor's Note: Additional JPEGs available upon request by calling Amy Bannon, 202-789-1940