

PRO FOOTBALL
HALL OF FAME
AWARDS

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With 25 years at the Pro Football Hall of Fame Store in Canton, Ohio, Senior Director of Merchandising Michelle Hunt has grown up alongside the establishment, watching it grow into the giant it is today.

A RETAIL TOUCHDOWN

WITH ICONIC NAMES ATTACHED TO THEIR BESTSELLING PRODUCTS, THE PRO FOOTBALL HALL OF FAME STORE IS SURE TO BRING ITS A-GAME.



STORY BY
CHRISTINE SCHAFFRAN

The Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, is mecca for football fans. And no such venue would be complete without the proper gift store to commemorate the visit. At 8,000 square feet, The Pro Football Hall of Fame Store fits the bill. It's a far cry from its humble beginnings in 1963 when it was no larger than a closet that sold "pendants, pencils, and postcards," according to Michelle Hunt, senior director of merchandising.

"It's been a journey," says Hunt, who has grown up alongside the Hall of Fame Museum's store, dedicating 25 years of her time in the workforce to the establishment. "I'm super excited to have been here all these years and to see all the changes."

Like many, Hunt secured her first job in retail at 16 years old and has remained in the field throughout her career, including working as an assistant manager at the Hall of Fame Museum's store prior to clinching her job as director.

As her role evolved over the years from working solely in the store to include purchasing, planning and making creative decisions, the store has been pushed and pulled into expansions in 1978 and 1995 before finding its footing at its current size in 2013.

But with 32 NFL teams, 100+ years of football history and 371 members in the Hall of Fame, somehow even 8,000 still doesn't feel like enough.

"It's not big enough," Hunt says. "Since we have so much merchandise, it's packed to the [gills]."

While an admission ticket to the Hall of Fame Museum is not required to shop at the store, no visit would be complete without a walk down memory lane where visitors can reminisce about the biggest dynasties in football history and peruse the uniforms and equipment worn by the biggest legends to ever play the game, such as Jim Thorpe, Joe Montana and Peyton Manning.

The experience continues with interactive exhibits where guests are invited to try on sample helmets and compare the size of their hands to



those of some of the best players like Johnny Unitas and John Elway.

And then — the holy grail of the trip — the bust gallery, a room which contains the "headshots" cast in bronze of every member who's been enshrined by class, including Deion Sanders, Jim Brown and Vince Lombardi.

As they wind their way through history, guests make their way to a ramp which delivers them to the heavenly sight of the Hall of Fame Museum Store — a playground of sorts for the die-hards and casual football fans alike.

A MERCHANDISE BLITZ

Among the endless racks of jerseys, T-shirts, ball caps, keychains, magnets, postcards, thermoses, mugs, shot glasses, license plate holders, mini helmets, footballs, bobble-head dolls, pendants and novelty items, visitors will discover that all 32 NFL teams have their own dedicated displays.

Exclusive Hall of Fame gear — one of the hottest tickets in the store — also is peppered throughout the sales floor to entice the more than 100,000

visitors who pass through annually, Hunt says.

"One of our bestsellers is our Hall of Fame-exclusive line where we co-brand with NFL teams and our Hall of Famers for one-of-a-kind souvenirs that you can only buy here at the Hall of Fame," Hunt notes.

Among the top-sellers are T-shirts and hats by

Ball caps from all 32 NFL teams rank among the most popular souvenirs.
Photos: Shawn Wood

DID YOU KNOW?
ALL 32 NFL TEAMS HAVE THEIR OWN DEDICATED DISPLAYS.



Hall of Fame exclusives are stand-outs as visitor favorites.

some of the biggest names in apparel and sports gear, such as Nike, New Era, 47Brand, Riddell and Wilson Sporting Goods, just to name a few. Hunt notes that all NFL products must be purchased from official NFL licensees, but she is able to use any vendor she sees fit for Hall of Fame-branded products. This opens the door to Camp David Apparel and Champion as well as G&G Outfitters Inc. for the museum's exclusive products.

"Our biggest-selling categories with our Hall of Fame exclusives are the Hall of Fame legends T-shirt line and it has the Hall of Fame marks, the NFL mark and then all of the Hall of Famers that played for that specific team on a T-shirt," Hunt explains. "That's our best-selling item in the store."

She adds that she tries to locally source products when possible, turning to Modern China Co. for Hall of Fame glassware. Meanwhile Game Day Feels in North Canton supplies leather keychains, lanyards and bracelets as well as collectible wooden wall signs.

**DID YOU KNOW?
MORE THAN
100,000 VISITORS
PASS THROUGH THE
STORE ANNUALLY.**

made in the USA — for under \$150. 3D signs of players' signatures and wooden coasters also rank among the products offered.

And when it comes to signatures, the Hall of Fame Museum Store does not disappoint in the signed collectibles, including helmets, mini helmets and footballs that are available for purchase by

"That product line does phenomenal in our store," she adds.

And why wouldn't it? The company makes cut-out replicas of Hall of Famers' jerseys complete with the name, number and signature of the player — all laser cut and



eager fans and protected behind a glass case.

"We do have those autographed, high-end collectibles that people are looking for," Hunt points out. "Like that one-of-a-kind unique gift that's signed by our Hall of Famers."

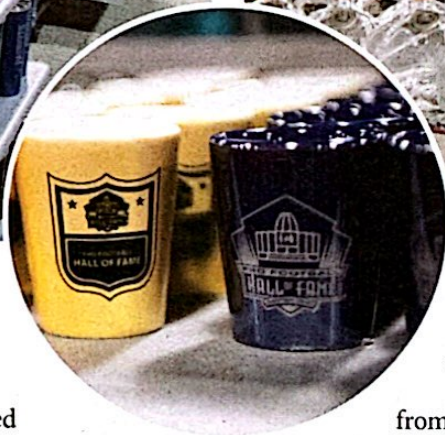
Among those enshrined in the glass case is Leroy Butler who played safety for the Green Bay Packers and whose journey took more than 16 years to officially make the Hall of Fame. He was nominated multiple times before he was finally inducted in 2022.

"One of my favorite Hall of Famers is Leroy Butler. He's one of my biggest shoppers and one of my biggest supporters of Hall of Fame gear," Hunt notes. "He's also very interactive with our staff and all of our guests when he's here."

Hunt says Butler's story to overcome adversity is one of inspiration to her. Growing up surrounded by poverty and crime, he was born pigeon-toed, had surgery on both feet at 8 months old, and was confined to a wheelchair with leg braces until he was 8 years old. It was more than a possibility that he may never walk, but he never gave up.

"To this day, he is such a strong man with a kind heart, positive attitude and is always giving back to the community," she says. "His story is so inspirational and has been an inspiration in my life to never give up, keep fighting, rise up and accept the challenges and changes that life throws at you and keep moving forward."

And like Butler, Hunt keeps moving forward in her mission to improve the Pro Football Hall of Fame Museum store and meet challenges head-on.



A wide selection of drinkware includes Hall of Fame exclusive glassware and shot glasses along with team-branded cups and mugs.

To do this, the store has hosted meet-and-greets and book signings in the last few years to help support the mission of the non-profit museum, which is to acknowledge every player, coach and contributor who helped build the game into what it is today.

And to serve those who arrive in town mostly from Memorial Day to Labor Day to pay their respects to their football idols, Hunt relies on six full-time retail staff members and as many as 40 part-time staff members during the busy season. There's really only one chance to get it right and make sure visitors buy on their way out the door, as Hunt notes, they are not known for repeat business.

"Most of the time, it's people that are traveling and we get those customers as they tour the museum," she says. "But it's a destination. People are coming to the museum, and once they're here in the museum, they'll find the store."

And when they do, they will be greeted by colorful pendants draped from the ceiling, rows of NFL helmets displayed behind the cash register, a wall full of team baseball caps and beanies, footballs signed by entire enshrined classes, flags, pens, Super Bowl coins, mugs, stickers, plaques, gloves and unlimited Hall of Fame-branded memorabilia for fans of all ages.

TACKLING CHALLENGES

With such an expansive store, one might think that the sky is the limit in bringing in products, but Hunt says, that just isn't true.

"There's so much product out there and so many new and exciting things that I want to try, but it's just a matter of trying to figure out space."

However, Hunt says renovating the store 10 years ago and expanding from 4,000 to 8,000

square feet is one of her biggest accomplishments.

"We renovated from scratch — planned the entire layout of the store,

what product was going to go where, what fixtures to use, the color of the slatwall, the color of the carpet, how the checkout would operate, the graphics, the signage and everything else that goes into a retail store," she notes.

Hunt adds that licensing for products can also be challenging because "there's a lot that goes into trying to get the right to use Hall of Famers' names and likenesses."

Challenge or not, the licensing and the name the Hall of Fame has created for itself is what differentiates the museum store from others selling football apparel and memorabilia, she notes.

"We have the exclusive line where we carry our Hall of Famers, and people like to have product that has their heroes or their legends on their shirts and honoring them," Hunt explains. "So, being able to co-brand with the NFL's team marks and our Hall of Famers, that's a unique product that nobody has and nobody can get anywhere else."

For this reason, Hunt says it's important to step out of the box, take chances and go for the hail-Mary play that just might land you a touchdown.

"Don't be afraid to try new things and grow your business. You don't want to take risks, but you have to in this business because you don't know if something's going to work," she says. "Try new things and adapt to the change around you and just grow."

And growing doesn't necessarily mean in a brick-and-mortar capacity. Hunt notes that the store is also responsible for the online store and



“We’re here to honor the greatest of the games and those are all the hall of famers in these walls here at the Hall of Fame.” — MICHELLE HUNT

shipping orders from the site, as they handle all their own website orders.

But she notes the enthusiasm of a die-hard fan dressed head-to-toe in their favorite NFL gear on any given day is enough to put her heart and soul into the job that she describes as “fun” and “creative” and an opportunity to “meet people from all over the world.”

“They’re so excited to be here and learn the history of the game and go through the museum and it’s a bucket list item for a lot of people,” she points out.

Whether Brett Favre, Jerry Rice or Ray Lewis is the favorite, all guests are coming to secure a piece of history from a hero that they likely have idolized since childhood. It’s important, therefore, that the merchandise be as legendary as the person it is honoring.



Pro football player jerseys for all ages are displayed on a large wall.

“We’re here to honor the greatest of the games and those are all the hall of famers in these walls here at the Hall of Fame,” Hunt says. “And we try to honor them in the store and in the products with their names and their licenses on them.”

Regardless of whether you’re a football fan or not, Hunt’s message is one no retailer should overlook — there’s no room to fumble the delivery on providing the best products to customers. Even when you’re ahead, go for the extra point. SGN

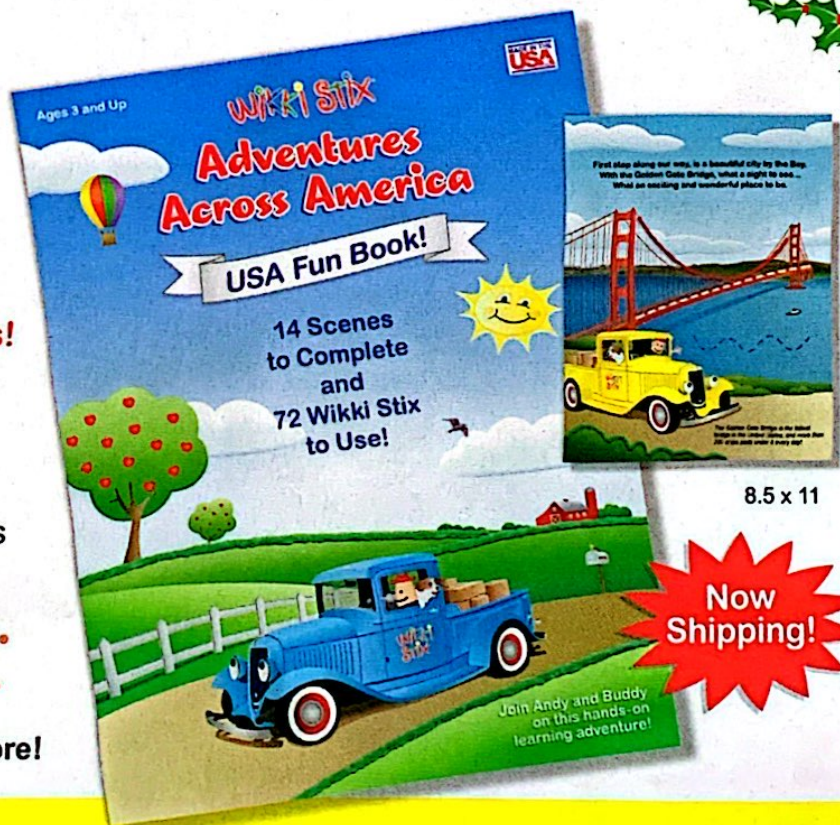
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